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TELL leaders discuss mental challenges in COVID era

Roundtable

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Note: This story discusses mental troubles and suicide.

The word "health" generally conjures images of clean eating and regular exercise. But beyond physical health, mental health is an often-neglected facet of wellness — particularly for foreigners in Japan. The challenges of living abroad, global economic and political instability, and increasingly disconnected human interactions in the wake of COVID all complicate the challenges that many face with their mental health.

Vickie Skorji and Billy Cleary at TELL Japan have dedicated their careers to bringing mental health resources to Japan's international community. Skorji, who has a master's degree in counseling, is director of TELL's Lifeline, managing workers who take calls from people seeking support and mental health resources. Cleary, who has a master's degree and license in marriage and family therapy, is TELL's clinical director, leading the 30 in-house clinicians who assist people all over Japan. They joined The Japan Times' Ross Rowbury for a Roundtable discussion centering around mental health in Japan.

TELL (The English-speaking Lifeline) was founded in 1973 as the first English-language support line in Japan. The Lifeline can be used by anyone struggling with their mental health, with an emphasis on suicide prevention. Lifeline workers provide support and resources, and the organization also provides counseling services. The Lifeline is available 24 hours during the weekends and is toll-free.

While the services are primarily provided in English, 38% of callers in 2023 were Japanese, showing a need for TELL's services in both the international community and the general population. TELL provides face-to-face counseling in its Tokyo and Okinawa offices and has expanded to online sessions through telehealth services. Beyond working with individuals, TELL also has an Employee Assistance Program designed to help organizations provide mental health support to their employees.

TELL has noted that during and following the global pandemic, the need for its services and the severity of its clients' challenges have continued to increase.

COVID and the internet

Considering the potential of social media platforms, video calling, and the ability to remain in constant touch with others, it could be said that people are more connected than ever before. However, Cleary said, we are "more connected



Roundtable host Ross Rowbury (left) with Vickie Skorji, the director of TELL's Lifeline, and Billy Cleary, TELL's clinical director YUICCO TAIYA

than ever, but more lonely than ever" and emphasized the need for face-to-face interactions to maintain our emotional, mental and social well-being.

The pandemic caused major disruptions in the ways people interact. Burnout, loneliness and depression rates have continued to increase since 2020, with roughly 70% of the workforce being burned out, compared to 45% pre-COVID. Youths are not exempt.

Due to increasing levels of isolation, Japan is seeing alarming increases in youth depression rates and suicides.

Schools, parents and workplaces often do not have the knowledge or tools to address these issues.

This is one way TELL can help. It provides workshops to schools and businesses on how to recognize the signs of someone who is struggling and what steps can be taken to help them. It acknowledges how a lot of responsibility is put on managers, teachers and HR departments to help those in need, yet they often are not given the proper training or resources to properly do so, sometimes resulting in an increase to their stress levels.

Helping your peers

Skorji emphasized the need for all of us to be able to recognize the signs of someone who is struggling, and noted that the burden cannot be put on the person who is struggling to step up. Cleary mentioned signs such as "a disheveled appearance, lack of sleep, dark bags under the eyes" as physical characteristics of someone in distress. Also notable are major changes in attachment style — someone who is struggling may suddenly withdraw and avoid people, or suddenly begin criticizing and attacking others.

Both Skorji and Cleary said the best help the average untrained person can give is simply to offer human connection — to let them know you see them. It doesn't have to be invasive; just checking in makes a world of difference to someone who feels alone. "We all need to recognize the signs," Skorji implored. The increase in remote work in the last few years has erased a lot of "water cooler" culture, in which people are able to meet and chat and where the signs of someone in need are more apparent to others or easier to identify.

Changing the conversation

Skorji and Cleary emphasized the need to reframe the narrative around how the general public views those struggling with their mental health, and reframe how those who are struggling view themselves. Many people suffering from burnout, depression, anxiety and other issues feel the need to shoulder the burden by themselves and hide these difficulties from the people around them. Usually this person's anxiety levels rise as they continually struggle to keep up with the demands of their daily life.

TELL wants people to understand that reaching out takes bravery — that making oneself vulnerable to loved ones or professionals by opening up is an act of courage. Cleary said, "It's like handing



People from around Japan and overseas interested in well-being applaud at the TELL Roundtable. YUICCO TAIYA

someone a sword and hoping they use it to defend me" — poignant words that demonstrate he understands how difficult it can be to take that first step.

This is why it is also important for those who are well to recognize the signs of someone in need, to create places of safety where friends and colleagues can feel seen, and to introduce resources such as TELL.

Managing mental health is particularly challenging to those living overseas, especially in the wake of the global disaster that was the COVID-19 pandemic. People have become increasingly disconnected from each other, and it has become easier for someone to slip through the cracks because we spend far less time face to face.

TELL provides a safe space for the international community in Japan to seek support and connect with trained support workers and licensed counselors. No one needs to carry the burden of mental health challenges alone — there are people out there who can help to manage the load.

