



UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

The *hikikomori* experience,
as written by *hikikomori* individuals:
A thematic analysis of the *Hikipos* magazine

Dissertação apresentada à Universidade Católica
Portuguesa para obtenção do grau de mestre em
Estudos Asiáticos

Por

Filipe Varela Franco

Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas

Julho 2024



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Sob orientação de Marta Maria Figueiredo Pedro Vazão de
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&
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Abstract

Hikikomori is officially described as the voluntary social isolation of an individual who does not leave their home for more than six months. This situation has become a social phenomenon, which estimates an increasing number of reported cases around the world. Japan, where this phenomenon was first signaled, continues to be the country with the largest number of *hikikomori* individuals. The *hikikomori* issue has been studied in both psychiatric and sociological settings, with no clear consensus on whether it is a Japanese culturally bound issue or a psychopathology. Furthermore, there is still no a definite understanding of all the factors that lead so many individuals to withdraw from society. This study aimed to understand whether the *hikikomori* individuals' perspective on their own experience offers any insight that may be lacking in academic discussion. To do so, a thematic analysis was conducted on 10 issues of the *hikikomori*-produced *Hikipos* magazine. This dissertation proves that the *hikikomori* issue is a more nuanced issue than officially described and that the definition itself may be subject to change with context. Furthermore, the main factors that contribute to *hikikomori* behavior mostly stem from abusive and neglectful environments, in school, work, and especially, at home. These forms of abuse are not necessarily physical but do always involve some form of social exclusion that leads individuals to decide to alienate from others due to fear of confronting an environment in which they constantly fear failure. Finally, this study found that the most successful reintegration methods are done through creating “safe places” for *hikikomori* individuals to be themselves and re-learn social interaction. This study also found that the biggest hurdle is the prejudice against *hikikomori* individuals and against mental illness in Japan, which stems from socio-cultural values that may prove challenging to change. Although this study may be mostly limited to literature in the English language, it aims to present this discussion to as broad an audience as possible. Despite this study being specific to the *hikikomori* issue in Japan, there are likely to be similar socio-cultural conditions that can be proponents to the appearance of more *hikikomori* individuals in other countries.

Keywords: *Hikikomori* experience; Japanese socio-cultural values; social exclusion; parental relationship; mental health.

Resumo

Hikikomori é oficialmente descrito como o isolamento social voluntário de um(a) indivíduo/a que não sai de casa por um período superior a seis meses. Esta situação tem sido apreciada como um fenómeno social em crescimento, pelo mundo inteiro. O Japão, país no qual este fenómeno foi identificado pela primeira vez, continua a ser o país com o maior número de indivíduos *hikikomori*. O problema *hikikomori* tem vindo a ser estudado nos campos da psiquiatria e da sociologia, sem ainda existir um consenso definitivo quanto à sua origem: se é um problema específico da cultura japonesa ou se é originado numa psicopatologia. Para além disso, ainda não existe um entendimento claro dos fatores que predis põem tantos indivíduos ao isolamento social. O objetivo deste estudo é descobrir se a perspectiva de indivíduos *hikikomori* sobre a sua própria experiência pode providenciar algum esclarecimento para as dúvidas que persistem na discussão académica deste tema. Com esse fim, foi realizada uma análise temática a 10 fascículos de uma revista produzida por indivíduos *hikikomori*, intitulada *Hikipos*. Esta dissertação prova que o fenómeno *hikikomori* tem mais nuances do que as oficialmente apresentadas e que a própria definição do termo muda consoante o seu contexto. Verifica-se ainda que os principais fatores que conduzem ao comportamento *hikikomori* têm origem em ambientes abusivos e negligentes na escola, trabalho e, especialmente, em casa. Estas formas de abuso não são necessariamente físicas, mas envolvem sempre algum tipo de exclusão social que leva a vítima a alienar-se de outros, por medo do confronto com o ambiente ao qual associam o medo de fracassar. Por fim, este estudo permitiu identificar que o maior obstáculo para indivíduos *hikikomori* é o preconceito social contra os mesmos, e contra as doenças mentais no Japão, que advém de valores socioculturais que ainda são difíceis de mudar. Apesar deste estudo estar sobretudo limitado a literatura em língua inglesa, o objetivo é apresentar esta discussão ao maior número de leitores possível. Também, ainda que o estudo seja específico do fenómeno *hikikomori* no Japão, poderão existir condições socioculturais semelhantes noutras culturas que tenderão ao surgimento de indivíduos *hikikomori* noutros países.

Palavras-chave: Experiência *hikikomori*; Valores socioculturais japoneses; exclusão social; relações parentais; saúde mental

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to both my advisors, Professors Marta Pedro and Tânia Ganito, for their guidance and advice throughout the process of writing this dissertation, and without whom I would not have been able to complete it. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Professor Jorge Santos Alves, who offered his insight into the development of this dissertation and remained available throughout the entire process. A special thanks to Joana Ramos and Yuka Dejima, who generously provided their translation services, without which the analysis conducted on this dissertation would not have been possible. I would also like to offer a special thanks to my friend, Kaede Kishimoto, who assisted me in acquiring all the issues of the *Hikipos* magazine. I would further like to acknowledge Yuta Fujita-sensei, of Akita Municipal Hall, and Kaeko Chiba-sensei, of Akita International University, who allowed me to attend a *hikikomori* support group and offered me their insight into the subject. Their generosity and interest in my research subject reignited my passion and determination to pursue it. Finally, I would like to thank my mother for her continued support, as well as my master's degree colleagues. Their emotional support was invaluable in this endeavor, and I am truly grateful.

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Introduction

Hikikomori (引きこもり), the term broadly that defines both the phenomenon, as well as the people, who withdraw from social contact and isolate themselves at home for a long period of time has, over time, acquired “multiple interpretations and representations in Japan” (Horiguchi, 2015:140) being associated with other terms such as *freeters*¹, *parasite singles*², or *NEET*³. It has become a widely debated social concern due to its association with broader aspects of Japanese society and culture. A Japanese government survey, in 2016, had estimated that there were 541,000 *hikikomori* people in Japan, between the ages of 15 and 39 (Matsuguma & Niemiec, 2021). A more recent report estimates this number has increased to 1.5 million, which indicates a growing trend, likely influenced by the rise in unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Yeung & Karasawa, 2023). These surveys prove how much of a social concern the *hikikomori* issue has become.

Although there has been an extensive discussion on the subject, no clear resolution has yet to be reached on what qualifies someone as a *hikikomori* individual, and what factors have led so many into withdrawing from society. This ongoing debate is due to the lack of an overall understanding of the complexities of the *hikikomori* issue. Is *hikikomori* a syndrome that falls within the realm of psychology? Or is it a social malady that stems from Japanese socio-cultural values? Or could it be somewhere between the psychological, sociological, and anthropological fields? A definitive answer has yet to manifest itself. One of the reasons could be that most studies conducted on this subject are either discussions on the existing literature or quantitative studies, with some exceptions of qualitative studies (see Dziesinski & Michael J., 2009; Rubinstein, 2016; Sekimizu, 2022; Tomonari & Noboru, 2022).

¹ *Parasite singles* are defined as single people who are dependent on their parents, either financially or for accommodation. However, the term often solicits the image of affluent young people who consume luxury items while living at their parents' expense (Imoto & Toivonen, 2012).

² *Freeter* (フリーター) is a term specifically used for freelancing youth, or youth who only work in part-time jobs and who avoid seeking full-time employment in Japan's corporate world. This term has also been used for involuntary young part-time workers who cannot secure full-time employment (Imoto & Toivonen, 2012).

³ *NEET* (ニート) is an acronym taken from the English language, which means “Not in Employment, Education or Training” (Toivonen, 2012). The term is often mixed with *hikikomori*, as *NEET* are also often described as “lazy” and “unmotivated” while mostly staying indoors (Toivonen, 2012; Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015).

However, no study has yet analyzed *hikikomori* individuals' testimonies and views through as many aspects as those presented in a publication such as the *Hikipos* magazine. Hoping to fill this gap, this study has chosen to analyze a collection of issues from said magazine.

Hikipos is a magazine produced in Chiba⁴ by a group of volunteers who are either current or former *hikikomori* individuals and who have all gone through the decision to isolate themselves from society. The magazine was founded by Ishizaki Moribito, one of the many authors of *Hikipos*, as well as its editor-in-chief. While working as the sub-editor-in-chief of a separate publication that focuses on the *hikikomori* issue, the *Hikikomori Shinbun*⁵, Ishizaki found that the most popular section of that publication was the one written by people who have experience being a *hikikomori* individual. According to him:

“Until then, reports on *hikikomori* had mainly been written by experts and rarely by the people themselves. However, withdrawal is not an incident but an experience. We believe that the narratives of those who have experienced it best represent the reality.”

(Excerpt from a written response provided by Ishizaki Moribito, present in Annex B)

Through some of his payments in the *Hikikomori Shinbun*, as well as sales of *Hikipos* issues, Ishizaki has managed to continue financing the volunteer project that is the *Hikipos* magazine: a magazine about the *hikikomori* experience, written by *hikikomori* individuals. Throughout its 13 issues, the authors of *Hikipos* have recounted their experiences and thoughts about the *hikikomori* issue, as it relates to mental health, their upbringing, and Japanese society. The magazine comprises different written pieces, such as opinion articles, prosaic retellings of their experiences, poetry, author-conducted interviews, and *manga*⁶. This study aims to analyze these articles to extract a collective understanding of the

⁴ Chiba is a city in the Chiba Prefecture, just east of Tokyo, the capital of Japan (*About Chiba*, n.d.).

⁵ An online English version of the *Hikikomori Shinbun* can be accessed at the following link: <http://www.hikikomori-news.com/?cat=38>. This newspaper is a relevant resource, especially for inter-cultural discussion on the *hikikomori* issue and for new projects that try to assist *hikikomori* in reintegrating Japanese society.

⁶ *Manga* is the term used for a variety of comic books originally produced and published in Japan. Although the term *manga* is, nowadays, mostly written in katakana as マンガ (which is the Japanese alphabet for Romanized words), the term was originally written as a conjunction of the terms *man* (漫), which means “whimsical” or “impromptu”, and *ga* (画), which means “picture”. This art form is said to date back to the 12th century, when painted scrolls were used to tell narratives. The term *manga* came to later use, during the 18th century, with the publication of picture books such as *Shiji no yukikai* (Pagan, 2018; Ryan, 2022).

hikikomori issue as it relates to the perspective of *hikikomori* individuals. To do this, several pieces had to be translated from Japanese to English, as this publication is sold exclusively in the Japanese language. All translated articles are available in Annex C⁷.

The starting research question is: How does a *hikikomori*-made publication offer new insight into the *hikikomori* issue in Japanese society? To account for several aspects of the *hikikomori* experience that will help answer this question, this study approached *Hikipos* with three different but interconnected specific research questions: How do *hikikomori* individuals define *hikikomori*? What are the main factors that have led *hikikomori* individuals into social withdrawal? How can *hikikomori* individuals conciliate with Japanese society? These research questions guided the analysis of *Hikipos*.

The starting question is aligned with the general research objective of this study, which is to understand the *hikikomori* experience within the context of contemporary Japanese society. In order to achieve it, three specific objectives were outlined, related to each of the research questions: explore how *hikikomori* see the *hikikomori* issue; understand what leads *hikikomori* individuals to social withdrawals; find out what paths to social inclusion are achievable for *hikikomori* individuals.

