**Mental Health First Aider Blog: How to stay active in a pandemic**

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Exercise, combined with a healthy lifestyle, is one of our best natural defences for our mental health.

If you have followed the news on the media, you will know the rules by heart: wash your hands thoroughly, maintain social distancing, and place yourself in isolation if you think you have been in contact with an infected person. Until a vaccine is developed, these are the most effective ways to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Along with these measures, we cannot forget to ensure that we remain healthy: for this, engaging in physical activity is the best solution!

Stress hormones impair immune function, whereas exercise, including soft activities like yoga, is extremely effective in combating stress. Numerous studies have shown that regular physical activity can improve mental health, reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, enhance cognitive functioning, and lead to a better quality of life and sleep. Indeed, the latest neuroscience data indicates that even moderate physical activity can have substantial benefits.

*Physical activity and the pandemic*

To stay healthy you need to "move" by walking, dancing, playing sport, or riding a bike. Men and women of all ages can benefit from 30 minutes of moderate daily exercise. Current WHO recommendations for adults is to engage in a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity during the week or 75 minutes of vigorous activity plus strengthening exercises for the major muscle groups, 2 or more times a week.

However, these recommendations are not easy to sustain during the pandemic, when our everyday lives have been dramatically transformed. Maintaining an active style during the COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge, and the changes that have taken place may affect our mood, which can reduce our motivation to engage in physical activity and movement. This is why it is important to plan our daily physical activity and take active steps to reduce the time we spend sitting down.

*So, what can we do?*

1. **Find a new balance:** In a difficult situation like this, it is important to build a new routine and adapt to the different rhythms imposed on us. Routines help us feel more in control and keep the mind occupied, reducing stress.
2. **Start small:** building new habits takes time and effort. If 150 minutes of exercise weekly feels unattainable right now, ask yourself what feels doable and go from there. Even adding 5 minutes of yoga or stretching to your morning routine, or setting an alarm to remind you to get up from your desk and walk around for a few minutes builds activity into your day. The key is to make it a part of your routine and build from there.
3. **Find support:** having people support you and hold you accountable for your goals helps you stick to them. It’s also more fun! Talk to family and friends about what you’re trying to do, and ask for their help.
4. **Share your emotions:** The changes that have occurred in our lives can fuel feelings of insecurity, sadness, anger, and stress. These emotions are typical in times of crisis. Do not be afraid to share your concerns with your loved ones or with a Mental Health First Aider (MHFA), or you can turn to a professional for help.

In this delicate period where we are gradually opening up our everyday lives, we must be protagonists in the recovery. It is essential we look after our physical and mental health by practicing good prevention like hand-washing, and keeping up healthy habits, including physical activity.

**References:**

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