

Healthy, Meaningful Longevity: One Family's Experience Over 110 Years



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In December 2019, The Senior Source Board Member Sejal Desai visited her then 108-year-old grandmother, who she calls Ba, in India. Upon her return, she wrote a [touching article](#) about her Ba's secrets to longevity. As her grandmother has now crossed the 110-year mark and survived the pandemic, we sit down with Sejal to talk about the past two years - how they have affected her grandmother and influenced her own decisions and actions.

Blue Zones

You talk about discovering the Blue Zones Power 9 secrets to longevity. There are hundreds of other studies about living a long, healthy life. Why did you choose that one to discuss your grandmother's life?

A decade ago, when my grandmother was about to turn 100, people would keep asking me, "What's her secret?" and "Is there longevity in your family?" I wanted to find the answer, so I literally Googled, "What makes people live to 100?" The Blue Zone's project popped up. I was curious, so I bought the book. When I first read about The Power 9 list, I had an "ah-ha" moment. I could connect so many of them back to my grandmother's story. They are very simple things, basic ways of living. As I contextualized her lifestyle to the Power 9, I realized the similarities between her and the other Blue Zones centenarians.

The Blue Zones became a research project for me, where I tried to understand my grandmother's longevity. I like that the Power 9 list is very practical, and we can apply it to modern life. We may not all live to 100, but maybe we can extend our lives by five years - five healthy, meaningful years. That is what kept me going down the research path.

In the past few years, and especially during the pandemic, have you made any adjustments to improve your own chances of living to 100?

My grandmother has a tradition of blessing her visitors. When I saw her in December, her blessing



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was “May you live to 100 years.” My first reaction was shock. I thought, “Why would she do that to me? I don’t want to live to 100.” I don’t really believe that I will. Mainly because our lives today are far more stressful, in a different way than our ancestors’ lives ever were. Much of it is stress we bring on ourselves, which decreases our longevity.

I also don’t think we are as physically active as they were. We have to plan and schedule exercise; it’s not woven into the daily activities of our lives. Our grandparents or parents ate and moved more naturally.

There are several of the other Power 9 habits I have worked to embody. I strive to find purpose and meaning in my life. I also have a strong connection to my family and consider myself fairly spiritual. I serve and give back to my community in my own humble way. I am a vegetarian. Even though my grandmother has never had any alcohol, I enjoy a glass of wine. Sometimes though, I feel like the Blue Zones added: “Drink a glass of wine every day” just to make Power 9 more appealing!

One of the Blue Zones healthy habits I am most passionate about is having the right tribe. It is vital to have your group of people, whether it is your girlfriends, family, or a club, to be a support system in your life. I have a tribe in my personal life, and I know they will carry me forward. But, in my work life too, I am actively looking for connections. At the Communities Foundation of Texas, where I worked previously, my clients were my tribe. Our friendship transcended our professional relationship.

When a group of Asian women, including myself, started the Orchid Giving Circle, we searched for a tribe of like-minded individuals who collectively wanted to give back to the community, and a unique sisterhood was created. We encourage one another through our professional journeys and support each other in our personal lives. Having that tribe in which you can be authentically yourself makes life more meaningful and less stressful.

Advice for Distance Caregivers

Do you have any advice for people who may be living far away from their aging loved ones on how to keep their connection strong?

My husband and I have been blessed. We have not yet had to step into the role of active caregivers. We have other family members living directly with our elderly loved ones in India, so we have been

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primarily emotional caregivers, and sometimes we provide tech support. I have had the opportunity to observe numerous caregivers and have identified four things I plan to keep in mind when it is my time to be an active caregiver:

