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The world's happiest people share their lessons

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Listen, no one ever said existence was a piece of cake. We may want happiness more than anything, but studies show we're bad at knowing (and predicting) how to get it.

Well, Dan Buettner is not the kind of man who tolerates the mysteries of life very well. He was determined to crack that coveted Lightness of Being code. Armed with data from world surveys – and there are many – on places where people report the greatest levels of emotional well-being, he set off to discover the reasons.

The author had done the same thing with that other secret of human life – why some people live to ripe old age and experience fewer health issues – for his first book, *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*. (What Mr. Buettner did manage to crack with that one was the trick to writing a bestseller.)

Now, he has published *Thrive: Finding Happiness the Blue Zones Way*. And what did he find by travelling to some of the world's reportedly happiest places such as Denmark, Singapore, northeastern Mexico and a little pocket of joy in a town called San Luis Obispo, midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco in California?

That happiness is a puzzle. (See earlier remark about the nature of existence.)

Still, there were tips to be gleaned from speaking to local sociologists, people on the street and other experts in places where residents are lightest of heart.

Herewith, a few pieces to the puzzle of human joy.

Don't grumble about high taxes. Okay, if you must, complain only briefly because there's something counterintuitive about creating an environment of equality with big government social services that make everyone happy. Denmark is one of the world's wealthier nations per capita and a happiness superstar as the top-ranked country for well-being according to the Gallup World Poll survey. Yet those who make more than about \$70,000 a year part with 60 per cent of it through taxes. Danish happiness is not about aspiring to achieve world dominance and accumulate great wealth. Rather it's about a satisfaction that comes from living with good health care, public education and family support services such as generous parental leave for both fathers and mothers. The country has one of the lowest disparities in the world between rich and poor. Almost half of its annual budget goes toward levelling the playing field. "Economic equality contributes to [a] sense of security," Mr. Buettner reports.

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Knock off work at 5 p.m. and take all your holidays. Danes generally work 37 hours a week. Remember: Studies show once income rises above \$60,000 a year, more dough fails to boost long-term happiness.

Appreciate your freedom. By most measures, Mexico should be unhappy. Taking into account levels of income, education and health care, the human development index – a widely accepted measure of objective well-being – puts Mexico at 53rd. About 60 per cent of the population is poor. Corruption is widespread. But in terms of happiness, Mexico ranks second in the World Values Survey. Which flies in the face of findings that suggest that, on the average, happiness comes from having a decent income, a trustworthy government, good health care and higher education. So what's cooking in Mexico aside from tamales? It has something to do with a sense of freedom that increased after the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost its 80-year hold on the presidency. Political freedom doesn't always factor significantly into happiness in other countries – economic freedom to get loans and start a business often counts for more – but it's worth noting. Get out and vote.

Support bike lanes and walkability. Cities that are easy to get around on foot and bike promote greater well-being because healthy people are happier. And people report greater satisfaction if they live closer to their workplace.

Light candles. Winters are long in Denmark. Darkness falls before 5 p.m. during the short days of the year. Sound familiar? The Danes have a concept for how to cope. Called *hygge*, it means the “art of relaxing in a warm and cozy environment.” In Canada – which is tied with Israel, Australia and Switzerland for eighth happiest place in the Gallup World Poll survey – this could be called voluntary hibernation.

Prohibit drive-through restaurants. Such restriction may seem a little contradictory, given the item about having a sense of personal freedom and choices, but, hey, happiness can be more complex than dating. Since the 1980s, there has been a ban on drive-through restaurants in San Luis Obispo. Initially, it was done to control car culture in the small town. But it has had an effect on obesity levels, promoting greater health.

Limit shopping hours. This idea is like the last one – obviously not one that any politician, at least one seeking re-election, would suggest, but interesting, nonetheless. You can get an “acquisition high” from making purchases, but it doesn't last long. Why not limit shopping options so there's more time and resources for other pursuits known to create lasting pleasure such as volunteering, exercising and involvement in the arts? Denmark and the Netherlands, two of the world's happiest countries, set the maximum shop opening hours at 155 and 96 hours a week respectively, Mr. Buettner reports.

Live in a neighbourhood where it's quiet and you feel safe. Research shows that the biggest deterrent to exercise for many is perceived danger. And while humans can acclimatize to many things – cold temperatures and ugly surroundings – we don't adapt well to noise. Your daily happiness can be chipped away by something as simple as the jerk in condo 310 with the loud music.

Call a friend or two and invite them over for a glass of wine. Let's face it. Research results and utopian constructs can be overwhelming and undoable. Thankfully, some happiness tips are simple.