



IKIGAI

The Japanese Secret to
a Long and Happy Life

Héctor García
and Francesc Miralles

Translated by Heather Cleary



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Be mindful about reducing stress

Whether or not the threats we perceive are real, stress is an easily identifiable condition that not only causes anxiety but is also highly psychosomatic, affecting everything from our digestive system to our skin.

This is why prevention is so important in avoiding the toll that stress takes on us—and why many experts recommend practicing mindfulness.

The central premise of this stress-reduction method is focusing on the self: noticing our responses, even if they are conditioned by habit, in order to be fully conscious of them. In this way, we connect with the here and now and limit thoughts that tend to spiral out of control.

“We have to learn to turn off the autopilot that’s steering us in an endless loop. We all know people who snack while talking on the phone or watching the news. You ask them if the omelet they just ate had onion in it, and they can’t tell you,” says Roberto Alcibar, who abandoned his fast-paced life to become a certified instructor of mindfulness after an illness threw him into a period of acute stress.

One way to reach a state of mindfulness is through meditation, which helps filter the information that reaches us from the outside world. It can also be achieved through breathing exercises, yoga, and body scans.

Achieving mindfulness involves a gradual process of training, but with a bit of practice we can learn to focus our mind completely, which reduces stress and helps us live longer.

What is logotherapy?

A colleague once asked Viktor Frankl to define his school of psychology in a single phrase, to which Frankl replied, “Well, in logotherapy the patient sits up straight and has to listen to things that are, on occasion, hard to hear.” The colleague had just described psychoanalysis to him in the following terms: “In psychoanalysis, the patient lies down on a couch and tells you things that are, on occasion, hard to say.”

Frankl explains that one of the first questions he would ask his patients was “Why do you not commit suicide?” Usually the patient found good reasons not to, and was able to carry on. What, then, does logotherapy do? ¹

The answer is pretty clear: ***It helps you find reasons to live.***

Logotherapy pushes patients to consciously discover their life’s purpose in order to confront their neuroses. Their quest to fulfill their destiny then motivates them to press forward, breaking the mental chains of the past and overcoming whatever obstacles they encounter along the way.

Case study: The grief-stricken doctor

An elderly doctor, unable to overcome the deep depression into which he'd fallen after the death of his wife two years earlier, went to Frankl for help.

Instead of giving him advice or analyzing his condition, Frankl asked him what would have happened if he had been the one who died first. The doctor, horrified, answered that it would have been terrible for his poor wife, that she would have suffered tremendously. To which Frankl responded, "You see, doctor? You have spared her all that suffering, but the price you have to pay for this is to survive, and mourn her."

The doctor didn't say another word. He left Frankl's office in peace, after taking the therapist's hand in his own. He was able to tolerate the pain in place of his beloved wife. His life had been given a purpose.

Going with the flow

Imagine you are skiing down one of your favorite slopes. Powdery snow flies up on both sides of you like white sand. Conditions are perfect.

You are entirely focused on skiing as well as you can. You know exactly how to move at each moment. ***There is no future, no past. There is only the present.*** You feel the snow, your skis, your body, and your consciousness united as a single entity. ***You are completely immersed in the experience, not thinking about or distracted by anything else.*** Your ego dissolves, and you become part of what you are doing.

This is the kind of experience Bruce Lee described with his famous “Be water, my friend.”

We’ve all felt our sense of time vanish when we lose ourselves in an activity we enjoy. We start cooking and before we know it, several hours have passed. We spend an afternoon with a book and forget about the world going by until we notice the sunset and realize we haven’t eaten dinner. We go surfing and don’t realize how many hours we have spent in the water until the next day, when our muscles ache.

The opposite can also happen. When we have to complete a task we don’t want to do, every minute feels like a lifetime and we can’t stop looking at our watch. As the quip attributed to Einstein goes, “Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That is relativity.”

The funny thing is that someone else might really enjoy the same task, but we want to finish as quickly as possible.

What makes us enjoy doing something so much that we forget about whatever worries we might have while we do it? When are we happiest? These questions can help us discover our ***ikigai***.

saxophone, a music studio. If you find that your surroundings continue to distract you, keep looking until you find the right place.