To accomplish these objectives through the analysis of *Hikipos*, the qualitative method selected for this study was the thematic analysis, as described in Virginia Braun's and Victoria Clarke's *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (2013). This methodology was selected as it proved the most suited for identifying thematic patterns across the several issues of *Hikipos*, and to extract a broad sense of what the *hikikomori* experience, as a whole, can help in understanding the *hikikomori* issue. By employing a thematic analysis, this study sought to: find thematic patterns across many of *Hikipos*' pieces using the MAXQDA Analytics Pro software; formulate broad themes to gain a broad understanding of the *hikikomori* experience; analyze selected excerpts from *Hikipos* in the context of existing literature to assess their scientific validity. The patterns found across the several pieces are included in Annex A.

⁷ The translated articles will later be provided to the *Hikipos* team, should they wish to publish them on their website, where some English articles are available. The website can be accessed at <https://www.Hikipos.info/archive/category/English>

The analysis of the *Hikipos* magazine is done by intercalating excerpts from the magazine with literature on the subject of *hikikomori*, such as Saito's *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End* (2013), Sekimizu's *A Sociology of Hikikomori* (2022), the various chapters that Horiguchi has written (Horiguchi, 2011, 2012, 2017a), among other journal articles and news articles. Other literature on related subjects is also used, namely in psychiatry, sociology, and anthropology, mainly in the context of Japanese society. Said literature primarily consists of journal articles from online databases such as PubMed Central and Frontiers, along with news articles and websites.

Even though indirectly, I have also taken my personal experience with the *hikikomori* issue into account, as I have had the opportunity to attend a *hikikomori* support group in Akita⁸, as part of a mobility project between the Catholic University of Portugal and the Akita International University. During this time, I had the opportunity to discuss the *hikikomori* issue with a social studies professor, Kaeko Chiba, with a social worker who helped organize the support group, Yuta Fujita, as well as with attendees of the support group, both *hikikomori* individuals and their families. It was an enlightening experience that convinced me that the perspective that *hikikomori* individuals have of themselves, and of other *hikikomori* individuals, is crucial to our understanding of this phenomenon.

The aim is to assess whether the authors' testimonies find validity in existing literature or offer opposing views. Finally, the editor-in-chief of *Hikipos* also contributed to some inquiries via e-mail, which are all included in Annex B.

This dissertation is structured in three parts, dedicated respectively to the state of the art on the *hikikomori* subject (Part I), the explanation of the methodology (Part II), and the results and discussion of the analysis that was conducted (Part III). Part I contextualizes the academic debate on the *hikikomori* issue by presenting it within its two main academic fields: psychiatric and sociological. The aim is to provide a historical framing of the discussion while also presenting the several factors that researchers and scholars have claimed to be the cause of *hikikomori* behavior. Both these factors are relevant to the debate that is developed in Chapters 1 and 2 of Part III. Part I also presents the *hikikomori* issue, as it is discussed internationally, within the context of COVID-19 and the past attempts at rehabilitating

⁸ Akita is a city located on the shore of the Sea of Japan, in the Akita Prefecture, the sixth largest and second least densely populated prefecture in Japan.

hikikomori individuals. The latter is of relevance in Chapter 3 of Part III. Part II presents the object of study, the *Hikipos* magazine, as well as an explanation of the chosen methodology and its implementation. Part III presents the results and discussion of said analysis. As the study aimed to answer three research questions, Part III is thus divided into three Chapters: Chapter 1 - *Hikikomori*, as defined by *hikikomori* individuals; Chapter 2 - Factors that contribute to social withdrawal; Chapter 3 - A place for *hikikomori* individuals in Japanese society. Each chapter of Part III is structured according to the themes found during the thematic analysis of *Hikipos*. The analysis is presented as an intercalation of excerpts from the magazine, followed by an analysis of the excerpt, which compares it to existing literature related to the subject.

Part I – State-of-the-art

Since the 1980s, the *hikikomori* phenomenon has been a subject of public discussion in Japan, associated with specific Japanese social values that encourage more and more people to withdraw from society. However, the *hikikomori* issue has become a topic of public discussion internationally, being often interpreted as “social withdrawal” syndrome (Dong et al., 2022:8), and more prominently examined from a psychopathological perspective. The literature suggests different reasons for the prevalence of *hikikomori* behavior, suggesting that this condition might be a consequence of other addictions, such as internet and social media addiction (Tateno et al., 2019) videogames addiction (Stavropoulos et al., 2019), a contemporary tendency towards individualization (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015), or even related to COVID-19 pandemic-induced isolation (Roza et al., 2021). Still, there has yet to be a consensus on how “*hikikomori*” can actually be defined, what constitutes a *hikikomori* individual, and what could be the related factors that have led to this phenomenon gaining increasing attention. To elaborate on these debates, this state-of-the-art study will first present the *hikikomori* issue through the two main areas of study that have tackled it: psychopathological and sociological.

1.1. *Hikikomori* from a psychopathological standpoint

The confusion surrounding the psychopathological framing of the *hikikomori* issue, on whether it should be considered as a distinct psychopathology, stems from the fact that “*hikikomori*” was not initially approached in this field. In fact, despite its now common association with mental health issues, *hikikomori* individuals were first described in the 1980s as children who “for various reasons, . . . have difficulty in taking an active role in situations where they have to collaborate in social interaction and groups” (Sekimizu, 2022:110). It was only during the 1990s that the *hikikomori* issue started to be discussed in relation to mental illness. In this context, Tamaki Saito, a renowned psychiatrist, became one of the most notorious voices. Amidst the existing debate on whether *hikikomori* should be considered a psychopathology or a simple “refusal of human relations” (Sekimizu, 2022:118), Saito bridged the two ideas, claiming that *hikikomori* should be regarded as a lack of social participation, stemming from a desire to “to enter into a relationship of loving

dependence” (Saito, 2013:133), absent during the childhood of *hikikomori* individuals. It is essential to highlight that Saito (1998) defined *hikikomori* in his work *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End* as:

“(…) a problem by the late twenties, that involves cooping oneself up in one’s own home and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal source.” (Saito, 2013:24)

Thus, Saito also frames *hikikomori* as gender and class-based, focused explicitly on middle-class young men. Despite some considering Saito’s first assessment of the *hikikomori* issue as skewed, considering it does not develop the idea of a possible social pathology that Saito hints at (Horiguchi, 2015), Saito’s original description of *hikikomori* individuals is still considered a seminal work that holds weight to the present day. This can be seen with the adoption of the *hikikomori* term as synonymous with “social withdrawal” or as a type of social withdrawal syndrome specific to the “biopsychosocial, cultural, and environmental factors” present in Japanese society (Kato et al., 2012:7). The term itself has gained international acceptance, being as far as added to the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology with a description akin to Saito’s:

“A culture-bound syndrome found almost exclusively in Japan, most commonly among male teenagers and young adults, especially eldest sons, although about a quarter of cases are female.” (Colman, 2008)

Despite contributing to the grounds for a psychological characterization of *hikikomori*, Saito provided the first argument that *hikikomori* should not be regarded as a medical diagnosis or a disorder. More specifically, Saito argues that the state of social withdrawal could act as a precursor of emotional instability that results in depression. This link helps explain some behaviors typically displayed by *hikikomori* individuals. A later study conducted by the Japanese government in 2010 further argued for the distinction between *hikikomori* and social withdrawal, considering the former possibly having “underlying prodromal schizophrenia” (Tateno et al., 2012a:1). This distinction was somewhat corroborated in a different survey, which showed that mental health welfare centers had noted an association between *hikikomori* behavior and diagnosis of “psychiatric disorders, including schizophrenia, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and

pervasive developmental disorder” (Kato et al, 2019:428). It is thus apparent that despite the psychologically driven need to explain *hikikomori* behavior, there is no academic consensus on whether *hikikomori* should be considered a distinct psychopathology in and of itself, nor is there a consensus among mental health professionals on what symptoms the *hikikomori* behavior tend to be more associated to, be it of delusional disorders, such as schizophrenia (Tateno et al., 2012b), anxiety disorders, and mood disorders, such as depression (Yong et al., 2020a). In this sense, researchers in the psychiatric field have since begun to distinguish cases of primary and secondary *hikikomori*⁹. Still, there is no empirical evidence of the validity of this distinction, especially when considering treatment (Wong et al., 2019).

Despite the lack of consensus, the World Mental Health Survey determined, via survey, that *hikikomori* individuals between the ages of 20-54 have high odds of being diagnosed with a mood disorder (Yong et al, 2020). However, despite the close association with psychiatric disorders, none prove to be the sole cause for the condition of being a *hikikomori* individual. To further elaborate on the academic discussion on the *hikikomori* issue, it would be beneficial to tackle the problem of its definition from a sociological perspective.

1.2. *Hikikomori* from a sociological standpoint

During the 2000s, scholars began to contemplate the *hikikomori* issue within the context of social independence, as well as mental health welfare (Sekimizu, 2022). With this shift, the Japanese government also began to frame the issue within its employment support policies, namely dedicated to assisting young people. The aim, as scholars advocated, was financial independence and, to some degree, emotional independence for Japanese youth, both for *hikikomori* and non-*hikikomori* individuals. Despite the subsidizing of such employment support programs, the government still had no plans for providing young people with social benefits (Sekimizu, 2022).

⁹ Primary *hikikomori* individuals are considered as those who socially withdraw without having any history or experience of a psychiatric disorder. On the other hand, secondary *hikikomori* individuals are considered to have had some psychiatric disorder, and this disorder possibly being the cause for their isolation, or at least an important factor in it (Frankova, 2019).

In the meantime, a different image was being constructed in the public eye, as the *hikikomori* issue began to gain social renown in 2000 “when reports on crimes allegedly committed by *hikikomori* individuals hit the headlines (Horiguchi, 2012). The association between *hikikomori* individuals and violence has permeated its public image, and in 2003 a study conducted by the Japanese government indicated that “40% of *hikikomori* cases involved domestic violence” (Bowker, 2016). Although others have debunked this number (Horiguchi, 2011; Yong & Nomura, 2019), the perception of *hikikomori* individuals as either criminals or potential criminals has been set in the public consciousness.

Despite Saito’s original alarming estimation of one million *hikikomori* individuals among the Japanese population, a Cabinet survey, in 2010, trimmed down this estimate to 700,000 *hikikomori* individuals, even without considering any ““potential” *hikikomori* who are averse to social relationships but have yet to withdraw completely” (Rubinstein, 2016:2). This distinction is relevant in governmental estimations as, by its definition, a citizen is only considered a *hikikomori* individual if they have been withdrawn from society for at least six months. During this time, two types of support were formally available for *hikikomori* individuals, as recommended by scholars and the government: mental health therapy and employment. Regarding the discourse of employment support, *hikikomori* individuals began to be paired with other socially disparaged groups, such as non-regular workers between the ages of 15-34 (*freeters*) as well as those not engaged in employment, education, or training (*NEET*) (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015).

Furthermore, despite Saito’s initial description, which came to be understood as the publicly accepted definition of *hikikomori*, a Ministry of Health and Labor survey further concluded that 36.8 % of *hikikomori* individuals are in their late twenties or older (J. Dziesinski, 2004). Horiguchi (2017) further posits that, instead of Saito’s original estimation being incorrect, it could simply be the case that the average of *hikikomori* individuals is aging. This hypothesis was confirmed in a 2013 nationwide association of parent groups’ survey which concluded that the average age of *hikikomori* individuals was 33.1. However, it seems difficult to pinpoint the precise age group of *hikikomori* cases, as it is suspected that, more often than not, “among the withdrawn, those in their twenties or thirties are viewed as problematic and hence reported” (Horiguchi, 2017:58).

