

Belong ... You'll Live Longer and Better

YOU MAY KNOW BY NOW THAT Southwest Florida has been selected to participate in the Blue Zones Project, a community initiative to help improve well-being and facilitate everyday healthy choices. That means that hospitals, restaurants, faith-based organizations and homeowner's associations will work with people to lower rates of obesity, smoking and chronic diseases, and to make our area a healthier and happier one.

The Blue Zones Project is based on nine core principles, known as the "Power 9," that were gleaned from areas in the world where people live the longest and healthiest lives. One of the principles is "Belong."

Research on these areas showed that belonging to a faith-based community contributed to longevity. In fact, attending faith-based services four times per month increased life expectancy by four to 14 years. It made no difference what denomination the group was.

Deb Millsap, executive director of the Blue Zones Project for Southwest Florida, speculates about why belonging helps us live longer and better: "It could be because people who attend services often have strong social networks—the fellowship you gain by

going weekly. Also, sometimes having faith in something can be a stress reliever," she says. "Faith, or believing in something greater than ourselves, takes some of the weight of daily liv-

and our self-worth.

This principle dovetails with two other "Power 9" tenets—surrounding yourself with people who support positive behavior, and putting loved ones and family first.

If you are looking to connect in a faith-based community, you may want to start by asking neighbors you like where they attend services. If you belong to a religion but haven't been to a service in a while, look online for a nearby house of worship and give it a try. A good fit is important—in terms of the congregation and clergy—so don't be afraid to keep trying if you don't feel comfortable in one place.

Even if you have unpleasant memories of worship services from childhood, you may want to try again. "It could be a whole different experience today than when you were young," Millsap says.

She summarizes the overarching Blue Zones philosophy this way: "Think about evaluating any choice you make in your day. Ask yourself, 'Did that enhance my well-being, or did it have a negative impact?' And in this time, when so much polarizes us, this is something we can all work on together—how to raise well-being in our community." **NH**



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ing off of our shoulders." Experts say a feeling of belonging helps us to increase our well-being, our self-esteem