FIND YOUR TRIBE

by **KIM PAINTER**

Take a walk alone and you get some exercise. Take a walk with a friend—or a group of friends—and you get something more.

"When you walk, you talk, and you never know where that will lead," says Deborah Woller, 62, a retiree who lives in Naples, Florida.

One place it's likely to lead is to more walks, with all their physical and mental health benefits.

The same can be said for sharing a healthy meal with a friend or working with like-minded folks on a soul-lifting volunteer project. When you do it together, you are more likely to keep doing it, social and behavior scientists say.

And that's just one reason that large, supportive social networks are linked with greater health and longevity—and that loneliness is linked with everything from runny noses to premature death.

So it's not surprising that many experts worry about a long-term trend: Americans seem less connected than they used to be. In 1985, an average U.S. adult had three close confidants with whom he or she could discuss "important matters," according to a government survey. By 2004, that number had dropped to two. It has remained that low since then, says Matthew Brashears, an associate professor of sociology at the University of South Carolina.

While that might not seem like a big drop, "it means you have fewer people backing you up," he says. Confidants can be family members, he notes, but the decline is most pronounced among non-family

connections—the friends, neighbors, co-workers, and other community contacts that are part of a rich social network.

Researchers are not quite sure why this is happening, but they believe that job instability and geographic mobility play roles. The influence of the Internet, for good and ill, is only now starting to get serious scrutiny.

What is clear is that a lot of us could use a few more good, healthy friendships.

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ENTER THE BLUE ZONES

Back in 2004, a writer named Dan Buettner got the assignment of a lifetime: *National Geographic* asked him to travel the world to learn the secrets of the world's longest-living cultures in areas the magazine dubbed Blue Zones. Buettner and his team visited Okinawa, Japan; the Italian island of Sardinia; the Greek island of Ikaria; Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula; and the Seventh-day Adventists of Loma Linda, California.

The result was a best-selling book, *The Blue Zones: 9 Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who Live the Longest.* As the title suggests, Buettner and his team found nine things those people do similarly, including eating lots of plants and not spending very much time sitting around. They also found that these groups tended to have strong personal ties within their families and their communities.

But the book, updated in 2012, was only the beginning.

Since its initial publication, the Blue Zones lessons have been translated into health projects in 37 communities in nine states. The projects are backed by Healthways, a health-promotion company based in Franklin, Tennessee. Working with local governments, insurers, and others, the local projects urge grocery stores and restaurants to offer healthier foods, nudge planners to approve more movement-friendly sidewalks and bike lanes, and ask citizens to connect with one another in health-promoting ways.

The idea is to find "the right tribe," people who will join and support you in taking up and maintaining healthy habits, says Blue Zones vice president Michael Acker. Social connection is not just part of the program, he says: "This is the foundation, the base of the pyramid. It supports everything else."

Blue Zone residents are urged to join groups that walk together, get together for healthy potluck dinners, or engage in group volunteer work. The groups are dubbed *moais* (pronounced mow-eyes), after social groups that Buettner discovered in Okinawa. The Okinawan friendship groups are composed of people who may know each other for a lifetime and depend upon one another for social, emotional, and even financial support.

In U.S. Blue Zones communities, moais are not solely for lifelong friends. In fact, they welcome newcomers. That's how Woller, the Naples retiree, ended up in a walking group that she says has changed her life for the better.

A few years ago, the divorced mother of four grown children was living alone in Wisconsin when a fall on the ice led to hip replacement surgery. That was a "shocking and shattering" experience that convinced her that she needed to shake up her life, she says. She moved to Florida, determined to adopt a more active and connected lifestyle.

Naples is a Blue Zones city, and soon after moving there, Woller heard about moais during a presentation at her church.

"I knew that's where I was going to meet people like me who wanted to move more," Woller says. "I knew that would be my social club, the right tribe."

Her walking group, based at her condominium community, includes not just year-round residents, but also folks who live elsewhere for part of the year. That's a lifestyle difference that could make it hard for the neighbors to stay in touch. But the group stays connected by meeting every Saturday morning for a 2.5-mile walk.

The benefits are physical and mental, Woller says: "There's nothing better for the human heart than to share an activity."

Julie Short, a 62-year-old retired teacher, had a similar experience when she and her husband Gayln, 65, moved from Duluth to the Blue Zones city of Albert Lea, Minnesota. The couple made the move to be near their son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. But they realized they would need some new social ties to thrive in their new hometown.

"There typically are two ways to make connections when you are an adult: through your work and through your children in the school system," Short says. But as retirees with grown children, she says, "we had neither of those."

So, like Woller, the Shorts started by joining a church and getting involved in volunteer causes. But they also signed up for a potluck moai and, later, a walking group.

Short says she has always been active, "but it is so much nicer when you have someone to walk and talk with." She says her walking group has become a key support system. "We share each other's triumphs and each other's problems. We pray for each other. We socialize outside of the walking moai. These are people we can call up any time," Short says. "I've told my husband that I feel closer to some of these people than I do to some of the people I've known my whole life."