Additionally, cases reporting middle-aged and elderly *hikikomori* individuals began to appear, proving that the initial conception of *hikikomori* individuals as “young people” no longer applies. Among these reports, the issue now known as the 8050 (eighty-fifty) crisis gained special attention. This crisis revolves around the *hikikomori* “children” who have now reached middle age (50s), while still unemployed and financially dependent on their parents, who are now in their old age (80s). Coupled with Japan’s growing aging population, the 8050 crisis became a growing concern (Yamazaki et al., 2021), as citizens who do not fall under the umbrella of Japan’s corporate welfare policies are less likely to receive financial assistance (Sekimizu, 2022).

Thus, it is clear that, even in a sociological setting, a clear definition of *hikikomori* has yet to be reached. Additionally, cases such as retired male widowers, or daughters who live with their parents while being responsible for home tasks, are likely excluded from being accounted as *hikikomori* individuals, despite fulfilling the requirement of “social withdrawal for more than six months”. *Hikikomori* individuals are still perceived as young, unemployed, middle-class males. However, considering the paradigm shift from being considered an issue of social inactiveness of young people to being considered a contemporary psychopathology, as well as an issue of social relevance, it can be said that “the framework for understanding the *hikikomori* problem over the past 20 years is astounding” (Sekimizu, 2022:146).

1.3. Possible causes of *hikikomori* behavior

In considering the causes of *hikikomori* behavior, no other factor is more commonly discussed as the lack of integration of *hikikomori* individuals into Japanese society, even before their period of social withdrawal. Some scholars attribute this exclusion to the cultural values of loyalty, conformity, and social harmony that permeate Japanese society, and that easily ostracize individuals who are unable to abide by these values (Goodman, 2012; Guo, 2022; Imoto & Toivonen, 2012). Thus, this exclusion is manifested as school bullying (Guo, 2022; Naito & Gielen, 2005) as well as abuse in the workplace (Dussich, 2001; Hsiao, 2015; Uggen & Shinohara, 2009), and is targeted at those who may stand out among others, even if they do not intend to. Not only are ostracizing behaviors commonly practiced, but they are even institutionalized, especially in schools, where they take the form of strict dress codes

and rules on hairstyles and accessories (Denyer & Inuma, 2021; Rogers, 2022). In this matter, it is more common for female citizens to suffer more types of harassment, as well as stricter dress codes. However, gender expectations also impact the male figure, as it is still associated with the image of the breadwinner of a family, void of weakness. As such, men tend to be the victims of further pressure to achieve the role of social participant, compared to the female figure (Chau et al, 2020).

The lack of integration also comes in the form of unemployment, which is often alluded to, due to the expected roles that Japanese citizens should fulfill in Japanese society (Yong et al., 2020b), and the subsequent discrimination and shame against those who are neither engaged nor interested in seeking employment. As the mother of a *hikikomori* young man attested “School (...) is all about preparing children to be hard-working company employees who follow orders.”(Rubinstein, 2016a:10).

Another possible cause of *hikikomori* behavior, according to Ogino’s findings (Ogino, 2008, as cited in Horiguchi, 2017), is the lack of engagement in interpersonal relations. Since school and work take up most of the Japanese citizens’ time during the day, it becomes the primary stage for developing interpersonal relationships, in which social skills can be developed (Hendry, 2019). The importance of obtaining these skills during childhood has been underlined by both Naito (1992) and Doi (1973). Namely, the development of the ability to navigate social interactions and choose which “personality” is more appropriate for each social context, the “social personality” or the “intimate personality” (known as *tatemae* and *honne*¹⁰). These “personalities” and the ability to switch between the two

¹⁰ To better understand the importance of context in the usage of the dual concepts of *honne* (本音) and *tatemae* (建前), it is important to explain how these are understood by scholars and by Japanese people. *Honne* is always referred to as one’s true feelings or intentions. However, it is presumed that *honne* is used in an intimate context, either with family or friends, although it may not always be the case as what qualifies as an appropriate context of “closeness” may vary with time (Naito & Gielen, 1992). *Tatemae*, on the other hand, has different levels of intricacy. It may be understood as the personality one adopts in order to fulfill certain social expectations, even if these contradict one’s own feelings and intentions (Buzzi & Megele, 2012). This behavior can be regarded as politeness when meeting a stranger for the first time, or it can have a more performative side of etiquette, which is more common when conducting business. *Tatemae* is also employed in regard to hierarchical structure, be that of addressing someone older, one’s superior, or one who has been working in the same company for a longer period of time (often referred to as *senpai* (先輩)). In these differing contexts, behaviors and language are expected to change to best suit the specific situation and not incur any disrespect towards those who are hierarchically superior.

(kejime/けじめ) depending on the social context and situation are considered essential skills when entering adulthood, as they become the primary means of distinguishing communication in familiar and professional environments. Unlike with institutionalized rules and social values, where *hikikomori* individuals feel excluded, in the case of interpersonal relationships, *hikikomori* individuals end up excluding themselves for not feeling able to fit in with their surrounding social environment (Concina et al., 2024). It should be noted, however, that this feeling of alienation may still stem from an underlying socially imposed pressure to fit in, as well as to succeed in academic, professional, and social settings (Ishihama et al., 2022; Umeda & Kawakami, 2012; Yoshikawa, 2019).

A more recent trend has suggested that the pervasiveness of *hikikomori* individuals can be attributed to individualistic tendencies, as a way for Japanese young people to carve a diverging identity in Japanese society (Ogihara et al., 2014) (Ogihara, 2017; 2021; Overell, 2018). Still, these studies have mostly considered quantitative data, with a surprising lack of inclusion of *hikikomori* individuals' testimonies regarding the indicators used to guide the data, which can impact their validity in the overall discussion.

Another aspect often deemed as a cause of *hikikomori* behavior is co-dependency, namely within the core family. Regarded as an insufficiency in what Doi (1986) understood as the concept of *amae* (甘え). This aspect implies a severely dependent relationship inside the nuclear family, especially between children and mothers. This co-dependency is regarded as an unhealthy consequence of an unstable nuclear family structure, resulting in both indulgent behavior from the parent (Bowker, 2016) as well as financial and emotional dependence of the child towards parental figures (Rubinstein, 2016). Thus, the combination of both parents' and child's behaviors, as well as the lack of the child's insertion into society, has been argued to create a vicious cycle by which a *hikikomori* individual fails to live up to society's expectations, while still being knowingly dependent on parents' financial and emotional support (Overell, 2018). This scenario had already been proposed in Saito's *hikikomori* system, by which *hikikomori* individuals and respective families experience a vicious cycle of guilt and shame, both in supporting *hikikomori* behavior as well as in hiding it, exacerbating the overall stress experienced by the situation, which is extended for years if not decades (Saito, 2013; Horiguchi, 2017). This section on the causes of *hikikomori* behavior has been mostly based on analytical texts and, more importantly, on qualitative

studies that involved the analysis of testimonies given by either *hikikomori*, *ex-hikikomori*, or *hikikomori* individuals in treatment or *hikikomori*'s families. The lack of integrating the perspective of individuals who have experience with being *hikikomori* individuals or being with *hikikomori* individuals has been noted as one of the main faults of the discussion surrounding this topic, which has been mostly concerned with a clinical and/or quantitative approach (Yong & Kaneko, 2015). As such, it seems increasingly imperative that *hikikomori* experiences and testimonies be taken into account if a clear understating of the causes of this phenomenon is ever to be reached.

1.4. *Hikikomori* outside Japan

Although there are speculations, among scholars, of the *hikikomori* issue being a Japanese culturally bound syndrome (Hattori, 2013), others discredit this claim, arguing that the issue has since been increasingly recognized in countries all over the world (Fong Yong & Kaneko, 2016; Kato et al., 2012; Tan et al., 2021). Most studies conducted in other countries have been conducted within a psychiatric framing. Studies that have emphasized psychiatric diagnosis, and possible treatment options include studies conducted in Croatia (Silić et al., 2019), Spain (Malagón-Amor et al., 2015), Portugal (Mota et al., 2019) and the USA (Teo, 2013). These studies involved teenage and young adult *hikikomori* individuals who were withdrawn in their rooms and absent from school, while engaging with video gaming or social media. In most cases, direct interventions in the *hikikomori* individuals' homes were needed. *Hikikomori* individuals either had symptoms of anxiety or depression, which were suspected to be caused by bullying, or by living with parents with mental health issues who struggled to attend to their children's needs (Malagón-Amor et al., 2015; Mota et al., 2019; Silić et al., 2019; Teo, 2013).

However, other studies suggest that post-modern changes in first-world countries, which led to a global internet-connected society, created the conditions for social withdrawal to occur, mainly in urban settings (Kato et al., 2011). In these studies, aside from factors of modernization that may promote *hikikomori*-related issues, such as internet and videogame addiction, many parallels with Japanese society were suspected of contributing to *hikikomori* issues. The closest examples are in the East Asian region, namely China, Hong Kong, South

Korea, and Singapore (Wong et al., 2019). In each territory, interdependent mother-child relationships and a strong sense of social cohesion are attributed as factors contributing to the social pressure that leads to an individual's social withdrawal, much like it does in Japan. Other studies have also highlighted these parallels with Japanese society, such as the ones conducted in Finland (Husu & Välimäki, 2017) and Oman (Sakamoto et al., 2005). These studies seem to show that the *hikikomori* issue can still be framed as a culturally bound issue, but not as country-exclusive, as other cultures share some of the same values of social harmony and collectivist thought as Japanese culture, which are believed to be related to the *hikikomori* issue.

1.5. *Hikikomori* and COVID-19

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the *hikikomori* issue garnered a surge of mediatic attention once more, as there were growing concerns that the enforced isolation of lockdowns was leading to increased levels of depression, suicide, and domestic violence (Watanabe & Tanaka, 2022), all factors which had been related to the *hikikomori* issue. Studies conducted specifically on *hikikomori* population found that symptoms of anxiety and depression worsened during COVID-19 pandemic (Ogawa et al., 2023). Thus, some researchers believed that there was a possibility of more people, namely children, becoming *hikikomori* individuals (Roza et al., 2021). This assertion was not only due to the increase in loneliness, anxiety, depression, and domestic violence that social isolation can trigger but also due to the rise in online services during periods of lockdown, which could facilitate voluntary social withdrawal (Dong et al., 2022b). Further research also pointed to the fact that social stigma associated with admitting symptoms of mental illness, as caused by the pandemic, also led to reticence in seeking treatment for said symptoms, a fact which is often pointed out in *hikikomori* cases, even before the pandemic (Kato et al., 2020).

However, other researchers highlight that, despite their many similarities, *hikikomori* and COVID-19-induced social isolation bear an important distinction: the causes behind both phenomena. While the cause of COVID-19-induced social isolation is known to be an imposed isolation by governments in order to avoid the spread of the virus, the cause of the *hikikomori* issue, on the other hand, stems from voluntary isolation aimed to avoid others

(Kathirvel, 2020). Furthermore, some believe that there is a danger in linking the *hikikomori* issue with COVID-19-induced isolation, as it may further add to the ambiguity in defining the *hikikomori* issue, and further add to the fallacy that *hikikomori* individuals are suited for a post-COVID-19 society because they can remain isolated for longer (Takahashi, 2020). As such, although COVID-19 has served to invigorate public interest surrounding the *hikikomori* issue (Ogawa et al., 2023), it is still unclear whether it has served to over-complicate an already complex subject.

