

## Longevity and Relational Health

Relational health, physical health and mental fitness are the important pillars of Wellbeing and a long healthy and happy life. Where should we place our limited resources of time, money, and energy? What should we prioritize?

Here is a list that can help us get started and gain perspective on the broad range of factors that create wellbeing.

What reduces your chances of dying the most? (or, increases your chance of living longer and happier?)

1. Weak ties (Dr Jillian Sandstrom))
2. Strong ties (Blue Zones + Harvard Men's Study)
3. Quit Smoking
4. Quit Drinking
5. Flu Vaccine
6. Cardio Rehab (if you've had an event)
7. Exercise (Movement is key, Blue Zone)
8. Lean vs Overweight (Plant slant, 80% rule, Blue Zone)
9. Hypertension (Stress Relief, Down shift Blue Zones, DASH Diet)
10. Clean Air

This research surprised me the most is that “weak ties” is the strongest health factor! Stronger even than “close ties” of family and close friends. Then I realized, weak ties lead over time, to becoming close ties, and both stimulate the social connectivity that down regulates our fight-or-flight and keeps us out of the danger zone.

I believe these lessons have not been prioritized in our Western culture. The old mantras of “go to the gym” or “lose weight”, are not found or emphasized in the Blue Zones, nor do you see them in Traditional Chinese Medicine. These “fixes” for healthy living are actually knee-jerk responses to our modern stress-filled lifestyles, that often in practice, create more stress.

The connection of close relationships and social integration accounts for the two top factors that reduce the risk of mortality. Social integration means how much you interact with people as you move through your day, including weak bonds. Rhetorically, Dr. Pinker asks: “Do you talk to the guy who every day makes you your coffee? Do you talk to the postman? Do you talk to the woman who walks by your house every day with her dog? Do you play bridge or poker, have a book club?” Along with close supportive relationships, casual daily interactions turn out to be “one of the strongest predictors of how long you'll live,” far greater than diet, exercise, and other factors we assume are more important.

Let's consider “relational health” in one culture that has one of the World's five blue zones and amazingly also regularly scores in the top 15 of the happiest countries in the world. What's going on in Costa Rica? What is it about their culture? Well...strong social support is one big reason. Costa Ricans tend to have strong social connections, both “weak ties” and “strong ties” which contribute to happiness and overall health. According to the World Happiness Report, Costa Rica ranks #1 for social support. Their healthy lifestyle tends to also prioritize healthy eating and physical activity, which are also strong contributors to a longer and healthier life. According to the Global Wellness Index, Costa Rica ranks #1 for healthy lifestyle. Costa Rican cuisine emphasizes a diet of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and is relatively low in saturated fat.

In Costa Rica's blue zones, the concepts of "Plan de Vida" and "Pura Vida" are often cited as key factors in promoting strong social ties and overall well-being, unique to Costa Rican culture.

"Plan de Vida" translates to "life plan" and refers to a sense of purpose and direction in life. In Blue Zones, people tend to have a clear sense of their values, priorities, and goals, which helps to guide their decisions and actions. This can lead to a greater sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in life, as well as a stronger connection to one's community and social networks.

"Pura Vida" is a popular phrase in Costa Rica that translates to "pure life." It embodies the country's laid-back and friendly culture, emphasizing positivity, gratitude, and enjoyment of life's simple pleasures. This attitude promotes a sense of contentment, optimism, and happiness, as well as a willingness to connect with others and form strong social ties. I've seen tense moments dissipate at the saying and remembering "pura vida."

Together, the concepts of Plan de Vida and Pura Vida contribute to a culture in Costa Rica's blue zones that values personal growth, community involvement, and social connection. By prioritizing these aspects of life, individuals can cultivate strong relationships and a sense of belonging, which contributes to the high happiness index ranking and longevity of residents in these areas. This may well be a cultural circuit breaker accounting for lower stress levels: Costa Rica is often cited as one of the least stressful countries in the world, with a laid-back culture and a relaxed pace of life. According to the World Happiness Report, Costa Rica also ranks #15 for positive emotions.

Overall, the combination of strong social support, healthy lifestyle, access to healthcare, low stress levels, and environmental factors may all unlock the secret to the high level of happiness and longevity, in us all.

