

OZ REFRESH:

LIVE LONGER & HAPPIER

To reboot your health for 2018, get inspired by the people around the world who have racked up the most candles on their cakes—and by communities around the U.S. that are bringing their lessons home.

by HOLLY PEVZNER

Almost 14 years ago, Dan Buettner, a writer and National Geographic explorer, set out on a quest to determine why folks who live in five distinct pockets of the world have the highest life expectancy. He and his researchers visited the areas (Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece; and Loma Linda, California), poked around kitchens, peeked into workplaces, and examined how the people who live there socialize, break a sweat, and de-stress. “In the end, we interviewed 263 centenarians and hundreds of other people,” says Buettner. He and the team dubbed these areas Blue Zones—and that term also came to represent the longevity principles his group found there.

After Buettner published his findings in the best-selling book *The Blue Zones: 9 Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who’ve Lived the Longest*, he set out on another quest: to bring the core maxims of the original Blue Zones to everyday neighborhoods across the U.S. Today, 42 communities in nine states have joined the Blue Zones Project, in which Buettner’s organization and his partner Sharecare work with schools, employers, restaurants, and local governments to come up with healthy programs specific to these particular areas.

Just in time for a new year refresh, we’re bringing you some of their stories, along with ways you can take these lessons and create your own personal Blue Zone.

▶
Lighting the way for healthier bodies and minds across the country.

↓
Good-living inspiration, by the numbers

263

centenarians were interviewed in the original Blue Zones

9

states in the U.S. have Blue Zones Projects

42

communities in those states have signed on

264,583

people in the U.S. are participating

1,068

organizations have joined in, including:

358

restaurants

483

workplaces

135

schools



BLUE ZONES MUST-HAVE

A Tight Tribe

In Japanese, the word *moai* means “meeting for a common purpose,” and Buettner cited this as a key Blue Zones concept. For instance, women in Okinawa would meet and talk about the well-being of the village, drink sake, and support each other. Similarly, some churchgoers in Loma Linda gather weekly outside of services to connect over a potluck or a nature walk. That kind of regular social support is a tentpole of a long life, increasing longevity by about 50%, according to research in the journal *PLoS Medicine*.

PUTTING IT INTO PLAY When Linda Fulmer’s neighborhood association in Fort Worth, TX, became part of the Blue Zones Project, she decided to form walking moais. “I hosted a kick-off meeting at my house,” she says, and the neighborhood formed five groups. “They’ve really brought us together,” she says. “It didn’t take long for people to start getting together outside of the morning walks.”

YOUR BLUE ZONES FRESH START Want to start your own moai? Predictability is important when it comes to establishing a bond. “Having regularly scheduled social meet-ups gives people a sense of trust and security, which is good for well-being,” says Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Brigham Young University. Shoot for a variety of relationships, she adds. “You’ll get a wealth of different pathways to feeling connected.” Think of it this way: Social support has various elements, including support that’s emotional; tangible (like favors); and informational (such as advice). “It may be more convenient to have your neighbors help you out by watching your kids when you’re in a bind, because they’re nearby, whereas you may more naturally turn to a close friend for really big favors or to provide sympathy when you’re feeling down,” says Holt-Lunstad. “All types of support are important.”

Downsized sweets Many BZ-designated restaurants offer 100-calorie “nice bite” dessert items, such as the Small Bite Bread Pudding at Buffalo West Restaurant in Fort Worth. It’s about one-sixth the size of the original, and a huge seller. The best part: A study has shown that no matter whether you eat a large or a small portion of dessert, you’ll be similarly satisfied.

BLUE ZONES MUST-HAVE

Natural Movement

Blue-Zoners don’t exercise more than the average person, but they are more active, moving about every 20 minutes, notes Buettner. They favor feet over cars; they tend to their garden; they knead their own bread. “This type of embedded movement is just as health-making,” says biomechanist Katy Bowman, author of *Move Your DNA*. You clock more non-sedentary time throughout your day, and can also boost good cholesterol and lower your risk of cardiovascular disease, says a study in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. And that’s regardless of regular exercise.

PUTTING IT INTO PLAY Easiness breeds inactivity, so the community of Klamath Falls, OR, is doing their best to de-convenience their town. For instance, local city and county elementary schools now participate in walking school buses, where kids stride en masse (with chaperones) to school. Several worksites, churches, and a grocery store now have designated Blue Zones Project parking spots far away from the entrance. Other businesses post signs that promote stairs over the elevator.

YOUR BLUE ZONES FRESH START Push a lawnmower rather than ride one; wash dishes by hand instead of using the dishwasher; buy whole fruits and vegetables that you need to chop. “Little activities seem insignificant when compared to the intensities of longer exercise sessions, but small, frequent movements absolutely add up over time,” says Bowman. One of her favorite de-conveniences: Never drive anywhere that’s less than a mile away.

BLUE ZONES MUST-HAVE

Downshifting

Folks in Ikaria enjoy regular naps. Those in Okinawa quietly remember their ancestors daily. Unlike in America, downshifting is built into the culture of Blue Zones areas. “We’re so fast-paced,” says Buettner, whose latest book is *The Blue Zones of Happiness*. This go-go lifestyle sets us up for stress, which can lead to chronic inflammation—a problem associated with virtually every major age-related disease. (See more about inflammation on page 26.)

PUTTING IT INTO PLAY “Stress can lead to headaches and sick days, and we wanted our work family to get a break from that,” says Robyn Joel, wellness coordinator at Freeborn-Mower Cooperative Services in Albert Lea, MN. Inspired by their community’s Blue Zones initiative, Joel and her team converted an oversize closet into The Quiet Room. They painted the walls a warm hue, hung art, and added a soft, fluffy rug. There’s a rocker-recliner and essential oils like peppermint for headaches and lavender for stress. Today, about half of their workforce uses the room when they need a break. “We regularly hear about how much everyone appreciates and relies on the space,” says Joel.

