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LIFE WITH COVID-19: LEARNING TO “BREEZE IN AND BREEZE OUT” IN JAPAN

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After the rising number of new untraceable COVID-19 cases reported mainly in Tokyo in February 2020, Japanese health officials realized the fight against the unknown virus could not be avoided. My hometown Yokohama was one of the first ‘hot spots’ in Japan due, in part, to the cruise ship with the first positive cases from China docked at the Yokohama Port. The hospitals and the medical center where I work had accepted the patients from the ship. Even though I was not directly involved in the treatment of confirmed COVID-19 cases, there was a high probability that I would encounter a new positive case, especially in the outpatient setting. At the time, we did not have fully established procedures to deal with the suspected cases; moreover, masks and protective clothing were seriously in short supply. As it upset me to hear many stories about coronavirus patients, their families, and medical professionals in Wuhan, China, I was anxious that it could strike us in Japan in the near future. Fear of infection, fear of death, and even fear of bias and stigma related to COVID-19 crowded my mind as the situation evolved. Everyone was avoiding going out and talking with each other unless absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, a cluster of coronavirus cases were reported, not only in Tokyo and Yokohama, but nationwide. Japan’s health officials declared state of emergency due to coronavirus on April 7th, 2020. Yet, I needed to tend to patients. Even so, I was able to avoid overtime hours and talking unnecessarily. The medical center was eerily quiet because even small chats that had previously filled the silence between people had disappeared. Instead, we just focused on our own jobs and ourselves. The air was getting thick with tension.

Although many people around me were struggling with stress and suffering from ‘cabin fever’ in a generally tense atmosphere, I found that I was relieved somewhere in my heart. More precisely, I literally felt my feet on the ground throughout the silent day. Of course, we clinicians expended extra energy to avoid an outbreak in the medical center. For instance, numerous necessary steps to prevent a cluster of the invisible virus were carried out when we saw a new patient in the outpatient setting. We made extra phone calls once, every two weeks, to all patients who could not come to the hospital under the stay-at-home order. In addition, meetings in the hospital were held again and again to discuss how to prevent the spread of this novel virus more practically. Furthermore, COVID-19 altered the environment for education in medical school, and thus medical teachers had to prepare a new style of online lectures by using unfamiliar educational ICT devices for the medical students at home. Clearly, we were much busier than before the pandemic. However, I found instances of a weird and unfamiliar feeling in which I was down-to-earth despite life with the nasty infection. Why?

I was living such that I needed to pay close attention to each and every action for the purpose of infection control. Every deed that I usually did unconsciously became more conscious to me. Consequently, this enabled me to observe my own actions while examining the meaning of what I was doing. This thought process promoted self-awareness and consciousness of the environment that I belonged to, giving me a moment to make a transition from one motion to another. I believe that this is a form of informal of mindfulness practice.

Furthermore, people became more considerate and caring about one another. Of course, people tried to practice social distancing which allowed them to literally keep their personal space to themselves. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily mean a psychological distance between people. Although Japanese society had prioritized economic growth over an individual’s well-being for decades, others’ health and life under the state of emergency became a priority. Life with COVID-19 reminded us of the most basic and essential aspects of life and death. People openly discussed these issues more than before since death and dying became more familiar. In order words, ‘idle talk’ in the ‘normal’ life was transformed. As a result, I would say people became kinder with themselves and others as they recognized how precious we all are.

Japan has traversed thousands of years of natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, and infectious diseases that affected its economy, development, and social life. The disasters made us question our values from our ‘everyday’ perspective. For example, the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami highlighted that the power of nature was beyond human’s reachable knowledge and then shattered illusions that underpinned our daily lives. We usually maintained a vague sense that things around us and even ‘me’ continued for a while. We normally believed that our future was assured, and we could live for the time being. However, the earthquake compelled us realize that familiar things could be gone in an instant. That critical event led people to share many stories of death and life while we contemplated what it means for us to be entities that will pass away one day.

Experientially, ordinary concerns can take our mind off the awareness of death. Our everyday life can be so filled with daily tasks that we fail to go beyond the ‘everyday’ perspective. I do not mean that this ordinary outlook must be viewed as reprehensible or that we must live in a gloomy atmosphere. Yet, I just want to say that awareness of our possibility not-being could invite us to focus attention on ‘me.’ It can help turn our eyes toward our own experiences and allow us to notice our sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Moreover, this awareness enables us to carefully observe one aspect of the self at a time and be conscious that the self is interconnected with others. This reflective perception can engender modesty and compassion which gives us a sense of being fully alive.

Impermanence is a clear fact of life. This holds true for all people and things in the world with COVID-19. People wish to return to a ‘normal’ life and make efforts to maximize productivity and efficiency for its economy again even more than before. The risk is that people will gradually fall back into old habits where they are absorbed in a ‘busy and mundane’ day as a new ‘normal’ life, with or after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, I often join four or five online meetings a day because I come to not be able to make excuse, “Oh, I’ll have another meeting in another place on the day...”. Even so, I stop for a moment and whisper to myself in my mind, ‘breezing-in, breezing-out.’ ■