- Divide each activity into groups of related tasks, and assign each group its own place and time. For example, if you're writing a magazine article, you could do research and take notes at home in the morning, write in the library in the afternoon, and edit on the couch at night.
- Bundle routine tasks—such as sending out invoices, making phone calls, and so on—and do them all at once.

Advantages of Flow	Disadvantages of Distraction
A focused mind	A wandering mind
Living in the present	Thinking about the past and the future
We are free from worry	Concerns about our daily life and the people around us invade our thoughts
The hours fly by	Every minute seems endless
We feel in control	We lose control and fail to complete the task at hand, or other tasks or people keep us from our work
We prepare thoroughly	We act without being prepared
We know what we should be doing at any given moment	We frequently get stuck and don't know how to proceed
Our mind is clear and overcomes all obstacles to the flow of thought	We are plagued by doubts, concerns, and low self-esteem
It's pleasant	It's boring and exhausting
Our ego fades: We are not the ones controlling the activity or task we're doing—the task is leading us	Constant self-criticism: Our ego is present and we feel frustrated

Microflow: Enjoying mundane tasks

But what happens when we have to, say, do the laundry, mow the lawn, or attend to paperwork? Is there a way to make these mundane tasks enjoyable?

Near the Shinjuku subway station, in one of the neural centers of Tokyo, there is a supermarket that still employs elevator operators. The elevators are fairly standard and could easily be operated by the customers, but the store prefers to provide the service of someone holding the door open for you, pushing the button for your floor, and bowing as you exit.

If you ask around, you'll learn that there is one elevator operator who has been doing the same job since 2004. She is always smiling and enthusiastic about her work. How is she able to enjoy such a job? Doesn't she get bored doing something so repetitive?

On closer inspection, it becomes clear that the elevator operator is not just pushing buttons but is instead performing a whole sequence of movements. She begins by greeting the customers with a songlike salutation followed by a bow and a welcoming wave of the hand. Then she presses the elevator button with a graceful movement, as though she is a geisha offering a client a cup of tea.

Csikszentmihalyi calls this *microflow*.

We've all been bored in a class or at a conference and started doodling to keep ourselves entertained. Or whistled while painting a wall. If we're not truly being challenged, we get bored and add a layer of complexity to amuse ourselves. Our ability to turn routine tasks into moments of microflow, into something we enjoy, is key to our being happy, since we all have to do such tasks.

Even Bill Gates washes the dishes every night. He says he enjoys it—that it helps him relax and clear his mind, and that he tries to do it a little better each day, following an established order or set of rules he's made for himself: plates first, forks second, and so on.

It's one of his daily moments of microflow.

Richard Feynman, one of the most important physicists of all time, also took pleasure in routine tasks. W. Daniel Hillis, one of the founders of the supercomputer manufacturer Thinking Machines, hired Feynman to work on the development of a computer that could handle parallel processing when he was already world famous. He says Feynman showed up on his first day of work and

María Capovilla (116)

“I’ve never eaten meat in my life.”

Born in Ecuador in 1889, María Capovilla was recognized by Guinness as the world’s oldest person. She died of pneumonia in 2006, at 116 years and 347 days old, leaving behind three children, twelve grandchildren, and twenty great- and great-great-grandchildren.

She gave one of her last interviews at age 107, sharing her memories and her thoughts:

I’m happy, and I give thanks to God, who keeps me going. I never thought I’d live so long, I thought I’d die long ago. My husband, Antonio Capovilla, was the captain of a ship. He passed away at 84. We had two daughters and a son, and now I have many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Things were better, back in the old days. People behaved better. We used to dance, but we were more restrained; there was this one song I loved dancing to: “María” by Luis Alarcón. I still remember most of the words. I also remember many prayers, and say them every day.

I like the waltz, and can still dance it. I also still make crafts, I still do some of the things I did when I was in school.²

When she had finished recalling her past, she began to dance—one of her great passions—with an energy that made her seem decades younger.

When asked about her secret for longevity, she responded simply, “I don’t know what the secret to long life is. The only thing I do is I’ve never eaten meat in my life. I attribute it to that.”

LESSONS FROM JAPAN'S CENTENARIANS

Traditions and proverbs for happiness and
longevity

A Declaration from the Town Where People Live Longest

At 80 I am still a child.

