

Walking groups help people with social connections

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Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Get ready to lace up your walking shoes for a Blue Zones Project event Oct. 1.

The health and longevity initiative is hosting a walking event at North Collier Regional Park to spark interest in walking groups, known as a walking Moai.

The word Moai comes from Japan

and means “meeting for a common purpose.” A walking Moai is one where people get together regularly to walk together and forge social connections.

“Our hope is that anyone who is interested in starting a walking group, either at North Collier park or elsewhere, will come out to walk that day and learn how to get started. Anyone from the community can attend, bring friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc.,” Kate Walter, a Blue Zones Project spokeswoman,

said in an email.

The walking event on Monday, Oct. 1 will be from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. with everyone meeting in front of the administration building. People can sign up until Sept. 30, or the day before the event, at RSVP at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/blue-zones-project-moai-launch-tickets-49347404415>.

The event is free and open to anyone, and capacity is around 200. There will be a presentation about the Blue Zones

Project and the value of being part of a walking group, she said.

The Blue Zones project was introduced to Southwest Florida in 2015 based on the travels of Dan Buettner, who identified communities worldwide where people share lifestyle traits and live to 100 or older. He wrote a New York Times bestseller about the nine principles of longevity.

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The “Power Nine” include moving naturally by being physically active, eating a plant-slant diet, knowing your purpose in life, taking time to relax, having a healthy social network and putting loved ones first. A popular activity is to form walking groups at work-sites, which gets people active and engaging with one another.

The NCH Healthcare System is underwriting the costs of the project locally, where consultants from ShareCare, a partner with the national Blue Zones Project in Minneapolis, works with communities that are pursuing the Blue Zones’ lifestyles.

Besides the physical exercise of being part of a walking group, the bonds formed with others helps to improve one’s sense of self.

“We know that loneliness can be even more deadly

than smoking in some cases and so we want to encourage people to get out and move naturally and connect socially with new people,” Walter said.

To date, more than 187 businesses have adopted Blue Zones Project principles to make changes in daily practices that promote better health, such as substituting fresh fruit for calorie-laden snacks, at meetings, with the idea that the better practices become habit.

Many residential communities that are recognized by the Blue Zones have formed walking groups.

Gail Smith, 72, chairwoman of the Blue Zones committee at Village Walk, said Village Walk has an active walking group in which people in their 60s to 80s get together twice a week.

“We started our walking group long before the Blue Zones came along, and when the Blue Zones came in we got interested,” she said. “We keep documentation and we hit 10,000 miles last year. We had a big party.”

Smith said the walking group and the Blue Zones has prompted social potlucks with healthy selections.

“It’s just really fun,” she said.