

Mental Health in 2020 — Suicide Prevention Among Young People

By Yuhei Kayukawa, M.D.

Two weeks have already passed since the beginning of 2020.

As the years go by, I feel more and more how quickly time passes.

Perhaps it is because I encounter fewer fresh, moving experiences than before,
or perhaps because my brain itself has begun to slow down—I am not quite sure.

It has been seven years since I retired from my university post.

For the past five years, I have quietly continued my psychiatric outpatient practice in an office district in Nagoya—without even putting up a signboard.

Requests for lectures and manuscripts have become rare, yet from time to time, interviews still come my way. Recently, a journalist from m3, a medical information platform, approached me for an interview on *suicide prevention among young people*.

The article was intended for a website aimed at young business leaders.

Below is the text of that interview.



Protecting Ourselves from Overwork — A Doctor's Perspective on Preventing *Karoshi* (Death from Overwork) Part 1

January 6, 2020

In today's society, death from overwork (*karoshi*) and suicide caused by work-related exhaustion have become deeply rooted social problems in Japan. Many companies are now promoting "Work Style Reform" initiatives to improve labor conditions, yet it would be difficult to say that these reforms have truly taken hold. So what can we do to protect ourselves—and those around us—from the dangers of overwork and burnout? What warning signs do our bodies and minds send when we are approaching our limits? What daily habits can help us prevent exhaustion and emotional collapse? And how should we approach our feelings of guilt or helplessness that sometimes arise

in the midst of intense workloads? In this two-part feature, Dr. Yuhei Kayukawa, psychiatrist and director of *Kayukawa Clinic*, who has spent many years studying and addressing issues related to *karoshi* and overwork-related mental health, shares his insights and practical advice for maintaining well-being in a high-pressure society.



Yuhei Kayukawa, M.D., Director of Kayukawa Clinic

Declining Suicide Rates — But a Concerning Trend Among Young Adults

— In recent years, "black companies" and deaths caused by overwork (*karoshi*) have drawn national attention in Japan. Since the of the Act on the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Death and Injury from Overwork in 2014, how has society changed?

Dr. Kayukawa:

Before discussing *karoshi* or work-related suicide specifically, it's important to look at the broader picture of suicide as a whole. According to international data, the global suicide rate has declined by more than one-third since 1990. Japan has followed this trend—overall suicide numbers have steadily decreased, and this is something we should sincerely welcome. However, when we examine the data more closely by age group, a more troubling pattern emerges. From 1999 to around 2011, the suicide rate among people in their 20s and 30s actually increased, even as the overall rate declined. After 2011, there was a gradual improvement, and by 2016, the total number of suicides in Japan had fallen to 21,897. Yet between 2016 and 2017, we once again observed an uptick among people in their twenties.

— Even though the total number of suicides has declined, why are we seeing an increase among younger generations?

Dr. Kayukawa:

In short, the challenges of what we call Japan's "*lost 27 years*" following the collapse of the economic bubble have become increasingly concentrated among young people. Many factors have contributed — university students driven to suicide after job-hunting failures, the rise of non-regular employment, and the spread of exploitative "black companies" are just a few.

According to data from Japan's National Police Agency ("Situation of Suicides in 2014"), the top three causes of suicide among people in their twenties are depression, schizophrenia, and work-related exhaustion. These reflect not only mental illness but also social and occupational pressures that can overwhelm a person's sense of stability and hope. For many young adults, a pervasive sense of uncertainty and stagnation about the future has taken root. On top of that, chronic overwork—long hours, weekend shifts, and the erosion of rest—gradually depletes both body and mind. By the time they or

those around them recognize the danger, it is often already too late.

How to Protect Your Life from Overwork

— What should we keep in mind to protect ourselves from the dangers of overwork in our daily lives?