1.6. The treatment of *hikikomori*

The treatment of *hikikomori* individuals, in Japan is yet another area where there is a lack of consensus among researchers and practitioners. With the discussion on the *hikikomori* issue, in the latter half of the 2000s, being mainly focused on mental health and employment, there were two main approaches to the treatment of *hikikomori* individuals: mental health treatment and employment support (Sekimizu, 2022).

Between the two, the most prevalently discussed form of treatment is still psychiatric treatment, which often involves internment in rehabilitation centers. During these treatments, therapists attempt to develop the social skills of *hikikomori* patients, such as their decision-making skills, ability to express emotions, and ability to confront without having anger outbursts (Hattori, 2013). Similarly, the families of *hikikomori* individuals were also advised to undergo treatment to both establish a trusting bond with the *hikikomori* patient and learn how to express and accept their honest feelings (Saito, 2013). The treatment was aimed at restoring the patient's "original personality", restoring relationships with the family, and connecting both to their immediate surrounding social context. The full process of rehabilitation can take up to two years, with 50% of patients not reaching this goal, for how demanding and expensive the treatment can be (Hattori, 2013).

Despite this form of treatment having already been in practice since the late 1990s, more extreme approaches have also been developed to rapidly rehabilitate *hikikomori* individuals back into society. These have taken the form of boot-camp facilities, where parents sign up their children to undergo military-like training programs, involving manual labor meant to discipline *hikikomori* individuals. These programs are built on the assumption that

hikikomori individuals are isolating themselves out of indulgence, as a possible consequence of emotional dependence (*amae*). In a particularly extreme case, a clinic in Nagoya ran a program in which *hikikomori* individuals were forcibly removed from their homes, scolded, and locked away in the clinic. Then, “after the death of one detainee, who was chained to a pillar for four days, the director was put on trial, accused of running a brutal regime” (Furlong, 2008:317). Such “shady businesses”, as they have come to be known, are named *hikidashi-ya*¹¹ and began to be denounced by the media not only for their criminal treatment of *hikikomori* individuals but also for the exorbitant fees they would request of their families (Misono, 2022)

Thus, these programs are often regarded by medical professionals “as misguided and harmful” (Furlong, 2008:317). In light of this, less extreme forms of rehabilitation have appeared, such as the ones organized by NPOs (Ismail, 2020) that focus on offering *hikikomori* individuals a safe place outside of their home context, as well as the skills to seek employment. Support groups have also become a common resource among *hikikomori* individuals and their parents, for focusing on opening discourse within families affected by the *hikikomori* issue (Horiguchi, 2011a; Rubinstein, 2016b; Tomonari & Noboru, 2022). Among NPOs, *New Start* has gained particular notoriety for its unconventional approach to *hikikomori* individuals’ rehabilitation. Aside from offering dormitories and social activities for *hikikomori* individuals, *New Start* also provides a rental service of “brothers” and “sisters”. These “rental brothers” and “rental sisters” are volunteers who act as surrogate caring family members, visiting the *hikikomori* individuals at their homes and conversing with them regularly. However, some psychiatrists resist this concept as it is not recognized as an established medical model. Furthermore, they believe that *hikikomori* individuals, who are deprived of interpersonal attachment due to their condition, may easily develop strong feelings for the “rental sibling” (Furlong, 2008) which could lead them to further distrust rehabilitation should they feel betrayed by the person with whom they have developed an attachment. NPOs often also provide workshops and classes for those who wish to learn specific skills to assist them in seeking new employment, as well as common etiquette of the

¹¹ The *Hikidashi* (引き出し) of *hikidashi-ya* (引き出し屋), in literal terms, means to “pull someone/something out”, which would explain its usage to characterize these businesses’ practice.

Japanese workplace, to prepare them for said employment (hikizakura, 2024; Priestly, 2013; Yanai, 2018).

The abovementioned state-of-the-art regarding the subject of *hikikomori* has proven that the discussion on the issue has had many factors to consider, despite the issue having only been discussed academically for the past 30 years, with the vast majority of literature being produced in the last 15 years (Neoh et al., 2023). However, there still seems to be an overall lack of consensus on the key questions regarding the *hikikomori* issue: its definition and its causes. Furthermore, although there have been a few qualitative studies (see Rubinstein, 2016, Dziesinski & Michael J., 2009, Tomonari & Noboru, 2022) that mostly examined *hikikomori* individuals, and a few which have considered *hikikomori* and their parents based on interviews, the vast majority of studies have still been quantitative. Still, there have been a few researchers who have examined *hikikomori*-produced narratives, either as a book (Sekimizu, 2022) or as blog posts (Caputo, 2020), both in Japan and abroad. Still, there has yet to be a study that examines a publication such as the *Hikipos* magazine, which accounts for a variety of authors that articulate their thoughts on the same aspects that are associated with the *hikikomori* issue (such as the relationships with their families, the pressure to work, the prejudice *hikikomori* individuals suffer, among others). This study thus aims to fill this gap in the existing literature and contribute to the body of knowledge in this field by examining the selected pieces of *Hikipos*.

Part II – Methodology

2.1. Methodological approach

In terms of methodology, this dissertation employed a qualitative methodology. Namely, a thematic analysis of the contents of *Hikipos*, based on the thematic analytic method discussed in the work of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke: *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (2013). Thematic analysis can be defined as “a systematic approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns – themes – across a dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2013:255). This methodology was deemed the most indicated for the analysis of *Hikipos* for two reasons. First, thematic analysis is considered an appropriate method for analyzing pre-existing textual data, especially when the aim is to extract concepts from the text without considering any phenomenological data. Second, thematic analysis is flexible enough to allow for an analysis that begins with the researcher’s pre-existing theories (Theoretical thematic analysis), while also allowing for a bottom-up analysis, which builds its theory from what is contained in the data (Inductive thematic analysis).

To answer the main research question (How can a *hikikomori*-made publication help to clarify the ambiguity surrounding the *hikikomori* issue?), the thematic analysis initially aimed to select excerpts from the *Hikipos*, analyze them, code them, and organize them within the scope of two narrower research question: How do *hikikomori* individuals, in their own words, define *hikikomori*? What are the main factors that have led the authors to decide to isolate themselves? These questions were mainly decided based on the fact that they are the dominating debates concerning the *hikikomori* issue. However, it was deemed important to remain open to any other theme or research question that could arise from the material. This openness was deemed important, as *Hikipos* is exclusively written in Japanese, and until translated, it is impossible to ascertain its contents completely¹². Later, a third research

¹² Exceptionally, some articles have been published on the *Hikipos* blog (<https://www.hikipos.info/>), namely those that were originally written in English, such as the articles written by foreign authors as part of the section

question was decided, upon finding that sufficient data from the analysis of *Hikipos* solicited its pertinence.

2.2. Object of analysis and selection of pieces

Hikipos magazine is composed of 13 issues¹³, which are sold in both paper and digital formats. Each issue of the magazine has a different theme, and each author of the issue's pieces has their own interpretation of said theme. Thus, from among the all the issues, ten were considered for this dissertation:

Issue 1 - "Why did I become a *hikikomori*?: "Causes" as told by those involved"¹⁴

Issue 2 - "This is how I connected with people: People with *hikikomori* experience talk about "how to connect with others"¹⁵

Issue 3 - "*Hikikomori* and Love / Marriage"

Issue 4 - "*Hikikomori* and "Work": Is employment the goal?"

Issue 5 - "*Hikikomori* and Happiness"

Issue 6 - "*Hikikomori* and Fathers"

Issue 7 - "*Hikikomori* and Prejudice: Media, Image, Potential Criminals"

Issue 8 - "*Hikikomori* and Friends"

Issue 9 - "*Hikikomori* and Health"

(世界のひきこもり、*Hikikomori* of the world). These were not considered in this study, as this study only aims to analyze the narratives of Japanese *hikikomori* individuals.

¹³ The 13th issue was not considered for this study, as it was released after the entire process of translation and analysis of the previously selected issues. Furthermore, it was not believed that its inclusion would present new themes.

¹⁴ The Japanese term used for "those involved" is *tojisha* (当事者). The literal translation of the term would be "involved parties", as it is a legal term. However, *tojisha* has long been used to refer to discriminated people, such as *hikikomori* individuals. The use of the term is meant to indicate that the opinions or testimonies are being given by those who are self-proclaimed *hikikomori* individuals. This is meant to distinguish their views from non-*tojisha*, or ones who are not *hikikomori* individuals (Tomonari & Noboru, 2022).

¹⁵ The term used here is *keikensha* (経験者). Its literal meaning is "experienced people" or "those with a particular experience". In this context, it is meant to refer to people who have had experience being a *hikikomori* individual (Kaneko, 2006).

Each one of these issues has anywhere between 11 to 15 pieces, which tend to be articles of opinion, but also include *manga*, interviews, and poems. From the titles of the issues alone, it was clear that some issues focus more on specific topics, such as the case with issues 4 and 10 focusing on matters of employment and the importance of work in Japanese society. However, after conducting a deeper analysis of each issue’s index, it was found that articles across all issues shared similar subjects. Thus, it was decided that selecting issues to be translated and analyzed would be done independently of each issue's main theme. As the magazine is exclusively published in Japanese, and the precise contents of the issues were unclear, a large selection of pieces was made according to their relevance in answering each research question. In the end, a total of 48 pieces were selected.

2.3. Translation

After I attempted a first translation of the pieces¹⁶, I found that the writing style of each piece could vary from a more realistic, journalist-like approach to a more prosaic tone, which hindered my own ability to feel confident that the translation was being faithfully done. Thus, the translation work was executed by two professional translators fluent in Japanese. These translations were then revised and, at times, compared with the original to confirm that there were no mistakes in properly conveying the meaning of each piece. After reviewing each piece, it was decided that only 45 would be coded and included as part of the analysis.

2.4. Coding

¹⁶ As a student of Japanese language, I have an intermediate understanding of the language. Although this knowledge allows me to read newspapers and other neutral tone, factually based writing, prosaic tones and figures of speech are still challenging for me to confidently understand.

As per the thematic analysis methodology, a phase of coding was conducted, after the familiarization with the pieces of *Hikipos*. Coding is defined as a “process of identifying aspects of the data that relate to your research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2013:298). Despite having two researcher-driven questions, the decision was still made to conduct the first coding phase as a “complete coding” phase of the data. In other words, the articles were first analyzed, regardless of the initial research questions, to verify if any new themes could be derived from them that would prompt new research questions to be formulated. For the purpose of coding and further analysis, the software MAXQDA Analytics Pro was used, as it easily allowed for the organization of the analysis, as well as for adjustments that had to be made as the coding of the pieces proceeded.

After performing the “complete coding” phase, a third research question arose. Throughout the many pieces on the issues *hikikomori* individuals face, the authors discuss their strategies and thoughts on how they cope with their situation, how they deal with their relationships, and how they conciliate with Japanese society. This data-driven research question became: “How can *hikikomori* individuals conciliate in Japanese society?”. Although the discussion of the *hikikomori* issue tends to focus on understating its causes, few studies have analyzed the possibility and method of successfully reintegrating *hikikomori* individuals back into society. As the first two research questions still seemed relevant and appropriate to what was found in the data, they were kept. Thus, a third research objective was also put in place to answer the latest question: find out what paths to social inclusion are achievable for *hikikomori* individuals.

