



Finding company: Women in their 60s and 70s get together last month at Iki Iki Salon, a cafe in Tokiwa Daira, Chiba Prefecture, where they spend time over 100 yen coffee. NATSUKO FUKUE

GROWING OLD ALONE

Neighbors, more than kin, face onus of keeping tabs on seniors

By NATSUKO FUKUE

Staff writer

Retired cabby Juzo Omata, 65, was depressed and lonely when he tried to hang himself. His suicide attempt failed only because the tree he selected couldn't take his weight.

Now he says he has new friends. He started visiting the Iki Iki Salon cafe run by a Chiba municipality where elderly people congregate and chat over ¥100 coffee.

Omata, who recently moved to a public housing complex in Tokiwa Daira, Chiba Prefecture, from Tokyo, now feels he can go on living.

"I'm so lonely, so this means a lot to me," he said at the cafe while chatting with his neighbor, Rikio Iikura, 73, a regular who stops by before his one-hour walk.

"I now know most of the people who come here. I want to communicate more (with them)," said Iikura, a retired pianist who also lives alone.

Experts say many elderly people feel isolated from society, especially if they live alone, and this isolation and lack of communication can have an unfortunate consequence: "kodokushi" (lonely death), or passing away alone at home, unnoticed by anyone else.

Nonprofit organizations and local governments are working to create a better environment for the elderly to mitigate this sense of isolation.

The cafe is one such project, set up in 2007 to enhance communication among older people living in Tokiwa Daira. About 35 people visit the cafe every day, according to Takumi Nakazawa, 76, director of an NPO trying to keep neighborhood seniors accounted for in cooperation with the city's welfare division, which runs the cafe.

Nakazawa traces the local effort to the grisly 2001 find of a skeleton in one of the public housing complex's units. He said the man had been dead for three years, but even the caretaker hadn't noticed because the tenant's rent was automatically paid directly from his bank account.

Since that discovery, Nakazawa and other NPO members have been promoting communication and cooperation among neighbors, and created a telephone list for emergencies. He particularly stressed the importance of people routinely greeting each other — a practice neighbors nowadays rarely share.

"The good thing about the cafe is that it allows people to be connected and to communicate," he said. "Being connected is so important. People can't lead life alone."

Before the NPO was set up, about 15 people died alone unnoticed at the complex, but now neighbors are able to learn about a death within three days, he said, noting, however, that men who have lost their partner and live alone are more likely to die a lonely death.

"(Compared with women) men don't say 'hi.' They don't join community activities. They can't cook. They can't clean and do their laundry." Therefore they are more likely to shut themselves inside, he said.

"What's more, Japanese men are good at working in a vertical society. But in a flat relationship in the community, they're not good

communicators."

Nakazawa thus recommends that men participate in activities outside the workplace. "You can't choose the way you die, but you can choose a way to live," he said.

A Tokyo-based NPO meanwhile provides opportunities for single women age 60 and over to make friends, aiming to prevent their social isolation. The all-female SSS Network, which stands for Smile, Single and Senior Life, has about 1,000 members, mostly single or divorced.

"We're like a matchmaking company," said Junko Matsubara, who started the NPO about 10 years ago.

With a ¥10,000 annual fee per member, the NPO organizes a gathering and seminar every month, Matsubara said. The members are also encouraged to form groups based on where they live to cooperate in natural disasters.

Matsubara said she had no worries about the future when she was in her 40s, but when she turned 50 she realized she would be alone when she reached 70 or 80, and have no family or job, like the many women around her. This prompted her to start the group, and membership is growing every year.

"It's not easy for singles" to live out the last part of their lives, especially when they become sick, she said, because many don't have family members who can help. Matsubara thus encourages older singles to seek out friends.

"Our lives will be totally different if we have friends," she said.

For Kazuko Kikkawa, a 68-year-old Osaka resident, however, it wasn't easy at first to become friends with her 77-year-old male neighbor. He was difficult to approach and seemed unfriendly, she said.

The man, who was living alone after his wife died, only bowed when they encountered each other. But one day she spoke to him when he was walking toward the elevator in front of her apartment.

After chatting with him several times, she found out he has no children. He asked an NPO to look in on him a few times a week and to handle his eventual funeral, she said.

Locally, she said, it is not uncommon to find people who died alone and unnoticed. A neighbor was found dead after several months in an apartment located a few blocks away, she noted.

"I was so sad that he couldn't ask his neighbors to look in on him," she said of her own neighbor. In the end, she decided to help, asking him to put a small doll she gave him outside his door in the morning and put it back inside in the evening.

"That way I'll know if he's OK every day," she said.

According to Kikkawa, Osaka is becoming less like a community where people communicate with each other. Luckily, neighbors in her complex, who range in age from their 30s to 80s, often have gatherings. "You know what they say. We'd better rely on neighbors than relatives living far away."

But she said a lot of Japanese tend to just mention they are willing to help out of politeness, and that isn't enough. "We've got to actually offer a helping hand (to neighbors)."

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