



Developing Compassionate Community with ‘community connectors’

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Introduction

The Importance of Social Connections in Aging and Illness

Social connections are essential for happiness, particularly in old age or during illness. In Japan, the aging population has led to an increase in single-person households, heightening the risk of social isolation, which negatively affects both mental and physical health.

Ōsaki City, located near the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake-affected areas, has seen many newcomers since the disaster. This tragedy highlighted the importance of mutual support and sharing, traits passed down through generations. However, a lack of connection between old and new residents remains a challenge, especially for the elderly, as local traditions and bonds risk being lost.



Great East Japan Earthquake

Methods

Training Community Connectors for Mutual Support

For 18 years, we’ve led a project at a local palliative care support center aimed at training “community connectors.” The training emphasizes empathy and the importance of connecting with others, both physically and emotionally.

Through simulations of caregiving situations and group discussions, participants learn to understand and support others emotionally.

These sessions help future community connectors to develop practical skills for providing support in challenging situations.

Additionally, participants are involved in planning and organizing community events that share local traditions and cultural heritage.

This hands-on experience fosters a deeper connection with the community and helps preserve valuable cultural treasures.

Our approach cultivates leaders who not only support individuals in need but also actively contribute to preserving the community’s cultural heritage, creating a network of mutual aid and emotional support.



Case Study

Transforming Lives through Community Support – S’s Journey

One participant, S, a monk struggling with alcoholism and terminal liver failure, initially resisted help. He was known in the community as a “bad monk who only drinks,” and his condition caused conflicts with his family and community.

However, with the support of local volunteers and the community, S gradually opened up. His turning point came when he was asked to conduct memorial services for those who passed away in home palliative care during Obon. Despite his reluctance, S participated, finding new purpose through his role in the community.

This involvement marked a significant transformation for S. He began to reconnect with his original aspirations as a monk and started taking on more active roles in community events. He participated in talks and discussions at Shoten-juku, a group he helped to create.

Even after being diagnosed with multiple cancers—such as oropharyngeal, stomach, and lung cancer—S continued sharing his experiences. He used his voice to chant sutras, reflecting on life’s suffering and the importance of living together, despite declining health.



Results

Building a Compassionate Community through Shoten-juku

Despite S’s health challenges, he chose to continue engaging with the community until his passing. His participation in the community left a lasting legacy through Shoten-juku, a group that continues to meet biweekly to foster mutual support and share life stories.

Over the past 18 years, more than 160 community connectors have been trained, and numerous events aimed at preserving local traditions and providing emotional support have been held. These initiatives have significantly reduced the sense of isolation among participants, particularly those in single-person households.

The project has created a compassionate community built on mutual aid and emotional connection. Participants have reported feeling more connected to their community, and the sharing of life stories has empowered them to live their own lives with greater confidence.

Conclusion

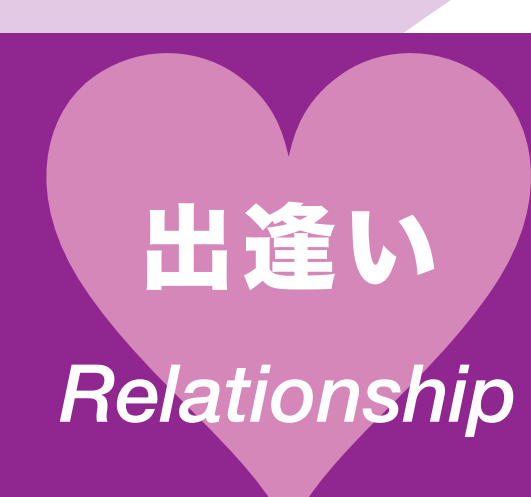
The Future of Community Connections in Palliative Care

Shoten-juku, the group S helped create, has grown into a compassionate community where individuals find mutual aid and emotional support.

By sharing and remembering each other’s life stories, participants gain the courage to live their own lives fully.

Our ongoing efforts to foster empathy and build diverse social networks highlight the importance of community connection in helping individuals navigate the challenges of aging and illness. Through mutual support, participants realize that they are also being supported, creating a sense of belonging within the community.

Looking forward, we aim to expand this project to other regions, training more community connectors and creating sustainable systems of support. By collaborating with both local residents and outside visitors, we hope to strengthen community bonds and ensure that no one faces life’s challenges alone.



物語は続くよ、どこまでも…

“The story goes on, forever and ever...”