The first phase was then followed by a second of selective coding, where the codes themselves were made more succinct so that it would be easier to find patterns in the overall material. In this section, the aim was to refine the noted codes by analyzing all the patterns and organizing them into main themes to answer all three research questions. Further adjustments to the codes were made as the analysis was developed.

2.5. Organization into themes

Once both coding processes were completed, the codes were organized into candidate themes. Themes highlight important patterns in the analyzed data and represent “some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2013:324). As discussed by Braun and Clarke, these themes need to make sense independently from other themes and be correlated with them. In order to build this correlation, some themes encompass subthemes, as they were better suited to be placed under an overarching idea. Finally, all themes were divided into three overarching themes, which represent each of the three research questions.

From this process, all three chapters were organized. Each chapter was structured around selected excerpts from the magazine, which correspond to a specific theme and which are then intercalated with analysis based on existing literature. The excerpts always reference the original articles and author. Most articles are written by either current or former *hikikomori* individuals, with the exception of a few articles that are interviews with either family members of *hikikomori* individuals or of journalists who have covered the *hikikomori* issue. Despite the latter not being the original opinions of the authors, they were still considered relevant as the magazine editors chose to include them as part of their narrative. Although some excerpts will also contain information on the gender, approximate age of the authors, and whether or not they remain in social isolation, this is only done as the information is part of the article. Although some authors may be comfortable sharing more information about themselves, most use pseudonyms, as they do not wish to share personal details. Out of respect for said authors, only the information contained in the *Hikipos* magazine will be discussed.

The objective of the intercalated structure of excerpts and analysis was to weave a narrative that best illustrates the overall themes that are being discussed in *Hikipos*, while providing insight into whether the authors’ perspective can be scientifically sound. Chapter 1 focuses on discovering whether *hikikomori* individuals have a concrete definition of the *term* and the characteristics that are most associated with it. This chapter presents both the *hikikomori* individuals’ view on what the public perception of them is, as well as their self-perception. Chapter 2 then focuses on *hikikomori* individuals’ perception of the main factors that led to their isolation, considering whether these factors align with the existing literature. Chapter 3 discusses the authors' attempts to cope with their condition and their insertion into

society and compares them to existing literature on other subjects that may provide further insight into the validity of their opinions.

The overall thematic analysis allowed this study to intercalate each of the themes that were extracted from the data with existing literature, as this “avoids repetition between a results and discussion section”, (Braun & Clarke, 2013:368) and allowed for the further adjustment of themes as the analysis was developed.

Part III - Results and discussion

From the coding process that was conducted on the pieces of *Hikipos*, 472 codes were identified as being relevant to answering the three narrower research questions. These excerpts were collected from 45 pieces of the magazine. From these codes, 28 themes were identified and organized into three overarching, according to each of the research questions: 1) *Hikikomori*, as defined by *hikikomori* individuals; 2) The main factors leading to social isolation; 3) A place for *hikikomori* individuals in Japanese society. The hierarchy of themes, subthemes, and respective excerpts are represented in the table included as Annex A.

For clarity, the authors of the *Hikipos* magazine will be referred to as “authors”, while the authors of other relevant literary works will be referred to as either “scholars” or “researchers”, depending on their approach.

3.1. *Hikikomori*, as defined by *hikikomori* individuals

This theme reflects the authors' perspective as either current or former *hikikomori* individuals and explores the characteristics that can categorize someone as a *hikikomori* individual. In this sense, this theme describes the authors' understanding of others' perceptions of them, including the common tropes¹⁷, as well as the authors' perception of themselves.

¹⁷ A trope can be understood as “a convention or device that establishes a predictable or stereotypical representation of a character, setting, or scenario in a creative work.” (*Tropes and Memes*, 2023). In the case of *hikikomori*, this trope is presented both in fictional works, such as TV dramas, but also in news reports.

3.1.1. Public perception of *hikikomori*

This sub-theme includes what the authors of *Hikipos* believe to be the public perception of *hikikomori* individuals, according to their own experiences. The authors summarize their own perception of their public image through some of the terms most associated with the *hikikomori* stereotype:

““They’re spoiled”, “they’re lazy”, “they’re pitiful”, “we should avoid them”, “they’re potential criminals”... These negative opinions about *hikikomori* permeate society, and often times *hikikomori* themselves are the ones who are most aware of them.”

(From the article “*Hikikomori* and Prejudice: Media, Images and Potential Criminals”
by the *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

3.1.1.1. *Indulgence*

The notion that *hikikomori* individuals have indulgent behavior, such as “laziness”, is often referred to in literature, which acknowledges the term itself as a widespread adjective to describe a *hikikomori* individual’s condition as one of lethargy and comfort (Saito, 2013), selfishness (Dziesinski & Michael J., 2009) and avoidant of social pressures (Horiguchi, 2017). The authors further elaborate on this association between *hikikomori* individuals and laziness through the notion that *hikikomori* individuals have no ambition to pursue their interests

“It’s been twenty years since I was a shut-in, but compared to back then, I feel like I have a lot less prejudice towards *hikikomori* now. I also have depression, so I used to get told that “I had no ambitions” and people didn’t understand me at all.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until” by the *Hikipos* Editorial
Department)

Furthermore, the alleged incapability to leave the house is rather seen as an excuse to engage in leisure. There are many reported cases of *hikikomori* individuals engaging extensively in forms of indoor entertainment, just as literature has attested (Saito, 2013; Horiguchi, 2017):

“To outsiders, it may have appeared as if I was casually napping or playing games, seemingly at ease. However, without a job, there was no real rest. Internally, I was constantly driven by something, and I perpetually blamed myself.”

(From the article “Rush to Take It Slow: For *Hikikomori*, Play Should Take Priority Over Vocational Training” by Kikui Yashin)

Authors also referred to the notion of *hikikomori* individuals as being “spoiled” individuals, often related to their condition of being unemployed and financially supported by either their immediate family (usually the parents), sometimes until they reach middle age (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2014) or government-supported welfare programs (Kato et al., 2019), provided they meet the criteria for said programs¹⁸. This lack of financial independence is often a fact that the authors feel the need to keep hidden:

“(…) they criticized him behind his back, saying, “He says he’s poor, but he sure throws out a lot of trash. Maybe he actually owns a bunch of things?” Apparently, people were always criticizing him, no matter what he did.”

(From the article “Pretending to be a “normal person” / To connect with society while being a *hikikomori*” by Vosot Ikeida)

3.1.1.2. Inferior to other people

Some authors claim that *hikikomori* individuals are often thought of as inferior to others. For example, their characterization of being helpless¹⁹ to engage in any activity that may require them to leave the house, such as interacting socially with others or even recovering from their current social withdrawal predicament:

18 The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare provides three different disability certificates, one of which is the Mental disability health/welfare certificate (精神障がい者保険福祉手帳) (Rothrock, n.d.). This certificate can only be received if the subject has been seen by a psychiatrist and determined that their mental disabilities either limit or make it impossible to carry out their daily or social activities. Only by obtaining this certificate is it possible for Japanese citizen to apply for welfare pension fund (Getting A Mental Disability Certificate (Seishin Shogaisha Techo) In Japan, 2021 and Kikuchi, n.d.)

¹⁹ The term used by the author is *myōyoku de* (無力で) which translates to “being powerless” or “being helpless”. The literal translation of the characters would mean “the lack of strength”

“They asked me, “Can you go to work on time?” That person was actually very kind and I think they were only worried if I could adapt to the job, but all I could think was: “Even I can do that little.” (Man in his 30s)

(...) I told someone I used to be a *hikikomori* and now worked as a supporter for other *hikikomori*, but he didn't believe I'd ever been one. I had to tell him some people can recover from being a *hikikomori*. (Man in his 20s)”

(From the article “The Prejudices We've Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Literature on the subject tends to justify this helplessness by theorizing the influence of the Japanese culturally bound concept of *amae* (甘え)²⁰, described as a “specific kind of affectionate dependence one feels when in a subordinate position” (Saito, 2013:183). Ever since this concept was first used in psycho-analytic diagnosis (Doi, 1962), it has become more predominant in explaining *hikikomori* behavior (Saito, 2013; Dzieszinski & Michael J., 2009; Toivonen, 2012; Tateno et al., 2012). Namely, the possibility that this concept can explain a *hikikomori* individual's expectation to be indulged and dependent on others, usually their parents, as well as their parents' predisposition to excuse their child's behavior. However, despite this assumption, the authors never address this term or discuss any emotional dependence towards their parents or other figures of authority in their lives. Still, the authors admit that both scenarios of wanting or not wanting to be dependent exist within the *hikikomori* community:

“While there are those who want to return home, there is a need for methods to sustain one's independent living for those who don't wish to return. (Male, 30s)”

(From the article “Various Opinions on "Money" from *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

²⁰ The term originates from the verb *amaeru* (甘える) which can be translated to “to depend and presume upon another's benevolence”. In psychoanalysis, Doi conclude that the patients' neurotic symptoms of being overtly preoccupied over something (*toraware* / 囚われる) and of becoming hypersensitive towards their relationship with the therapist (*kodawaru* / 拘る) resulted from a unfulfilled desire of *amaeru* (Doi, 1962). The feeling of *amae* is then described as a “specific kind of affectionate dependence one feels when in a subordinate position” (Saito, 2013b), just as a child would feel towards their mother.

In a more drastic sense, the authors reported having heard derogatory comments about *hikikomori* individuals, characterizing them as “less than human” in some way. However, these comments were never directed at the authors themselves. Rather, the authors heard these comments, without others being aware that the authors were *hikikomori* individuals:

“Someone who didn’t know I was a *hikikomori* said to my face, “People who’ve been *hikikomori* for more than a decade aren’t human”. My only thought was that I’d only been a *hikikomori* for seven years, so I was still barely human. (Man in his 30s)

(...) When I told someone I was trying to build a place for *hikikomori*, they replied “*Hikikomori* are so despicable. They’re like cockroaches who show up at night.” When I told them I was a *hikikomori*, they didn’t go to that extent. (Woman in her 30s)”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

These derogatory comments, which are never directly targeted at a specific individual, but rather at the *hikikomori* image that has been formed in the public consciousness, are observed by some of the authors who are more active in social media:

“The hurtful words spouted without hesitation on the internet saw *hikikomori* as foreign objects, and they brimmed with fear and anger, desiring to expel *hikikomori* from society and cut them off entirely.”

(From the article “[Internalized prejudice] Tracing the Source of Prejudice” by Yurina)

Despite the author’s claim, in a study conducted on the tweet content and engagement of Japanese Twitter users about the topic of *hikikomori*, stigmatizing content was found to only constitute 3,42% of the overall engagement to the subject (Pereira-Sanchez et al., 2022). Still, the contribution of the propagation and trivialization of stigmas about mental is considered one of the main obstacles to the success of programs to improve mental health (Robinson et al., 2019; Sartorius, 2007).

The stigmatization of the *hikikomori* issue could also be attributed to literature on the subject. In fact, the term “*hikikomori*”, along with others such as *NEET* and *freeteer*, has often been the subject of scrutiny when analyzing Japan’s growing job insecurity, unemployment, stagnating income, low marriage rates, and birthrates (Rosa K. Kim, 2019). The

dehumanizing aspect can be seen as an extension of the discussion on *amae* (Saito, 2013), by using the coined term “parasite singles” to describe the parasitic existence of young unmarried singles and couples who still require their parents’ financial support in order to survive (Yamada, 2012). As some scholars see this phenomenon as the collapse of the traditional family structure in Japan, the threat of single-only households is regarded by them, as well as by the Japanese press, as one of the leading reasons for Japan’s social and economic struggles (Zielenziger, 2006).

