

The Wellness Express™

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The Blue Zones: Exploring Longevity

Presented by:

Longevity, the length or duration of human lives, is an intriguing topic that has been studied by numerous researchers. Many methods or strategies have been proposed to increase the average human lifespan, but finding concrete evidence of what works and what doesn't is often challenging. In most cases, notes a study in the *Gerontologist*, living a longer life is a multidimensional achievement, and it involves you avoiding disease and disability, keeping high levels of physical and cognitive function, and staying engaged in social, leisure, and other productive activities.¹

The search to understand the secrets of longevity, for many, is more than simply about discovering how to live longer; it is also about how to live a healthier, happier, and more meaningful life. The best way to unlock these secrets, notes adventurer, educator, and author Dan Buettner in his book *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From People Who Lived the Longest*, is to study the regions of the world where people live measurably longer lives.



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The Blue Zones

Blue Zone is a term coined by two researchers, Gianni Pes and Michel Poulain, who used it to describe longevity hotspots - regions of the world that produce the greatest concentration of centenarians, or people who have lived 100 years.² Having a high concentration of centenarians is an important criterion in achieving Blue Zone status, though these areas (and the groups that inhabit them) also are known to experience fewer diseases that reduce lifespans in other regions of the developed world and enjoy not only more years of life, but more *healthy* years of life.³

Buettner has identified five distinct Blue Zones around the world, including the islands of Okinawa, Japan, mountain villages in Sardinia, Italy, the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica, the island of Icaria, in Greece, and Loma Linda, California. Blue Zone groups, according to Buettner, appear to have the following lifestyle factors in common, even though these groups are separated by thousands of miles: they do not smoke, they place a priority on family, they participate in moderately strenuous physical activity every day, they stay socially connected and engaged, and, though exceptions exist, they consume a diet centered around fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Exercise of the Week

Cobra Pose – Spinal Extension
Difficulty: Easy - moderate

(Consult your chiropractor before doing this or any other exercise.)

Start: Place a mat on the floor. Position your body as shown in Image #1, with spine in a neutral position.

Exercise: Try to move spine into a fully extended position. Concentrate on lowering hips right to the floor, relaxing the muscles of spine. Support upper body with your arms straight. Bring chin up toward the ceiling. Hold for 15-60 seconds. Return to neutral position and rest for 15 seconds. Repeat 5X.



Smoking and Longevity

Smoking status is a common thread that binds Blue Zone groups, and not smoking is a lifestyle characteristic shared by Blue Zone groups that helps boost their longevity. Smoking, perhaps not surprisingly, is *extremely* rare among centenarians.⁴ Smokers in any culture live fewer years than nonsmokers, though even longtime smokers can benefit from smoking cessation. According to a 2002 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, quitting smoking as early as possible is important for health reasons and longevity, though smoking cessation at any age confers significant life extensions.⁵

An Emphasis on Family

All Blue Zone groups place great significance on family time and togetherness, and they put family ahead of their other problems or concerns. Buettner states that being part of a thriving family unit can add six years to your life expectancy, and that other family-related factors that nurture longevity include spending a significant amount of time with your children, engaging in a loving, monogamous relationship, and keeping your aging parents close by. Close contact with older family members or community elders is an important variable in the longevity equation in Blue Zone groups.

Regular Physical Activity

Moderately strenuous physical activity is an intimate part of daily life in Blue Zone groups. Walking, gardening, tending herds, and other manual tasks are built into the daily schedule,

keeping many Blue Zone individuals in a state of near-constant movement or motion. Increased physical activity levels are essential in boosting longevity, though researchers sometimes disagree on the intensity with which this exercise should be performed. A study published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* suggests that moderate intensity activities are somewhat beneficial in reducing mortality rates, though the researchers note that vigorous activity may be even more beneficial.⁶

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness, or a sense of belonging in a community, helps Blue Zone group members in times of crisis or distress. Many Blue Zone individuals are surrounded their entire lives by a close group of friends who support them during their times of greatest physical, emotional, and financial need. Benefits of this permanent support network include reduced anxiety during stressful life events, a sense of belonging and purpose in the world, and, according to Buettner, a decreased likelihood of heart disease and depression.

A Healthy Diet

Blue Zone diets are largely plant-based and include plenty of nuts, beans, greens (green plants), and whole grains. Some Blue Zone diets also include a small amount of meat or fish as well as cheese and red wine. Blue Zone members' increased consumption of vegetables and unprocessed foods provides them with natural antioxidants and other nutrients that may help prevent chronic disease.

Quote to Inspire

“Remember that no time spent with your children is ever wasted “

- H. Jackson Brown

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