

"Father Can't Come Home Anymore"

By Ato Ekusa

A small but growing number of the corporate warriors who gave their all to make Japan the economic superpower that it is today are suffering from a strange phobia—they dread returning home to their family after work. According to psychiatrist Toru Sekiya, the number of such men visiting his clinic in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward has increased over the past five years, reaching more than 30 in 1989. Realizing the seriousness of the situation, Sekiya, 59, issued a warning to salaried workers and their wives at the end of last year in his book *Otosan wa mo kaerenai* (Father Can't Come Home Anymore).

Sekiya had operated a night shelter at his clinic, initially for elementary and junior high school students with a phobia about going to school. About 10 years ago, Sekiya began to receive visits not from children but from male salaried workers asking to be allowed to stay at the clinic because they could not return home. Gradually the number of men taking refuge in the clinic for the night and going straight to work the next day increased. On any night there are three to eight men staying at his clinic and undergoing treatment for this home-avoidance syndrome. The following are examples.

Mr. A, 42, works for an electric parts maker. He is a very serious company employee. After reaching the post of deputy section chief he remained stuck there while younger people chalked up good results and, leaping over him, went on to become section chiefs. Since Mr. A lived in company housing, rumors spread about his failure to achieve promotion. This made him grow even more impatient and put in long hours of overtime, but his subordinates would not play along. When he took work home, his family frowned on him.

The last straw came when Mr. A again failed to win promotion in the annual personnel shake-up and his wife snapped, "You're no good at all, are you?" At that point, Mr. A's world caved in. He could no

longer sleep well at night, lost his willpower, and began making careless mistakes on the job. In the morning he would feel drowsy, take ages over washing, and dawdle over breakfast. Only when his wife nagged him would he eventually set off for the office. He lost any desire to go to work, and would sit mindlessly in a park. When evening came, he would be terrified of going home. On the verge of suicide, he finally plucked up the courage to visit Sekiya's clinic.

Mr. B, 45, works as a section chief in a trading company in Tokyo. He was transferred to the Fukuoka branch, which was a step up on the ladder of promotion. Since their son was swotting for university entrance examinations, Mr. B's wife refused to move, so Mr. B went to Fukuoka alone. The wife made their son study hard so that he could follow in her father's footsteps by entering a top national university. "You won't be able to get a good job if you enter a private university like your father," she would tell him.

When Mr. B returned for the weekend, he felt like an outsider. One Sunday he was lying sprawled out, watching television, when his son, who was studying for his exams, complained of the noise. They got into a quarrel, the wife took the son's side, and Mr. B backed down.

After that the mother and son began to disparage Mr. B, and he returned home less and less frequently, instead putting all his effort into his job. But this in turn caused friction with his subordinates, who thought he was pushing them too hard. Alienated from both his family and his workmates, Mr. B lost his drive. He returned to Tokyo but remained in the post of section chief. Completely dejected, he began to avoid going home. Eventually he visited Sekiya's clinic at the suggestion of a friend who had become aware of his abnormal behavior.

According to Sekiya, the home-avoidance syndrome represents one of the costs that Japan is now paying for the rapid economic growth it experienced in



the 1960s. At that time, work and life were synonymous. But since the oil crises in the 1970s, the Japanese economy has remained in a period of low growth, which means that the number of managerial posts has declined, and profits have fallen. However industriously they work, some men just cannot secure a high income and better position. Eventually, their families begin to look down on them.

Stuck in a middle management post with no prospect of advancement, these men lose their zest for life and become alienated from their roles as husband and father. Since they are inherently of a serious nature, they can find no outlet for their anxiety and irritation. Even if they want to quit their job, they feel hedged in by the need to pay for their home and their children's education and to plan for old age. If they seek understanding at home, their wives will often ignore them in retaliation for the past, when, the wives feel, they themselves were ignored by their workaholic husbands. So in the end, these men have no one and no place to turn to.

According to Sekiya, a father is at risk if the following factors apply to him:

His income stays the same, and he fails to win promotion; his colleagues and juniors pass him by and become his seniors; his work is not going well; he has no hobbies; he is serious but clumsy; his wife nags him about his salary and promotion; he does not communicate with his wife; he is ridiculed by his children; he has no place in the family; he is living in company housing; his salary is paid into the bank.

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