

Alone Together: Reggie Pawle Explores the Feelings of Being Far From Home

Loneliness is one of those gut psychological urges – it seems that everyone feels it. Being such a strong experience, loneliness easily aggravates whatever other psychological difficulties a person is having. So when a person is living very close to a lot of other people, but with little friendship interaction, and in the past has been used to being with friends and/or family, negative psychological effects often occur.

A foreigner living in Japan can be susceptible to loneliness because it is so easy to be isolated. Foreigners often have a hard time making relationships after arriving in Japan. But loneliness also affects foreigners who have been in Japan a long time. Foreigners often feel in some ways like “outside people.” Having been here a long time, but still feeling like an outsider and/or not having any good friends, can really gnaw at a person. Looked at from the perspective of a time line, loneliness can affect anyone regardless of how long they’ve been in Japan.

Susan is a good example of the kinds of effects of loneliness that a person can feel when new in Japan. Growing up she had lived with her family in two different countries, so she wasn’t anticipating any problems. However, upon arriving in Japan she didn’t fit in with the other foreigners in the company at which she was working and she wasn’t able to make any other friends. Soon she was spending her non-work time alone in her apartment, mostly watching videos and keeping very erratic hours. And then, as can easily happen when loneliness starts gnawing at people, she started fixating on her negative feelings and thoughts and her lonely feelings spread into general depressed feelings. This morphed into thoughts of self-worthlessness and increasingly strong

fantasies of jumping off the balcony of her apartment. After she finally sought help, four months later she said to me, “What was I thinking then? In my isolation I really got out of touch with reality.”

A different point of the time line of being in Japan, but still being very influenced by loneliness, is Mark’s story. He married a Japanese woman and they had a couple girls. Then the marriage went sour and Mark came to feel like he was living with a stranger. However, with his friends he couldn’t talk about what was happening in his marriage. With everyone it all seemed to him like superficial relationships, leading to a great sense of loneliness. Furthermore, due to the divorce laws in Japan Mark believed that if he left his wife, he would lose contact with his daughters. So he felt stuck. All he could do was deal with his situation as-it-was, try to deepen his friendships, and enjoy his life as much as he could. To do this, he had to deal with his loneliness.

Other common causes of loneliness include distant relationships with one’s family-of-origin and losing friends because they leave Japan. Whatever the cause of loneliness, it is hard to ignore it. Certainly part of dealing with loneliness is common sense - do what you need to do to make good friendships. If you can’t find friends through your workplace, then look in social and/or interest activities. There are many in Japan for foreigners, but effort and, important psychologically, being able to tolerate failure and temporary loneliness are needed. This toleration ability often must be developed because many people do not have it. A person also sometimes needs to develop relationship skills and understand what makes a healthy relationship. A person additionally needs to make the connections within their psychological experience itself, as in, “Oh, I’m depressed (or anxious, etc.) because I’m lonely.” This sounds simple, but

in the midst of psychological experience is often not so easy. Loneliness ripples through one's experience, affecting thinking, emotions, bodily experience, behavior, relationships, sense of self, and stirs up past memories. Having some understanding of one's psychological experience, one is in a position to grow psychologically and do things that are appropriate to deal with this experience. Finally in a way one comes to a place similar to where Mark was – having done everything that they can, their psychological growth becomes finding their freedom in their situation as-it-is. We can change our situation, move to Japan, but still all of us are stuck within our minds, bodies, and this world. For expatriates, who sometimes deal with psychological predicaments by movement, finally not moving and simply dealing with their psychology as-it-is can be most beneficial. Loneliness in this way can become an opportunity for psychological growth.

The people in this article are fictional. Any apparent identification with actual people is incidental. For psychotherapy services contact Reggie Pawle, Ph.D., 075-724-1356, reggie_pawle1@yahoo.co.jp, or check the website of International Mental Health Professionals Japan for foreign therapists in Japan at www.imhjp.org.