



Socially safe etiquette during COVID-19

Description

Physical distancing tips to help you when you are out and about

By **Wanda Potrykus**

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, there is a myriad of posters and public service announcements informing us of the correct way to cough, sneeze and wash our hands, while others urge us to practise 'social distancing'. But there are seemingly very few that touch on the subject of the ***Hows and Whys of physical distancing***, especially when we go out for groceries, or to take a walk, with or without a partner, the kids and the dog.

Our daily walk outside is not easy

Currently, I still try to get out a few times a week for a walk. I've given up attempting it every day as there are just too many people outside of their homes in the area of Westmount where I reside who apparently have no idea what the term 'physical distancing' means in practice. And yes, I'm addressing not only the walkers but also the cyclists, skateboarders, joggers, runners and the kids on scooters and parents with strollers.

To help out I've compiled a list of tips to help keep you safe, to remind you and your family members that this is now the time to step outside your own personal 'me-first' bubble and to think of the health and welfare of others, as well as yourselves, especially when venturing away from your home environment.

The first in the series of these **Pandemic Public Etiquette Tips** will focus on ***what to do when out and about on the streets of the city*** (no matter which city you live in).



Image: John Cameron – Unsplash

How not to hog the pavement or paths

(aka do not practice sloppy sidewalk etiquette)

The most important rules are these first two that boil down to this: **Be aware of your immediate surroundings. Stay alert.**

- **Walk at the edge of narrow sidewalks and vary your pace.**

Unless you are using a really wide sidewalk (and the reality is there aren't too many of those in our cities), walk near the edge of it to permit a six-foot (2m) space between yourself and those passing by. Note: On the majority of my local sidewalks this distance is impossible to achieve as our sidewalks just aren't that wide.

Thus, if possible, stop for a moment and step into a driveway, or onto a grassy verge or lawn (if available) to maintain the required distance. Sometimes you may have to slow down, or perhaps even speed up a little if the sidewalk is particularly busy, as you try to maintain that 6-foot/2metres of separation. The take-away is "Be constantly aware of your surroundings".

- **Walk in single file** (when sharing a sidewalk or path with those you're not related to)

What this means is if there are others around when you are out as a couple, or family grouping, endeavour where possible to walk in single file when other people are approaching, especially on narrow or busy sidewalks.

To couples, this means you will need to disengage your hands, or arms, and **walk one behind the other**



when passing others, to allow for the recommended 2m (6-foot) separation. Two of you, no matter how close you are, are at least twice as wide as one single person is when he or she is walking past, or alongside of you. And to dog walkers, it means shortening the leash and keeping your pooch right by your side.

- **Look ahead and don't pass if someone is approaching from the opposite direction**

The City of Westmount is promoting the idea their sidewalks become uni-directional only (see below for details). However, that will only work 'if' everyone knows about it and 'if' everyone chooses to adopt the practise, which may yet prove to be a form of 'magical thinking' on the part of the municipality while being somewhat difficult to implement. For instance, what happens if you wish to shop on both sides of the street or live on the opposite side, or if your car is parked on that side and you need to approach it since one is not supposed to cross the road mid-block.

Thus, until that happens, and even when it does, I suggest you continue to think of whatever sidewalk you are on as a two-lane, two-way street (even if it isn't theoretically supposed to be so in Westmount) and don't pass the person in front of you if there is someone else approaching from the opposite direction. Instead, wait for them to pass before you make your move into their lane.

Note for cycle path users:

Theoretically, only cyclists, skateboarders, in-line skaters, motorized wheelchair or electric scooter users should be using the designated cycle paths, especially in Westmount Park where currently the bike path is literal 'free-for-all', which makes it dangerous for the cyclists/wheelchair users, as well as everyone else, although there are those that will disagree, for a variety of reasons, with this stance.

Thus if you insist on walking, pushing wheelchairs, running or jogging on the cycle path; especially, for instance, where it runs through Westmount Park, you should not (if at all possible) be going in the same direction as the ever-increasing number of cyclists (since the weather is warming up, chances are they'll be more cyclists not less using the path in the coming months). Like wiser country folk, you should try to be facing the on-coming wheeled traffic, so you can see it coming and they can see you. Plus you should also endeavour (if feasible) to step aside off the path rather than force the cyclist or motorized wheelchair to veer around you.

- If you are following the Westmount initiative of uni-directional sidewalks, **walk on the left side of the sidewalks. This way you can step onto the parking lane more easily if someone is approaching you.** Admittedly, I hesitate to recommend this since it goes against the much safer "walk facing the oncoming traffic" directive that country residents practise. By walking on the left, it makes it easier to step down from an overcrowded sidewalk to walk in the street to maintain the 2m distancing requirement. However, it also puts you in danger of any wheeled traffic approaching you from behind.