When I come to see you at 90,
send me away to wait until I'm 100.

The older, the stronger;

let us not depend too much on our children as we age.

If you seek long life and health, you are welcome in our village,
where you will be blessed by nature,
and together we will discover the secret to longevity.

April 23, 1993

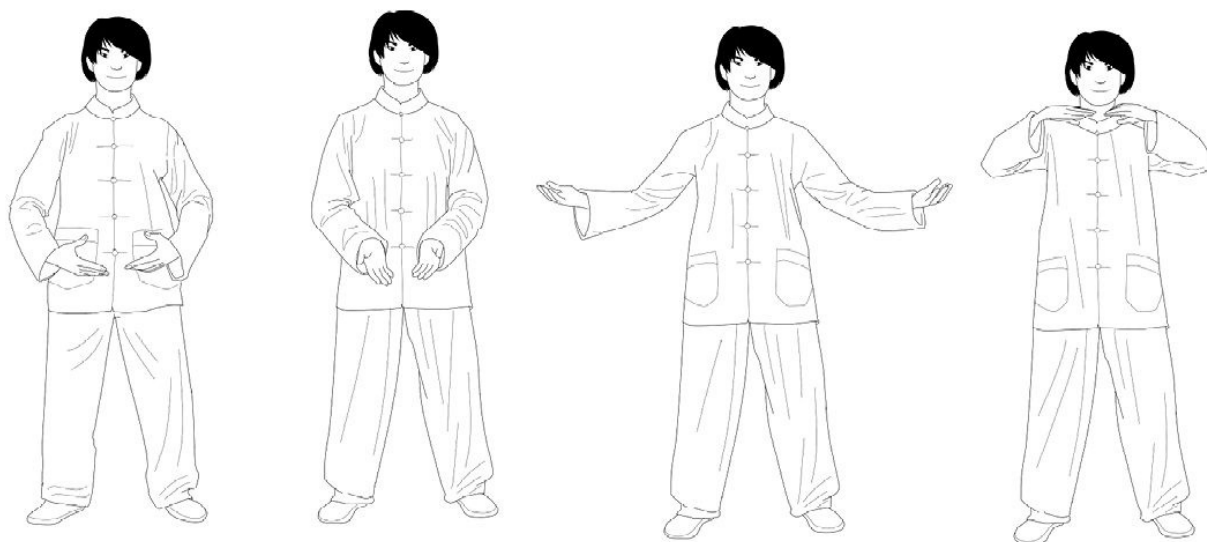
Ogimi Federation of Senior Citizen Clubs

lack of resources once the war ended, the average life expectancy was not very high during the 1940s and 1950s. As Okinawans recovered from the destruction, however, they came to be some of the country's longest-living citizens.

What secrets to long life do the Japanese hold? What is it about Okinawa that makes it the best of the best in terms of life expectancy?

Experts point out that, for one thing, Okinawa is the only province in Japan without trains. Its residents have to walk or cycle when not driving. It is also the only province that has managed to follow the Japanese government's recommendation of eating less than ten grams of salt per day.

- ***Hatha yoga***: the most widespread form in the West and Japan; characterized by ***asanas*** or poses combined in a quest for balance



METAL

1. Starting from Earth posture, raise your arms until your hands are level with your sternum.
2. Turn your palms toward each other, about four inches apart, with your fingers relaxed and slightly separated, pointing upward.
3. As you inhale, move your hands away from each other until they are shoulder width apart.
4. As you exhale, bring your hands toward each other until they are back in position 2.
5. Repeat twice, for a total of three, observing the concentration of energy as you bring your hands together in front of your lungs.

*and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.*

Taking a hit or two can be viewed as either a misfortune or an experience that we can apply to all areas of our lives, as we continually make corrections and set new and better goals. As Taleb writes in ***Antifragile***, “We need randomness, mess, adventures, uncertainty, self-discovery, hear traumatic episodes, all these things that make life worth living.” We encourage those interested in the concept of antifragility to read Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s ***Antifragile***.

Life is pure imperfection, as the philosophy of ***wabi-sabi*** teaches us, and the passage of time shows us that everything is fleeting, but if you have a clear sense of your ***ikigai***, each moment will hold so many possibilities that it will seem almost like an eternity.