- 1. Don't do it alone** – Caregivers need to engage family, friends, and service providers. The assistants can pitch in by either providing respite care, taking direct responsibility for the senior while the caregiver takes a break or by doing small services to support the caregiver directly. Both are equally important. Get them all involved in the caregiving process. When my mother was ill with COVID-19, her strong support network of family and neighbors got us through the difficult time.
- 2. Visit regularly** – A planned visit gives your older parent something to anticipate. Setting a specific date is always better than a vague future expectation. Our other interactions, such as texts or phone calls, are micro-doses of happiness, little bleeps of interaction. But when you visit, it is like a booster shot that fills them with energy and excitement.
- 3. Use technology** – Because of COVID, we all started using technology more, including our seniors. Video chatting apps can substitute for face-to-face interaction, and you can text or email them little messages or links to websites that would interest them. While this is a great way to stay connected with people at a distance, make sure Seniors have tech support locally. When I recently visited India, I would sit down with my parents almost every evening and help them with their iPad, laptop, or app log-ins. Even though my dad writes everything down on paper, it is still confusing, and I am sure he will probably lose the paper.

A little over a decade ago, my mother started playing Lumosity. She is hooked on their brain-teasing and memory games. Recently, when I hit my 50-year age mark, I embraced it too. Not only does it exercise my brain, but it gives my mother and me a fun discussion topic. There is one game where you become a barista, challenging your multitasking skills. Because she started many years ago, my mom is far ahead in the levels, and she really likes that. Her good-natured teasing is an enjoyable way for us to bond.

- 4. Plan activities** – Even at a distance, you can help your senior loved-ones plan activities, like getaways and social time. I've been encouraging them to plan a short afternoon trip to the beach and an outdoor lunch for my parents' anniversary. They rarely get out these days, so I gave them ideas, offered to make reservations, and curate activities. Caregiving, especially during COVID,

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can be challenging. Even though my parents love caring for my grandmother, they need to stay engaged with each other and life outside of caregiving. Planned activities can give them something special to anticipate.

What are some ways you create moments of joy with your elders at a distance?

When my husband and I have calls or visits with our parents, we try to share a memory instead of just checking in. My husband is good at this. He will bring up a vacation they went to 40 years ago in a conversation. Sometimes he will sit down with a photo album and ask about relatives who have passed. He has brought up the idea of doing a family tree, and everyone starts to think about the people to include. Reliving those days and remembering those people helps his parents have a meaningful shared experience. He does such an excellent job of giving them an ear. Sometimes others don't make the time to just BE with their older relatives. Their interactions are too fleeting and quick. Being able to sit and enjoy that time together is very special.

The Senior Source

You joined the board of The Senior Source in April of 2020. How much was that decision influenced by your relationship with your grandmother and your parents?

Absolutely! It entirely was. Because of my family, I have a deep passion and interest in older adults, and I am happy to support others on this journey.

It actually was my mom who discovered The Senior Source. When she came to the U.S. to help take care of my kids in 2005, she heard about The Senior Source and later joined the RSVP program. They placed her as a volunteer at the local public school and library. Then through the years, I have



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volunteered with the Friendly Visitors Program as part of my work with Communities Foundation of Texas and the Orchid Giving Circle has donated to The Senior Source.

Do you see any ways that The Senior Source's programs mirror the Blue Zones Power 9 and could improve the healthy longevity of our clients and volunteers?

Many of The Senior Source's programs, such as Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and RSVP, are perfect ways for seniors to have a sense of purpose in their lives and create their tribe. The programs offer an opportunity to do meaningful work with people going through the same period of life. I think about our group of Asian Foster Grandparents. They are a group of Asian seniors that live in the same apartment community and volunteer at after-school and summer school programs. It gives the right tribe an opportunity to do something meaningful.

As we get older, the opportunities to exercise, especially during COVID, are harder to find, so I love that The Senior Source offers exercise classes on social media and partners with the Dallas Parks and Recreation Department for other activities.

And beyond the seniors, the support we give to the caregivers is important too. Because sometimes, the caregivers are forgotten in this whole equation, and they need physical and emotional support.

My 80-year-old parents are caregivers for my 110-year-old grandmother. My dad recently joked, "What if Ba outlives us?" But it's not really a joke. That absolutely could happen because caregivers rarely take care of themselves. However, my parents are my inspiration. As a caregiver, my mom embraces her responsibilities in a profound and meaningful way. She has derived purpose and meaning in that engagement, and I think it has kept her young because she is physically and emotionally engaged. I hope to embody their spirit of caregiving when I find myself in that role.