*"We need to prioritize our social relationships like our life depends on it, because it does."*  
Dr. Holt-Lunstad

Work and research on the Blue Zones, by the Harvard Study of Adult Development, by Dr. Holt-Lunstad at Brigham and Young University, by Susan Pinker developmental psychologist, and by Gillian Sandstrom, Ph.D., has one thing in common: the research shows the importance of social ties and human connection in promoting health and happiness.

The experiential research from Blue Zones cultural wisdom distilled from hundreds if not thousands of years, to bodies of work from the social science and health research, all confirm the importance of prioritizing social bonds.

1. Weak ties
2. Strong ties (friends close, family closer)
3. Right tribe (Faith/civic based community)

Extensive research has demonstrated that good relational health creates better longevity than diet or even exercise!

Blue Zones research has identified several areas of the world where people live longer and healthier lives, and a common thread among these regions is the strength of social ties and community connections. The Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the longest-running studies of adult development in history, has found that close relationships are the key to health and happiness throughout life. Dr. Holt-Lunstad's research has demonstrated that social isolation and loneliness can have negative effects on health that are comparable to smoking and obesity. Susan Pinker has explored the importance of face-to-face interactions and social networks in promoting resilience and longevity, while Gillian Sandstrom has studied the impact of social interactions on happiness and well-being.

All this research points to the importance of social ties in promoting health and happiness and emphasizes the need for individuals to cultivate and maintain strong connections with others. Whether it's through family relationships, friendships, community involvement, or other forms of social engagement, the benefits of social ties are clear. By prioritizing social connection and building meaningful relationships, individuals can live longer, healthier, and happier lives.

- The longevity research into the Blue Zones shows that, of the nine factors common to all Blue Zones longevity, one-third are relational health skills.
- In the data of the 75-year Harvard Study of Adult Development, the primary lesson also confirms good relational health keeps us happier and healthier. Close relationships, the data indicates, are what keep people happy throughout their lives. The study found strong relationships to be far and away the strongest predictor of life satisfaction, and better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, wealth, fame, IQ, or even genes. And strong relationships are not only correlated with happiness, but with physical health, longevity, and financial success, too.
- **Dr. Holt-Lunstad at BYU** has researched hundreds of studies and tens of thousands of people of all ages and her conclusion is that having more, and better relationships is associated with better life outcomes. People who are more socially connected live longer. Dr. Holt-Lunstad has found convincing evidence that having more, and better relationships is associated with better health while, fewer and poorer quality relationships is associated with poorer health. This is true regardless of gender, age, or geography; people who are more socially connected live longer.
- **Susan Pinker is a writer** who researches and describes how face-to-face contact is crucial for learning, happiness, resilience, and longevity.
- **Gillian Sandstrom, Ph.D. is a senior lecturer in the Psychology** of Kindness, researches the link of participants who engaged in a weak tie, an everyday social interaction by smiling, making eye contact and having a brief conversation, (thus treating them like a weak social tie), experienced greater feelings of well-being and belonging.

**It makes sense to take stock of our relational health skills, and to understand our blind spots in these areas and their impact on our health.**

1. **Right Tribe.** Creating and nourishing social circles that support healthy behaviors is crucial. We know from the Framingham study that smoking, obesity, happiness, and even loneliness are contagious, and other research demonstrates that behaviors like viruses flow through social circles. Finding new playmates, such as recreational groups around golf, tennis, pickleball, etc. gives us both exercise and develops friendships. Friend groups around book clubs, bridge, poker, choirs, etc. all share a common interest that becomes an opportunity to develop and deepen friendships.
2. **Faith-based community.** Belonging to a civic- or faith-based organization, creates strong social relationships, with a framework of shared beliefs.
3. **Strong Ties.** Close supportive relationships with family and close personal friends, gives us a conscious and unconscious support network of those who have our backs in a crisis, lend us money, talk-through anguished feelings, support us through illness or surgeries. Along with close supportive relationships, casual daily interactions turn out to be one of the strongest predictors of how long we'll live.
4. **Loved Ones First.** Caring for children is important on many levels. Nourishing this primary relational unit, has many benefits that support us in the present and that can reflect on us later in our lives. Let's work to keep our close relationships, closer. Fresh evidence shows that these in-person friendships create a

biological force field against disease and decline. It's not the number of close friends you have, or whether you're in a committed relationship, but the quality of our close relationships that matter.

