

BIG IN JAPAN

Japan needs to do more than simply 'cope' with stress

By MICHAEL HOFFMAN

What's ailing us? The list is long. In a nutshell: stress. Sixty percent of Japan's work force suffers from it, according to the business magazine Weekly Toyo Keizai.

That's astonishing. If 60 percent of people in a given environment are miserable — and stress, beyond healthy limits, is extremely miserable — the logical inference is that the environment is radically amiss, or our mode of life doesn't suit us. That is not Toyo Keizai's conclusion, however. Its solutions amount to variations on the theme of "coping." Get organized, eat better, drink less, be more tolerant of other peoples' foibles, develop a state of mind conducive to rest when rest is possible. All of that is important, but so obvious we should hardly need to be told. We *don't* need to be told. That this is the best the experts can do, and that such self-evidently sensible advice turns out to be so mysteriously hard to put into practice, suggests a deeper problem than the magazine acknowledges.

That 60 percent figure, incidentally, seems to have been calculated before the ongoing surge in "earthquake stress," "tsunami stress," "radiation stress," and so on. They are in a category by themselves, and Toyo Keizai is surely right to say their effects range far beyond the disaster areas.

But consider this average Japanese family — a couple in their early 40s, married 20 years with an only daughter preparing for university entrance exams. It's an ordinary middle-class household, not rich but far from poor. The daughter's education is a financial strain, and so the wife took a part-time job. That leaves her less time for housework. There's much talk about men doing their share around the house, but this particular man is in his working prime, his responsibilities at his company are growing, he works late most nights and

doesn't dare beg off because, like most companies in a sour economy, his faces personnel cuts, no one knowing who might be next, and after an entire day of being put through the corporate wringer, coming home to a house in disorder is not cheering.

It's not his fault and it's not hers, but soon they reach the point where they can't stand each other. The daughter can't study properly in the poisonous atmosphere, her grades slip, she throws tantrums while her parents look on helplessly ... It's a descent into hell — a comfortable, well-fed, automated, educated, amusement-saturated hell, and it's utterly unexceptional.

It's worse at work. Corporate Japan seems to have perfected the art of twisting the human personality into contortions it never evolved to bear. "Power harassment" and cringing are the two dominant modes, but, this being the 21st century and human dignity having supposedly become a human right, the deprivation of it is more galling, therefore more stressful, than in times when that kind of thing was taken for granted.

Power harassment comes in many forms, seasoned with many refinements. There's the boss who picks apart your reports for faulty grammar, the boss who never misses an opportunity to reprimand you in front of others, the boss who peppers you with insulting emails. One thing Toyo Keizai curiously doesn't mention is sexual harassment — but it does cite surveys showing that the leading source of stress for working women is office "human relations," whereas for men it's more likely to be unattainable quotas that keep them chained to their desks past midnight — to very little purpose, since the brain tends to shut down long before that.

There's so much more to this subject than this column has space for: the stress of caring for infirm parents, for example, which no society in history has ever experienced on anything like the present scale; the stress of a once soaring economy having plunged with an abruptness that gave no one — not the unemployed, nor the working poor, nor the political and corporate leaders whose numbness and helplessness have been a national embarrassment — time to fully absorb and adjust to what had happened.

The earthquake-tsunami-meltdown, in short, struck an already reeling population. What it has done to those in its path has

been well documented. But stress is not confined to them. Toyo Keizai introduces a 42-year-old Tokyo publishing executive whose wife is driving him crazy: Is it safe to go out? Is it safe to send the children to school? What if an earthquake happens? He leaves for work and for a moment feels free, but the emails start immediately and continue all day. He knows she's concerned about the children and doesn't want to be unkind, but "my nerves are shot." So are nearly everyone's.

Stress has medical as well as psychiatric consequences: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, liver malfunction, diabetes, chronic insomnia. All of which begs the question: What are we doing to ourselves, and why? Our work and what we produce by it are supposed to make us happy, and it turns out instead that they're making us wretched. Yet no one out there is shouting, "Stop, this is crazy!" Instead, Toyo Keizai and the experts it consults offer "coping" tips. The real problem would seem to be this: Instead of driving through life, we're being driven through it. "Freedom is slavery" is how it was in George Orwell's futuristic dystopia "1984." It's how it is with us, too.

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