

# Happy people stop working, but never retire or quit

Michiko Itosu has been running a rainwear shop in Okinawa, Japan, for the past 65 years. She has been working nearly every day from 8 am – 8 pm, taking vacation only during the New Year holiday. Her daughter and granddaughter also work in the shop, and the two of them speak fairly good English. When I stumbled upon their shop in downtown Naha, I discovered three friendly women eager to talk to me. Ironically, I was equally interested in learning longevity secrets from this 91 year-old shop owner.



When I asked her about her secret to good health, she said, “work every day and eat vegetables.” But I could tell by the look on her face that Michiko wasn’t really *working*. She enjoys helping people select rainwear. It’s not *work* to her. The smile that’s molded into her face is genuine. She helped me slip into several different raincoats, demonstrating the best way to

snap and belt each one for the best look.

**Do you spend the majority of your time on activities that you’d do regardless of whether or not you got paid?**

For years, researchers and journalists have been curious about healthy old people in Okinawa. Reporters interview them for feature articles and longevity experts poke at them, literally, as they try to uncover the secrets to a long and healthy life. Some of the elderly seemed to be annoyed by

Westerners like me walking around with a camera, while others were friendly.

Most of the exceptionally old people I interview say they enjoyed their *work* which they talk about as if they're talking about a hobby they love. Whether farmers, teachers, doctors or artists, they've got a treasure chest full of stories. Most talk more about how they help people rather how much they earned. It doesn't mean that they're less motivated. In fact, they can accomplish more over their lifetime simply because they live longer. Turtles can win races against rabbits.

## **Do you love what you do enough to do it the rest of your life?**

If not, consider putting a plan in place to change soon. When you do what you're passionate about every day, not only will you enjoy life more, you'll naturally reduce your stress. It's so much easier to get up each morning when you love what you do.

Okinawans are known for living exceptionally long lives. Coincidentally, the Japanese language has no word for retirement. If you visit the island, don't be surprised if your taxi driver is in his 70s and the hotel concierge is in his 80s. That was the case for me. When I traveled to the island, I saw working elderly people in many places. When I asked their ages, most of them proudly told me. One taxi driver happily shared his age. At a red light, he pulled a case out of the center console showing his recognition medal of honor for more than 50 years of safe driving.

In the US, birthdays are happy celebrations up until the 21st. This celebration is the first legal toast with alcohol, the welcoming elixir to surviving the rat race. Many Westerners avoid talking about their age by the time they get to their 30s or 40s. When asked, they may pull out the "I'm 29 again" groaner to avoid revealing their age. If you took a poll on

their favorite day of the week, more would say “Friday” than “Monday.” The US even has a restaurant in honor of the last day of the work week: TGI Fridays!

Short-sighted American companies often target “over the hill” people as the ones that need to be weeded out. This is justified, in part, due to the high cost of health care and the lower life expectancy of Americans compared to other first world countries. *CIA Life Expectancy*. Unfortunately, this results in a lot of great experience and wisdom getting extracted from organizations prematurely. Lots of great workers are put out to pasture, unwillingly, just as they’re reaching their prime.

Even after 65 years of helping people in and out of raincoats, Michiko still likes to help people stay dry in the rain. “Years ago people bought more rainwear because they rode their bicycles,” she told me through her granddaughter who translated. Michiko, along with her daughter and granddaughter, work together selling rainwear 7 days a week.



“Today, lots of the young people go by car, so they only want umbrellas,” she told me. She has adjusted her inventory to meet their needs. Regardless of your age, you can make adjustments if you want to remain relevant in your field.

Many centenarians have habits that keep their minds sharp. They adopt new ways to remain proficient in their chosen field. Many centenarians in longevity hot spots never really retire from the work and activities they love. Although they

may leave one employer or even close their business, they continue to share their talents and find ways to add value to society. They're not quitters.

## **Have you mistakenly felt that you're too young or old to be happy with your work?**

Centenarians didn't get to their age by saying, "I'm too old to do this or that." Many of them work well into their 80s or 90s doing what they enjoy. It keeps them alert and gives them a reason to get up and moving each day. Age itself is rarely the limiting factor in any country. Although there are laws which regulate minimum ages of doing things, there are very few things you can't do because you've passed a legal maximum age.

Work satisfaction is one of the secrets of some of the world's oldest people, and ironically, many are humble gardeners or laborers who are physically active every day.

Smart people sit at desks all day, while wise people get their hands dirty. Although educated women with desk jobs typically earn more money and have longer fingernails, they tend to lead more sedentary and shorter lives. Don't be afraid of dirty short nails. If your work involves low-impact physical labor much of the day, you'll probably be better off in the long run.

Whatever you do, don't retire to a sluggish lifestyle. A sedentary retirement often leads to boredom, lethargy, depression, and a downturn in health. Even if your work is relatively sedentary, it still causes you to do things you wouldn't otherwise do.

## **Do you leave work each day with a healthy sense of satisfaction and well-being?**

Some jobs are better for your health than others. Jobs that expose you to toxins, or require you to do sporadic shift

work, put you at high risk of injury, or require you to sit at a desk all day, are likely to have a negative affect on your health. If your job is causing too much stress, what good is it doing you or your loved ones? Resolve the issue or find a different job. You'll be much better off in the long run.

Health is the greatest form of wealth, but unfortunately many people don't realize it until they're facing illness. Although your income can affect the range of options you have in life, your economic status is no guarantee of happiness or health.

If you have a full-time job, you probably spend about half of your waking time getting ready for work, thinking about work, commuting to or from work, and of course, working at work. You give your best energy each day to your employer or customers, and your family and friends get your leftovers at the end of the day. Does this routine sound familiar? Doesn't it make good sense to use all this precious time, your life, contributing to a product or service you believe in?

## **Are you passionate about your work?**

One of the greatest regrets many people have late in life is that they didn't take more risks to do what they really wanted. You probably know a few people who found a way to turn their passion into their source of income. They don't even think of their vocation as "work." If you're already doing work you love, keep doing what you're doing. But if you're not satisfied with your job, consider finding one or two mentors who love their occupation, and ask for their guidance as you transition into more fulfilling work.

Don't stress too much over any particular job. Be creative and put together a plan for your future. One of the best ways to reduce your work pressure is to keep your living expenses as low as possible. Use your time off work for retraining or making other changes that will help you to reposition yourself, if necessary. Or volunteer or take on a part-time

job doing what you love. This alone may open new doors for you.

Remain positive through transitions. Knowing that you're working toward a better future should help to give you the extra energy you need to get there. You may not be able to make drastic changes quickly, but if you plan carefully, get training as needed, you can find a way to support yourself while expressing your talents and interests at the same time.

What's the point of burning away your days doing things that feel meaningless? Doesn't it make sense for you to enjoy your work, get along with your colleagues, and be in an environment that's conducive to good health?

Do happy people tend to find ways to like their work, you may wonder? Or is it that people who do the work they love tend to be happier? What I've noticed is that happy people who live exceptionally long lives never really *work*, retire or quit. They wake up every day and do the things that bring them a lot of pleasure and just enough income to meet their modest needs.