

The Struggle to Prevent Another 34,000 Deaths

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

“WHAT do you think happens to people when they die?” A doctor specializing in pediatric neuropsychiatry recently carried out a survey that put the question to elementary and middle school students across the nation. It was an exceptional question, probing young Japanese views of life and death. Twenty percent responded “they come back to life” or “people could return from the dead.”

Suicides among elementary, junior high and senior high students have increased as much as 11.4% in a single year. The doctor concludes that these young people think life is like a video game where you can push a “reset” button.

Japanese adults’ views on life and death are also fragile. In 2003 a record 34,000 committed suicide. There has been a rapid rise in cases of suicide motivated by “economic and livelihood issues,” especially among men in their 40s and 50s, who are in the prime of their working lives. The Japanese suicide rate is lower than those of Russia and the Baltic states, but it far exceeds the levels in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany.

In October 2004 in Saitama prefecture, seven complete strangers – including a housewife, a student and workers – committed group suicide by suffocating themselves by burning a briquette stove in a car. The individuals were from a variety of regions and had contacted each other through suicide websites. Their motives for committing suicide are unclear. One mother left a note to her two small children which read, “Mommy’s going to die, but I’m glad that I gave birth to both of you.”

The wife of a university baseball team coach who hung himself at his home said that her husband had too much strain to lead to a league championship once every three years. She claims that he hadn’t taken a day off in three months and he committed suicide due to overwork. A high court judge who logged 300 work hours every month also committed suicide. His wife guesses that his suicide was caused by depression.

The number of suicides in Japan in the past two years exceeds

the casualties of the Vietnam War. The novelist Itsuki Hiroyuki calls this *Kokoro no Senso*, the War of the Spirit.

Various attempts have been initiated to stem the number of these “war casualties.”

The “Suicide Prevention Manual” compiled by the Japan Medical Association is considerably detailed. Concerned about the existence of a prejudice against mental illness and the high barriers to consulting a hospital psychiatric department, the manual advocates that doctors in other departments have an appropriate understanding of depression and other mental illnesses. If patients should complain that they feel like killing themselves, a doctor should avoid simply responding, “You shouldn’t give up your life.” Instead, doctors should assume the role of a thoughtful listener.

“Straightforwardly inquire about the person’s feelings that make him or her want to commit suicide. It is essential to make the patient pledge not to commit suicide while undergoing treatment.” The manual is filled with such concrete suggestions.

Matsunoyama in Niigata prefecture, a mountain village with a heavy annual snowfall and a rapidly aging population, once had a suicide rate nine times higher than the national average. Many of the elderly people there said “I feel guilty for having lived this long” and “I want to die early so that I won’t be a burden on my family.” By pinpointing those with a strong tendency toward depression by means of questionnaires and follow-up interviews, the high-risk respondents were provided with treatment and as a result the suicide rate has dropped by over 30%.

The *Tokyo Inochi no Denwa* (the Tokyo Lifeline), a 24-hour telephone counseling service, is kept constantly busy. Their website says that they endeavor to listen carefully to each person who calls, and that takes a lot of time, so it is often difficult for callers to get through. But they encourage people in need to keep trying. “Please don’t give up trying to reach us. We want you to call us. We are making an effort to become a good listener for you.” **JS**

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Illustration: Kaio Susumu