Dr. Kayukawa:

First, take a moment to reflect on *why* you work. Have you unconsciously begun to adopt the mindset of "working for the company, for society, for others"? Such devotion may sound admirable, but if it leads you to neglect your own well-being — working to the point of forgetting to eat or sleep — it can quietly put your life at risk. Instead of letting work dominate every aspect of your existence, try to keep a healthy balance among "work," "life," "family," and "leisure." Consciously make time to relax, to share meals with loved ones, and to nurture your relationships outside of work. Most importantly, remember that it is perfectly valid — even essential — to work for your own happiness, not solely for someone else's expectations or goals.

— What kind of daily habits can help us avoid building up fatigue and stress?

Dr. Kayukawa:

Above all, make sure you are getting enough sleep to properly rest both your body and mind. Many people believe that a "nightcap" helps them fall asleep, but in reality, alcohol before bed disrupts deep sleep and prevents full recovery — so it's best avoided. Keeping a regular daily rhythm is equally important. These days, more and more people skip breakfast, but doing so leaves your body and brain without nourishment for more than ten hours from dinner to lunch the next day. A simple breakfast can make a great difference in your energy and focus throughout the morning. During work hours, try to take a short break every 90

minutes. A 15-minute nap at lunchtime can also be very effective. In the afternoon, around 3 p.m., give yourself a tea break — these small, regular pauses prevent fatigue from building up and help your mind reset before exhaustion takes hold.

Frequent short breaks improve concentration and allow you to work more efficiently. When you finish your day smoothly, enjoy your evenings — perhaps a hobby, a class, or time with friends once or twice a week after 5 p.m. If you notice that what used to bring you joy no longer feels enjoyable — if your after-work hours or weekends have lost their lightness — it's a sign that fatigue and stress have already accumulated. That's the moment to pause, rest, and care for yourself.

Listening to Your Body's SOS Signals

— **What are the warning signs our bodies send when we're overworked? How can we recognize them early?**

Dr. Kayukawa:

The most important indicator is insomnia. Even when you feel exhausted, if you can't fall asleep, or if you sleep but wake up feeling unrefreshed — that's a clear warning sign. You might also notice a loss of appetite, a heavy sense of fatigue even right after waking up, or excessive daytime sleepiness despite getting enough rest. Physical symptoms such as headaches, stiff shoulders, or chronic pain can also appear as your body's way of saying "enough." On the psychological side, losing interest in things you used to enjoy, finding no pleasure in hobbies, or feeling emotionally flat are all signs that your mind is becoming overwhelmed. The key is not to dismiss these signals as "just being tired" or "nothing serious." Recognizing them early and taking action can prevent deeper burnout. Simple online stress checks can be a good first step — but what matters most is not ignoring or postponing care because of work.



Protecting Ourselves from Overwork — A Doctor's Perspective on Preventing *Karoshi* (Death from Overwork) Part 2

January 6, 2020

— Written by ZUU Co., Ltd.

(Note: The following information was accurate at the time of publication. Please check official sources for the latest updates.)

As Japan continues to promote “work-style reform” through new labor legislation, improvements in workplace environments and more flexible employment options are gradually spreading. Yet, many working adults — particularly young professionals — continue to experience stress, exhaustion, and mental strain in their daily lives. How can we manage stress effectively and protect both our bodies and minds from the risks of overwork? In this second part of our discussion, Dr. Yuhei Kayukawa, psychiatrist and director of Kayukawa Clinic, shares practical advice on stress management and the importance of support from those around us.



Yuhei Kayukawa, M.D., Director of Kayukawa Clinic

When You Notice Signs of Fatigue or Mental Distress

— How should you respond when your body or mind sends an SOS?

Dr. Yuhei Kayukawa:

If you begin to notice symptoms such as insomnia, loss of appetite, fatigue, or emotional instability, the first step is not to ignore them. These are important warning signs that something may be wrong. If your workplace has an occupational health nurse or industrial physician, try consulting them first. If that's not available, visit your primary care doctor or a general practitioner whom you see regularly. It's important to determine whether your symptoms are caused by physical illness or stress and overwork. If your condition is not due to a physical disease, your doctor or workplace health department can refer you to a mental health professional who can provide more specialized care. What matters most is to seek help early—don't postpone it because you feel "too busy with work." And if seeing a doctor immediately is difficult, try to ease your workload and rest as much as possible in the meantime.

