

Greetings from the President

## The Eighth Year Since The Massive Disaster

Akira Kodaka - President

Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center

Just yesterday, I was reminded that spring the year of the earthquake was a cold one, and the earliest spring leaves did not make their appearance until May. Seven years have passed since, and once again the season of rebirth pays her visit to a place once struck by disaster.

Outpatient clinics may have seen a decrease in cases of patients being directly affected by the disaster, but the lasting effects on their mental and emotional lives – whether due to great changes in their daily lives or emotional scars from the past trauma – only continue to multiply.

In one case, a middle-aged woman now living in the city after moving from an affected coastal area survived the disaster along with her family, but it was the death of her son in a later traffic accident that plunged her into depression. “Most of my friends and acquaintances lost relatives to the earthquake, so how could they have the emotional space left for my tragedy? It felt awkward and uncomfortable to express my own grief, and I kept it to myself until I was depressed. It eventually became too painful to stay here so I moved to the city with the support of friends, but my spirits have not lifted.”

In another, a senior citizen who has moved from an affected area outside of the prefecture has experienced declining cognitive functions along with an intensifying persecution complex from her son’s wife, who twenty years before had lost her child in an earthquake-related accident before losing her parents to this earthquake. Unhealed from her accumulated past traumas, she would apparently display acts of aggression toward her mother-in-law.

There is no finite end to the trials and tribulations of life. Traumas and personal troubles interconnect with each other, and a disaster like an earthquake can make them all the worse even long after the event itself has occurred. It is with painful awareness that I feel the urgent need for more support mechanisms in place to provide mental health care.

In 2018, as MDMHCC marks its eighth year of service, the total number of resident support cases has in fact increased since 2017, to numbers exceeding 7,000. Although temporary housing home visits have decreased with the completion of the health survey, public housing home visits and municipal case counselling have increased, and in Kesenuma, increasing numbers of walk-in visitors are young people. Our work has become central to the community in the time since the disaster, and as support needs continue to change, the need for our services has not diminished.

Miyagi Prefecture’s public health plan for the upcoming 2019 year focuses on post-disaster mental health programming for the community, and the prefecture is continuing negotiations with the national government regarding budgeting for mental health care after 2021. Some key findings from mental health care centers’ current work include a need for continual support for community mental health programming, the importance of preventive care and home visits, a need for human resources core to community programming, and the indispensability of a network of stakeholders.

It is my hope that from this tragedy, we can build a society in which anyone and everyone can live with peace of mind and access to a robust and effective community mental health system to provide support, and it is my sincerest wish for MDMHCC to be a continuing part of this endeavor.

On behalf of MDMHCC, thank you for your continued guidance and support.