

How To 'Thrive': Dan Buettner's Secrets Of Happiness

by NPR Staff

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Writer and explorer Dan Buettner has spent his life traveling the world in search of answers. His early life consisted of trekking throughout the world on a bicycle, covering thousands of miles in Africa, Asia, South America and beyond. His travels around the world (and on assignment for *National Geographic*) inspired him to discover and name the globe's "blue zones," the countries and societies with the longest life expectancy, the greatest happiness and other strengths. His first book to come out of this research was 2008's *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who've Lived the Longest*, a prescription for life extension that became an international best-seller.

Now, Buettner is back with a new book, *Thrive*, which focuses on happiness in the "blue zones," and how everyone can attain a better quality of life by following the happiest countries' examples. Buettner spoke with *Weekend Edition Sunday* host Liane Hansen about his studies and how we can all infuse more joy into our lives.

'A Place Where A Garbage Man Makes As Much As A Lawyer'

Buettner devotes a section of *Thrive* to Denmark, where the "gross national happiness" is incredibly high. When asked why this is, he notes that the country's leveling tax structure enables its citizens to have more freedom. "Normally when we think of happiness, we think of money and status, but Denmark teaches us the opposite lesson," he says. "There, you have a place where you are taxed to the mean. A cultural norm reminds everybody that they are no better than everybody else, so you're not going to choose your career path based on status. You're in a place where a garbage man makes as much as a lawyer. So what you have are 4 million people who excel at things like furniture design and architecture."

Buettner also notes that in Denmark, most people only work "37 hours a week on average, and they take their full six weeks of vacation," noting that a liberal work schedule leads to greater happiness overall.

He also traveled to Singapore for the book, finding that the citizens there responded well to the stringent law enforcement. "What you have here is a place that's very secure. Evolutionarily speaking, we are more hard-wired for security than freedom," he says. "So in Singapore, while you can't buy pornography, a woman can walk any street day or night and be completely secure that she's not going to be raped or mugged. And there's also tax laws in place that encourages people to stay closer to their aging parents. That way the elderly are taken care of and happier, and it turns out the way socialization works, we get more satisfaction retroactively socializing with our parents than anybody else."

'The Happiest People In America Socialize Seven Hours A Day'

In terms of translating the lessons from the "blue zones" to daily life, Buettner recommends that people "set up permanent nudges and defaults" in order to maximize happiness.

"For example, in our financial lives, we know that financial security has a three-times greater impact on our happiness than just income alone," he says. "So setting up automatic savings plans, and buying insurance as opposed to buying a new thing. The newness effect of a new thing wears off in nine months to a year, but financial security can last a lifetime."

Buettner argues that relationships are really the key to lifelong happiness, noting that "the happiest people in America socialize about seven hours a day," and mentioning that "you're three times more likely to be happy if you are married ... and each new friend will boost your happiness about 10 percent."

Watch Dan Buettner give a TED talk about living to be 100 years old.

Source: YouTube

He also states how important good relationships can be in the workplace, adding that "the biggest determinant of whether or not you'll like your job is if you have a best friend there, more so than how much you're paid, so proactively make sure you have good friends there. One way I assert doing that is: Be the one who organizes happy hour."

'The Luster Of Experience Can Actually Go Up With Time'

Finally, Buettner says that he has learned that people are happiest when they spend their time and money on experiences, as opposed to objects. He advises taking up an interest in sports or the arts, which will provide longer-term satisfaction than any one purchase. "The luster of an experience can actually go up with time," he says. "So learning to play a new instrument, learning a new language — those sorts of things will pay dividends for years or decades to come."

When asked about his own happiness level, Buettner admitted that he is incredibly content. After all, he has spent his life in the hot pursuit of adventure and helping others discover how to live longer and smile more. "I have always followed exactly what interests me and never really worried about the money," he says. "And when you think about it, to be able to travel the world ... on an expense account and do exactly what interests you, it just doesn't get much better than that."