



Emily Wheeler // The land of UK Lockdown is a strange one, where we are allowed out for essential purposes only. For the time being, exercise outdoors is counted as such an essential purpose due to its importance in maintaining physical and mental health. That fact that exercise and time spent outdoors is good for us is not news. It has been part of the backdrop of public health messaging (particularly about cardiovascular health) for a long time. The benefits of physical activity for mental health are likewise part of the familiar litany of inducements from friends, family, PE teachers, the lifestyle pages of newspapers, to keep ourselves healthy. Despite all this, the consensus still goes that we in the West spend too much time sitting still, and not enough time moving about.

It doesn't help that amongst the promises of health and overall wellbeing to be gained from being physically active, there are also less appealing aspects to contend with. Exercise: something you do in pursuit of the bikini-ready-beach-body; penance to be paid for the sins of saddlebags, muffin tops and bingo wings. Perhaps the word 'Sport' is a friendlier one? In my case it is not so, and perhaps for others too. 'Sport' conjures up images of school PE, a litany of dropped balls, missed balls, a ball to the face (why do school sports always seem to involve a ball?). It seems preferable to expunge these from the memory as something best forgotten.

But as things stand, we're not going to the beach and team sports are off the court. And so, despite the glorious spring, the notion of the bikini-ready body feels utterly irrelevant. Exercise, now as part of the daily 'allowance' for outdoor time has become more appealing. It has taken on the flavour of... a treat. Instead of exercising every few days I am now doing so more or less every day, that dose of the outdoors being all the more a tonic when the rest of the day is spent largely in one

room. Friends post pictures on Instagram pages from their cycle rides through empty city streets, of tree blossoms on their daily 'governmentally endorsed' walk. The government mandated exercise habit has been recently acquired, and rather taken to. I see families out on their bicycles in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week, in the heat of an April sun, carefully navigating the socially distant walkers driven onto the road by narrow pavements and the odd car. They look, despite the strangeness of it all, like they're having fun.

Lockdown rules around exercise have not been without controversy. They have thrown into relief many stark social contrasts, and particularly within urban and suburban environments where access to green space and the outdoors is highly variable. We are split between those who have access to gardens of their own, those who rely on public parks and those who can't access even those. There has, in response to the lockdown, been a surge in the availability of 'digital fitness.' Still, capitalising on these resources is dependent on having enough space indoors (I've only recently found the optimal spot for my yoga mat where I can do a one-legged downward dog without smashing a foot on some hard and pointy piece of furniture). In the heated discussions about the stringency of lockdown rules, and whether urban parks should close due to crowding, it is ironic that government endorsed exercise is perhaps becoming a proxy for freedoms more generally. But how much more appealing is that, than a concept laden with beauty standards that change with the fashions of the times?