

Why Social Support Groups Matter

One of the five original Blue Zones—the identified locations across the globe where people live the longest lives—is Okinawa, Japan. In Okinawa, locals call their social groups “moais.” Moais are groups of five to eight people who meet regularly to walk or share a meal. The groups provide social support and have been shown to promote health and well-being.

Deb Logan, executive director of the Blue Zones Project—Southwest Florida, says, “These are friends they can count on during good and bad times. Moais provide a stress-shedding security of knowing that there is always someone there for them.”

Twenty years ago, the average American had three best friends—friends who would celebrate the good times, provide support, and also set another friend straight when he or she was off-course, Logan explains. Today, we have an average of one and a half such true friends. That decrease in friends has brought on more loneliness and isolation, conditions associated not only with decreased quality of life but also with decreased quantity of years. Lisa Berkman, Director of the Center for Population and Development Studies at Harvard’s Chan School of Public Health, studied social connectedness and longevity over a nine-year period and found that individuals with the

most social connectedness lived longer.

Dr. Robert Butler, the late founding Director of the National Institute on Aging, concluded, “I think a superior social support network is one of the reasons women live longer than men. They have better and stronger systems of support than men. They are much more



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engaged with and helpful to each other and more willing and able to express feelings, including grief and anger and other aspects of intimacy.”

So how can you start to see these benefits? Logan has these suggestions:

- Identify friends and family members who support your well-being and whom you can truly depend upon.
- Spend a few minutes a day with friends or people in your social support group.
- Be likeable. The easier you are to be around, the more people will want to be around you.

The Blue Zones program can help, too. Lyn LeBlanc is a walk leader at Riverwoods Plantation, a 55-and-older community in Estero that implemented the moai program after a Blue Zones representative spoke on-site. Upward of 56 people were interested in joining, so the people broke into six groups. LeBlanc walks daily at 9 a.m., inside the community center, for 45 minutes to an hour. She walks about 15 miles per week

and loves the social and physical aspects the walking provides. “We have a sense of camaraderie in the group,” she says. “It’s a way to connect and get to know people. For me, it’s been a great way to transition from working to retirement and helps me have a healthy attitude toward aging.”

You can get involved in a walking, potluck or restaurant moai through the Blue Zones Project—Southwest Florida. To learn more about how to join a moai, go to southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com or call (239) 624-2312. **NH**