

# Meaning and Health: A Review on *Ikigai*

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## Abstract

*Ikigai* is a Japanese term that is commonly referred to as ‘purpose in life’ and ‘meaning in life’.

Different researchers may have different ways of defining the term. Measures and scales in English were validated to aid research in *ikigai* outside Japan. There are many health benefits related to *ikigai*. It is associated with longevity, lower all-cause, external-cause, and cardiovascular mortality. It helps improve people’s wellbeing and quality of life. It helps people cope with difficult situations and negative emotions. It makes people more receptive to health messages. *Ikigai* can be enhanced through interventions.

**Keyword:** *Ikigai*, purpose in life, meaning in life, wellbeing.

## I. Introduction

*Ikigai* is a Japanese term that is considered to be an important factor in improving one’s health and living a more satisfying life [37]. Japan’s most authoritative dictionary describes it as ‘joy and a sense of well-being from being alive’ and ‘realising the value of being alive’ [47]. Dr. Kamiya, one of the earliest *ikigai* theorists, introduced the term to the public due to its uniqueness, which makes it difficult to fully explain in other languages [16].

Dr. Kamiya treated leprosy patients in the late 1950s when the disease was considered fatal. She discovered that while some people can maintain their optimism in the face of adversity, others cannot. She discovered that *ikigai* distinguishes between patients who have hope and those who don't. Patients with *ikigai* were able to maintain hope and meaning in their lives. When confronted with a challenge, striving to find a deeper meaning rather than avoiding it is a form of *ikigai* [16].

There are numerous physical and mental advantages of having a stronger sense of *ikigai*. It is associated with longevity, wellbeing, and overall quality of life. This is especially beneficial to today's context, with the COVID-19 pandemic and the world's population aging. Experts suggested that pandemic-related feelings are akin grief [2], with people feeling empty and sad about the loss of their usual lifestyle, which can even lead to a loss of meaning in life. On the other hand, ageing is associated with a variety of distinct social problems, including an increased need for elderly care and support, as well as the associated financial and emotional burden [18]. Therefore, developing a sense of *ikigai* may help improve the situation.

This paper aims to provide a systematic review of on the concept of *ikigai*. It is organized as follows. Section II describes what is *ikigai*. Section III presents some existing English scales measuring one's level of *ikigai*. Section IV presents benefits of having sense of *ikigai*. Section V presents existing interventions about enhancing *ikigai*. Section VI presents challenges about research in the field. Section VII provides the final conclusion.

## **II. What is *Ikigai***

The term *ikigai* is made up of two parts, '*iki*' which means 'life' and '*gai*' which means 'to be worthwhile' [10].

There is a lot of debate over which type of *ikigai* is best for each individual [34]. While some claim that *ikigai* can be found in the pursuit of one's personal dream, referring to it as a form of self-realisation, others confuse *ikigai* with a sense of oneness, arguing that true purpose in life can only be found through dedication to a group, such as family.

There are many different ways of translating and defining the term *ikigai* in English. Many refer *ikigai* as 'purpose in life', 'the sense that life is worth living' or 'a reason for living' [22, 29, 35, 37, 41]. Some refer it to the processes of 'realising' or 'gaining joy from' the purpose [54]. Researchers believe that *ikigai* should be viewed as a composite construct that encompasses life's meaning, motivations, and values [28, 55]. *Ikigai* has also been said to be similar to eudaimonic wellbeing i.e., the state of functioning and living well [25], rather than hedonic wellbeing.

According to Kamiya [17], seven needs are associated with *ikigai*: the need for a fulfilling existence, the need for change and growth, the need for future perspectives, the need for receiving responses, the need for freedom, the need for self-actualisation and the need for significance and value. People may have additional needs other than these seven, and the strength and combination of needs vary from person to person. At the same time, some needs may be merged with others. A single *ikigai* item can satisfy a variety of needs. According to her, beyond merely purpose and meaning in life, *ikigai* is linked to one's social value and role.

As a philosophical notion, *ikigai* specifies many areas that foster a sense of autonomy and self-awareness, both of which are considered crucial to determining one's life's meaning. *Ikigai*, according to Mathews [34], is the intersection of what you enjoy, what you are good at, what you can be paid for, and what the world needs.

Kumano's study [27] shows that life-affirmation, goals/dreams, meaning of life, meaning of existence, sense of fulfillment, and commitment are important aspects of *ikigai*. Among these aspects, commitment makes *ikigai* distinctive to subjective well-being and psychological well-being [27]. While *ikigai* and subjective well-being commonly include personal satisfaction with both current and past life, *ikigai* also includes the good perception of one's future and social interaction [12].

Shirai et al. [49] refers *ikigai* 'as a comprehensive concept related to emotions including happiness and life satisfaction, as well as cognitive evaluation of one's meaning in life, self-esteem, and self-efficacy'.

### **III. Scales and Measurements**

#### **A. *Ikigai-9***

The *ikigai-9* [12] is a psychometric tool that consists of nine items measuring one's *ikigai* across three dimensions. The dimensions include 'optimistic and positive emotions toward life', 'active and positive attitudes towards one's future', and 'acknowledgement of the meaning of one's existence'. It is first proposed and validated in Japan in 2012. Fido et al. [6] translated the scale to English and validated it in the United Kingdom (UK). One needs to rate whether each of the nine statements applies to himself/herself on a five-point scale (1 = Does not apply to me, 5 = Applies to me a lot).

