

Employees in Crisis:

When mood kills

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“Act One, Scene One”

The scene is hauntingly familiar: a proud confident *salaryman* frequenting hotel lobby bars during cocktail hours in Tokyo. Then the global economic crunch hits hard on the company and leaves everyone in a state of uncertainty. The *salaryman* couldn't sleep. The drinking bouts become more frequent. And before we know it, a rope is strung over the ceiling, or a troubled soul in a suit plunges in front of a speeding morning train. Scenes like these have become so typical the management of Japan Railways (JR) even came out with an ordinance requiring the families of suicide victims who throw themselves in front of speeding trains to pay for the cleanup costs.

In a restrictive society that frowns upon failure and nonconformity, taking one's own life (自殺 or *jisatsu*) seems to have become an accepted way of ending the despair. As Leo Lewis of *Time Online* vividly describes it, “*Japanese professionals in their thirties are killing themselves at unprecedented rates, as the nation struggles with a runaway suicide epidemic.*”

The hard facts...

Public discussion of suicide as a social problem remains to be taboo in this cloistered country but the statistics can be pretty distressing. Government figures indicate that about 32,000 people took their own lives in 2008, marking the 11th straight year that this figure is above the 30,000 mark. Worst, the National Police Agency recently reported that in January alone of this year, there have been almost 2,700 suicides already. This statistics make Japanese among the most suicidal people in the developed world. Suicide rates remain to be highest among men, particularly those over 60. Recent figures culled in the last decade, however, indicate that nowadays people in their thirties are the most likely to kill themselves due to workplace pressure and work-related depression. Now, something is wrong. Terribly wrong!

Unfortunately, as the economy worsens there is fear that depression, and ultimately, mood-related hopelessness can get worse. Recession can easily become one of the lowest period in everyone's life. As the economy struggles to remain buoyant, more and more people become at risk of losing their jobs or sources of income. When a person is at risk of being deprived of his ability to meet basic needs, he becomes emotionally vulnerable and prone to

depression. Instead of being productive, he becomes a burden to the company which is forced to adopt drastic measures to survive the rough times. Soon enough, he gets the pink slip—not necessarily because the company has to cut on jobs, but largely because he has not been performing well—and the cycle of life threatening depressions repeats itself.

Japan's disturbing suicide rates would have sent other industrialized countries to take a hard look at the problem, according to George Wehrfritz in an Aug. 21, 2001 *Newsweek* feature. Tradition, however, has idealized suicide as part of the *samurai* culture. In a society that stigmatizes any indication of weakness, treatment can be interrupted if not discouraged by the shame felt at work and the lacerating guilt that one is not able to overcome problems alone. But whether this explains why the government has not been so successful in coming up with real measures to curb suicide among its populace is uncertain. What is definite is that in spite of the wave of depression-related deaths, there is an astounding dearth in trained therapists. Most doctors, according to Wehrfritz, either cannot or would not even treat mental illnesses, further discouraging people from seeking professional help. Oddly still, the popular antidepressant *Prozac* was introduced in Japan only in 1999 (and approved a little while longer) even though the drug had become widely available in Europe and the US a decade earlier.

Jisatsu explained

Interestingly, amidst all these cultural explanations, empirical studies still point out to socioeconomic conditions as the most significant variable. In general, according to a study by Joe Chen, Yun Jeong Choi and Yasuyuki Sawada of the University of Tokyo Faculty of Economics, better economic conditions such as high levels of income and higher economic growth tend to reduce the suicide rate while income inequality tend to increase it. Likewise, it was found that the suicide rate in Japan is more sensitive to economic factors captured by real GDP per capita, growth rate of real GDP per capita, and the *Gini* index than to social factors represented by divorce rate, birth rate, female labor force participation rate, and alcohol consumption.

It may be worthwhile to mention that as early as 1879, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim already found that suicides may be explained from an economic standpoint, that is, they tend to take place

either in both periods of economic depression and prosperity. The swings between economic prosperity and crunch that usher class change and shifts in social equilibrium, according to Durkheim, may lead to role conflict, disillusionment, *normlessness*, and a state of what he referred to as *anomie*. Anomie is akin to a Kafkaesque condition in which an individual holds unregulated personal goals only to realize that certain social conditions or norms prevent these goals from being achieved.

In Japan, *anomie* may be seen in the trauma that followed the collapse of lifetime employment. At the height of the Japanese economic miracle, workers committed themselves to an implicit social contract—to work tirelessly for their companies which will take care of them in return. The Japanese clocked unpaid overtime services, deliberately skipped vacations and literally worked themselves to death for the sake of their companies. But when the economic bubble finally burst in 1997, the news of inevitable downsizing left many workers feeling betrayed and confused. Most have spent their entire lives working for the same company and conforming to a system that existed nowhere else. Worst, finding work was next to impossible as most mid-career workers barely spoke English or were computer literate. Soon enough they had to face families they had barely known and have neglected in favor of work, a society that frowns upon failures, and very little prospects in terms of career opportunities.

What can we do

Employees, in other words, are at the very heart of Japan's depression epidemic. Fortunately, a few large corporations are now trying to break down the suicide taboo and are addressing the issue head on through employee assistance programs (EAPs), confidential counseling, and health plans that cover depression and other psychological conditions. As an example, Sony's preventive health care program which allows off-site consultation and confidentiality, for instance, is regarded as a major step in these efforts.

As individuals, of course, we can always choose to distance ourselves away from suicide and help

others from falling into the depression maelstrom. We can start by shying away from objects or places that may be used as a means of committing suicide. And when feeling stressed out, it is better to seek comfort from things other than alcohol and drugs. Sometimes it is best to avoid things where we are likely to fail or find difficult to accomplish at the moment. We should accept the fact that we all have limits. And in the event that when you feel that you have already reached your limits, **call for help**. Reach out. Believe it or not, there are people out there willing and able to help you.

In our daily routine, we may have to squeeze in at least two 30-minute periods for activities that we find pleasurable like listening to music, playing a musical instrument, meditating, playing videogames, watching movies, writing, strolling in the park, playing with pets, working on a hobby, shopping, gardening, hanging out with friends, or even just having a conversation with people we love.

Finally, it may also be worthwhile to keep even just an ounce of optimism every now and then. Before we know it, the financial markets will bounce back, the economy will stabilize, jobs will become available and the world will turn to normal in a short while. Hope, deceitful as it is, as French author François Duc de La Rochefoucauld reminds us, *"hope, deceitful as it is, should serve at least to lead us to the end of our lives by an agreeable route."*

What ever crisis you are in, no matter how deep you are stuck, that too shall pass and when it does, will you be there as a survivor or a part of the statistics? The choice is yours.

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About the Author



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