

Report on Observation of Korean Ferry Disaster Support Facilities

Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center, Stem Center

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Introduction

On April 16, 2014, while on its way from Incheon Port to Jeju Island, Sewol—a large passenger ship—capsized and sank off the southwestern coast of Korea. Because this disaster was widely reported in Japan as well, it is quite well-known to the Japanese public. Two hundred and ninety-nine of the passengers and crewmen aboard perished in the accident; five people remain unaccounted for; and eight individuals involved in the rescue efforts also died. The Sewol Ferry disaster had one of the highest death tolls of any marine accident in Korea's history. In particular, many 11th graders from Danwon High School were on board, as they were on a school trip. Two hundred and ninety-five of them died, and nine are still missing. Indeed, more individuals perished in the accident than survived. This incident was caused by overloading, illegal hull modifications, and a delay in official aid due to politics. It was primarily covered as a “manmade” disaster. It devolved into a large social controversy involving the media as well, eventually forcing the President of Korea to resign.

Following this disaster, Korean interest in support initiatives for trauma-affected persons spiked, and quite a few organizations and facilities whose goal was to support the many people affected by this disaster were established. In 2015, the Korean Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (KSTSS, <http://www.kstss.or.kr/give/001.htm>) was inaugurated, and with it, a system for providing psychiatric support and practicing academic research also came into being. In FY 2016, a specialist from the KSTSS visited the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center to observe our work, and the following year, I was invited to Korea to do the same. In this manuscript, I will report on three of the locations I visited: the Ansan Mental Health Trauma Center, a group memorial altar for the bereaved families, and a commemorative classroom for the victims. Finally, I would like to offer a bit of discussion on the nature of the loss to a community.

1. Ansan Mental Health Trauma Center

Immediately after the disaster, a government order mandated the creation of disaster psychology support teams in the Ansan region of Korea, and their parent organization, the Ansan Mental Health Trauma Center, was founded on May 1, 2014. The center's missions are to ① provide services that will help survivors and the bereaved recover from their trauma ② use the support experience gained from this incident to construct a disaster mental health support system, ③ deepen knowledge of trauma care and disaster psychological support, and ④ strengthen community bonds and aim for harmony between the affected individuals and society itself. At the time of my visit, the center had 34 staff in all: 4 psychiatrists, 10 psychiatric social workers, 1 mental health counselor, 9 mental health nurses, 9 social workers, and 4 office staff. It had been created with interprofessional collaboration in mind. Between the year of the center's founding and March 2017, the majority of the center's visitors – 85% were the bereaved family members of the casualties of the disaster; this was followed by survivors, who accounted for 10%. Thus, the primary function of this center has been to treat feelings of loss in the bereaved, and trauma among survivors.

The majority of residents did not seek the support of their own accord; not immediately after the event occurred, and not even after the center was founded. However, the construction of the center itself accounts for this reluctance. To make it easier for survivors and the families of victims to use, there is no grand sign in front of a massive building, broadcasting the location of the center to the entire world. The center quietly and unassumingly functions out of a smallish room in an office building. It is tucked away amidst barbecue restaurants and massage parlors. In fact, from the outside, one would be hard-pressed to guess that this building had anything to do with mental health. Furthermore, while its official name is indeed the “Mental Health and

Trauma Center,” it is also known as the “Onmaun Center,” (Sincere Heart Center), and it is by this latter name that it is known by among the people of the area.

The center also endeavored to provide survivors and the bereaved with places and spaces for them to easily gather and meet. As a productive space, they have made provisions for activities like art therapy using paintings, clay, pressed flowers, etc., and created pin batches and key chains for educational activities. For activities centering the body, gatherings for traditional performing arts such as meditation, yoga, and taiko were planned. A room with a kitchen stands in the center, and volunteer staff provide meals and participate in the activities. In such a warm environment, people connected and supported each other (Picture 1). Besides, staff frequently visited the community, sold artworks created by bereaved families at bazaars, and focused on activities that enlighten the general public, like flash mobs made up of the surviving high school students. I felt very deeply that the center’s greatest concern was ensuring that the survivors were not isolated from the rest of the community.

There is a small subset of people for whom activities of the aforementioned sort will not be enough to achieve recovery. The center also provides trauma-focused medical care and therapy for such individuals. In addition to general psychiatric and psychopharmacological treatment, both provided by psychiatrists, the center is home to specialists capable of providing EMDR, Biofeedback, PE cognitive behavioral therapy, Accept and Commitment Therapy(ACT). For families, they have also provided group programs that encourage trauma recovery, psychological education to prevent secondary trauma, and post-traumatic growth (PTG) workshops. Further, multidisciplinary teams are formed, and individual meetings with counselors, connections to local resources via social workers, and phone/home visit support are all provided.



Picture 1: Onmaun Center Cafeteria

2. Group Memorial Altar

The group memorial altar for bereaved families was about 10 minutes by car from the Onmaun Center. We arrived at a large parking lot-type area, consisting of one large building that looked like a gymnasium and several small prefabricated trailers parked neatly in rows. The rows I saw there reminded me very much of temporary housing units back home. Inside the large building, pictures of all of the high-school students who had lost their lives in the disaster had been placed on the altar, with flowers strewn around them. Visitors wrote their names in a registry, received a wreath of flowers, offered it at the altar, and prayed for the solace of the spirits of the departed. While many Korean people follow the Christian faith, my experience of this ritual left me with the enduring feeling that something quite similar to Japanese culture flowed through it. As I looked at the altar positively bedecked with flowers, I realized that even though three years had passed since this disaster had occurred, so many people still visited this memorial. At the center of the gymnasium, a large model of a ship meant to evoke the Sewol-ho had been placed, held aloft by two hands (Picture 2).

