

# Mental Health Problems Associated With the Concept of “Ikigai” As Purpose in Life or “Raison D’etre”

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## Abstract

Mental health has become crucial problem over the world. Difference is observed between Western and Eastern countries. The concept of “ikigai” exists in Japanese culture, meaning of reason for living or purpose in life, which is nearly well-being, “raison d’etre” or “raison de vivre” in French. For some reports, ikigai has certain relationship with well-being, anxiety, stress and depression. People with having ikigai showed lower risk of functional disability (-31%) and dementia (-36%) compared with people not having ikigai. Furthermore, related words include Hinohara-ism and also “life crafting” that means a framework searching for a life purpose.

**Keywords:** Ikigai; Reason for Living; Well-Being; Raison D’etre; Hinohara-ism

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## Commentary

Inadequate situation of mental health has given various negative impact over the world. According to the actual statistics, global financial expense from poor mental health would become about 2.5 trillion USD a year [1]. There are large incidence differences of depression or anxiety for lifetime between Western and Eastern countries. The former has about ten times higher than the latter, in which cultural difference may be involved [2]. As one of the background, western people apt to disclose various mental health problems. Then, such disparity may contribute a better understanding the difference among several countries.

Conceptual gap may exist for understanding and management of mental health between Western and Eastern countries. It can be presented when people explore the purpose in their lives. Psychosomatic research for mental health and well-being has been crucial for decades. It includes various problems, such as anxiety, worry, sadness, decreased interest, poor concentration, and others. These symptoms related to anxiety were the second most disorders in the mental health worldwide [3].

The concept of “ikigai” has been presented in Japanese culture, which means reason for living or purpose in life. In contrast, it was not investigated in Western populations. Recent study showed the exploration of ikigai in the light of depression, well-being and anxiety. The protocol included 94 female cases, and they responded a survey. As a result, ikigai showed positive relationship with well-being, negative relationship with depression, and

negative tendency with anxiety [4]. Such study reveals the importance of ikigai investigation for future, leading to beneficial mental well-being.

As regards to “Ikigai”, this word has been from Japanese language. In English literature, there is no exact translated word [5]. Then, the similar nuance is often used in English as life worth living, purpose in life, or reason for life [6]. In French, ikigai is close to “raison de vivre” or “raison d’etre” that are reason of life, or reason for existence. Historically speaking, psychiatrist Dr. Mieko Kamiya firstly introduced the concept of ikigai in Japanese culture and literature [7]. She understood well for the unique word, where it can be expressed by only Japanese language. The term “ikigai” is known in medical, psychosomatic, and cultural fields [8]. It means reason for living or purpose in life [9]. Some people can translate it as sense of life worth living [10]. Ikigai is considered as a composite construct combined with motivations, meaning and values in life [11].

As to UK-based research, significant relationship was observed between ikigai situation and both of depression/well-being [12]. However, the relationship was not found for stress or anxiety. It was indeed an impressive first step for ikigai condition, but some critique was present for insufficient conditioning using Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) [13]. Regarding the validity of DASS-21, some unstable factors were reported, such as nomological validity, discriminant validity and related loading values [14]. In addition, stress was evaluated to be contributing element for depression state by biological investigation [15]. For

the Western people, further study seems to be crucial for predictive value in ikigai feeling for well-being and mental health [12].

In order to evaluate the degree of ikigai, a questionnaire of Ikigai-9 has been used [16]. It is related to three psychological aspects of ikigai. They are a) positive and optimistic emotions toward life, b) positive and active attitudes in the future, c) recognition of the meaning of one’s existence. General contents of exploratory factors for Ikigai-9 are as follows: I have or feel i) some impact on someone, ii) mentally rich and fulfilled life, iii) interest in many things, iv) contributing to someone or society, v) mind to develop myself, vi) feeling that I am happy, vii) my significant existence value for someone, viii) to learn something new, ix) room in my mind. Concerning these nine items, enough validity has been reported. Utilizing this questionnaire can bring the understanding the general definition and previous experience of ikigai for each person who wants to know psychosomatic aspect of oneself [17]. Ikigai is a Japanese word as iki (to live, life) and gai (to be worthwhile). From latest research, ikigai situation can predict the self-reported measures of depression, well-being and also anxiety [4]. The degree of the influence showed that ikigai can predict significantly 31% variance for well-being, and significantly 21% variance for depression. As ikigai level becomes greater, well-being shows greater and depression shows lower. The concept of ikigai was studied mainly in Japan. It is widely felt by Japanese elderly people to improve their QOL and ADL. Such perspective is similar to the concept of eudaimonic well-being (EWB) that has been recognized in Western countries. Concerning ikigai in United States (US), how elderly recognize the sense of meaning, and how social robot can help the sense were investigated [18]. Then, living situation can influence desire, happiness, well-being and social connection. Furthermore, social robot may enhance ikigai, positive perceptions and well-being when adopting a social robot in the home.

From ikigai study for elderly more than 65 years using 2 databases (n = 6,441 and n = 8,041), detail investigation was conducted for several factors [19]. They included health behavior, physical health, subjective well-being, social well-being, psychological distress, and so on. Consequently, people with having ikigai showed lower risk of functional disability (-31%), dementia (-36%) for 3-year follow-up in comparison with people not having ikigai. The benefit of having ikigai would be higher life satisfaction, happiness, instrumental ADL and frequent social activities. These combinations were observed for male than female, and for people with higher socioeconomic status.

COVID-19 pandemic has persisted for 3 years, where the important perspective of ikigai has been more highlighted. Some people has lost the meaning in life [20]. Then, higher value of meaning in life were observed associated with lower values of distress or anxiety. It may indicate the protective efficacy of meaning in life against various stress reactions. A novel word “life crafting” has been recently found, which means a framework for people to make the search perspective for a life purpose [21]. Similarly, how life

crafting has been applied during difficult situations [22]. Furthermore, Hinohara-ism can almost cover the concept of ikigai, where authors have been involved in social movement for years [23].

In summary, various topics on ikigai as purpose in life or “raison d’etre” were described. This article becomes hopefully useful reference for further developing research.

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