

10 questions - Dan Buettner

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Dan Buettner: "Chronic grumpiness will take eight years off your life."

LONGEVITY expert Dan Buettner, 50, on the futility of gyms, the joy of Blundstones and the self-destructiveness of grumps.

You've devoted much of your life to studying so-called "Blue Zones", the regions where people live the longest, such as Okinawa, Sardinia and Costa Rica. What's the common thread?

It's amazing how neither exercise nor diet figures in their lives. None of the longest-lived people ran marathons or pumped iron. They live exactly as their grandparents before them – surrounded by family and friends. They drank wine; they partied. They wouldn't recognise a vitamin or supplement if you put it in front of them.

Most us only want to live long lives if we can remain active and healthy. Does exercise really help stave off conditions like arthritis and osteoporosis?

Exercise, from a public health perspective, is an unmitigated failure. The world's longest-lived people live in environments that nudge them into more movement. They don't use power tools, they do their own yard work, they grow a garden. Walking is the only way proven to stave off cognitive decline – it works.

In your new book, *Thrive*, you write that money does make us happy – but only to the point where we have enough to easily pay the bills. Is consumerism a trap?

We need food, shelter, health care and education. Some things can buy us a little more happiness – those new Blundstone boots I bought in Melbourne are downright fetching – but the "newness" wears off after about nine months. Research shows

we're much better off spending our money on financial security, which has three times the impact on happiness that income alone does.

In *Thrive* you write that the Danes are among the happiest people on the planet. What's their secret?

It's crucial we get our working hours right. In Denmark, something called the Jante Law reminds us that we're no better than our neighbour. The 60 per cent marginal tax rate means the garbage man makes as much as a lawyer. So you have 5 million people who are good at furniture-making, jewellery, architecture – engaging jobs. They work 37 hours a week, knock off mid afternoon then hang with friends.

Do “super foods” – blueberries, red wine, oily fish, nuts, spinach – actually work?

No. Forget all that crap. Maybe these foods are good for you but no one sticks to them long enough to have an impact on their longevity. Worse, we think that if we eat a super-food breakfast we can eat a burger and chips for lunch. The longest-lived people eat a plant-based diet. They eat meat but only as a condiment or a celebration. Nothing they eat has a plastic wrapper.

What do you think of the European Union's decision to ban the marketing of products as “super foods”?

This is a good idea. Who is to say what is a “super food”? We should eat real food. We should look and see what our great grandparents ate when things were tough and mimic that. There's wisdom in tradition.

So far the only thing proven to increase longevity in clinical trials has been calorie restriction. What's your view of restricted diets?

I believe they do extend our lives – in much the way that turning down the flame on a cigarette lighter will extend the life of the lighter. But you burn less bright with less heat. And how many people do you know who are going to cut 40 per cent of the calories out of their diet – eat steamed broccoli and soy beans for dinner – and stick to it for 20 years?

How big a role does personality play in how long we live? Unhappiness or chronic grumpiness will take about eight years off your life. Of the 252 centenarians I interviewed for Blue Zones, I didn't meet one I didn't like. Congeniality favours longevity.

Last year, obesity overtook smoking as the leading cause of premature death in Australia. Why have diet foods and gyms made no difference? We are fighting a losing battle. We are evolutionarily hardwired to crave calories. Every place we turn we're besieged by empty, cheap calories. We've engineered physical activity out of our lives. In 1970, 50 per cent of kids walked to school. Now it's around 10 per cent. We live in an environment of fatness.

What changes have you made to your own lifestyle as a result of all your research across the globe? I drink more and work less.