— How can we help prevent not only ourselves but also our family members or colleagues from falling victim to overwork?

Dr. Yuhei Kayukawa:

One practical guideline is to keep monthly overtime work under 40 hours. This helps maintain enough time and energy for life outside of work. It also prevents people from becoming overly absorbed in their jobs at the expense of their health and personal well-being. It is also important to remember that we work not solely for the sake of the company or others, but for our own lives, goals, and happiness. When people lose sight of this balance, they become more vulnerable to exhaustion and burnout. Individuals who already have lifestyle-related conditions, such as hypertension or diabetes, or those who tend to be pessimistic, should be especially cautious. For them, avoiding long hours, all-nighters, and chronic sleep deprivation is crucial for maintaining health. If a stress

check or routine medical exam indicates that further medical attention is needed, do not ignore the results or "wait and see." Consult a professional or visit a specialist as early as possible.

First, Speak with Your Supervisor

— When struggling with overwork or excessive job stress, where should one turn for help?

Dr. Yuhei Kayukawa:

Your immediate supervisor should be the first person you approach. Many supervisors simply do not realize that their team members are becoming overworked or nearing exhaustion. In most cases, they are not intentionally assigning unreasonable workloads. That is precisely why it is essential to communicate your condition clearly and ask for support. Opening up to family members or trusted colleagues can also lead to important insights and relief. These are the people closest to you, and they are often willing to listen with genuine concern. Your next step should be to consult your workplace health professionals—such as public health nurses or occupational physicians—or your primary care doctor. They can listen carefully, assess your current condition, and recommend appropriate treatment or advice. While seeking medical help may feel more intimidating than speaking with a supervisor or colleague, consulting a specialist early on greatly increases the chances of resolving the issue quickly. In addition, several organizations offer accessible online consultation services for overwork-related concerns:

- **National Center for Overwork-Related Death Prevention**
Online forms allow individuals to seek advice regarding overwork, overwork-related suicide, and excessive labor. Based on submitted concerns, the service can direct users to local Labor Bureaus, Labor Standards Inspection Offices, or attorneys specializing in overwork-related cases.

- National Overwork Hotline Network (Karōshi 110 Ban)
Operated by the National Lawyers' Network for Overwork Death. Their mission is to eliminate karōshi through telephone consultation lines and region-specific support windows.
- National Center for Protecting the Life and Health of Workers
Offers consultation on overwork, overwork-related suicide, and excessive labor through an email-based form.

Toward a Society Free from Karoshi and Overwork-Related Suicide

— As work-style reform continues to progress in Japan, what kind of society would eliminate “karoshi” and overwork-related suicide?

Dr. Yuhei Kayukawa:

Two major measures are essential: the enforcement of a legal ban on overtime work, and strict compliance with the 2020 Workplace Harassment Prevention Act. Under clear national legislation, employers must be prohibited from imposing excessive work hours or unreasonable workloads. Several European countries have already enacted such laws, demonstrating that systemic change is possible. Ultimately, we should move toward a society in which people can work with purpose and satisfaction—without overtime, without sacrificing their physical or mental well-being. Beyond work, individuals should have the freedom to fully enjoy leisure time: dancing, singing with friends, or engaging in hobbies that enrich their lives. A healthy rhythm of working well, playing well, and sleeping well enables people to return to work refreshed and motivated. A society that balances tension with relaxation—and occasionally embraces the joyful, uninhibited spirit one might associate with Latin

cultures—would greatly reduce the risks of overwork-related tragedies.

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Dr. Kayukawa is a leading expert in sleep medicine and has been deeply involved in national efforts to prevent overwork-related deaths. His publications (including edited and co-authored works) include: *Tips and Pitfalls in the Treatment of Sleep Disorders*; *Understanding Schizophrenia Correctly*; *Tips and Pitfalls in the Treatment of Depression*, among others.

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