

Chapter III

Contribution

The six years since the Great East Japan Earthquake

Kunimidai Hospital, Peaceful Mind Association, Miyagi (General Incorporated Foundation)

Iwadate Toshiharu, Hospital Director

This is a personal topic, but I am an earthquake man. The first disaster I experienced was the Chilean Earthquake and Tsunami when I was in second grade (1960). My father woke me before dawn, packed up my belongings in a school bag, and said that we needed to evacuate to the home of some relatives. While rubbing our sleepy eyes, and still not really knowing what was happening, my two siblings and I watched the sun rise as we walked three kilometers to our relatives' house.

My parents and the other adults who arrived later listened to the radio with a serious expression. That evening we went home, after being told that it was okay. The next day my mother took me to the harbor, and I was told that the tsunami came inland as far as two or three hundred meters from our house. Although I did not know much about tsunamis, as we approached the harbor I was astonished by its destructive power. Fishing boats and dog houses were on rooftops, and the railroad tracks floated in midair. The concrete of the wharf had crumbled and the waves were washing over the exposed rebar. Some people were sunning tatami mats here and there beside the road and sprinkling the now-banned insecticide DDT over them.

My mother said they were doing that because the mats had been contaminated with raw sewage. I thought that I would never see such a sight again in my life. The next disaster happened when I was in my first year of high school, the Tokachi Earthquake (1968). I was in geography class on the first floor of a two-story wooden school building. Because the tremor was so intense, I thought for a moment that the ceiling might collapse. As I looked up, glittering dust was falling from the ceiling.

I heard confused footsteps from upstairs as people tried to escape, but the teacher firmly instructed us not to move. After the shaking stopped, the teacher resumed class as if nothing had happened, but suddenly she said, "I wonder if there were landslides." It was just after a long period of rainy weather. Eventually all the students were assembled in the gathered in the courtyard and told to go home for the day. I boarded a temporary municipal bus, but the asphalt cracked and smoke began to rise in the central part of the city.

The third time was the offshore earthquake in Miyagi Prefecture (1978), when I was in my first year of my psychiatry residency. I was among the new doctors who were attending a lecture at that time. A female colleague of mine screamed and tried to escape, but the professor strongly restrained her. Fortunately, there was no serious damage to the building, but the elevator did not work, and we had a hard time going back and forth between the 9th floor ward and the 7th floor medical office. The electricity was working but the gas did not get repaired for a while and we cooked on hot plates for some time.

The fourth time was an earthquake in northern Miyagi Prefecture (2003). As I was serving as a medical instructor at Kurihara Public Health Center, I toured the evacuation shelter with two

medical interns at our hospital. I remember clearly how the interns, who were normally expressionless, said that they were deeply moved by the experience.

The fifth time was this one, the Great East Japan Earthquake (2011). I was at a private hospital; the Keiai Hospital in Ishinomaki, Karuigaoka Recreation Park in Kesennuma, and Minamihama Central Hospital in Iwanuma all suffered major damage. Damage to our hospital was minor compared to these institutions, but we had hospitalized patients to care for. Problems were piling up, such as how to keep them safe, provide meals, and ensure that staff would be present in the absence of gasoline. I knew that I had to take action and do something on my own.

When the situation at the hospital was under control, we wanted to help others, so we offered to assist Professor Hayashi and our team decided to go to the Rokugo District. But the hour was already late and we did not have much to do. As I was listening to the stories of the victims, I had the mysterious feeling that we supporters were receiving a kind of inner guidance. I realized that our work was not on the front lines, but to provide support to those who had been injured on the front lines.

Now the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center is working hard on the front lines. Although our assistance will continue, I think that supporters themselves are paying attention to mental health and want to bring mental health to the affected areas.