

Blue Zones and Healthy Aging

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Canadians are living longer than ever before. The 2021 census showed that there are almost 13,000 Canadians aged 100 or older. Life expectancy for males is now 79.8 years while for females it is 84.1. This is a striking change in less than 100 years. During the 20th century, life expectancy increased from 50 years to almost 80.

As a result of this increased longevity, there is more concern with healthy aging. Although several factors influence how well we age, healthy aging starts long before the last decades of life. Improvements in people's health (including brain and cardiovascular) can largely be attributed to our society's way of life over the life span.

Researchers have identified six pillars of brain health that can enhance our lives as we age. The six pillars are fitness and exercise, social activity and supportive relationships, mental stimulation, good nutrition, stress management, and sufficient sleep.¹ We now know that dementia can be reduced by as much as thirty percent with a healthy lifestyle over the lifetime.²

Canada can learn a great deal about healthy aging from Blue Zones, places in the world where people live a long time and have quality lives as older adults. It is not unusual in Blue Zones for 100-year-olds to be active in community life. There are five blue zones world-wide; Icaria, Greece; Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya,

Costa Rica; Loma, California. Findings from Blue Zone research shows that there are several things that people do that enhance healthy aging:³

- Move naturally – people find ways to move all day long, every twenty minutes. No gym workouts, but regular walking, yoga, and dance.
- Right outlook – people have a strong sense of purpose, and they take time to downshift, with meditation, napping, or relaxation.
- Eat wisely – people eat mostly plant-based diets, small helpings, occasional meat, poultry, or fish.
- Socially connect – people focus on loved ones, sense of belonging, and are part of positive, supportive social networks.

Montreal psychologist Susan Pinker looked at many factors to explain people's longevity in Sardinia, one of the Blue Zones. She concluded that *supportive relationships and social integration* were the most important.

As Pinker says, “We are happier, healthier, and more resistant to disease and despair if we satisfy the need for meaningful human contact.”⁴ The lesson is clear: *to stay healthy, build relationships and stay connected with life in your community, whether through work, volunteering, or participating in clubs, community associations, or your neighbourhood.*

In Blue Zones, people are nudged into habits that enhance healthy aging. The focus is on supportive environments. If everyone in your network is active, the chances are very high that you will be as well. If your neighbourhood and community is walkable and easy to access, you will tend to get out. And you will not find a long-term care institution in a Blue Zone. Younger people support elders who require assistance. In Sardinia, unlike Canada, *respect increases with age, creating natural age-friendly communities.*

There are four implications from the insights from the Blue Zones.

First, we need to be vigilant against ageism, which continues to be prevalent in Canada. Consider the limited resources for home and community care for seniors, and the continual growth of long-term care institutions, even though elders have been adamant against them.

Second, we need to increase prevention approaches. As one example, when people turn 65 in Denmark, they receive a visit from a health professional, who takes time to understand your situation and help you plan what you may need as you age. Combined with expansive home care means far fewer Danish citizens are placed in nursing homes.

Third, we need to be much more intentional about nurturing inclusive communities. This includes improving city design and assisting apartments, condos, and neighbourhoods to create supportive social connections. Neighbours want to feel a sense of belonging, but often do not know how to initiate the process of engagement.

Fourth, municipalities and the province need to have an ‘age friendly lens’ on all their initiatives, as the Waterloo Age Friendly Community Committee has been encouraging for the last decade. At the recent Global Wellness Summit, macro-level policies (such as reducing poverty, expanding affordable housing, and reducing loneliness) were identified as being vital to age-friendly communities.⁵

A culture that promotes healthy aging and age friendly communities will reduce ageism and segregation of elders. These will not be easy to change, but as our society ages we must transform ageism and elder care. We can start by embracing the lessons from the Blue Zones and the implications from these insights.

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End Notes

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- ¹ Six Pillars of Brain Health (2022). *Mind Over Matter*. 15, p. 27. mom@womensbrainhealth.org
 - ² Sanjay Gupta (2021). *Keep Sharp: Build a better brain at any age*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
 - ³ Dan Buettner (2012). *The Blue Zones*. Second Edition. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic.
 - ⁴ Susan Pinker (2014). *The Village Effect: How face-to-face contact can make us healthier and happier*. Toronto: Vintage Canada. p.305
 - ⁵ Global Wellness Summit (2022). *Defining Wellness Policy*.