#### **B. *Four-Factor Ikigai Scale***

Takeda [52] developed and validated a four-factor scale to measure *ikigai*. Self-esteem, purpose in life, personal energy, and life satisfaction are considered as the most appropriate factors to explain the concept of *ikigai*. Self-esteem is the deepest and unconscious level of *ikigai*; purpose in life is the most crucial and fundamental element of *ikigai*; personal energy is

the ‘observable and tangible level of *ikigai*’ that is based on the two aforementioned factors; life satisfaction is the result of the first three factors. Takeda finalised the five-point, 28-item *ikigai* Scale which has the four aforementioned factors.

#### **IV. Benefits of Having a sense of *Ikigai***

Despite the fact that *ikigai* is a term that originated in Japan, it may be applicable to non-Japanese cultures [33], and there are many benefits related to it.

##### ***A. Physical Health***

Having a purpose in life or an *ikigai* has been considered as one of the keys to longevity [1, 3, 45].

Studies have shown that a strong sense of *ikigai* can reduce all-cause mortality [11, 39, 51, 53]. People who have a stronger sense of *ikigai* are less likely to suffer from stroke or die from a cardiovascular disease [21, 51, 57]. In addition, they have a significantly lower risk for external-cause mortality [53].

Having *ikigai* can be a modifiable health practice that prevents middle-aged and older persons from a deterioration in higher-level functional performance [40]. Mori et al. [37] found that people who have a stronger sense of *ikigai* have greater functional mobility and instrumental activities of daily living (IADL).

*Ikigai* may be associated with healthier habits. Study shows that the proportion of current smokers was lower for people with *ikigai* [53]. People with *ikigai* generally sleep more and exercise more frequently as compared to those without [53].

Stronger senses of meaning were linked to greater physical health, as well as behavioural characteristics that reduced the likelihood of bad health outcomes and increased the likelihood of positive health outcomes, according to the systematic review by Roepke et al. [42]. In the systematic review, some considered *ikigai* as one of the aspects of meaning in life while others don't. Those who had found meaning reaped a slew of benefits. For example, quicker recovery after knee surgery [50] and a lower risk of disability in old age [26].

According to a study by Zilioli et al. [58], those who have a stronger sense of purpose in life had lower levels of allostatic load, which is the physiological burden the body bears when reacting to external challenges like stress.

### **B. Mental Health**

Study has shown that a strong sense of *ikigai* improves well-being or quality of life [5].

People who lack meaning or purpose in life may feel empty and anxious, which affects their subjective well-being [7, 17]. Studies also show that *ikigai* helps people better integrate difficult psychological situations from the past, present, and future with less conflict and uncertainty, and effectively cope with stress [13-16]. It was also found to be a protective factor in the treatment of stress, depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses [9, 20]. People with a stronger feeling of *ikigai* are less likely to suffer from depression and receive more social support [37]. *Ikigai* has also been linked to a lower risk of psychological problems and a slower rate of age-related cognitive decline [11].

Maki [31] believes that *ikigai* interventions aid primary (intervene before adverse health effects occur), secondary (delay the development of the disease), and tertiary (slow or stop disease progression) prevention for dementia. Empirical evidence shows that having *ikigai* is a

significant factor in dementia prevention [31]. Since dementia diagnosis is frequently accompanied by negative emotions, which may contribute to the progression of dementia [30], continuing to modify *ikigai* may aid in overcoming the critical transitional stage by keeping one's sense of identity unchanged before and after onset [31]. As for tertiary prevention, support for *ikigai* is essential for rehabilitation in terms of tertiary prevention [32].

### ***C. Decision Making***

People with a sense of purpose in life may be more open to health messages [18].

Due to conflicting motivations, people may be reluctant to change when given health advice. On the one hand, motives for self-improvement drive people to take on helpful health advice [44]. On the other hand, motives for self-enhancement make people defensive and deny the self-relevance of such message, because admitting one's unhealthy behaviour may jeopardize their feeling of self-worth [4, 47].

Making healthy decisions may be less conflicting and thus easier for those who have a higher sense of purpose in life, according to [18].

## **V. *Ikigai* Interventions**

*Ikigai* can be enhanced via interventions. These interventions include career counseling, wellbeing training and clinical practice and can include self-help guides [10, 36] or more focused interventions like 'life crafting' which comprises reflecting on one's values, passions and goals, visualising one's best possible self, and goal attainment plans [43].

## **VI. Challenges**

Although there are numerous benefits that *ikigai* can provide to people, which may serve as a driving factor for further research in the field, it also faces many challenges.

It is difficult to review and summarize past research beyond Japanese people due to the plethora of terminology connected to *ikigai* in Western culture. As a result, there is currently no published empirical research investigating the presence of *ikigai* in Western populations [25].

Because of its complex, experiencing nature, *ikigai* is difficult to describe or operationalise, making it difficult to measure [34]. Some *ikigai* measures are constrained by limited responses, resulting in lower data variance [23]; some focus primarily on the leisure pursuit enjoyment, failing to capture the complete range of *ikigai* sources [24]; and some were only available in Japanese, with the English version validated years later [6], limiting research outside Japan.

Anecdotal evidence or cross-sectional data have dominated much of the available work on *ikigai* [25]. The dearth of empirical evidence around *ikigai* study has hindered the ability to draw causal conclusions.

## **VII. Conclusion**

In conclusion, *ikigai* is a complex concept. Although it may be difficult for researchers to agree on a precise definition and translation for *ikigai* due to the term's intricacy, it is something that people can relate to and have a rough notion about. It is similar to eudaimonic wellbeing and it is about one's purpose in life and things that make one's life worth living. It has many dimensions and sources of *ikigai* can vary from person to person. Research on *ikigai* has shown that it has positive associations with better physical and mental health, and it makes people to be more open to health advice. There are several ways of intervention. However, there exists many challenges.



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