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## Life in the Blue Zone

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Learning a new language helps preserve mental sharpness.

Surround yourself with people who have a healthy lifestyle.

## Life in the Blue Zone

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

The world's longevity all-stars live healthy, active lives well into their 90s and 100s. Yes, they not only live longer, but they also retain their vitality well into old age. Places where there exists a high percentage of centenarians in the population are called "Blue Zones." Longevity experts identified four Blue Zones in the world—Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, California; and the Nicoya peninsula in Costa Rica. Their longevity secrets were discovered not in pills or surgery but in the everyday things that they do, such as the foods they eat and the company they keep.

In the last chapter of his book, *The Blue Zone*, Dan Buettner describes a number of common features that characterize people living in the Blue Zones. The inhabitants of these areas engage in low-intensity physical activity as part of their usual work routine. This includes a combination of aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities to ensure good body balance. All centenarians were noted to walk every day.

Longevity all-stars also did not overeat. They ate to satisfy hunger rather than eating until they felt full. They typically ate nutrient-dense foods rather than calorie-dense foods. It was noted that the Okinawan stir-fried tofu and greens has the same volume as a hamburger and fries, but the Okinawan meal has only one-fifth the calories. In the Blue Zones, the biggest meal of the day is typically eaten during the first half of the day and typically plant-based foods are eaten. They often eat food from their own gardens rather than processed foods, soda pop or salty snacks. Whole grains, beans (or tofu) and garden vegetables are the cornerstone of all Blue Zone diets.

Of all the centenarians interviewed, Dan says there was not a single grump in the whole bunch. Inhabitants of the



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Blue Zones were happy people, possessing a strong sense of purpose and a clear goal in life, giving them fulfillment and meaning. People who make it to 100 were seen to exude a sense of serenity. They have time periods where they slow down, unwind and de-stress. Meditation allowed the mind to get rid of incessant chatter in the head. The most successful centenarians also put families first. They make family time a real priority.

Healthy centenarians everywhere possess faith and participate in a spiritual community that fosters social networks and connectedness. Religion typically encourages positive expectations that improve health. People normally relinquish the stress of everyday life to a higher power.

Dan encourages the reader to surround themselves with people who share the same Blue Zone values. It is easier, he says, to adopt good health habits when you hang out with people who practice those things. By adopting the lifestyle habits of Blue Zone inhabitants we also can live longer and improve the quality of our lives.

Winston J. Craig, Ph.D., RD, is a professor of nutrition at Andrews University.