5. **Weak Ties.** A fascinating predictor of longevity that's quite surprising, even more than "strong ties". Casual daily interactions turn out to be "one of the strongest predictors of how long you'll live," far greater than diet, exercise, and other factors we assume are more important. This social integration means how much do we interact with people as we move through our day, weak bonds. Such as "Do you talk to the guy who every day makes you your coffee? Do you talk to the postman? Do you talk to the woman who walks by your house every day with her dog?"

### **Blue Zone Power 9 Principles**

*Cultural wisdom proven over hundreds, if not thousands of years, researched from 5 of the healthiest cultures around the world, condensed into nine healthy lifestyle habits*

#### **1. MOVE NATURALLY**

#### **2. KNOW YOUR PURPOSE**

The Okinawans call it "Ikigai" and the Nicoyans call it "plan de vida;" for both it translates to "why I wake up in the morning."

#### **3. DOWN SHIFT (STRESS)**

Cut inflammation, stress-relieving strategy that works for you and make it a routine. Cultivate the Rest and relax response, Rest and Digest, PSNS. (Switch-on healing and detoxification.)

#### **4. 80% RULE**

Saying "Hara hachi bu," the 2,500-year-old Confucian mantra, before meals

#### **5. PLANT SLANT (BIOME/FIBER) (China Study, Okinawan Program)**

While most people in the Blue Zones areas only consume small amounts of meat on rare occasions, all of them eat a rich array of fresh fruits and vegetables, which are packed with disease-fighting nutrients.

#### **6. WINE @ FIVE (not for everyone obviously)**

Limit your daily intake to one glass for women and two glasses for men.

#### **7. RIGHT TRIBE**

To create social circles that support healthy behaviors. Ikarians enjoy tight-knit communities that socialize frequently, while Okinawans build "moai" groups of five friends that commit to each other for life. Research from the Framingham Studies shows that smoking, obesity, happiness and even loneliness are contagious.

#### **8. BELONG**

Faith-based community. Belong to a civic- or faith-based organization since strong social relationships can add years to your life.

## **9. LOVED ONES FIRST**

Caring for children is important for many reasons, too, and many people in the Blue Zones areas go out of their way to invest time and love their children to ensure they'll be more likely to care for them when the time comes.

### **One of the longest-running studies on happiness and longevity.**

The project has followed 724 men (including JFK) since they were teenagers in 1938. (Approximately 60 men, now in their 90s,) the longest-running study on happiness. The Harvard Study of Adult Development identified 3 factors that create longevity and happiness. The extensive research found that specific traits and behaviors were linked with increased levels of happiness across the entire group. Those in the studies were chosen from poor and rich communities in Boston.

Stay connected. They found a strong association between happiness and close relationships like spouses, family, friends, and social circles.

**1. Social connections** are good for us, and loneliness kills.

**2. Keeping your close relationships, closer.** It's not the number of close friends you have, or whether you're in a committed relationship, but the quality of your close relationships that matters.

**3. Good relationships** don't just affect our bodies; they protect our brains. The same study also showed that being in a securely attached relationship to another person in your 80's is protective, that the people who are in relationships where they feel they can count on the other person in times of need, those people's memories stay sharper and longer. "Those in the study that were the happiest in retirement were those that actively worked to replace workmates with new playmates" according to psychiatrist Robert Waldinger, the director of a 75-year-old Harvard study on adult development. The research found three primary lessons about relationships.

People who are more socially connected to family, to friends, and to community are happier, they're physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected. And the experience of loneliness turns out to be toxic. The quality of close relationships matters. It turns out that living during chronic conflict is bad for our health. Relationships with people who have our backs provides protection for our brains, and people in relationships where they feel they can't count on the other person, experience earlier memory decline.

### **What are the qualities we need to cultivate to nourish warm relationships around us?**

It turns out there are eight emotionally intelligent actions to cultivate better relationships. Simply put, great relationships are built on trust. The Harvard study identifies what you can do to cultivate stronger, deeper trust-- leading to more meaningful relationships.

1. Communicate
2. Be authentic.
3. Be helpful.
4. Be honest.

5. Be dependable.
6. Show appreciation.
7. Show empathy.
8. Apologize

**"We need to prioritize our social relationships like our life depends on it, because it does."**

Research at *Brigham Young* by Dr. Juliana Holt-Lunstad's researched tens of thousands of middle-aged people, in a series of studies, over 7 years. How often they visited Doctor, studying their diet exercise, alcohol, etc. all were studied in the research of Brigham Young Dr. Juliana Holt-Lunstad's. She is focused on the long-term health effects of social connection and her work has been seminal in the recognition of social isolation and loneliness as risk factors for early mortality.