- My personal advice on safety grounds is that it would be **safer for everyone**, especially if you are following Westmount's advice on walking in the direction of the traffic, to **walk on the right of the sidewalk**, with the hope those approaching you on your left will be the ones to step into the street (parking lane) and thus they will then also be the ones facing the oncoming traffic. Of course, that comes with the caveat that they will choose to be the ones to move apart to maintain the required distance, not you (which in practice is not always a given).

Thus as always, remain vigilant and do what keeps you safest. The basic truth is... on the streets today not everyone you meet will be aware of or be practising safe sidewalk etiquette.



Image: Kate Trifo – Unsplash

- **Keep your distance when stopped at traffic lights or crosswalks**
While waiting to cross the street, don't bunch up next to another person waiting. Look ahead and stop six feet away. Keep an eye on the walk signal (or green light) and maintain the requisite distance from other people. Yes, it is a bit of effort but it will help keep you and them safe.
- **Don't multi-task, if at all possible**
Is it really necessary to toss a ball or a Frisbee, talk on the phone, listen to music, podcasts or audiobooks, or to stop to feed or see to junior (whether child or dog) in the middle of the sidewalk, especially at busy times while you are out for your daily dose of fresher air? While everyone is supposed to be trying to keep six feet/2m of distance from others, it's helpful to keep your mind focused on what's happening around you on the sidewalk, and not centred on your phone, audiobook, your ball, or on other distractions. If you really need



to stop for something or to talk to someone, step aside and try not to block the flow along the sidewalk.

- **Try not to bike or use a scooter on sidewalks**

If you are travelling by bicycle, scooter, inline skates or skateboard please try to stay in the bike lane, or on the street now that there is less motorized traffic. The overburdened sidewalks cannot afford the extra traffic right now. This rule is addressed mostly to adult riders since it may not be safe for children to ride their bikes or scooters on the busier traffic streets. If this is the case teach them instead to follow the single file rule on the sidewalks and not to go too fast or range too far ahead. I, for one, tend to step to the side when children are approaching me on bikes since the smaller ones, in particular, are often somewhat unsteady, and so wait for them to pass me.

- **Consider the elderly, the physically challenged, and less mobile people**

If you are on the same pathway with an elderly or physically challenged person, or someone who is obviously less agile than you are, be the person who moves out of the way, not vice-versa. I am especially addressing sidewalk cyclists and joggers as well as those family groupings and couples holding hands that seem to believe they have a pre-determined right to take up the whole sidewalk. Be mindful of others, please.

- **On more crowded paths, please no sudden stops and do step off the pathway, or to the side if you really have to stop**

If you need to stop walking and attend to something, step out of the way of the traffic, much like you would were you in a car. If you meet someone and want to chat, walk to where there's a seat, or to a place you can step off of the sidewalk itself. Perhaps onto a grassy border, path or a driveway?

Since there are far fewer parked cars on most main arteries that also tend to have the busiest sidewalks, which means currently you also have the option of stepping down from the curbside onto the street if it's safe to do so that is. After all, that's what I consistently have to do these days, when I need to pass you. And I walk with a cane, meaning I am somewhat less stable on my feet than you are.

One day last week on the sidewalk alongside the Westmount swimming pool there were so many stationary folks chatting, some with dogs and each keeping the requisite 6-foot distance, that I was forced to walk into the middle of St Catherine Street to bypass them all. Luckily for me, there wasn't the usual number of cars on the street, so it was doable, but it would have been nice if maybe someone else had also moved aside. So, at all times, be aware of those trying to navigate around you.

- **Corral the kids**

When practising physical distancing on narrow paths in the parks and on sidewalks shared with other pedestrians during a pandemic, you need to keep your children close. This is not the time to let them run free and range too far ahead of you. If you want them to run, let them loose on the soccer fields and open grassy areas in the parks, and do not allow them to monopolize the sidewalks.

In parks and Westmount Park in particular, if it's busy, do try and ask your children to walk their bikes or scooters on the park pathways and not cycle/scoot pell-mell around every which way. If you, or they, need or want to do that find them an empty parking lot somewhere. In front of the library is one option. With the library closed its parking lot is empty, as is the larger parking lot by the Westmount recreation centre and swimming pool, or there's the paved alleyway along the back of the houses on the east side of Lansdowne or the playground along the side of Westmount Park School.



Also, since the children's playgrounds in Westmount's parks are technically closed, perhaps kids with wheels can use those immediate pathways surrounding their former popular playgrounds for their cycle races since they aren't permitted on the equipment. The rest of us have the option to avoid or skirt that area if we choose to walk through our neighbourhood park.

