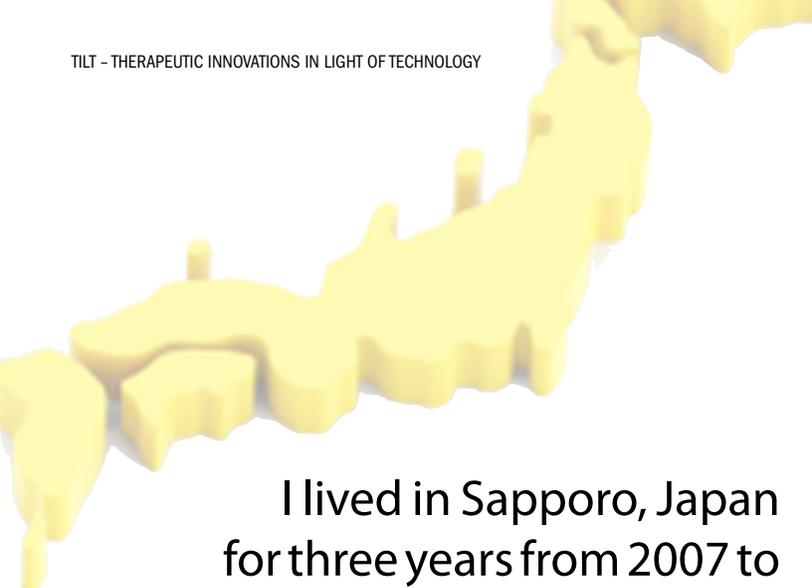


A Distance Counselor's Ohanashi*

Coming to
Work with
People in
Japan





I lived in Sapporo, Japan for three years from 2007 to 2010. My day job was teaching English to middle and elementary school kiddos as a member of the JET Program. Teaching was great, but it wasn't the profession I trained for. I wanted to get practicing counseling, even if it was an all-volunteer deal. That's when the legwork began.

FINDING MY WAY

He was a gentle-looking young man, a cop in the coastal town of Otaru. His name was Hideki. He looked genuinely shocked.

I – well, our mutual friend Rosemary, really – had just explained to him what police in America do when a mental health clinician calls and reports that they believe someone may be about to commit suicide. It took several efforts, as he kept thinking he must be misunderstanding our English. When it got through to him, he couldn't believe it.

"Ohanashi"
means
"story."

"Oh," he said with strange calm, "we don't do that."

I asked him, "So what would you do if you saw someone about to commit suicide?"

He thought about the words for a few seconds. "Of course, I will save his life."

"And then what?"

"Well, I will talk to him and try to help him before he leaves."

Wait. What?

"Leave? They just leave?"

Rosemary chimed in. "Police here don't do the same things that police in the States do. They can only arrest someone who is accused of a crime. They can't hold people for safety."

"Yes," Hideki added, "I wish I could."

* * * *

I was grateful for Hideki's help, but I wanted to know more about what to do if a client was in crisis. Graduate school didn't prepare me for this Wild West situation I was in. With some

guidance, I found a Tokyo-based American psychiatrist who had this to say:

"Put yourself on the witness stand answering the lawyer who is representing the family of a suicided client who asks you: Did you have medical backup? Did they speak English? How can you see clients if you are a language teacher? What is your surrounding support system? You don't work in a larger organization? You have to decide where your personal comfort zone is with this."

You have to decide where your personal comfort zone is with this."

It took me a while to realize the implied cultural values here. Japanese don't put much truck in a young guy with no doctoral degree operating on his own outside of a large organization. And there are few well-recognized mental health services besides psychiatry. Also, I would get little sympathy for moonlighting on my day job, although I had the blessings of my supervisors!

Unsurprisingly, the solution lay in doing as the Romans do. If Japan doesn't have the kinds of public mental health support networks I'm used to, how do Japanese people get that support? It turns out it's usually provided by families and, in some cases, employers or other larger social groups.

The JET Program has a network of support people called Prefectural Advisors. They have a little bit of counseling training and a lot of resources for interfacing with the Japanese government when a JET participant is in need of help. I worked with Hokkaido's wonderful PA on several occasions during my time there, and most of my referrals now come from JET

Program PAs, who can act as local champions for our mutual clients. It's great to have a support system.

The next step was finding a place to practice.

KARAOKE THERAPY

My friend Chieko is a California LMFT who maintains her California license, although she lives and practices in Sapporo. To earn it, she finished a huge portion of her required 3,000 client contact hours in just 1 year, because that's all the time that the US government allows those on student visas to remain in the country after completing school. Japan has no regulation or licensure, so she was in a now or never situation after graduation.

"If you're in a pinch, you can use a karaoke booth." She told me over Starbucks one day.

"Umm, how would that work?" I was understandably skeptical.

"Well, you both go in and get a karaoke booth. Then you do a session instead of singing. Or I guess you could do karaoke therapy!"

"I wouldn't object to that." Really. Honestly. I wouldn't. "How is that private, though? Is that ethical?"

"Like I said, you can do it in a pinch. Karaoke booths are quite private, though. No one will bother you at all."

