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The right living space can help combat “social distancing blues” - by Audrey Epstein Reny

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Boston is feeling the effects of COVID-19 and orders by our local governments to socially distance ourselves from others. That coupled with the fact that even though it's technically spring, we're still experiencing colder days, dark nights and general dreariness that can come with this time of year. And, the CDC has outlined some potential signs of stress during an infectious disease outbreak, including fear and worry, changes in sleep patterns and worsening of chronic health problems.

But, the CDC has also laid out a list of what you can do to support yourself during this time: Taking breaks from consuming news, taking deep breaths, eating healthy, exercising regularly, getting plenty of sleep, taking time to unwind and do activities you enjoy, and connecting with others through phone calls or other virtual means.

Living in the right environment can also help combat feeling socially isolated, the lethargy that comes with an extended period of time at home, and other challenges that may come up during these challenging times. Here's how:

Join with loved ones: You may have heard in recent years about Hygge, the Danish and Norwegian word for coziness, wellness and contentment, especially amid cold weather. This may come in the form of some cozy socks, a hot cup of tea or a candlelit room, but the true expression of Hygge is "joining with loved ones in a relaxed and intimate atmosphere." See this time as an opportunity to spend time being cozy within your space. For families, this is an opportunity to get in that extra quality time that often gets lost due to the demands of physically going to work. And, while building amenity spaces may be closed for health reasons right now, the current crisis is an opportunity to pick up the phone (or computer) and call a loved one you may not have checked in with for a while.

Work out: Your motivation to exercise may waiver during this time, but it's actually more important than ever: Physically, to boost your immune system; and mentally, to keep your head as clear as possible. Working out can significantly improve your mood: A 2005 Harvard study suggests just walking fast for about 35 minutes a day five times a week can improve symptoms of mild to moderate depression, and that exercising under bright lights maybe even better for seasonal depression. While the health club may be closed, many local fitness studios are making online classes available for free and CorePower Yoga is making its "on-demand" service free for members as well.

Get outside: Going outside is getting increasingly easier as the weather warms and spring commences, and the benefits of doing so are significant: Spending time outdoors can improve focus and lower stress levels. And, for those living in and around Downtown Boston, there are a number of beautiful places to choose to spend that outdoors time: The Charles River, the Back Bay Fens and the Boston Harbor all offer breathtaking views. Plus, add a jog into your outing and you're using two tools to beat back the stress of this pandemic. Remember the recommendation to stay at least six feet away from others applies outdoors as well as indoors.

Let the light in: Research has shown that between 50 and 80% of people who deal with stress and anxiety can get either partial or complete relief from bright light therapy, and this is another example of why your living environment matters. Floor-to-ceiling windows, open floor plans with airy and expansive living spaces and even smartphone-controlled lighting that optimize your living space for the brightest amount of light can make a real difference to your mood.

Find a new way to engage with the outside world: Being temporarily stuck inside your home does not mean you have to disengage from the outside world. Many of what Boston offers in music, entertainment, and museums have gone digital to give residents a chance to still experience all of

the cultural richness of the city without risking your health. For example, Google Arts & Culture offers online tours and exhibits of hundreds of museums around the world, including the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Seeing friends is possible through video conferencing services such as Zoom.

Universal Studios is even offering some movies set to open in theaters, online. Experts believe laughter actually stimulates processes in your brain that counter depressive symptoms, so try to take in a comedy at home, or check out a standup routine on a streaming channel.

While we're all struggling during this time of crisis, finding creative ways of being socially distant while still enjoying what the city has to offer is possible. Exercising, making your space cozy, and creatively engaging with the outside world without compromising your health are all strategies to staying mentally fit during this time.

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