

## The Blue Zone Phenomenon

**Author: Chrisoula Adonopoulos**

There are currently five well-documented regions in the world known as 'Blue Zones'. Blue Zone is a term that first appeared in the November 2005 National Geographic magazine cover story titled "The Secrets of Living Longer" by Dan Buettner. Blue Zones are essentially hotspots for longevity. What is even more interesting is that the people who live in these areas not only live longer – having the highest numbers of centenarians per capita – they are generally happier and healthier than the rest of us.

can be found in:

The Blue Zones are Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, United States of America; Nicoya Peninsula, Republic of Costa Rica; and Icaria, Greece.

The people living in these zones – though vastly distinct from zone to zone in infinite ways – generally have nine things in common:

1. Their physical activity is moderate and regular during waking hours. (They generally don't sit in one spot for longer than an hour before getting up and moving about for at least a few minutes in perfectly natural ways. They walk, cycle, hike, do a few basic physical functions that don't require gym memberships or above average endurance.)
2. They feel a sense of life purpose and responsibility. (This is that inner drive which makes one want to wake up each morning. It can be anything from going to work to provide for one's family or self, to maintaining the household or volunteering at a social or charitable institution, to caring for your pooch and pottering in your garden... basically, whatever floats your boat.)
3. They prioritise their circle of family and friends above other concerns where possible and feasible.
4. They are social. (I'm not talking Facebook chats and hurried phone calls. They physically and meaningfully interact with their families, friends, co-workers and community face-to-face. This applies across generations. Neither the kids nor the elderly are pushed out of sight and thus out of mind.)
5. They are spiritual or religious. (They actually make a point of spending time appreciating nature, or attending the theological/religious/mystical gathering of their choice at least once a week.)
6. They practice moderate alcohol intake. (Think one glass of red wine with dinner, not distilled spirits at your local bar till you feel buzzed, or a few beers in front of the TV till you're ready to hit the sack.)
7. Their caloric intake is moderate. (They stop eating when they feel satiated rather than full. Basically, they do not overeat, and they don't go crazy on sugars and other additives that confuse the body into insulin rollercoaster rides that promote hunger pangs, which in turn cause a person to reach for another sugar or salt-loaded snack.)
8. They are semi-vegetarian and almost all the grains, legumes, nuts, tubers, fruit and vegetables they eat are unprocessed. (Meat and other animal proteins account for only 5% to 10% of overall caloric intake. This includes fish. Meat is a side dish, not the main course.)
9. They do what they can to live low-stress lives. (The nice thing about this last point is that all the above points are stress relievers when you get right down to it.)

So, imagine living for a century...

Now, imagine if you could make it to that three-digit goal and be healthy and happy.

Sounds like a pipe dream to most of us. It is... Currently, according to the World Health Organization, the average South African's life expectancy is 60 to 67 years. There are many factors that play into this number, but most causes of death boil down to lifestyle choices that are largely within the individual's control. In fact, according to Stats SA, 88.8% of deaths that took place in South Africa during 2016 were due to natural causes.

---

The ten leading causes of death in South Africa were as follows:

1. Tuberculosis (6.5%)
2. Diabetes mellitus (5.5%)
3. Other forms of heart disease (5.1%)
4. Cerebrovascular diseases (5.1%)
5. HIV (4.8%)
6. Hypertensive disease (4.4%)
7. Influenza and pneumonia (4.3%)
8. Other viral diseases (3.6%)
9. Ischemic heart diseases (2.8%)
10. Chronic lower respiratory diseases (2.8%)

Looking at the above data, it's reasonable to assume that improved lifestyle – exercise, meaningful social interactions and diet in particular – can reduce most, if not all, of these percentages. In short, and realistically, the average lifespan of South Africans can potentially be extended by 10 to 20 years without medical intervention if we just eat right (think fresh vegetables, legumes and unprocessed meat), get our blood circulating with moderate, regular physical activity, and spend our downtime engaging in more activities and with people who matter to us.

As a side note: Most of these Blue Zones have truly meagre medical care, and the communities are what a great number of us would term well-underprivileged. They grow their own food and eat what's in season. Most cannot conceive of those ready-made foodstuffs like fast food and microwave meals we all too often turn to for nourishment.