**Nine Keys to Aging Gracefully
By Dr. Ramona Warren**

Aging is not a choice, but we do choose how we age.

A few years ago I came across a fascinating book called The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest. In the book, National Geographic Explorer Dan Buettner travels the world uncovering the best strategies for longevity found in the Blue Zones -- places in the world where higher percentages of people enjoy remarkably long, full lives.

Buettner specifically cites nine principles that everyone can apply in order to age gracefully and improve the overall quality of their lives.

1. **Move Naturally** - Life is motion and we were designed to be in motion. Focus on regular, moderate exercise that combines aerobics, balance and muscle strength activities. Walking, yoga, gardening, bicycling or kayaking are all good, low impact activities. Get a Fitbit to help you track your activity and calories. (You can easily find this by going to fitbit.com or amazon.com.)
2. **Hara Hachi Bu** - Inspired by Confucius, this principle says to eat only until you are about 80% full. This will help cut back on total calories consumed. Calorie restriction has been shown in many studies to help slow the aging process. Control your portions and do not supersize. Use small plates or bowls so it looks like you are eating more. Eating slower and sitting down to eat also helps to follow this practice. Practice mindful eating rather than mindless eating, which usually happens when you eat at your desk or in front of a TV.
3. **Eat a plant-based diet -** Vegetables should make up the main portion of your meal, with meat serving as a side dish. We need to have small amounts of protein at each meal to help keep our blood sugar balanced. When our blood sugar is balanced we won’t have the cravings for the high-carb and high-sugar foods. Protein also helps us to feel satiated. Meat isn’t the only protein option. Fish, legumes, beans and quality grains are other good sources of protein.
4. **Drink red wine…in moderation** - Studies have shown some health benefits linked to having a beer, glass of wine or cocktail on a regular basis. However, the key is moderation, which means no more than one glass for women and two glasses for men daily. Be aware that some studies have shown increased alcohol consumption can lead to an elevated cancer risk. So, if you don’t drink, don’t start. You can get good antioxidants, such as resveratrol, from grapes or balsamic vinegar.
5. **Have a purpose for waking up each morning** - In Okinawa they call it *“Ikegai,”* which simply means, “Why I wake up in the morning.” When you have a strong sense of purpose, it helps reduce stress, as well as your risk for diseases such as Alzheimer’s, arthritis and stroke. Find something you are passionate about -- your golf game, your grandchildren, traveling, bridge, learning a new activity or volunteering to help others. Get excited about life.
6. **Downshift** - Take time to slow down. Making time to rest and reflect is essential to healthy aging. Follow the advice of a 107-year-old woman quoted in The Blue Zones: “Life is short. Don’t run so fast you miss it.” Learning to be still without the TV on, meditation and arriving early for appointments are simple ways to lessen your pace.
7. **Belong** - Being a part of a spiritual community is something that Centenarians and those in the Blue Zones all share. Studies show that those who participate in worship service, even as little as once a month, lead longer lives.
8. **Make family a priority** - Centenarians who married, had children and made their loved ones the center of their lives were the most successful and fulfilled. Take steps to honor your parents, spend time with your spouse and children, and be grateful for the blessing of family.
9. **Right Tribe** - We become like those we spend time with. Find those people in your life that practice healthy habits and spend more time with them.