

Saving 10,000 — Winning a War on Suicide in Japan

By Rene Duignan



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Introduction

In a war on suicide, who is the enemy?

Despite having one of the highest living standards and the longest life expectancy in the world, Japan has tragically lost over 450,000 lives to suicide in the last 15 years. Attempted suicides could be 10 times that figure, according to the World Health Organization. From 1995 to 2009, a decline in suicide was achieved in most OECD countries but the rate increased by 40% in Japan (*Chart*). In the international context, Japan's suicide rate is double that of the United States, three times that of Thailand, six times higher than Greece and 12 times larger than the Philippines.

I felt compelled to make a documentary on how Japan could reduce suicide but many people warned me this was a foolish idea, as I had zero film-making experience and this was hardly a topic for an Irishman to tackle. All my requests for professional assistance or funding were rejected. In the end, only a 22-year-old student, Marc-Antoine Astier, agreed to work with me. Marc managed to persuade another young student, Ms. Eri Kageyama, to come on board to help us as a language and culture advisor. Our small but motivated movie crew was complete. We bought a camera and worked relentlessly on

week nights and weekends for two years. People laughed at the tiny scale of our project but gave us an interview anyway. After a year doing 96 interviews and a year editing 100 hours of footage the movie was almost complete, but I collapsed from exhaustion. I remember the peace I felt while in a hospital bed on a drip. I used this precious time to make the final movie edits in my head as I knew each scene by heart.

I am not naive enough to believe that with this uncomfortable topic we could ever make it onto Japanese TV, so we work at the grassroots level. We made DVDs and have started to do screenings, and the audience reactions have been incredible. One audience member told me that the movie was like an answer to his prayers. Many people have shared personal stories of suicide loss with me after seeing the movie. I usually come home feeling emotionally wrecked after a screening but hoping that I might just have helped somebody. Japanese people are starting to stand up against the horror that is suicide. In 2012, for the first time in 15 years, Japan's suicide rate fell below 30,000 thanks to many unsung heroes. I was very fortunate to speak with several of these heroes, and here are 10 ways to help reduce suicide in Japan by 10,000.

CHART

Change in suicide rates
Percentage, 1995-2009 or latest available period



Source: OECD Factbook 2011: Economic, Environmental & Social Statistics

1. To the Media — “Stop Spreading the Suicide Virus”

How on earth does an 8-year-old girl learn how to hang herself? The short answer is that Japan has a suicide-infested popular culture which infects vulnerable minds, even those of children. It normalizes, rationalizes and commercializes suicide. In my 15 years in Japan, it has disturbed me how suicide is endlessly reproduced in movies, TV soap operas, news bulletins, novels, kabuki plays, ballets, computer games, comic books, suicide websites and how-to-kill-yourself manuals. Suicide is cynically portrayed as beautiful or heroic to draw tears from an audience. Am I exaggerating about how a suicide “virus” is spreading the idea of killing yourself everywhere? A 2012 government survey found 25% of Japanese had suicidal thoughts in the past year. A staggering 36% had considered suicide in the 20-30 years age-group.

There were no suicides in Aokigahara forest until it was used as the location for a “beautiful” lover’s suicide in a best-selling novel. Today, the forest is the number one suicide spot in the world. Now the media relentlessly features the forest’s infamy to irresponsibly advertise suicide and send more people there to kill themselves. Best-selling suicide manuals describe Aokigahara as the most beautiful place to die but there is little beauty about the human scavengers who come to search for wallets, shoes or a corpse to film. Forest corpses on YouTube can attract literally millions of views. Why? Even “serious” news shows go “corpse hunting” to fill up space in a quiet week. Thankfully the local government has announced it will start to restrict permits for the filming of suicide scenes in the forest. When will the Japanese media stop mass-marketing suicide and feeding off tragedy like vultures?

