

Technical Report

The Current State of Youth Suicide Countermeasures from a Public Health Perspective

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From October 24–26, 2018, I took part in the 77th Annual Meeting of the Japanese Society of Public Health, which was held in Koriyama City, Fukushima Prefecture. The main theme of the meeting was “Public health from cradle to caregiving: health support from a disaster response perspective,” and as this title indicates, the very latest research was introduced and extensively discussed from a variety of viewpoints related to health and medical care, welfare and education and on a wide range of subjects over a person’s lifetime from the fetal period to old age. Although all the presentations were extremely interesting, particularly noteworthy in relation to suicide countermeasures was the symposium held on the first day, “Formulating new suicide countermeasures for young people in an age of social media: with a view to preventing a re-occurrence of the Zama incident” (chaired by Dr. Yutaka Motohashi, Director of the Japan Support Center for Suicide Countermeasures [JSSC]). Because the rapid spread of the Internet in an information society and incidents involving social media that accompany it have become social problems, exploring methods to deal with them is a pressing issue. Accordingly, this paper introduces the abovementioned symposium and considers the relationship between the status of social media today and youth suicide countermeasures.

The symposium discussed the actual state of affairs for young people in an age of social media as well as specific measures to support them. In recent years, incidents involving social media have often been covered by the media. Some of these have evolved into cyberbullying and even crimes; in particular, the so-called Zama incident (nine young people who posted messages suggesting their suicidal ideation on

Twitter were killed by a man who was also making use of social media for posting his own suicidal ideation to gain the victims’ trust), a tragic social-media-related incident that occurred in October 2017, shook Japanese society. Since today is an age in which all sorts of information can be transmitted on the Internet and anything can be looked up there, even methods of committing suicide are searchable. As Mr. Jiro Ito of the NPO OVA reported (in Symposium 2-3: “Experiments with web-search-linked support for young people with suicidal tendencies”), however, many of the statements about “wanting to die” that abound on social media can be regarded as psychocathartic acts of spilling out painful feelings, SOS signals seeking help from those around them or other expressions of “wanting to live.” Since, therefore, it is important to provide as much information as possible about how to live, as Ms. Hiroko Matsunaga of the JSSC reported (Symposium 2-1: “Suicide countermeasures using social media for young people with suicidal tendencies: the national government’s approach”), strengthening the counseling function of social media and supporting young people’s efforts to find a place where they belong are being promoted as national policies.

Since youth suicide countermeasures are regarded as ones that the national government should focus on intensively, the General Principles of Suicide Prevention Policy, revised in 2017, addressed the need for such measures to make use of information and communications technology (ICT) and cited “teaching how to raise an SOS” as a means of preventing suicide among primary and secondary school students. There are three teaching models for doing so: the Adachi Ward model, the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education model, and

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Hokkaido University of Education's Graduate School of Teacher Education model. JSSC has documented the special features of these three models and has been studying their educational content and verifying their benefits in the interest of promoting their dissemination nationwide. The results confirm that it is important to enhance students' feelings of self-esteem, have them find a trusted adult close by, and know that it is all right for them to ask that adult for help. It has also been shown that the percentage of respondents who say that "there is an adult they can trust near by" increases significantly after they have taken a course on how to raise an SOS.

According to a report by Mr. Yoshiaki Takahashi of the Nakasone Peace Institute, a public interest incorporated foundation (Symposium 2-2: "Youth suicide ideation"), suicidal ideation is said to have high sustaining power among the young generation. Social media are a necessary method of communication when dealing with young people in particular. It is imperative to convey to young people who transmit information to, and accumulate it from, many unspecified persons via social media that there is always a trusted adult close at hand who is ready to receive an SOS from them at any time.

Mr. Akizumi Tsutsumi of Kitasato University School of Medicine (Symposium 2-4: "The development and implementation of a suicide prevention education program for medical students") has been promoting the development of such a program and regards it as critical for those seeking employment as human service professionals to thoroughly learn the necessary communication skills. Face-to-face communication skills are, after all, indispensable not only for human service professionals, but for all people living together in society. Another topic that was raised is the fact that there are few places nowadays where the younger generation can connect with the community; thus, consideration must also be given to what kinds of outlets can be provided in the community and in society as a whole that are tailored to young people's special characteristics. In short, it is probably necessary to examine both how the younger generation can appropriately raise an SOS and how society receives it.

Since the rapid spread of the Internet in an information society and the social-media-related incidents that have accompanied it have become social problems, studying methods to deal with them is a pressing issue. The younger generation has a high affinity with social media, and there are even reports that many of them feel they would be able to communicate more freely through social media counseling rather than conventional telephone counseling. What is important is that social media are merely a starting point. As Mr. Ito of the NPO OVA says, it is a matter of "how do we really connect." What is required now and in the future is to build a better society by making skillful use of social media without being consumed by it.

Additional remarks:

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