

Lessons from Happy Town, U.S.A.

You'll Wish You Were Here



*For his 2008 best-seller, *The Blue Zones*, Dan Buettner searched the world for the truth about longevity. In his new book, *Thrive*, out Oct. 19, he tackles the topic of happiness. What are the happiest spots on Earth—and what secrets can we glean from them? One utopia his travels took him to is San Luis Obispo, near California's Central Coast, where joy seems to be in the tap water. In a 2008 Gallup-Healthways poll, the city's 44,000 residents ranked No. 1 in the U.S. in overall emotional health. Here are some lessons that Buettner learned—and that we can try out in our own communities.*

Support the Arts

Former mayor Ken Schwartz likes to quote this Persian proverb: “If you have but two coins, use one for bread to feed the body and the other for hyacinths to feed the soul.” Art, like flowers, nourishes the soul. Happy people usually have access to art—painting, film, sculpture, theater, music—and live in places that are attractive to the eye. A city must provide venues for artists to create and exhibit their work, so San Luis Obispo created a center that houses galleries and hosts concerts and film seminars.

Boost Biking and Walking

Research shows that if city planners make the active option the easy one—by providing good sidewalks and bike lanes and taking steps to decrease and slow car traffic—activity levels go up. San Luis Obispo has all of these features, and new office buildings are required to have bike lockers and showers so people can freshen up before work. Public-transit use is also encouraged: Bus stations are conveniently located, and people who work downtown can ride for free.

Create a Greenbelt

San Luis Obispo has an aggressive greenbelt plan and an ordinance limiting housing growth to 1% a year. With help from its county's Land Conservancy, a city manager raises funds to purchase green spaces that come up for sale close to town. The result: Since 1994, the city has acquired 3000 acres of open space, and suburban sprawl has been minimized. San Luis Obispo is now surrounded by parks, hiking trails, mountain-biking trails, and wildlife preserves—beautiful areas to enjoy and to get the body moving.

Prohibit Drive-Throughs

The city banned drive-through restaurants in the 1980s. Since San Luis Obispo is a college town, the law was originally written to reduce traffic, but it has had beneficial effects on public health, especially on helping contain obesity and its associated costs. The obesity rate there is 17.6%,

versus the national average of 26.5%.

Stamp Out Cigarettes

As Gallup poll data have shown, it's hard to be happy without your health. In 1990, San Luis Obispo became one of the first municipalities in the world to enact antismoking legislation in bars. More recently, it has placed citywide bans on smoking in front of office buildings and in parks and playgrounds. The idea is to “de-normalize” smoking—so smokers are reminded wherever they go that it's not a smart thing to do. Smoking rates stand at around 11% in San Luis Obispo, among the lowest in the U.S.

Shrink Signage

Signs tend to beget more signs—as one sign gets bigger and blinkier, other businesses feel forced to make theirs even bigger and blinkier. In 1977, Mayor Schwartz imposed limits on the size and type of signage, making the city more aesthetically pleasing, ratcheting down marketing, and decreasing the urge to buy.

Empower the People

Having a project that people can comment on and rally around sends the lasting message that citizens have a say in how their city grows. In 1968, San Luis Obispo residents and businesspeople engaged in a heated debate over whether to close a street in the city center and create a plaza. The issue was ultimately put up for a public referendum, and voters overwhelmingly approved the plaza project. Since its construction, Mission Plaza has become a symbol of the city, an icon of civic pride, a place for social gatherings, and a spot for the arts and farmers' markets.

Raising Your Own Joy Quotient

More than any other factor—including income, education level, and religion—where you live determines your happiness. Five things to look for:

- **Quiet.** People can get used to an ugly street or subfreezing weather (Minnesotans are happier than Floridians), but they don't adapt to noise—like jet planes overhead or buzzing transmission lines. It steadily erodes happiness.
- **Walkability.** Go to walkscore.com, type in an address, and see how your neighborhood rates in terms of strolling distance to parks, groceries, churches, and museums.
- **Safety.** In surveys, people consistently rank it as even more important than freedom. You want a place that draws you out, not nudges you in.
- **Income equality.** Live in a neighborhood where your neighbors' paychecks are similar to yours. One study found that people would rather make \$50,000 a year and live among those earning the same than make \$100,000 and live among those who made \$250,000.

- A short commute. Commuting is people's least favorite daily activity. In fact, research shows that workers who travel an hour each way would need a 40% raise to be as satisfied with their lives as those who walk to work.

Inside your home, try these six known mood-lifters:

Toss the extra TVs.

Keep only one TV in your house, ideally in an out-of-the-way spot. Bonus: Removing one from your kid's room, research shows, will likely reduce his or her body fat index by nudging them to be more active.

Connect with family and friends.

Data from Gallup-Healthways polls show that the happiest Americans socialize an astounding six or seven hours a day.

Paint yourself happy.

Research on color and psychology shows that painting a room yellow will increase energy and lift the spirits; sea-foam green (a healing shade used in Japanese hospitals) is good for rooms devoted to relaxation.

Grow some veggies.

Several studies have shown that gardening lowers stress hormones. Hoeing, planting, weeding, fertilizing, and harvesting are good, low-intensity activities that can raise your heart rate and improve your range of motion. A garden also comes with its own deep-rooted source of motivation: Unless you want to end up with a plot full of dead plants, you'll need to keep getting out there and working.

Soak up some sun.

Maximize your daily intake of sunlight by creating an outdoors area—putting in a patio, getting lawn chairs—where you can relax. Research shows that sunlight prompts the manufacture of endorphins that give you a feeling similar to a runner's high, and it also promotes the manufacture of vitamin D, a compound that many Americans lack. Just a few minutes of quality sunlight on the face and arms can provide more vitamin D than a gallon of milk.

Center your bedroom on sleep.

The average person should sleep six to seven hours per night for optimal health and wellbeing. If you get into bed at a decent time but then find yourself unable to doze off, turn your bedroom into a sleep-centered zone. Free it from TVs, computers, brightly-glowing clocks, and other distractions. Make sure that it can get dark and stay warm or cool, depending on your preference. If reading helps send you to dreamland, keep books and magazines nearby. Finally, put the light source within arm's reach—that way, when you begin to feel drowsy, you can switch off the light without having to get up.