

Lessons from the happiest place on Earth



After steaming up in the Loyly sauna in Helsinki, Finland, patrons can dip into the Baltic Sea to cool down before heading back into the heat. (Danielle Braff / Chicago Tribune)

By **Danielle Braff**
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The happiest place on Earth is just 4,400 miles away from Chicago.

Finland, which topped the [United Nations](#) report this year as the happiest country on the planet, is a land filled with saunas, forests and coffee (the Finns are obsessed with their java). But you don't have to give up the Cubs, Lake Michigan and Chicago hot dogs for the Land of the Thousand Lakes (aka Finland) to boost your spirits. Here's a look at how to take Finland's happiness tricks and replicate them at home.

Finland's happiness trick: Experience nature

Even in the winter (yes, it's freezing there too), the Finns are determined to go outside. "No matter what the season, we always have possibilities to enjoy different activities in nature," said Heidi Savolainen, adventure guide with Adventure Apes in Finland. "We can go hiking, skiing, snowshoeing, biking, ice swimming, you name it — and enjoy the silence of nature."

It works: A recent study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found that being in nature increases activity in the subgenual prefrontal cortex, which is the area of the brain about feeling centered, focusing on the good

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around you and seeing that there is a world bigger than yourself,” said Theresa Herring, an Evanston-based licensed therapist. “Getting out into nature is a great way to shift into that perspective.”

Do it here: If you want to stay in the city, you can walk or cycle along Lake Michigan, Herring said. Or, check out Alltrails.com to find recommendations for hiking, cycling, backpacking and more around Illinois.

Finland’s happiness trick: Chat over coffee

Finns take the time to nourish their relationships daily, and a major way they do this is over a cup — or five — of coffee. They have a huge coffee culture, and the Finns brew their coffee in batches of 10 cups at a time, said Arttu Muukkonen, co-founder of Lehmus Roastery in Finland, which was voted best roaster in Finland at the Helsinki Coffee Festival for the last two years. In Finland, having a cup of coffee is a time to take a break and relax with friends, rather than sitting on your own with a cup of java. “The sharing aspect is really important here,” Muukkonen said. “You share the same drink, and you drink it at the same time as other people.” In fact, the word coffee is often used in Finnish in the plural — *kahvit* — instead of singular, because coffee is typically shared, said Olga Javits, spokeswoman for Visit Tampere in Finland. “This coffee-centered culture creates a lot of moments of coziness during the day,” she said.

It works: A Harvard study following alums for nearly 80 years, found that close relationships — more than anything else, including money or fame — keep people happy. Nurturing relationships with friends, family and their community helps people through difficult situations. The researchers also found that those in happy marital relationships said that their moods didn’t suffer, even if they were in physical pain.

Do it here: Sit down for dinner with your family, or linger over a few cups of coffee at a cafe with friends. Steffani LeFevour, a Chicago-based happiness coach, makes an effort to nourish personal relationships simply by showing up, turning off her phone and making herself available to speak with others one-on-one.

At the beginning of the year, her family began having regular dinners Monday nights with her mother, stepfather and mother-in-law. “In our American culture, we’re so fast-paced, so on-the-go, that we don’t take the time to nourish our connections,” LeFevour said.

In Finland, silence in conversations — even long silences — are considered to be a normal and natural part of communication,” Javits said. If you don’t have anything important to say, don’t waste the time and energy, and everyone will be comfortable. There is no such thing as an awkward silence in Finland.”

Finland’s happiness trick: Get some heat

In a country of 5 million people, there are more than 2 million saunas. In fact, the sauna is so essential to their well-being that it’s a verb: Did you sauna today?

It works: A University of Colorado study found a link between very high temperature and mood, suggesting that exposure to warm temperatures increases your serotonin levels.

ise if you’re at the beach, sauna or even in a hot
in ice water (or a cold shower) post-heat, and

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Finland's happiness trick: Everyone is welcome

There's a law in Finland called "The Every Man's Right." Translation: You can wander into any forest to pitch a tent, forage berries and enjoy the country. It's all part of the focus on the people and the community. Everyone is equal.

It works: "Activities that involve community collaboration bring people together for a common goal — socialization and teamwork — and it allows them to be a part of something greater than themselves that is for the common good," said Joyce Marter, a licensed psychotherapist in Chicago, and founder of Urban Balance, a multi-site counseling practice.

Do it here: Community gardens offer a great opportunity to share that common experience, Marter said.

Danielle Braff is a freelancer.

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