2. To the Authorities — “Ban Suicide Manuals”

It is shocking that suicide manuals with explicit instructions on hanging, electrocution or asphyxiation can sell a million copies in Japan. One interviewee argued that suicide manuals are useful in Japan because they help suicidal people to die in painless and efficient ways. A Buddhist monk told me he performed 80 funeral ceremonies for suicide victims last year and all the bereaved families knew these manuals. He is also a counselor to several hundred suicidal people and the manuals hold a magnetic appeal for them. One journalist described a suicide scene where a young boy had electrocuted himself with a manual open beside him. A dispirited policeman begged the journalist to write a story on the evil influence of suicide manuals. Do these books represent a loosening of the moral restraints of a civilised society? I can’t imagine my own blind terror if I were to find my daughter had bought a death manual.

3. To Life Insurance Companies — “Stop Paying People to Kill Themselves”

You’ve lost your job but still have a mortgage of 20 years left to pay. You’ve got children’s education fees to pay, you’ve got multiple consumer-loan debts to pay and you feel under unbearable pressure



Photo: Eri Kageyama

Press conference at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan (FCCJ)

— what do you do? Well, in Japan the solution is easy. All you have to give is your life. People would sign a life insurance contract and go and kill themselves under the nearest train. Life insurance companies were forced to create a one-year exemption period — i.e. you sign a life insurance contract but must wait one year before killing yourself to ensure that your family gets the payout. One year is still a good deal for desperate people so the suicide rate jumped on the 13th month. Life insurance companies shifted to two years of exemption but suicide spiked on the 25th month. In 2006, the US Society of Actuaries said that “*Suicides quadrupled after expiry of the exemption period*”. In Japan, 10% of all death benefits are estimated to be suicide-related. Why is it that life insurance companies pay out on suicide? Stop paying people to kill themselves. Stop incentivizing people to die and abandon their families. Which family would say: “I’ll take the money, I’ll lose the husband or son.”?

I believe in life insurance not death insurance. Life insurance is to help families live with a sense of security; it is not to help people to die. People can make a “rational” decision that they’re worth more dead than alive. Paying people to kill themselves creates the dangers of adverse selection, moral hazard and perverse incentives. It allows the illusion of a heroic suicide which is particularly lethal in Japan. For life insurance companies, to pay on suicide is no financial loss because actuarial tables are adjusted up and everybody pays a little more in a policy. Is it actually easier for life insurance companies to pay out than risk negative publicity? Debt and life insurance policies are a deadly combination especially when we’re given leaflets with debt collection harassment hotline numbers in Tokyo train stations. It would simply not be safe for me to detail the huge role of organized crime in illegal moneylending and the harsh methods which are routinely used to collect those debts.

4. To Mental Health Professionals — “Less Medication & More Therapy”

Among the average of 30,000 suicides of recent years, it is reported that 10,000 of the victims have been receiving treatment in the mental healthcare system. Experts told me that Japanese psychiatric services still use a 1960s model with high

Photo: Eri Kageyama



Interview with Professor Kiyoshi Kurokawa

institutionalization rates. While the global trend was to move patients to community reintegration, an alarmingly high 350,000 people are still institutionalized in Japan. Some 90% of mental institutions in Japan are private profit-making entities, like hotels. In a hotel you have to fill the beds, and average lengths of institutionalization are extremely long in Japan. Due to shortages of trained professionals, there is a reliance on high doses of multiple anti-psychotic medications. Global standard treatments such as individual and group therapies are not so common in the in-patient psychiatric setting. For standard consultations to diagnose and treat depression, Japanese psychiatrists are forced to deal with a huge patient base. The average clinic can include 40 to 50 patients in a city hospital where the psychiatrist might have only three or four minutes per individual. Do you think you can solve your problems in three or four minutes? You may have problems with debt or are feeling that life has no meaning. “Sorry, the time is up now please.” When you call a suicide helpline in Japan, you may have to dial that number 30 or 40 times because the lines are so busy. A lot of people have a lot of problems but nobody to talk with. One study said that 70% of these callers are already on medication. Something is very wrong.