If you or someone you know is going through a crisis, please reach out immediately to TELL's Lifeline number: 0800-300-8355 (toll-free) <https://telljp.com/>



Times Gallery



Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba receives a recommendation for prompt action on a Japan-Mercosur economic partnership agreement from Japan-Brazil Business Council chairpersons on Nov. 5. EMBASSY OF BRAZIL



American Chamber of Commerce in Japan President Victor Osumi presents the ACCJ Person of the Year Award to U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel on Oct. 23. LIFE14



Representatives of the Embassy of the Republic of Albania participate in Expat Expo Tokyo 2024. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA



Ahmed Khaleel, the Maldives' former ambassador to Japan, is conferred the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star at an Imperial Palace ceremony. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



A celebration of "La Dessalinienne," the Haitian national anthem, is held at the Embassy of Haiti on Nov. 18. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF HAITI



Ambassador Aleksandra Kovac (front left) joins the winners, contestants, jury members and sponsors of the First Serbian Language Speech Contest in Japan, held at the Embassy of Serbia on Nov. 9. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



The Indonesian band J-Rocks lights up the evening for an audience of 50,000 at the Indonesia-Japan Friendship Festival 2024, held at Tokyo's Yoyogi Park on Oct. 19 and 20. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA



Ambassador Shorna-Kay Richards, Photographic Society of Japan Chairman Yoshikazu Aoki and Yasushi Noguchi, Foreign Ministry director general opens Jamaica-Japan Photo One Love exhibit. EMBASSY OF JAMAICA

Oji seeks optimal approaches to nurturing and utilizing forests

ESG/SDGs

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Oji Holdings, Japan's leading paper maker, owns and manages 635,000 hectares of forests across the globe. Forest resources — for wood, paper and wood-derived materials or for biomass power generation — are attracting increased attention as sustainable resources. However, their sustainability hinges on how they are utilized and managed.

Oji, who has been planting trees for 100 years, places forests at the core of its business and engages in a range of activities aimed at maintaining healthy forests and enhancing the well-being of the people involved in its forest management initiatives across the globe. Additionally, it strives to accurately assess the multifaceted value of forests and leverage them to boost its overall value.

In a recent interview with The Japan Times, Hiromi Yamamoto, manager of Oji's Forest Value-Creation and Promotion Department, said the total number of employees engaged in afforestation activities abroad is 13,000, and the company has established production facilities in 23 countries.

Many of the company's forests are located in remote areas where social services and infrastructure are often limited. "In response, we have been providing health checkups in communities of these areas, primarily in Southeast Asian countries. To date, a total of 3,000 people in Vietnam and 5,500 in Indonesia have benefited from this initiative," Yamamoto said.

In the field of education, the company provides environmental education programs in Japan and abroad. Since 2004, Oji has offered a summer program for elementary school children to visit its forests and engage in hands-on activities in Japan. "In New Zealand, we have conducted environmental education programs at schools since 2008, with over 10,000 students participating to date. Similarly, our programs offered in Brazil have been attended by 4,300 students over the

past three years," Yamamoto said.

Oji provides support for local businesses, including farmers and beekeepers, as well as for infrastructure.

It is also engaging with stakeholders from outside Japan in an effort to quantify the values of forests. One example of this is its collaboration with Pivotal, a UK-based startup that provides the comprehensive analysis of biodiversity by using AI which is made possible by the use of drones, cameras, acoustic sensors and environmental DNA and other technologies. "This is the first attempt of this kind of biodiversity evaluation in Japan. In Europe, this type of technology, which is called 'nature tech,' is gaining momentum. In this context, we sought a partner to collaborate with and identified Pivotal as a potential partner," Yamamoto said.

One of the objectives of this collaboration is to analyze natural areas in Japan and present the findings to the world. It is important to recognize that nature is not uniform. The optimal approach to conserving and nurturing natural resources varies by place, influenced by factors such as climate, geography and history.

"In Europe, forest conservation requires a strategy of restoration from overuse. In Japan, where forests are generally underused, forests need to be managed by adequately using forest resources," Yamamoto said.

Approximately 60% of the total forest area in Japan is natural, though not all of it is pristine. There are forests, often referred to as *sato-yama*, that have been well maintained through human interventions such as the use of bamboo and wood for building and fuel. However, many of them are now abandoned. Some of the man-made forests planted with timber trees, such as cedar and cypress, have also been left untouched due to the decline in timber production. This is not only a waste of resources but also poses a potential risk because the soil in these neglected forests is generally subject to degradation due to insufficient sunlight and a lack of varied vegetation and creatures.

Cutting down trees may be harmful to nature in one place, yet be a way to conserve



Hiromi Yamamoto OJI HOLDINGS

it in another. Yamamoto emphasized the need to scientifically and quantitatively analyze the state of Japan's forests, and to determine which measures are the most effective in conserving nature in Japan.

"The efforts to quantify nature and to use the result to conserve or regenerate nature should come in one package. In the near future, when natural capital becomes part of financial assets in the accounting standard, turning the result of such efforts into natural capital credits will lead to an increase in our asset value," she said.

However, she warned that this shift to natural capital accounting needs to happen quickly because the rate of natural degradation is critical. To accelerate change, promote the benefits of forests and increase the presence of forest-related industries at international conferences, Oji founded the International Sustainable Forestry Coalition in September 2023 with like-minded companies from around the world and is working with other member companies to achieve its mission of "helping society build a nature-positive bioeconomy by making the best possible use of forests and forest products." This accords with Oji's corporate purpose: "Grow and manage the sustainable forest, develop and deliver the products from renewable forest, and Oji will bring this world a brighter future filled with hope."

Oji Holdings is a member of the Sustainable Japan Network, a group of companies that cooperate to spread information about sustainability in Japan. You can also be part of the network; scan the QR code for more details.



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