In the large plaza outside the school, 10 prefabricated containers had been built. Ten buildings for each of the 10 Danwon High School 11th graders who had perished in the disaster (Picture 3). This area was meant to be a space for the families of the victims to gather and participate in activities together. During my visit, several families had gathered in this area to work, on leathercrafts, completely absorbed by the work. In a separate building, away from the trailer, a woodworking shop had been set up, and the men (fathers) were making tools, etc. A priest was also stationed inside the very same building, and a church had been set up for those who wished to pray. Two months before I visited, the sunken Sewol had been raised from the ocean, and I heard that many families had flocked to watch the process, all to be as close to their children as they could. This was the reason so few families were participating in the activities that were being held in that space that day. Upon hearing this story, I saw how strongly these Korean families believed that one should not shy away from or forget the pain and trauma one has endured.



Picture 2: Interior of the group memorial altar



Picture 3. The number of trailers reflects the number of Danwon High School students who lost their lives in the disaster

3. Memorial Classroom for the victims

Immediately after the incident, photos of the victims were placed on their desks at Danwon High School, and their friends and acquaintances would leave offerings there when visiting them. Two hundred and ninety-five of the 325 students that went on the school trip that day fell victim to the disaster. I can only imagine the sort of turmoil the school went through afterward. After some time, the constant visits by pilgrims began to get in the way of normal classes, and the bereaved families suggested vacating the classrooms of the victims as a kind of memorial. Of course, this idea sparked a standoff between the families of the victims, the school, and the government. Eventually, after much discussion, a decision was reached: a facsimile of the classroom would be built in a separate area. That is how the Memorial Classroom came to be (Picture 4).

I visited this classroom alongside some others. The caretaker of this facility was the father of one of the victims. He took my visit from abroad as a sign of honor and gladly allowed me to take pictures inside the facility. Ten classrooms and one teacher's room had been reproduced inside the facility (Picture 5). Each classroom had a blackboard, lockers, lectern, and desks exactly matching the number of children that once studied there. On top of each desk sat the photo of the student that once sat there, and the rest of the desk surface was covered in offerings left by visitors: candy, flowers, portraits, and messages. I noticed that some of the desks did not have anything on them. I asked my companions why this was, and they told me that some of the victims' families had refused to place photos of their late children in the classroom.

At the end of the corridor, 10 pictures were arranged, one of each class, all taken before they left on their trip. The walls of the corridor were filled with a painting of mourning done by an artist. Alongside the attitude of mourning, some of the images strongly condemned the actions of the government and the crewmembers of the Sewol, and I felt just how angry the people of Korea were over this disaster. Displaying commemorative photos of the classes that perished or a strongly critical mural are perhaps not things we Japanese would do, but they spoke strongly of national identity and culture that believes that letting out one's feelings is far better than bottling them up inside.



Picture 4. Memorial Classroom Exterior



Picture 5. Memorial Classroom Interior

Summary

The high-school students that survived the incident and the families of the victims did not seek out support on their own. That is why the Ansan Mental Health Trauma Center provided proactive home visit counseling in addition to the usual psychiatric therapy you would find at any clinic. The efforts of these trauma center employees to deliver mental health support to the environments in which the disaster-affected people lived and worked were quite similar to our efforts. These individuals took great caution to ensure that disaster-affected people would not be cut off from their communities, and they provided a variety of places and ways for disaster-affected individuals to meet, mingle, and stay connected. Men were unlikely to seek out support on their own and were also unlikely to take part in gatherings. Thus, the center picked activities for the all-male get-togethers that could be of use to the community (cooking, fieldwork, woodworking, etc.). This is something we have done in Japan. It may well be a fundamental biological instinct for communities to come together in times of peril, and we have seen this phenomenon occur in different cultures. On the other hand, the sorts of content that make it easy for individuals to gather or not vary considerably between cultures.

I felt differences in how and to what extent emotions were expressed here. We try to hide away painful experiences and do not attempt to put them on display for others to see. However, in Korea, the surviving high schoolers organized a flash mob, and the bereaved families put on a dramatization of the incident itself. As I watched all this, I felt a twinge of pity along with a stark realization of the differences in our cultures. At the “Memorial Classroom for the Victims,” work criticizing the government and the crew of the ship was put on display, alongside artwork meant to express the sentiment of mourning. It was almost as if they realized that suppressing one’s anger is unnecessary, and expressing it is an individual’s right. Further, when meeting a visitor from abroad, rather than being overconcerned about what they might think, their attitudes indicated that they wanted me to learn as much as I could about the happenings that day, and they freely shared a great deal of information with me. It is well known that avoiding trauma prevents one from recovering from it. While this habit of laying one’s emotions bare is not something we are used to, I believe there is something here for us to learn.

My observation experience showed me that the people of Korea do not view this disaster as a personal tragedy, but rather a community one. Healing this wound is the entire community’s responsibility. I realized that to prevent people from becoming estranged from another, one of the most important issues we must tackle is the construction of a framework that allows us to connect with and support one another. This attitude underlies the work we have done in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake, and by continuing to share our struggles, we will be able to ensure much better mental health for all.

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