

## Ikigai: The Japanese Way to Find Meaning in Life

How you can find lasting inner joy and sustained motivation through small, everyday experiences.

By Chantelle Pattemore MAY 25, 2021

Over the years, everyone from Ralph Waldo Emerson to *The Simpsons* has pondered the question “What is the meaning of life?” While a number of theories have been proposed, there is one traditional Japanese philosophy that has been waiting in the wings to help each of us discover our true purpose. Say hello to ikigai.

“‘Iki’ means to live, and ‘gai’ means reason, so ikigai is literally a reason to live,” explains Ken Mogi, Japanese neuroscientist, lecturer, and the author of [Awakening Your Ikigai](#). “On a grand scale, this would mean what you would like to achieve in your career or what you would like to accomplish in terms of your private life,” he continues. “But, on a smaller scale, it’s really a reason to get up in the morning.”

Ikigai could be anything from watching the sun rise to trying out new recipes, to volunteering at a local shelter or spending time with family — there’s nothing too trivial as long as it provides you with pleasure and a sense of motivation. “The Japanese are traditionally in the mindset that there are many, many little things that make your life worthwhile — not necessarily all these grand goals,” adds Mogi.

Instead of offering a single explanation for us to all adapt to, ikigai is something very personal and varies between individuals. The concept originated in Okinawa — a Japanese island located around 1,000 miles away from Tokyo. It’s known for its dazzling blue seas, sandy beaches, slower pace of life, and the [highest life expectancy](#) on Earth. From there, it spread to become an integral part of Japanese culture — [76 percent](#) of Japanese adults state they have an ikigai — and the philosophy is becoming more recognized outside of Asia. However, Mogi notes, the true meaning of ikigai is often lost in translation.

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### East vs. West

Search “ikigai” online, and you’ll find yourself inundated with images of a Venn diagram created in 2014 by British activist and entrepreneur Marc Winn. In this, ikigai is represented as the crossover point of four factors: passion, mission, vocation, and profession. Westernized interpretation puts notable emphasis on career and giving back to society — but, in reality, only 30 percent of Japanese people associate their ikigai with work.

“I think that diagram is a helpful interpretation, but ikigai in its original form is something more private and ephemeral,” Mogi states. “Mission, profession, and vocation are all socially constructed.”

While some will definitely recognize their career as an ikigai (which is wholly acceptable), placing such emphasis on work and social standing has the potential to undermine and devalue the concept as a whole.

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“We can think of a person who is not socially successful at all and does not have any important social connections. From today’s point of view, he or she might not be a very interesting person — but they could have all these rich ikigai,” states Mogi. “I think, in a way, ikigai is an antidote to globalization and the globalized economy where many people compete with each other.”

Don’t worry if your ikigai isn’t Instagrammable or a nice little side hustle that brings in some extra cash. The fact it likely won’t be is all part of its charm. “Ikigai is a very evolutionary idea where your activities are ... valued based on your inner joy, which is the most important thing in your life,” Mogi adds.

## How to find your ikigai

We get it: The prospect of finding your “reason for being” might (unsurprisingly) seem daunting — those three words carry some heavy meaning. But Mogi reveals there are several key approaches to success, all of which are easily doable.

## Turn back the clock

First, he suggests casting your mind back to your childhood. Was there anything during that period that really made you happy? “When you are a child, you do not live by these [modern] ideologies; you find pleasure in whatever you do, and you’re in that zone of ikigai the most,” he explains. In adulthood, however, “your brain is bombarded with all these ideas around what is and isn’t important, and socially significant and insignificant.”

If nothing from your early years is particularly forthcoming, don’t stress. Mogi notes that ikigai is something that “makes your life more healthy, sustainable, and well-balanced,” so consider if there are any activities you currently do, or have done, that particularly motivate you, energize you, and bring significant joy.

## Start small

You’ll also be pleased to hear that figuring out your ikigai is definitely more of a marathon than a sprint. In his book, Mogi identifies five pillars that are key in achieving this, one of which is starting small.

“I’m not saying that ikigai is anti-achievement — you can actually achieve great things by starting small and not thinking too much about the bigger picture,” he assures. “The devil is the details. When you make progress, dopamine [the body’s “feel good” chemical] is released in the brain, and that leads to so-called ‘reinforcement learning.’ So, you can start small and climb the steps gradually.”

## Be in the moment

This is an important element of ikigai: focusing on the here and now rather than what the activity might lead to in the long term. Mogi references Hayao Miyazaki, the renowned Japanese animator and founder of Studio Ghibli, as a prime example of someone accomplishing this. “He never mentions ... animating for an Academy Award, social significance, or his mission as an animator. He never mentions the bigger picture.”

## One is the loneliest number

Winn’s Venn diagram suggests an individual can have only one primary ikigai — but this isn’t the case. If there are two, three, or even four activities that you believe could count as yours, embrace them all! “Ikigai is a spectrum, or a rainbow, if you like,” muses Mogi. “I have many ikigai,” he reveals, noting his work as a neuroscientist studying the mind-

brain connection, running, writing, watching butterflies, and painting as several of his. They say the more the merrier, and when it comes to ikigai, the sky's the limit.

## Ways it can help your well-being

Recognizing your ikigai and engaging with it regularly can help bring about feelings of happiness, motivation, and achievement, to name but a few, and who doesn't want those? However, doing so can also yield very real benefits for our physical health.

As mentioned earlier, the citizens of Okinawa are well known for their long life expectancies — the island being home to more adults over the age of 99 than almost anywhere else in the world. While experts believe diet is a prime factor behind this, the islanders' embracing of ikigai is also thought to be an element. "It does have a great part to play in that," assures Mogi.

The rate of heart disease and cancer amongst Okinawans is very low — and research shows that having ikigai can lower your risk of developing the former. The Ohsaki Study of more than 43,000 Japanese individuals found those who reported not having an ikigai were significantly more likely to experience heart disease, although no correlation was found to exist between ikigai and cancer.

Meanwhile, in another study of elderly Japanese adults, those with a strong sense of ikigai were less at risk of experiencing functional disability — defined as a long-term limitation to either physical or mental health arising from a previous condition or injury.

Ikigai can have a positive effect on mental health too. While researchers have yet to discover if it can directly impact the shape and structure of the brain as mindfulness does, studies have found that those who embrace the concept experience fewer symptoms of depression and better cognitive well-being overall. "If you have ikigai, you feel as if you could be more resistant and robust," Mogi notes.

While ikigai may not be the straightforward answer to the meaning of life you were expecting, with such focus on the self, inner joy, and proven health benefits, it's certainly not one to dismiss. "I think ikigai is an enveloping term for all these wonderful, balanced workings of the brain which make your life easier and more productive," concludes Mogi — and we can definitely get on board with that.

*Chantelle Pattemore is a freelance journalist and editor, with a predominant focus on wellbeing, health, fitness and culture. She has written for Greatist, Men's Fitness, Best Life, Women's Health, Reader's Digest, Top Sante, Stylist and The Strategist UK, among others – and can be found occasionally musing over life on Twitter [@journochantelle](https://twitter.com/journochantelle).*