Chieko was, and still is, a great resource. I could turn to her for consultation and referral then and I still do in my distance practice.

I've referred several distance counseling clients to her for things like couple therapy or consultations around getting Somatic Experiencing treatments. She's another great person to have on the ground.

The final savior in my search for practice space, however, was my Japanese teacher, Sagara-sensei. No surprise there. She got me out of a lot of rough situations during my time abroad, even so far as lending me the money to buy the computer I'm typing this article on. She wasn't using her lesson space on Sunday nights, and so for those evenings it would become my private counseling office.

For the record, I did end up doing a counseling session in a karaoke booth at one point. It worked just fine. I have, over the years, learned that Japan has a different idea of confidentiality than we do, however.

PAPER WALLS, CLOSE NEIGHBORS

I opened the door to my borrowed office, which would be my working space for the next two hours. There were already shoes in the genkan (the entry space where you take off your shoes.) They were dainty and feminine, although my scheduled client was male.

A voice came from inside. "Hello! Are you Roy?" A woman, probably one of the assistant teachers, was washing dishes.

"Yes, I'm Roy. Umm..." I trailed off, which was a way to express that something is wrong

without actually saying so, Japanese style, and happened to also cover for the poor Japanese language skills I had at the time.

She beamed at me. "Ah! You're counseling tonight, right?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Oh, that's splendid!" She continued washing dishes.

"Umm... so... Ya, I'm always busy at this time. I don't have much time to prepare before patients come, you know?" I'm pretty sure I said something like that. I was trying to imply that she should make like a tree and leaf, of course.

"Oh, really?" Dishes. Dishes. She wasn't budging. "Go ahead and start preparing. I don't mind."

"Yes." Giving up, I sat down and commenced fretting. Luckily, my client was a little late and she finished up and left before he arrived.

* * * *

When I start a distance counseling session, I ask my client to pick up their computer or camera and scan the room for me, so I can see if doors are closed and do other confidentiality checks. My clients want their privacy, of course, and I've not yet had any problems with this policy. It mostly acts as a safety measure. Simply closing doors and shooing other adults out of the room, however, has turned out to be not quite enough.

Nearly every Japanese apartment I've been in



has walls that are made out of this material that is kind of bumpy and smooth on the surface, and stops sound the way a tissue stops bullets. If drywall could somehow be more flimsy, it would be this stuff.

Doors are a challenge, too. You've probably seen the classic Japanese sliding door. Modern apartments still use them, and they typically don't have locks. Often, a whole wall of a room can consist of just these doors. Did I mention that they don't have locks? Locks that help keep rambunctious kiddos out of the confidential room?

None of this is all that strange in Japan. Classically, the sliding doors were made with

wooden frames and paper, and the walls weren't necessarily much thicker. People live close together and privacy is assured by the social contract of "I'll ignore you if you ignore me."

I love the creativity my distance counseling clients employ to solve these problems. One client, who lives further south, took the many box fans she had running to deal with the sweltering summer heat and placed them in a semi-circle next to the wall that separates her from her neighbor. She then sat facing away from the wall, some distance from the fans, so she got both breeze and sufficient white noise for privacy. She somehow protected her microphone from the wind, as well.

SUPPORT ON THE GROUND

I was sitting across from Sagara-sensei in her classroom, working on pronunciation exercises. As often happened, our conversation got sidetracked into talking about the other English teachers in town and how they're doing at their respective workplaces. Lessons with Sensei were never boring for those who enjoy well-meaning gossip.

Sagara-sensei is a retired 35-year veteran of the Sapporo public school system, where she taught middle school Japanese. "Sagara-sensei" would usually be translated as "Mrs. Sagara" or perhaps "Sagara-teacher," but for me it's much closer in meaning to "Mom."

"Roy," she reached across the table and

touched my arm, as if to interrupt our conversation with something emergent. "You are always taking care of everyone else, but no one takes care of you."

I smiled, and did my best to express that she's quite wrong about that. Sensei took care of me all the time. She taught me the language and how to behave. She was there for me when I was freaking out from culture shock or someone's xenophobic rudeness. She gave me a counseling space and supported me when things went wrong in my life.

She brushed these things off, of course. "Roy, Roy," she changed the subject, "what if you

stayed here when you're done teaching? You would be one of the only counselors in all of Hokkaido. Your practice would be so big!"

She was right, of course. Chieko said the same thing. So did Chelle, the JET Program Prefectural Advisor for Hokkaido (our prefecture.) So did Kiku, the medical social worker who happened to go to the same graduate school I did. It was like I would be mad to leave such an opportunity.

When I returned to the States and started working on my licensure contact hours, my supervisor expressed a similar sentiment. We talked about the great need for counselors in Japan and the support network I had there. Why couldn't I continue that practice, even though I'm back in Oregon? Isn't that what the Internet is for?

A lot of research and due diligence had to be done after that, of course. If you're reading this, you probably know all about it. No need for more stories.

ROY HUGGINS, MS NCC is a mental health counselor in private practice in Portland, OR, USA. When he's not jawing about Japan, he's jawing about digital ethics, online marketing, and security and privacy issues for mental health clinicians at www.personcenteredtech.com.