

'Attitude of gratitude' keeps older people in Japan feeling hopeful as they age

21 January 2021, by Iza Kavedzija



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Older people in Japan have an "attitude of gratitude" which keeps them feeling hopeful despite the challenges of aging, a new study says.

Feeling thankful and grateful for the care and support they have had during their life helps pensioners in the country to be more optimistic, even when they experienced difficulties and were anxious about getting older, an expert found.

Dr. Iza Kavedija, from the University of Exeter, observed people in their 80s and 90s in the course of long-term ethnographic fieldwork in a merchant neighborhood in the city of Osaka. Her research is published in the journal *Anthropology and Aging*.

Dr. Kavedija found many members of the older community cultivated a "quiet hope", even though they had concerns for the future, such as getting dementia like their parents or becoming a burden to their children. They said they believed things would work out "somehow" (*nantonaku*). They accepted the uncertainty ahead, but remained actively engaged in their wider community. This

gave them a sense of security, and offered them some confidence for the future.

Dr. Kavedija said: "As people move through life, through their later years, many experience a sense of loss. But this time for them also offers opportunities to reflect more on life, with a heightened realization of their interconnections with others. If one habitually invokes the involvement of others and their role in one's life, one is reminded how much other people have helped them, in countless small and more substantive ways. The same events seem different when one focuses on how others have helped."

"An attitude of gratitude was embedded in older peoples' recollections of the past, but also allowed them to think about the present in a hopeful way. A world in which one has received much good will from others is a different place than one in which one has experienced loss, even if the facts of life are the same."

"Gratitude in Japan can be seen to a large extent as a recognition of how much one relies on others as one moves through life. Gratitude highlights feelings of interdependence in the social world."

Many people said they wouldn't be the person they were without others who played a significant part in their life. A phrase they liked to use was *arigatai*, "I am grateful," and sometimes *kansha*, "gratitude". This gratitude might exist for having been able to lead a full life, for having had a good husband who supported the family, for having understanding in-laws, or simply for an opportunity to work.

Dr. Kavedija said: "While people in Japan might hesitate to say they are happy, [gratitude](#) is mentioned frequently. Through appreciation, dependence on others is not seen as simply a burden or a potential source of embarrassment, but also as moving and deeply meaningful. Meaningful relationships and encounters with others comprise

a valuable foundation for what Japanese people call ikigai, or that which makes life worth living."

More information: Iza Kavedzija, An Attitude of Gratitude: Older Japanese in the Hopeful Present, *Anthropology & Aging* (2020). [DOI: 10.5195/aa.2020.244](https://doi.org/10.5195/aa.2020.244)

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