3.1.1.3. Potential criminals

One of the two most commonly discussed associations with the term “*hikikomori*” is crime. The authors note how often the term “*hikikomori*” is used when describing the perpetrators of criminal acts:

“The first reports that came out after the incident in Noborito, Kawasaki City, in May 2019 included headlines that read “the criminal had *hikikomori* tendencies”.”²¹

(From the article “*Hikikomori* and Prejudice: Media, Images and Potential Criminals”
by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

The fact that *hikikomori* individuals have long been associated with criminal acts in the public consciousness, before the issue gained public awareness in terms of mental health, has been recognized by some scholars (Horiguchi, 2011; Bowker, 2016), which has formed the notion that *hikikomori* individuals are “potential criminals”, with violent and suicidal tendencies (Fong Yong & Kaneko, 2016). Although there were two highly mediatized cases, involving kidnappings that contributed to this criminal image (Rees, 2002), the authors also noted the use of other incidents, such as those of KyoAni²² and Nerima²³, reframed

²¹ This incident involved a serial stabbing in a bus stop in Kawasaki City, of Kanagawa Prefecture, which resulted in 18 injured and two dead. The perpetrator was 51-year-old Ryuichi Iwasaki, who committed suicide right after the attack by stabbing himself in the neck. Later, it was found that Iwasaki was unemployed and had been a *hikikomori* individual for many years (Eiraku, 2014).

²² This incident involved an attack by arson on one of the Kyoto Animation’s studios. The attack killed 36 people and injured another 33 (*Suspect in Deadly Arson Attack on Kyoto Animation Studio Arrested*, 2020). The arsonist was Shinji Aoba, 42, who claimed Kyoto Animations had plagiarized his novel, later received the death sentence, after pleading guilty. While there have been no claims that the perpetrator was a *hikikomori* individual, this incident has been heavily linked to that of the Kawasaki stabbings (Hong, 2019).

²³ This incident involved the stabbing of 44-year-old son Eiichiro Kumazawa, by his father, Hideaki Kumazawa, a 76-year-old former top bureaucrat for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Although the victim rather than the perpetrator was a *hikikomori* individual, this fact alone gathered much attention for being a main

hikikomori individuals in a criminal light, despite the perpetrator not being a *hikikomori* individual. This association is further exacerbated by the portrayal of *hikikomori* individuals on TV:

“The character showed up in a city at night and was yelled at “monster!” by several policemen, who then chased after him. At home, he wore a pair of white briefs that was half taken off and shut himself in a locked room. Inside, there was a huge pile of trash, leftovers on the floor and several cockroaches scurrying about. He was incredibly abusive and violent towards his family to the point of causing them to vomit blood, and at night he would rummage through the fridge for mayonnaise, which he ate whole. This was the kind of *hikikomori* that was portrayed in that television drama (...) during and after the broadcast of this drama, the channel would report on incidents that had taken place in which “the perpetrator was a *hikikomori*”. Twenty years have passed since then, but I think the image the media shaped about *hikikomori* still remains in people’s memories and hasn’t changed.”

(From the article “[A society that is unaware of its prejudice] On the Other Side of the Walls” by Suzuho Ozaki)

This portrayal not only underlines the previously discussed description of *hikikomori* individuals as somehow “less human” or “monstrous”, but also as inherently violent. Although most authors protest this stigma, one author maintains that “criminal tendencies” exist among *hikikomori* individuals, and that some use social withdrawal as an alternative to committing crime:

“Even in this magazine, *HIKIPOS*, many contributors have confessed that “they shut themselves in to stop themselves from committing crimes”. By shutting themselves in, they were saving other lives.”

(From the article “(Potential criminals) Two Voices in Disorder: The Aggressiveness within a *Hikikomori*” by Vosot Ikeida)

Despite this later claim, most scholars still agree that the number of *hikikomori* individuals who turn to crime is still small (Saito, 2013) and studies conducted by researchers, as well as the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, show that the percentage of *hikikomori*

factor in the entire incident (*Former Top Bureaucrat with Agriculture Ministry Accused of Fatally Stabbing Son*, 2019).

individuals that harbor violent tendencies, usually towards their parents, is somewhere between 17 and 18% (Horiguchi, 2011; Yong & Nomura, 2019).

Furthermore, Ishizaki, the editor-in-chief of *Hikipos*, emphasizes what he believes to be the danger in equating *hikikomori* individuals with crime, as he explains that the sensitive nature of *hikikomori* individuals, and the fact that they choose to withdraw instead of confronting others, contradicts the claims that they are prone to commit:

“It is not appropriate to equate *hikikomori* with crime, and this is one of the typical prejudices against social withdrawal. Of course, there may be cases in which long-term withdrawal leads to distorted thinking due to feelings of loneliness, frustration, jealousy, and so on. This is similar in some ways to the problem structure of incarceration in the West. However, it is seldom put into practice. Most *hikikomori* individuals are more sensitive and good-natured than others. When frustration builds up, they are unable to attack others and tend to attack themselves, which leads to withdrawal.”

(Excerpt from a written response provided by Ishizaki Moribito, present in Annex B)

3.1.1.4. “Mentally ill”

The second most common association with the term “*hikikomori*” is mental illness, which has often been used to identify and categorize *hikikomori* as a disability that escapes the person’s control:

“The news reports on the incident talked about why someone is categorized and simplified as a “*hikikomori*” or a “mentally disabled person”. And in all this, there is no space for the “individual” who is connected to a wide array of circumstances. Eventually, the incident will cease to be a topic and people will forget all about it. And the only thing that will remain is the “prejudiced look” towards those categories.”

(From the article “[A society that is unaware of its prejudice] On the Other Side of the Walls” by Suzuho Ozaki)

These reports are consistent with several studies indicating that the phenomenon of *hikikomori* either occurs within the context of psychiatric disorders or has some connection with psychiatric disorders (e.g. Bowker, 2016; Martinotti et al., 2021; Pozza et al., 2019; Silić et al., 2019; Tateno et al., 2012). Studies in the psychiatric field have since made that distinction between *hikikomori* individuals with a history of psychiatric disorders, known as

secondary *hikikomori*, and those without a history of said disorders, known as primary *hikikomori* (Frankova, 2019; Muris & Ollendick, 2023). However, there is still no definitively proven distinction between the two, or even the extent to which mental illnesses contribute to someone becoming a *hikikomori* individual (Muris & Ollendick, 2023).

Still, the danger in associating mental illness with the term *hikikomori* seems to come more from the overall prejudice that exists in Japanese society against mental illness. This seems to come from the misconception that mentally ill people lack behavioral self-control, which then requires the family to step in and attend to the needs of the mentally ill individual. Moreover, a sense of shame is associated with this perceived lack of self-control, which leads some individuals not to seek help, even if they are experiencing severe symptoms of mental illness (Desapriya & Nobutada, 2002). This misconception comes at the expense of the authors' self-image, as many reported having their own prejudices towards mental illness, and thus, realized what prejudices they were being subject to when finally admitting to having a mental illness themselves:

“By thinking that way, I tried more than ever to remain mentally healthy and gradually started drawing a line between “healthy people” and “victims”, almost without even realizing it. However, once I became mentally ill, that same prejudice turned against me. (...) the thought that I'd experience the very same attitude I'd shown them made me fearful of other people's eyes, and I started to despise the side of me that had upheld that prejudice.”

(From the article “[Internalized prejudice] Tracing the Source of Prejudice” by
Yurina)

According to a study focused on mental health-related stigma among Japanese people, the disparaging view that Japanese people have against the mentally ill seems to surpass that of neighboring countries, namely concerning schizophrenia and depression (Ando et al., 2013), two conditions often associated with *hikikomori* individuals. Many authors admitted that they have had, at one point or another, prejudices against *hikikomori* people, even after becoming *hikikomori* individuals themselves:

“When the word “*hikikomori*” comes up, what I imagine is someone in a room with the curtains closed, either sitting on the floor while hugging their knees or lying down in bed. Even after meeting other *hikikomori* at different events, that image hasn't changed.

It remains tightly associated to that word, like how we imagine red objects when we hear tomato.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Thus, it becomes clear that the authors have a negative view of their public portrayal, which negatively affects their own perception of their condition. To better understand what exactly could correctly characterize a *hikikomori* individual, it becomes crucial to go beyond their perception of the term “*hikikomori*” and analyze the characteristics that seem to be common among the experiences of the several authors, to better understand which characteristics become apparent from their descriptions.

3.1.2. Psychological characteristics of *hikikomori* individuals

This sub-theme refers to the most common characteristics of *hikikomori* individuals, according to the authors’ experiences. These characteristics were found to be most related to the authors' feelings through said experiences. These feelings were found to be similar to symptoms of anxiety disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and social anxiety disorder, as well as mood disorders, namely some form of depressive disorder.

3.1.2.1. Alienation from society

Firstly, some authors expressed a feeling of alienation between themselves and others, predominantly in a school environment during their teenage and university years:

“The feeling that my values and those of other people were fundamentally different made me think that I was a foreigner. I think Albert Camus experienced the same feeling when he titled his work “L’Étranger” [The Stranger].”

(From the article “My relationship with my mother became the basis for everything” by Vosot Ikeida)

As referenced by the author, *The Stranger* also explores the theme of alienation, as the protagonist’s morality collides against traditionally accepted social values, soliciting

alienation from his own society (Abdullah & Saksono, 2021)²⁴. Some studies agree with the fact that, rather than *hikikomori* individuals being the actors in their alienation, they are in fact the ones that are alienated from society, experiencing “a feeling of mismatch rather than simple disaffection” (Fong Yong & Kaneko, 2016).

Alienation also seems to occur associated with the abusive use of technology as a way of disconnecting from a painful reality:

“I was constantly driven by something, and I perpetually blamed myself. For me, games were not a form of entertainment; they were a means of escaping reality, like a tranquilizer, and certainly not enjoyable. Just as taking medication may bring relief but is not enjoyable in itself, continuously playing games was not enjoyable either.”

(From the article “Rush to Take It Slow: For *Hikikomori*, Play Should Take Priority Over Vocational Training” by Kikui Yashin)

Some studies have attested to the connection between internet, social media, and videogame addictions and the *hikikomori* issue (Tateno et al., 2019). Among these studies, a particular one established the connection between MMO ²⁵ games and *hikikomori* individuals, claiming that individuals who play these games are often motivated by the desire to interact with others and to escape from real-life distress (Stavropoulos et al., 2019)

Still, the reason for this feeling of alienation is itself a strange concept to grasp, even amongst the authors:

“The problem is, even if I looked back at my ancestors, there’s no two ways about the fact that I am ethnically Japanese, and the people around me did not see me as a foreigner.”

(From the article “My relationship with my mother became the basis for everything” by Vosot Ikeida)

²⁴ In the novel *The Stranger*, the author Albert Camus explores what he would later name the feeling of “absurdism”: the human tendency to try and find meaning in life colliding with the fact that the universe is purposeless and chaotic. The protagonist, Meursault, defies all accepted social and traditional conventions: not crying upon his mother’s death, his emotional detachment from his girlfriend, and committing homicide for no heartfelt reason. In the end, Meursault is judged not only for his crime but for his sense of morality as a whole (Abdullah & Saksono, 2021).