Moais also can help longtime residents make new connections. Consider Jean Eaton, 65, the owner of a concrete overlay company and a former mayor of Albert Lea. She met the Shorts and other neighbors who might have remained strangers when she joined a potluck moai. Thanks to the group, she has learned to love more vegetables and to follow what Blue Zones calls the "80 percent rule"—ending her meals when she feels 80 percent full. The dinner meetings also are a lot of fun, she says. "We drink our wine (also a Blue Zones suggestion) and have lots of laughs."

THE POWER OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Research done on the U.S. Blue Zones Project communities does not separately break out the effects of the moais. But there are signs that the project as a whole is improving lives. For example, Naples was named the U.S. city with the highest overall well-being for the last two years in a Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index survey. And Albert Lea, which started participating back in 2009, has seen increases in walking and biking, higher sales of fruits and vegetables, lower soda sales, and decreased employer health costs (thanks largely to smoking cessation efforts), according to a recent progress report.

There is broader research that suggests the focus on human connections will pay off. For example, studies suggest that healthy habits, including eating small portions and maintaining healthy weights, can spread from person to person, almost like infectious diseases.

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Julie Short (pictured above with her walking group)

Research also suggests that loneliness can literally make us sick. People with weak social ties are more likely to become disabled or depressed. One recent study even found that lonely people reported worse cold symptoms. And it gets worse. Researchers from Brigham Young University reviewed 148 studies and found that social isolation was strongly associated with premature death, packing a wallop similar to that of smoking or inactivity.

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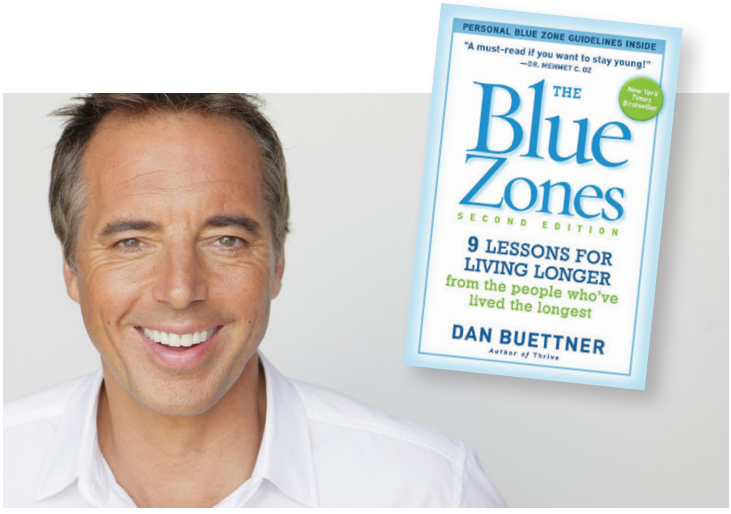
"That science is very strong," says Burt Uchino, a professor of psychology at the University of Utah. He says it's not clear how social support extends lives, but one theory is that "having a wide social network, being connected to a lot of people, gives us motivation to take care of ourselves." Good relationships—setting aside those that are troubled or especially complicated—also seem to reduce stress, which in turn reduces blood pressure and harmful inflammation while boosting immunity, he says.

Uchino says it's less clear how to turn that science into interventions that improve health and well-being.

The Blue Zones projects may be doing that, but researchers and communities around the country are trying other approaches, too, says Dr. Dianne Liebel, an assistant professor of nursing at the University of Rochester. Interventions include everything from enlisting gas meter readers and community volunteers to look in on isolated residents to training medical professionals to check on their patients' social safety nets as routinely as they check blood pressure, she says. There's also potential in online social networking, she says, though studies in that area are in early stages.

And, of course, almost every community has good, old-fashioned YMCAs, senior centers, service clubs, and other places where people can meet to do good for themselves and, often, their communities, says Acker, the Blue Zones vice president. V



Dan Buettner
Author of *The Blue Zones*

MAKE YOUR OWN BLUE ZONE

Want to turn your life into a personal Blue Zone? Here are nine ways:

MOVE NATURALLY.
You don't need to run marathons. Instead, build movement into your day: walk, garden, or take the stairs. Get rid of your riding lawn mower.

FIND YOUR PURPOSE.
Have a reason to get up in the morning—something that makes a difference.

DOWNSHIFT.
Take time to relieve stress. Enjoy a happy hour or a long meal with friends, meditate, practice yoga, or pray.

FOLLOW THE "80 PERCENT RULE."
Stop eating when you feel 80 percent full.

EAT WITH A PLANT SLANT.
Eat more fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, and beans—and less meat.

DRINK RED WINE (IN MODERATION).
That means having one or two drinks a day, preferably with food, family, and friends. (And note, at least one Blue Zone group, the Seventh-day Adventists, does just fine without alcohol.)

BELONG.
Participate in a spiritual community. If you don't have a particular faith, explore your options with an open mind.

PUT LOVED ONES FIRST.
Make family time a priority. Try to eat together at least once a day.

FIND THE "RIGHT TRIBE."
Spend more time with friends who support your healthy habits.

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