Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has loomed over everything we do. Whether it comes to plans to meet up with friends, play sports or even just go to school; social behaviour that was previously normal has been disrupted in the interest of safety for all, a smart yet depressing price to pay.

According to the CDC, over 40.9% of people who were surveyed on mental health during the pandemic claimed they had experienced at least one behavioral condition (depression, anxiety…). It can be argued that these mental health issues have brought about a second concurrent pandemic - This makes the need to keep a healthy mind that much more significant.

Studies show that in order to remain physically and mentally healthy during the pandemic, people must continue to do activities they enjoy, with many people starting new hobbies like bread-making or language-learning.

The Mayo Clinic’s research into COVID-19 has proven that indoor spaces are ‘generally more susceptible to transmitting the virus than outdoor spaces’, which makes continuing sports especially difficult, with many college teams cancelling sports until this academic year for instance, disrupting the mental health of many.

Go outside! According to an article by Business Insider, “Being outside can improve memory, fight depression, and lower blood pressure.” students who spent time outside in the forest saw benefits such as de-stressing, improvement in short term memory and lowered depression and anxiety.

To take advantage of the benefits of being outside, I personally go for a walk at 5:30 am to watch the sunrise. I realized that whenever I did this, I instantly felt more at ease. Exercise in general can alleviate a lot of stress, boosting mood and energy. Put aside 15 minutes of your day just to get a breath of fresh air and you will be surprised just how much it can calm the mind.

Dr. J. Kip Matthews, a sport and exercise psychologist explains why this is the case, “Endorphins are also involved in natural reward circuits related to [certain] activities...they activate opioid receptors in the brain that help minimize discomfort…[helping] bring about feelings of euphoria and general well-being.”

In addition to being outside, activities like playing a musical instrument, learning a new language, or taking online courses to develop your knowledge in a subject you are passionate about, are all wonderful activities to remain physically and mentally healthy in a pandemic world. They minimize the amount of stress placed on you and keep you busy at the same time.

Plan virtual hangouts with your friends, family and those close to you, it is something essential during these difficult times. Emotional bonds have always been important but now, it is even more important to connect and share emotions with others.

An article from the Mental Health Foundation in the UK emphasizes the importance of this, “Friendship is a crucial element in protecting our mental health. We need to talk to our friends, and we want to listen when our friends want to talk to us. Our friends can keep us grounded and can help us get things in perspective. It is worth putting effort into maintaining our friendships and making new friends. Friends form one of the foundations of our ability to cope with the problems that life throws at us.”

There are many limitations to the activities we are allowed to do, but improving your lifestyle in any way possible, small or large, will make a big difference for you.