²⁵ MMO is an acronym for Massively Multiplayer Online games that are often played with other people, and that never have an end goal objective. In other words, they offer a world to inhabit and interact with others that is endless by design (Stavropoulos et al., 2019)

As pointed out by the author, the sense of alienation does not have an immediate and tangible reason. Despite this fact, scholars have attempted to find a reason for it, often attributing it to shifts in the cultural paradigm of Japanese society (Zielenziger, 2006) and to a multitude “of biological, psychological, and social factors.” (Horiguchi, 2011a). One author even attempted to equate this sense of “otherness”²⁶, by moving outside of Japan:

“By being reduced to an ethnicity they did not know [understand], my existence was accepted by them. Thus, my escape from Japanese society became not the “inside” of my room, but the “outside” of the country, and I spent my 20s as a *sotokomori*. (...) pi Spend about a month living in the same city and you’ll grow used to its routines, and the “privileges” of the foreigner start growing stale. (...) after only a few years, I fell into a deep depression once again, and this time around spent 4 years in a dark room as an *uchikomori*.”

(From the article “My relationship with my mother became the basis for everything”
by Vosot Ikeida)

The term *sotokomori* means to withdraw from Japan to another country and to live in said country for as long as possible (Mayumi, 2009). However, this does not necessarily mean that *sotokomori* individuals isolate themselves socially in other countries, like *hikikomori* individuals. Instead, *sotokomori* individuals often travel to countries with lower living costs and conduct either a lifestyle similar to a backpacker or stay in the same place for longer periods (Mayumi, 2009). The idea of removing *hikikomori* individuals from Japanese society, as a form of rehabilitation, has been previously suggested as a drastic measure for cases where *hikikomori* individuals express their anxiety over being judged by Japanese social norms (Rubinstein, 2016b). The author also uses the term *uchikomori* as synonymous with the common understanding of *hikikomori*: social withdrawal within one’s house or room (Vosot, 2018) . The only difference between *uchikomori* and *hikikomori*, is that the former highlights that the social withdrawal occurs in one’s own society or country (in this case, in Japan)²⁷. It is relevant to highlight how the author sees both behaviors,

²⁶ “Otherness” can be defined as “a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us,” the Self) constructs one or many dominated out groups (“Them,” the Other)” (Staszak, 2020:2). This construction occurs through the stigmatization of the difference of the out-group, which can be factual or fictional. The out-group is thus only consistent in the definition that was determined for it by the dominant in-group.

²⁷ In fact, it seems that the author chooses to use the terms *uchikomori* and *sotokomori* to denote two contrasting types of social withdrawal: social withdrawal within Japan; and social withdrawal outside Japan. To clarify,

uchikomori and *sotokomori*, as a response to the alienation he felt, specifically, in Japanese society:

“People who are not *hikikomori* are already valued simply for not being *hikikomori*. (...) This kind of acknowledgment, whose existence becomes as natural and obvious as air and water, means being valued. And this is what *hikikomori* lack.”

(From the article “(Potential criminals) Two Voices in Disorder: The Aggressiveness within a *Hikikomori*” by Vosot Ikeida)

The author thus argues that it is not *hikikomori* individuals who are at fault for not fitting into Japanese society. Rather, it is Japanese society that does not acknowledge the value that *hikikomori* individuals may have. This argument contradicts the current rhetoric regarding the *hikikomori* issue, which normally emphasizes measures on how the *hikikomori* individual, and their families, can reintegrate society (Saito, 2013; Matsuguma & Niemiec, 2021).

Regardless, the authors expand on their experiences of being alienated as being unable to engage and maintain social relations with other Japanese people, as early as high school:

“I became acutely aware of my lack of belonging to any group in the class, which dealt a severe blow to my self-esteem. (...) Even if I managed to withstand the scrutiny and lingered on the periphery of a group, if the next class involved changing rooms, the members of that group might not invite me to join them, leaving me abandoned and vulnerable to another round of emotional distress.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese Masaki)

Researchers have found that *hikikomori* individuals have a fear of adverse social environments, as they might result in rejection, leading to the aforementioned “emotional distress”, as it challenges their sense of belonging (B. Lu, 2014). In the authors’ experience, this inability to adapt to their surrounding social environment seldom changes and, in fact,

the character used for the *uchi* of *uchikomori* is 内, which means “inside”, while the character for the *soto* of *sotokomori* is 外, which means “outside”.

seems to aggravate over time and manifests itself in the authors' inability to adapt to a workplace environment as well:

“I became a recluse after graduating from high school, and after working as a part-time and a full-time employee for a while, I became lightly reclusive again.

(...) by the time I turned twenty-five, I had developed a pattern of working for two to three years, followed by *hikikomori* due to adjustment disorder.”

(From the article “A Father's View of Women Affects His Daughter's Life” by Yuki)

Still, studies have suggested “that having an introverted personality plays a crucial role in a person becoming *hikikomori*.” (Bonnaire & Roignot, 2023:743), thus affirming that personality, rather than communication ability, could be a better indication of whether the subject may be able to communicate and interact within their social environment.

Some researchers believe that the social impairment, along with the authors' feelings of alienation, can be linked to symptoms of anxiety disorders, such as social anxiety disorder (Frankova, 2019). An earlier study has given some validity to these claims, as from 141 social anxiety disorder patients, 27 were found to also fit the criteria as *hikikomori* individuals (T. Nagata et al., 2013). The study also found that, among those symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder were more common in *hikikomori* patients. From this data alone, it is not clear whether these symptoms cause social withdrawal, or vice-versa. What becomes clear is that *hikikomori* individuals can exhibit symptoms from more than one psychological pattern, as many of the authors have symptoms of social anxiety, while claiming that these symptoms originated from their abuse at home, school or work (as further explored in Chapter 2).

As a consequence of the social difficulties the authors face, the predisposition towards isolation appears to be pervasive among *hikikomori* individuals, not as an indulgent behavior, as is their public perception, but more as a way to avoid the fear of judgment (Zielenziger, 2006).

Even for authors who were able to connect with others in their environment, some still express some distress in losing their composure:

“In my case, a single session of “studying abroad” corresponds to one day. If I spend any longer than that interacting with “normal people”, I start feeling anomalies in my mind and body, and I fear I might start saying things I shouldn’t.”

(From the article “Pretending to be a “normal person” / To connect with society while being a *hikikomori*” by Vosot Ikeida)

By using “studying abroad” as an analogy for leaving their room and interacting with others in society, the author recalls the aforementioned idea of “otherness”:

“Even when I am able to enjoy conversation with others, I am still unable to lose my politeness, and I lose sight of when it is time to be open with others. Unable to treat people honestly, they always try hard to make themselves look good. I don't know how to take advantage of others, and I become relentlessly stubborn and finally retreat into my shell.”

(From the article “An Indifferent Father Who Never Shows Weakness” by Yurina)

In this passage, the author underlines an inability to “make themselves look good” and “to lose my politeness”, as opposed to the others around them. The capability of creating a personality distinct from one’s true feelings, for the sole purpose of functioning in society, has long been a topic of discussion among scholars of Japanese culture. This distinction was first discussed as Doi’s two-fold structure of consciousness (Doi, 1973) and has long been tackled as the symbiotic concepts of *honne* (本音), or one’s true feelings, and *tatemae* (建前), the persona that is presented in most social contexts. The concept of *tatemae* is seen as a social construct necessary to navigate adult life. The ability to understand a social situation and know which persona is appropriate, between *honne* and *tatemae*, becomes a growing pain for Japanese children, some of whom suffer from failing in this regard (Doi, 1973; Naito & Gielen, 1992). Ishizaki emphasizes how the dichotomy of *honne/tatemae*, despite being present throughout Japanese society, is especially challenging for *hikikomori* individuals due to the negative image associated with the term “*hikikomori*”:

“Not only *hikikomori* individuals, but many people may put on a “mask” in their social lives. In Japanese society, in particular, there is a tendency to value *tatemae*, and many people may be troubled by the gap between their real intentions (*honne*) and *tatemae*. However, I feel that in the case of *hikikomori* individuals, the conflict tends to be more

serious because one has to hide the fact that he or she is a *hikikomori* individual. If you cannot talk about your true self at all, and can only have conversations appropriate to the situation, it is as if you are playing the role of a “stranger.””

(Excerpt from a written response provided by Ishizaki Moribito, present in Annex B)

Some therapists have claimed that *hikikomori* individuals’ “unwillingness” to employ *tatemae* as a means of facilitating communication only contributes to their isolation (Zielenziger, 2006). Although many authors discuss the hurdles, they had to face in order to communicate with others, these tend to be more closely associated with *honne*, than with *tatemae*:

“I couldn't even explain my true feelings. Before I feared being pointed out by others, I couldn't even articulate my true emotions within my own inner thoughts. Expressing something like "I haven't made a single friend in high school" in a lengthy statement was nothing more than a pipe dream. Just thinking about basic words like "school," "classroom," and "group" was painful.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese Masaki)

Thus, an undeveloped articulation of one’s own emotions is often described by the authors as one of their main sources of anguish. This impairment of articulating emotional expression can be related to mental issues, as some studies explain that alexithymia²⁸ can cause sufferers of anxiety and depression to have “great difficulty with regulating and resolving negative affect” (Hogeveen & Grafman, 2021).

On the other hand, the authors also express their view that social interactions occur on a necessary and effort-inducing falsehood, in order to mask their own feelings of alienation:

“Meeting someone else means playing a role and assuming a personality that won’t be seen as “weird” by the other person.”

(From the article “My relationship with my mother became the basis for everything” by Vosot Ikeida)

²⁸ Alexithymia is defined as the impaired ability to be aware of, explicitly identify, and describe one’s feelings . It manifests as a tendency to focus on superficial information and avoid internal, affect-related thoughts or difficulty identifying and describing feelings (Hogeveen & Grafman, 2021)

“I pretended to be someone who didn't care about expanding their social circle, someone who possessed the "civilization" of not needing a network of friends. I did this to hide my true feelings of loneliness at school, fearing that others would notice my vulnerability.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese Masaki)

This necessity for a pretense to fit into their surroundings extends beyond the individual, as the family, knowing the subject's condition as a *hikikomori* individual, also participates and incentivizes the pretense, so as to not feel scrutinized from outside the family:

“Normally my family alienates me, but when we have to meet up for things like memorial services, they force me to play the role of caring uncle. It’s the only time they do so.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

“Us (family) sitting together around the table became a mere formality, a simple representation of our minimal form of interaction.”

(From the article ““Go to school”: everyone was tied down by this rule” by Kikui Yashin)

As described by the authors, *tatemaie* appears to be adopted by them, and their families, to compulsively suppress the authors' feelings and condition, and conform to a specific social role (that of not needing friends, or of caring uncle) (Hattori, 2013). Because *hikikomori* individuals try to hide their situation from their families, and their families proceed to hide it from their surrounding social context, the links between all three realms (the individual, the family, and society) become severed. Consequently, *hikikomori* individuals and their families keep repeating the same behavior. The separation of these three realms, and its resulting vicious cycle, is what Saito originally dubbed the *hikikomori* system, as opposed to a healthy system that has all three realms in contact with one another (Saito, 2013).