5. To School Authorities — “Zero Tolerance on Bullying”

Schools across Japan reported more than 140,000 bullying cases in the first six months of 2012 — double that of the entire 2011 academic year. Over 1,000 cases of bullying a day is a nightmarish statistic for parents but more awareness is leading to higher reporting rates. Trying to explain the scale of the problem in Japan, interviewees told me that bullying has been a tacitly approved disciplining device against individuality, a trait equated with selfishness. A relentless drive for conformity means those who dare to be different are ostracized by the group. Students have been forced to “practice suicide” or have had “DIE” written over their school books. Bullying in Japan is often chillingly focused on pushing fellow students over the abyss. I am disturbed by this recurring theme in my project as it perfectly matches with co-workers telling you to kill yourself and with online strangers

urging you to commit suicide.

Practical actions must be taken by the authorities. *Option 1:* Make schools legally liable if they cannot provide a safe environment for children. *Option 2:* Use systems like those developed in Europe to *Recognize–Refuse–Report*. Define bullying in exacting detail for students. Witnesses must not be allowed to turn a blind eye. It hardly requires genius to stop children bullying others. *Option 3:* Enhanced playground supervision is needed. Teachers should worry more about children than exam results. Often suicide notes blame the bullies but also the teachers who ignored desperate pleas for help. Unfortunately, teachers are themselves under severe duress with sick leave for mental-health reasons hitting new records each year.

6. To Office Managers — “Stop Working People to Death”

Nobody kills themselves in a right state of mind. Nobody rationally decides “Thanks, but I’ve have enough of life.” It is always an element of mental illness. It is often excruciating depression that pushes people to choose death. Two-thirds of depression comes from a trigger. It comes from not getting enough sleep, from being overworked or being bullied by a boss who is demanding impossible targets. One interviewee described Japan as a hierarchical male chauvinistic society that kills workers by relentlessly pressuring them. Two people separately told me of a boss literally screaming at them to go and kill themselves. Showing any mental pressure is seen as weakness. After a movie screening, one person told me that he does 100 hours of overtime each month. I felt helpless as I had no solution to propose. It is notoriously difficult to change jobs in Japan so people feel genuinely trapped. Several interviewees told me of colleagues who committed suicide due to overwork but dared not talk about it on camera. The corporate culture is ferocious and ruthless in many companies. One person bullied to tears by the office manager was told to shut up and do her crying in the toilet. Thankfully, this person I could help because it was my wife and she quit the company.

7. To Japanese Society — “Break Down the Taboos within Suicide”

a) *Alcohol:* Heavy drinkers among middle-aged men are one of the largest categories of Japanese suicide victims. Only 1% of an estimated 2.4 million problem alcoholics in Japan receive any professional treatment according to the Japanese National Institute on Alcoholism. Doctors and social workers witness the enormity of the problem but the alcohol industry is powerful with massive advertising budgets and there are simply never any difficult questions from the media. One journalist interviewee told me he only saw two stories on alcoholism in his 50 years of reporting in Japan. A clinical counsellor said a large proportion of her clients suffer alcohol dependency problems. In Finland, studies show that alcohol was found in the blood of 50% of suicide victims and one-third were found to have had alcohol dependence problems. How can Japan tackle a major societal

problem when nobody will even dare to admit it?

b) *Gambling*: Gamblers drowning in debts often fund their habit from multiple consumer finance companies or with loans from illegal moneylenders. Gambling is supposed to be illegal but somehow Japan is the biggest gambling market in the world. Spending on pachinko alone is worth over \$300 billion each year, comparable to the auto industry or healthcare spending. Pachinko enjoys four times the profit of worldwide legal casino gambling. Sadly gambling addictions and the link with debt and suicide will likely never be highlighted.

c) *Homosexuality*: A Japanese study found 15% of male homosexuals in Japan admitted to having attempted suicide at some stage. Some 13% experienced clinical depression and 83% experienced school bullying, while 60% reported being harassed due to sexual orientation. Why do we never hear of school bullying due to homosexuality in the Japanese media? Homosexuality is a topic that makes people feel uncomfortable and discrimination remains high.

