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Keep parks open. The benefits of fresh air outweigh the risks of infection.

Some simple strategies can help keep you healthy. Remember to wear a mask.

By **William "Ned" Friedman**, **Joseph G. Allen** and **Marc Lipsitch**

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In the midst of a pandemic, urban life goes on. People are mourning the loss of a spouse, battling cancer and dealing with anxieties and stress from everyday life on top of new anxieties and stress from the coronavirus, all of which is often made worse by economic insecurity and extended duties of caring for children and elderly relatives.

What public-health and well-being policies can help alleviate some of the extraordinary stressors that urbanites are feeling across the nation right now? Part of the answer is baked into every city in the country. It is our public green spaces, our parks, botanical gardens and arboreta right outside our doors or down the street.

Regrettably, though, many public green spaces across the country have been closed. Yes, in most cases, there have been good reasons for the specific closings: overcrowding with parking lots jammed, egregious disregard for proper social distancing and respect for others, and the prospect of drawing people from afar who would be better off spending time in nature closer to their front doors.

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But closing parks and public gardens should be a temporary, last-resort measure for disease control. If visitors persist in violating physical distancing, officials could employ capacity controls like those now in use in supermarkets, timed entry or other measures to reduce crowding, such as limiting parking, extending hours, or putting up signs and enforcing limits. Maintaining the benefits of public green spaces is critical as we also make our best efforts to restrict covid-19 transmission. Public parks (though not playgrounds or sports facilities, which are much harder for maintaining social distancing while using), botanical gardens and arboreta are essential to the public health and well-being of the more than 80 percent of Americans who live in urban areas.

The science could not be clearer: The benefits of getting outside vastly outweigh the risk of getting infected in a park.

Study after study has shown that time spent in contact with nature has important and positive psychological, indeed neurological, effects on the mind — decreased rumination and negative thoughts in adults, reduced symptoms of ADD and ADHD in children, improved cognitive development. The amount of green space around a school is associated with decreased stress, better attention capacity and reduced mental fatigue and aggression. Those are the exact types of benefits kids need while coping with this crisis, especially with their access to green space missing with most schools shut down. And no one needs a scientific study to envision the benefits to a family's well-being of just being together in a beautiful green space surrounded by nature.

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Anxiety is understandably high, and many might be fearful of heading out to a public green space. But before you hesitate to visit a park, botanical garden or arboretum, it's worth looking at the science to disentangle real from perceived risk.

There are simple strategies you can take to head outside with confidence. First and foremost, maintain physical distancing. That means staying at least six feet away from others for the vast majority of time. But walking past someone should not induce fear or panic — these short walk-bys are low risk for transmission of the coronavirus.

Everyone in community green space — cyclists, runners and pedestrians — should wear a facial covering. Even a homemade cloth mask can help prevent you from infecting others, which can happen if you have the coronavirus even with no symptoms, and it also provides some protection for you from others. Perhaps equally important, wearing a facial covering is a clear social signal that you take your community role in minimizing risk to others seriously. This simple courtesy can help others relax when outdoors in a common space.

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If you're a runner, be mindful that you eject more aerosols while exercising due to heavy breathing and exertion, with most of it trailing behind you, so give others a larger buffer than six feet as you approach or pass. If you're running with others, the best way to do this is to run side-by-side, separated by six feet. If you're behind another runner, give yourself more than six feet and stagger your alignment so you're not directly behind their plume. Outdoors, the virus quickly disperses in the air, so others should not be anxious if a runner goes by — even if they pass within six feet. Such fleeting exposure, especially if you and the runner are wearing masks, is low-risk.

The virus can survive on surfaces, but it diminishes over time. Try to minimize how many surfaces you touch while outside, don't touch your face, and wash your hands when you get home. Some have worried about tracking the virus home on their shoes, but this is not a concern. Still, it's good public-health practice in general to take your shoes off at the door.

Frederick Law Olmsted is remembered as the creator of great urban public spaces such as Central Park and Prospect Park in New York, the Emerald Necklace (including the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University) in Boston and the U.S. Capitol grounds in Washington. Perhaps less well-known is that during the Civil War, he headed the U.S. Sanitary Commission. Olmsted knew a thing or two about contagious diseases when he designed these great urban public spaces.

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Here in Boston, where we live and work, and also across the nation — in New York, Washington, Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles — during this pandemic, Olmsted's words still ring true: "The occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air, and change of habits, is favorable to health and vigor."

Parks, botanical gardens and arboreta and other urban green spaces are not just pretty places to jog or stroll, they are also central to our health and well-being in the urban built environment. Especially now.

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