- **Remind your children out alone on their bikes or scooters to look both ways**

On my daily walk around the edge of the park, I am often almost knocked over by younger cyclists who dash out from drive, alley and pathway as well as the bike path onto the street or sidewalk, or sometimes even between parked cars, without stopping to see if there are people on sidewalks or crossing the street and without checking to see if cars are coming towards them. There are still some cars on the roads. Do remind your young cyclist or scooter rider that he needs to stop, look, as well as listen before venturing quickly onto the road.



Image: Tatiana Rodriguez – Unsplash

- **Look out for the leash**

Pandemic or not, dogs still need to be walked and Westmount, Montreal and the West Island have closed the dog runs to aid in physical distancing. Thus when walking your dog on the sidewalks, do please try to be mindful of others and do take note of your dog's leash. If it is stretched across the path, it can make passing hard and may also be a potential tripping hazard, especially for older pedestrians with canes and those using walkers. And it's a veritable nightmare for wheelchair users.

- **Finally, a special word to runners and joggers...**

At this time of overcrowded sidewalks, if at all possible, and when required, consider running in the road facing the on-coming traffic. If the road is too busy, and as you are no doubt moving faster than most



pedestrians, you will still need to stay a minimum of six feet away from them, which means you may have to **run in zigzags** from pathway to road in some cases (a drill that will help increase strength and flexibility in your hips and ankles).

Plus if you continue to insist on running in groups of two, three or more... do remember, to form a single file when passing pedestrians. Too many runners seem to think since they are the ones moving fast, us slow-poke, often singleton, walkers are the ones who need to get out their way, instead of vice-versa, and since there's more of them when they run in groups, it's their right to use up the entire walkway. Wrong! Think again, please. If we all follow a code of conduct on the road and the sidewalk, it will make it easier and safer for all.

So kindly mind your manners when out and about on the streets in a pandemic and practise safe social distancing street etiquette! In fact, many of these tips will work just as effectively in a post-pandemic world as well.

Special note to Westmounters and residents of some boroughs in the City of Montreal

The City of Westmount and the Plateau Borough of Montreal have introduced some temporary measures to aid in making streets and sidewalks safer for increased foot traffic. These measures include:

In Westmount

Citywide: Pedestrians are being encouraged on East-West streets to walk on the sidewalk in the same direction as the traffic. What this means is along an East-West street such as Sherbrooke, those walking west should use the north sidewalk and those walking east should use the south sidewalk.

On North-South streets such as Claremont, those walking north (uphill) should use the east sidewalk and those walking south (downhill) should use the west sidewalk.

These measures, apparently compiled from advice provided to the City from the police (SPVM) and Westmount's traffic planners, are supposed to encourage safer physical distancing on the sidewalks, which are for the most part far too narrow to allow adequate self-distancing with two-way traffic.

Warning: While in theory this is a simple idea to remember i.e. to walk in the same direction as the traffic, it doesn't help keep us safe when walkers and, especially runners, are forced to step into the street as a result of the physical distancing rules and the overcrowded sidewalks (due, in part, to those who refuse to uncouple or to walk in a single file) since it puts them in danger with a possible approaching wheeled vehicle at their back. For greater safety, when stepping off the curb onto the street, you should be able to see the traffic approaching. So once again, no matter which way you are walking, please be aware of your surroundings.

Some changes to aid pedestrian or cycle traffic

Some streets in Westmount with significant foot and cycle traffic have also been cordoned off and parking restricted in various ways to allow for greater circulation by pedestrians and with motorized traffic restricted to localized traffic only i.e. those who live in the area and need to get home to park.

These streets include de Maisonneuve, Summit Circle, Greene Avenue between Sherbrooke and de Maisonneuve, Cote St Antoine, Westmount Avenue between Lansdowne and Claremont, and Lansdowne between St Catherine Street and Westmount Avenue.



The City of Westmount might add more streets to those mentioned above, if needed, in the coming weeks.

For additional information, go to Westmount.org

In the Plateau and potentially the Rosemont-Petite Patrie borough of Montreal

The City of Montreal has created a 2.7-kilometre (1.7 miles) safe walking corridor on Mont-Royal Avenue, running east to west from Papineau to Esplanade streets. To achieve this, it has eliminating parking on one side of the street to create a 4.5-metre pedestrian corridor on the other side, which is something similar to what Westmount has done on Greene Avenue.

Montreal's Mayor Plante has said that other measures may be implemented in other areas on the island of Montreal in the coming weeks in consultation with the borough mayors. For instance, Côte-des-Neiges–Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Borough Mayor Sue Montgomery has announced parking is being restricted to allow for more space for pedestrians on Queen Mary and possibly also on Sherbrooke and Somerled. In addition, the borough of Rosemont – La Petite Patrie is supposedly also looking into making some sidewalks one-way as a voluntary measure, although no news as yet on what sidewalks they are proposing.

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