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"Not only are we at the highest recorded rate of living alone across the entire century, but we're at the highest recorded rates ever on the planet," said Tim Smith, co-author of the study. "With loneliness on the rise, we are predicting a possible loneliness epidemic in the future." Social isolation exceeds the health risks associated with obesity, inactivity, excessive drinking, air pollution and smoking over 15 cigarettes a day, according to [a 2010 review of 148 studies](#) by psychology professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad of Brigham Young University.

Dr. Holt-Lunstad has found strong evidence that having more, and better relationships is associated with better health while fewer and poorer quality relationships is associated with poorer health. This is true regardless of gender, age, or geography; **people who are more socially connected live longer**. Lacking social connection significantly increases the risk of heart attack, stroke, and Type II Diabetes. Social isolation slows wound healing, increases risk of dementia and Alzheimer's, and even increases the rate of cellular aging.

Air pollution increases your risk of early death by 5%, obesity by 18%, physical inactivity (not exercising) by 22%. **Loneliness increases your risk of early death by 26%**, (Holt-Lunstad, 2015 & 2010) yet poor social interaction were the top predictors of death. The study analyzed data from a variety of health studies. Altogether, the sample included more than 3 million participants from studies that included data for loneliness, social isolation, and living alone.

Previous research from Holt-Lunstad and Smith puts the heightened risk of mortality from loneliness in the same category as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and being an alcoholic. Those findings were referenced in a campaign Oprah launched called [#JustSayHello](#). Social connections also have a biological impact — a lack of proximity to trusted individuals can trigger a heightened physiological state of alert and threat, which then can lead to signaling increases in heart rate and blood pressure, circulating stress hormones or inflammation. When inflammation is chronically heightened, it "can put us at increased risk for a number of chronic illnesses," Holt-Lunstad said, "but also can increase your risk for mental health issues such as depression, and cognitive health issues, such as mild cognitive impairment, dementia and Alzheimer's disease."

Connection in the form of close relationships and social integration accounts for the two top factors that reduce the risk of mortality. Social integration means how much you interact with people as you move through your day, including weak bonds. Rhetorically, Dr. Pinker asks: "Do you talk to the guy who every day makes you your coffee? Do you talk to the postman? Do you talk to the woman who walks by your house every day with her dog? Do you play bridge or poker, have a book club?" Along with close supportive relationships, casual daily

interactions turn out to be “one of the strongest predictors of how long you’ll live,” far greater than diet, exercise and other factors we assume are more important.

Now that we spend, on average, more time online than on any other activity (around 11 hours a day), Dr. Pinker dug deeper to see if connecting online is just face-to-face connection. The short answer is no. She says: “Face-to-face contact releases a whole cascade of neurotransmitters, and like a vaccine, they protect you now in the present and well into the future. So simply making eye contact with somebody, shaking hands, giving somebody a high-five is enough to release oxytocin, which increases your level of trust, and it lowers your cortisol levels. So, it lowers your stress. And dopamine is generated, which gives us a little high and it kills pain.”

Dr. Pinker concludes that women may live longer than men because they prioritize face-to-face relationships and develop them over their lifetimes. She states, “fresh evidence shows that these in-person friendships create a biological force field against disease and decline” and calls for each of us to do what we can to build “in-person interaction into our cities, into our workplaces, into our agendas [because it] bolsters the immune system, sends feel-good hormones surging through the bloodstream and brain and helps us live longer. I call this building your village and building it and sustaining it is a matter of life and death.”

You might imagine each of your relationships as a bridge you build between yourself and another person. Any strong bridge must be built on a solid foundation--and for relationships, that foundation is trust. Without trust, there can be no love, no friendship, no lasting connection between people. But where there is trust, there is motivation to act. If you trust someone to look after your best interests, you will do almost anything that person asks of you.

**Health Risks of Loneliness.** There is strong evidence that many adults aged 50 and older are socially isolated or lonely in ways that put their health at risk. Recent studies found that:

- Social isolation significantly increased a person’s risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.<sup>1</sup>
- Social isolation was associated with about a 50% increased risk of dementia.<sup>1</sup>
- Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) were associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.<sup>1</sup>
- Loneliness was associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.