d) *Gaming/Internet addictions*: The government estimated there are 700,000 full syndrome and 1,400,000 sub-syndrome *hikkikomori* (social recluses) in Japan. They never leave their bedrooms and have cut themselves off from the world. The average age of a social recluse in Japan is 30 and the average period of their social isolation is 9.6 years. In Japan, computer gaming is a massive industry and is part of a “Cool Japan” image. *Hikkikomori* is not “cool” and must be recognised as mental illness. Internet and gaming addictions must be recognised.

e) *Female suicide*: Japanese women’s suicide rates are ranked sixth in the world, higher than Japanese men who rank 11th. Rising domestic violence (DV) came across as a major problem in the movie. DV is a taboo topic itself, as is child abuse which according to latest statistics is also rising sharply. Alcoholism amongst women is another taboo, with the loneliness of being a housewife forcing many to become kitchen drinkers. There is so much we need to study. Why do we never hear about measures to counter the 10,000 female suicides each year?

8. To Hospital Emergency Rooms

— “Help Suicide Attempters in a Comprehensive Way”

One completed suicide has a ratio of 10 suicide attempts, according to the WHO, which translates to at least 300,000 suicide attempts in Japan every year. One expert told me that 10% to 20% of all the patients transferred to the most critical emergency medical centers in Japan are suicide attempters. Suicidal people are coming to hospitals every day, cutting their wrists or overdosing. The hospital will bandage wrists and pump stomachs, while saying “Don’t do it again.” Often suicide attempters are seen as a nuisance, as they cut themselves again and again and come to the emergency room. Japan could save so many lives at this critical moment. When a suicide attempter arrives: *Option 1* — Have a psychiatrist there. *Option 2* — Have a social worker there. Is that too expensive? *Option 3* — Follow up and check if they are alright afterwards. *Option 4* — Put attempters in touch with external psychiatrists. *Option 5* — Why not give them free consultations to incentivize them to get help. If

they tried to kill themselves, this is a golden chance to show that society cares about whether they live or die. Don’t just send them home with an admonishment so that a month later they cut their wrists again. The next time they might not come to the hospital but be going straight to the morgue.

9. Elderly Suicide

— “Depression Awareness Campaigns”

One-third of all suicide victims in Japan are over 60 but nobody talks much about elderly suicide being a problem. They are just old, tired of life, so what is there to talk about? Elderly suicide doesn’t excite the media as much as a sensational bullying case or a celebrity suicide. As rural areas become depopulated, often only the elderly are left behind. Japan can be a very lonely place and loneliness is one of the key suicide factors, particularly for the elderly. Who wants to talk to them? How to reach them when they rarely leave their home? They can no longer cook and start to have hygiene problems. They are living in complete solitude after their partner has died. Few elderly write suicide notes because they know there is no one to read them. When they see a doctor, they’ll never admit to depression and wanting to die. They often complain of tiredness or insomnia. Doctors need to realize that this is not an ordinary sleeplessness. “Masked” depression must be found at an early stage. Many elderly think about an “honourable” sacrifice of getting out of the way but this is just the depression talking. Depression awareness has been proven all over the world as a key tool to reduce suicide.

10. To All of Us — “Take the Time to Listen”

I thought what a nightmare to have a neighbor who is always knocking on your door for tea and sympathy. As she had got older, work had got less and less; she said she’d barely leave her room. I quickly got bored listening to her problems and sad stories; it was depressing. So when a knock would come, I’d turn down the TV and keep quiet. She slipped a tiny note under my door with her phone number and e-mail address; it said “Talk to you soon”. Then thankfully she stopped knocking. A couple of months later, I got angry when the landlord wouldn’t fix a gas leak that left a horrible smell in the corridor. Her corpse was only discovered after three or four weeks of the summer heat. Two days later, I looked out the spy hole of my door to see an elderly lady stacking boxes. Despite the smell, the lady didn’t wear a mask; this was still her daughter. No matter how many people I interview or what answers I find in *Saving 10,000*, I’ll always know; I myself couldn’t even save one. My last advice is that sometimes, all you need to save someone’s life is to take the time to listen. If we’re looking for the enemy in a war on suicide, all we have to do is to look in the mirror to see our own indifference. **JS**

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