

Final Report

Title: Project “It felt safe here”

Overview of the Project

Everyone wants to retreat from the world sometimes. But some Japanese people find themselves spending months, sometimes years of their lives in their bedrooms: only surfing the internet, reading manga and will not come out. Usually male and usually in their twenties, these are Japan's "missing million," otherwise known as Hikikomori—one of the biggest social and health problems facing Japan now.

Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has defined a hikikomori as a person who does not participate in society (particularly school or work) and has no desire to do so. A hikikomori is also someone who doesn't have any close, non-familial relationships. These withdrawal symptoms must last for at least six months and the social withdrawal itself must not be a symptom of a pathological problem.

There may be over one million hikikomori in Japan, or approximately 1% of the total Japanese population. While the degree of the phenomenon varies on an individual basis, in the most extreme cases, some people remain in isolation for years or even decades. Moreover, the most widely reported cases of hikikomori are from middle- and upper-middle-class families whose sons, typically their eldest, refuse to leave the home, often after experiencing one or more traumatic episodes of social or academic failure. However, considering that hikikomori adolescents are hidden away and their parents are often reluctant to talk about the problem.

Japanese health professionals are now scrambling to stop the next generation from suffering the same fate. Not only is the condition shattering families, it is also threatening and burden the country's economy. When their parents get old and pass away, these people still fall into the more dramatic scenes. Therefore, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is planning to mobilize people with the syndrome of "hikikomori" was back for working to strengthen the workforce which is increasingly aging of country. Mr. Abe also said to reduce the rate of population reduction, which is the problem of the 3rd largest economy in the world.

While hikikomori is mostly a Japanese phenomenon, some cases have been found in the United States, Spain, Italy and South Korea.

Activity Overview: This project has the following main activities:

- Follow all the activities of the hikikomori community center at New Start NPO and learn about them.
- Follow the Rental Sister and learn about her work, also see the process of how to help a hikikomori people go out from their room. In the realm of creative problem-solving, some organizations and halfway houses like New Start employ young women to physically go to the houses of hikikomori and try to strike up a conversation from the other side of the bedroom door. The goal for these "rental sisters" is to ultimately reassure, befriend and then coax the hikikomori out of their bedrooms and to a place where they can get help.
- Through the Rental Sister, approach and photograph the Hikikomori.

Collaboration with a Host Institution:

- Follow all the activities of the hikikomori community center at New Start NPO and learn about them: I have been contact the New Start NPO as a photographer then ask them to be a volunteer there for 2 months (from May, June 2016). New Start has a live-in community center, a restaurant and cafes, where the youngsters can interact with the community through work experience and social activities. During that time, I come to the official 3 times per week, join the lunch time with all the hikikomori there, watching, try to make friend and learn about their story. I also joined the weekly Saturday evening party, with food prepared by people from the center. Locals are invited to come and meet some of the youngsters, in an attempt to break down the stigma associated with the condition.

- Follow the Rental Sister and learn about her work, also see the process of how to help a hikikomori people go out from their room: After take 2 months with New Start NPO, I know about the Rental Sister and try to contact with 3 people there at the agency. They have 2 rental sister and 1 rental brother but only one can speak English so I follow her, her name is Ayako Oguri. After get her accept, I come with her to all her client house and try to meet the hikikomori there.
- Through the Rental Sister, approach and photograph the Hikikomori: It take a really long process. I follow the Rental sister and come to visit all her hikikomori clients. Most of them will dont want to meet for the first time so I just come and say hi, and wait outside of the house, each meeting is in around 2 hours. Then in next 2 or 3 times, they will accept me to go in the house and wait in the living room. After 3 or 5 times, they will accept me to go in the room and join the meeting and take some pictures.

Future plans or prospects regarding the project

My ambition is capture the long process of a hikikomori since they are still locked in, then with the help of the rental sister, they will go out. However during 6 months in Japan, I only can do the first step is to assess the character and getting to know them, take their portraits in a separate room. This is just the beginning of a long story that I did not have enough time to tell.

I had meet and take a picture of 8 hikikomori any way after make an editing, I just use photo of 6 people. Here is the final edit of my photo story (to see more, you can find in the attach files)

Riki Cook, 29 years old, a 3 years hikikomori in his place.



Sumito Yokoyama, 42 years old, 3 years hikimomori.



Hiroki Chujo, 23 years old, a 2 years hikikomori.



Ikuo Nakamuro, a 2 years hikikomori



Kazou Okada, 47 years old, a 8 years hikikomori.



Fuminori Akao, 29 years old, 1 year hikikomori.