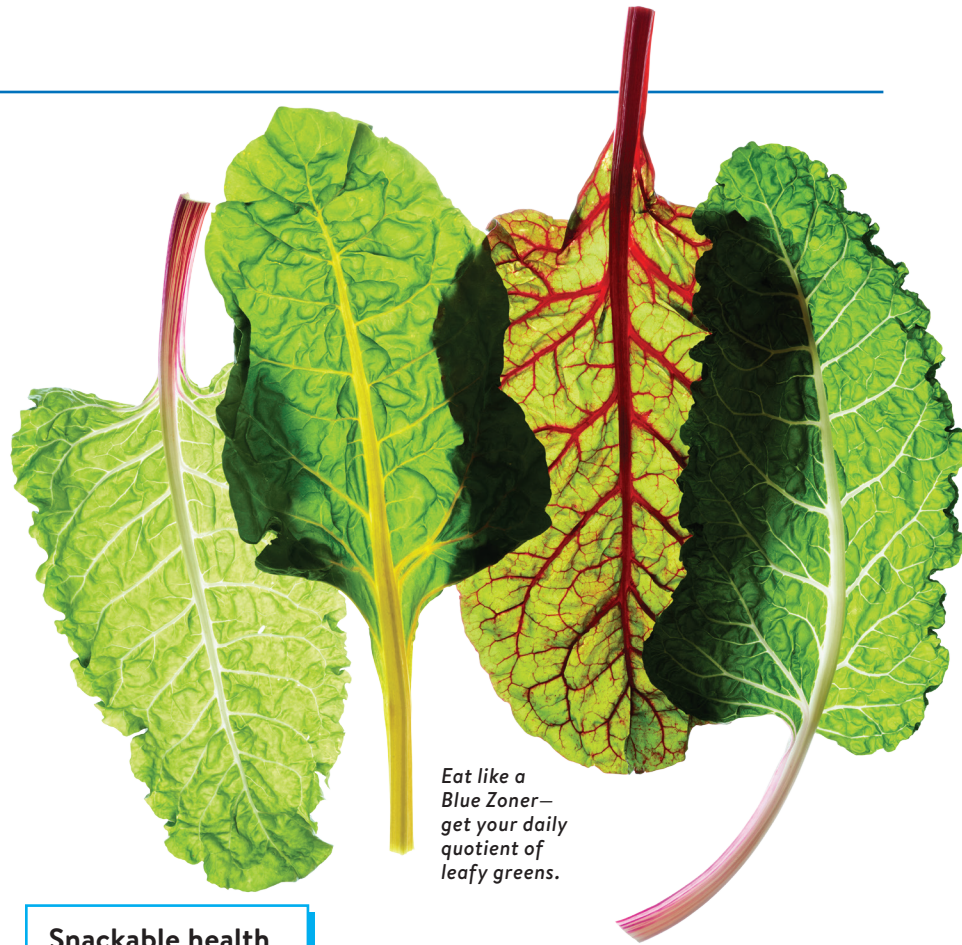
YOUR BLUE ZONES FRESH START

Pick just one practice that brings you to a place of “ahh”—and do it consistently. “Start small and share your intentions with others so they can help support you,” says Katrina Michelle, Ph.D., a holistic psychotherapist in New York City. A couple of Michelle’s go-to downshifting habits are taking daily fresh-air breaks and doing alternate-nostril breathing: Seal one nostril and take a deep breath in. Then seal the other and take a slow exhale. “It seems silly, but it slows your breath, so you get immediate physiological and emotional relief,” she says.

BLUE ZONES MUST-HAVE

Plant-Based Meals

Veggies, greens (especially leafy ones), grains, nuts, and beans are the cornerstone of most Blue Zones diets. And meat is generally eaten on average only five times a month, usually during celebrations. People who eat in this plant-based way, quite simply, live longer. One of the reasons: It promotes longer telomeres, which sit at the tip of chromosomes and are biomarkers of aging. Shorter ones are linked to decreased life expectancy and increased risk of aging-related chronic disease. Long ones? Health and longevity.



Eat like a Blue Zoner—get your daily quotient of leafy greens.

Snackable health

The corporate headquarters of Skechers (a BZ-designated workplace) in Manhattan Beach, CA, has a box of fruit delivered to the offices each week. The apples, oranges, grapefruit, and kiwi are free and available to anyone craving a good-for-you bite. Encourage at-home grab ‘n’ go by preportioning dried fruit and nuts and keeping fruits like clementines and pears in your line of sight.

Find your own path to calm, whether it’s using essential oils or taking a breath.



PUTTING IT INTO PLAY At Carver Pump in Muscatine, IA, what started as a teeny Blue Zones Project-inspired garden plot next to the lunch room has blossomed into five garden beds bursting with strawberries, radishes, garlic, spinach, squash, zucchini, and more. Employees take the crops home to enjoy, and throughout each harvest season, there’s a potluck. “All the gardeners make a dish from the produce,” says Aron Rutin, an engineering manager who spearheaded the project. “We provide recipes too. We wanted to encourage eating right, and we did, but there’s more to it—when people need a break, they go to the garden to reduce stress and talk to others. It’s been fantastic.”

YOUR BLUE ZONES FRESH START Begin with just one plant-based meal a week and then incorporate more. You can also boost the veggies in your regular meals, says Connie Diekman, R.D., director of university nutrition at Washington University in St. Louis. For instance, when making a stew, use less meat than usual and add more produce—and (bonus!) toss in some veggies that are new to you.