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LATELINE.

Loneliness a national crisis in Japan

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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Reporter: Mark Willacy

Divorce, a plummeting birth rate and an increase in average lifespan are creating an epidemic of loneliness in Japan.

Transcript

ALI MOORE, PRESENTER: It's being described as a national crisis in Japan.

It's not political deadlock or economic meltdown, but loneliness. Within a couple of decades, single person households will be the dominant demographic in Japan, and there have been a litany of cases in recent times of dozens of people dying alone.

Increasing incidences of divorce, a plummeting birth rate and a lengthening average life span are making life an extremely solitary experience for millions.

But some see this lonely demographic as an untapped business opportunity, as North Asia correspondent Mark Willacy reports from Tokyo.

MARK WILLACY, REPORTER: In an empty park in Tokyo, Mokoto Asami is phoning a friend, albeit one he's never met. Yuzo Kikumoto offers a sympathetic ear, but at a price.

YUZO KIKUMOTO (voiceover translation): We charge \$12 for every 10 minutes. We have about 1,500 registered customers.

MARK WILLACY: Yuzo Kikumoto operates the Listening Well Club, a phone service for lonely people to call in and discuss their personal problems.

MAKOTO ASAMI (voiceover translation): Basically, I don't have anyone I can express my true feeling to. I have a friend I can tell superficial stories to, but no-one I can speak honestly with. So I use the phone service instead.

MARK WILLACY: Ever since his divorce, Mokoto Asami has relied on the Listening Well Club for someone to talk to.

MAKOTO ASAMI (voiceover translation): I talk about my job. And grumble about my boss mainly. I can't talk about this with anyone else because they might regard me as petty. So I use the Listening Well Club instead.

MARK WILLACY: A former hairdresser, Yuzo Kikumoto regards himself as a natural listener. He's also a natural businessman, cashing in on the latest Japanese malaise: loneliness.

YUZO KIKUMOTO (voiceover translation): The most popular topics are the general problems with relationships, particularly at work. 20 to 30 per cent of my customers just grumble.

MARK WILLACY: But there are grumbles and there are genuine hard luck stories. Akiko Mukasa spends her days visiting the sick and the dying. Many of her patients are ending their days alone.

This afternoon, Nurse Mukasa is visiting Sueo Hatakeyama in the tiny one-room apartment where he's destined to die.

SUEO HATAKEYAMA (voiceover translation): My doctor says I have cancer. I don't know how long I have left to live. I might die tomorrow or the day after.

MARK WILLACY: Like thousands of others in Tokyo every year, Sueo Hatakeyama is destined to become a victim of a kodokushi, or a lonely death.

AKIKO MUKASA, NURSE (voiceover translation): By building up a relationship with a lonely person and growing a friendship with them, I think we can help ease their loneliness and sadness.

MARK WILLACY: Mr Hatakeyama has no family and he knows he hasn't got long left. And so he's thankful for Nurse Mukasa's visits.

SUEO HATAKEYAMA (voiceover translation): I feel cured by her visits because I'm always at home alone. At times like that, I think of the worst things, so I feel thankful that I can chat with Mukasa-son.

AKIKO MUKASA (voiceover translation): By building up a relationship with a lonely person and growing a friendship with them, I think we can help ease their loneliness and sadness.

MARK WILLACY: Back at Listening Well Club, Yuzo Kikumoto is still on the phone and still making money. His business is booming, just like the epidemic of loneliness here. But Mr Kikumoto denies it's easy money.

YUZO KIKUMOTO (voiceover translation): Once I had a woman who talked about her problems at work for seven hours. Her story took 30 minutes, but she repeated it for seven hours.

MARK WILLACY: Seven hours may feel like an eternity, but in Japan, loneliness can last a lifetime.

Mark Willacy, Lateline.

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