3.1.2.2. Consequences of self-denial

The authors' pretense, as has been noted across many articles of the magazine, results in self-denial:

“For starters, since I could never feel relaxed as a child, the only way I could sustain myself [preserve my sense of self] was by suppressing such feelings. In order to feel “fine” in an environment where there is no peace of mind to be had, we have no option but to suppress the feelings that make us want to seek such peace of mind in the first place.”

(From the article “Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others” by
Ishizaki Moribito)

A study conducted on 35 psychological patients, considered *hikikomori* individuals, has shown that the fear of rejection, criticism, and being disliked results in *hikikomori* individuals suppressing their authentic feelings which, over time, leads to an overall lack of self-expression (Hattori, 2013). Some authors believe that the active role of self-denial affects the development of their identity:

“Plus, due to carrying that sense of self-denial, I was unable to develop my “identity”. This “identity” is the power to value one’s feelings and to make choices in society that are comfortable for us. In other words, it means to lead a life that is favorable to us and to the people who matter to us. People who are mentally healthy may think this is an obvious thing that should go without saying, but when we have feelings of self-denial, we become unable to put it into practice.”

(From the article “Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others” by
Ishizaki Moribito)

As claimed by the author, the literature on the *hikikomori* issue also examines the issue through the lens of identity formation. Considering Erikson’s description of identity formation (Erikson, 1968) as actively selecting which role expectations one most identifies with, the act of self-denial in order to fit a social role different than the one a given subject identifies with, means to create a discrepancy between what the subject’s self-image and the image that is presented to others. Thus, an identity crisis ensues between the self-image of the *hikikomori* subject and the image that society perceives (Sekimizu, 2022). Although *hikikomori* individuals present this “social image” in order to protect themselves from the

scrutiny of others, they also deeply yearn for the understanding for acceptance and understanding from others, on deeper level (Horiguchi, 2017):

“If I’d had people who understood me from the very beginning, I think I could’ve avoided having those prejudices altogether; but once I accepted society’s prejudices as they were, I stopped being able to do anything.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Additionally, the authors wished to avoid the feeling of shame that occurs with being associated with the derogatory portrayal of *hikikomori* individuals:

“I couldn't help but wonder why she would bother being with someone like me, whom she considered a *NEET* (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), but I couldn't bring myself to reveal that I had also been a *hikikomori* from high school onwards.”

(From the article “If I Could Become a Full-Time Employee... Memories of Leaving *Hikikomori* Behind and 'Her'” by Toshi)

The distinction between *NEET* and *hikikomori* individuals is already well established both by Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, as well as by academia (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015). However, it is relevant to highlight that, in the author’s view, being a *hikikomori* individual is more shameful than being a *NEET*, likely because it tends to be more associated with depressive tendencies, such as anhedonia²⁹ (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015), which appears to support the author’s statement.

Aside from shame, a feeling of guilt also informs their strenuous emotional state, mainly towards failing to meet an expectation of either regularly attending school, or being employed:

“In my mind, their words transformed into a relentless tirade about how I was living a comfortable, lazy life without working, while everyone else endured tough jobs early in the morning. And that if I ever had to work, I would be too weak to endure it.”

(From the article “How I Rose from the Depths of Misfortune” by Ishizaki Moribito)

²⁹ Anhedonia refers to the reduced ability to experience pleasure, and is considered as a core feature of major depressive disorder (Gorwood, 2008).

Scholars have also found that the guilt felt from this perceived failure to live up to the expectations of others results in anxiety, as *hikikomori* individuals, to some degree, still wish to conform “to the majority life course” (Sekimizu, 2022:205). Thus, the suppression of the authors’ identities, coupled with feelings of shame and guilt, leads to self-depreciation and a feeling of worthlessness. A burden that is then carried daily:

“I wondered if someone like me deserved to live. As I heard the sound of his dry leather shoes fading away, I cursed myself repeatedly, calling myself a useless scumbag.”

(From the article “How I Rose from the Depths of Misfortune” by Ishizaki Moribito)

These feelings, in turn, lead to the denial of others as well, manifested through a sense of fear and mistrust towards others:

“I can't help but think that even my mother or friends, who have been close for decades, would abandon me if the right circumstances arose. I don't feel any sense of security. Sure, spending time with friends can be fun. But deep down inside, there's this lingering 'fear' that I can't shake.”

(From the article “Friends Are Scary Deep Down” by Usamin Minato)

As some of the authors recall the state of despair they found themselves in, they retell their experiences of self-harm and even suicide as a means of escape from this anguish:

“It was a period of unending despair, to the point where I felt an overwhelming desire for suicide.”

(From the article “How I Rose from the Depths of Misfortune” by Ishizaki Moribito)

Although it has long been discussed that *hikikomori* could be distinct from any DSM disorders³⁰, namely depression (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015), studies still attest to the authors’ claims of depressive and anxious conditions associated with their experience as *hikikomori* individuals, as attested by a study that ascertained that 54,5% of its *hikikomori* participants had experienced some form of psychiatric disorder (be it mood, anxiety, impulse

³⁰ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, also known as the “DSM,” is a reference book on mental health and brain-related conditions and disorders which is published by The American Psychiatric Association (APA). This manual is intended help clinicians and researchers define and classify mental disorders, which can improve diagnoses, treatment, and research.

control, or substance-related), and that, from the total of its participants, *hikikomori* individuals had a 6.1 times higher risk of also having a mood disorder (Koyama et al., 2010). Researchers have also found that self-blaming emotions, such as feelings of shame and guilt, are often seen in depressive individuals (Pulcu et al., 2013), which gives some credit to the claim that *hikikomori* individuals, aside from anxiety-related symptoms, may also experience symptoms common in depressive disorders.

Thus, the main characteristics demonstrated and discussed by the authors seem to be interdependent and linked to their physical state of withdrawal (Horiguchi, 2017). The sense of alienation is exhibited in both their inability to foster interpersonal relationships, as well as to adapt to their environment. As a result, the authors admit to resorting to pretense to try and fit in, despite denying their own feelings. The consequence of this self-denial, coupled with feelings of guilt and shame from being unable to maintain their pretense successfully, or from their strong sense of failure and inadequacy to lead “normal” lives (Iwakabe, 2021) exacerbates their poor mental state, leading to anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide. In this instance, social withdrawal presents itself as another alternative:

“Despite appearing strong on the surface, the private me, hidden behind the mask, suffered deeply. I witnessed the exclusion I felt every day during lunch breaks when my classmates gathered in close-knit groups, or during physical education classes when they formed pairs and called out to each other (...) As I embarked on new social endeavors like attending university or entering the workforce, I no longer had the strength to endure the sense of isolation.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese Masaki)

3.1.3. *Hikikomori*: A "visible" and clearly defined situation?

After discussing the interconnected psychological characteristics of *hikikomori* individuals, this sub-theme focuses on understanding whether it is possible to define what constitutes a *hikikomori* individual clearly. Although the term *hikikomori* was first coined to describe socially withdrawn men in their late twenties, with no other psychological problem as its source (Saito, 2013), it has since been used to describe “the mentally ill; those with

friends but without jobs as well as those with jobs but without friends; and those that on some level seem to possess a reclusive side to their character” (Horiguchi, 2012:132). In fact, taking the information provided by *Hikipos* authors, we are able to verify *hikikomori* individuals from their 20s to their 50s, and that are either male, female or X-gender³¹. Furthermore, the fact that one is a *hikikomori* individual may go completely unrecognized in cases where the subject works intermittently between periods of social withdrawal:

“For a long time, I didn't consider myself a "*hikikomori*," which meant I had no connection to people within the *hikikomori* community. Therefore, my understanding of *hikikomori* was just as biased as that of the general public. I thought of "*hikikomori*" as someone who was entirely unable to leave their home and participate in social life. Subsequently, I was fortunate enough to discover support groups for people with developmental disorders and "places" for *hikikomori* individuals. (...) This is how I came to realize, at the age of over 50, that I was a genuine "*hikikomori*."

(From the article “Working to Resolve, or Not” by Medium)

This experience not only confirms how the image of *hikikomori* individuals is erroneously formed in the public eye (as discussed in sub-chapter 1.1), in which an individual that does not adhere to the sole condition of continuous social isolation may not be recognized as a *hikikomori* individual, despite sharing many of the main characteristics that have been discussed thus far (Horiguchi, 2012; Hattori, 2013). As one author expresses:

“According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *hikikomori* refers to the condition where “one does not go to work or school, barely has connections to people except their family and shuts themselves in their house for longer than six months.” This definition is used in official surveys on *hikikomori* and is split between the narrow sense of *hikikomori*, and the broad sense of *hikikomori* (semi-*hikikomori*).”

(From the article “What does *hikikomori* mean to you? “*Hikikomori*” is actually a word with many definitions” by Kikui Yashin)

As the author later notes, if the definition of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare is taken in a strict sense, then people such as teleworkers, housewives, and househusbands

³¹ One of the authors identifies themselves as X-gender or, more specifically, FtX (female to X-gender). X-gender is a denomination, only used in Japan, for those who identify themselves as a non-binary unspecified gender, akin to how the term “queer” is used in Western society (Dale, 2012).

could also be described as *hikikomori* individuals, as they mostly stay indoors and may lead socially limited lifestyles. However, people who conduct these lifestyles are likely to be excluded from surveys and studies, precisely because they do not share many of the psycho-social characteristics associated with the phenomenon of *hikikomori*. This often hinders their effort to receive publicly funded assistance, or even to feel comfortable in seeking any form of treatment (as will be discussed in Chapter 2).

On the other hand, even considering the “narrower sense” of the *hikikomori* issue, of those who are completely cut off from social interaction, there can still be some nuance, especially when discerning what type of outing is tolerable for each *hikikomori* individual. Considering the five levels of *hikikomori* proposed by sociologist Sekimizu (2022), one author notes:

“According to this book, *hikikomori* in Level 5 correspond to about 3% of all *hikikomori*. We also now know that there are many women and middle-aged/elderly who are *hikikomori*, and that one can still be a *hikikomori* even if they are active in the outside world.”

(From the article “What does *hikikomori* mean to you? “*Hikikomori*” is actually a word with many definitions” by Kikui Yashin)

In the context of Sekimizu’s book (2022), level 5 is the most severe, accounting for subjects who are incapable of leaving their own room. Still, an additional 17% of the subjects who were considered in this study, conducted by the KHJ National Association of Families with *hikikomori* individuals, are unable to leave the house, either feeling able to move freely within their homes, or only in specific areas of the house. Outside these 20%, this study estimates about 60% of *hikikomori* individuals who can leave the house in varying degrees which, as the author suggests, might account for the women and elderly, but who at times are not considered as *hikikomori* individuals in a “broader sense”. However, this classification is highly subjective, even for the authors, as expressed by the editor-in-chief Ishizaki, when asked whether he views himself now as a *hikikomori* individual:

“I don't know the time frame of this question, so I don't know if I can answer it adequately, but I don't consider myself a recluse now, at least not since it happened in the past. (You had a drink last night and were a drunk, why don't you consider yourself a drunk now?)”

(Excerpt from a written response provided by Ishizaki Moribito, present in Annex B)

Furthermore, if we consider the ethnology of the term *hikikomoru* (引きこもる), which is the verb tense equivalent of the noun *hikikomori*, it can not only mean to “withdraw socially” but also to “stay inside/indoors”. The authors note this particular usage in social media:

“(…) if we search *hikikomori* on social media platforms, we’ll see many dressed up [fashionable] youngsters using this word with zero seriousness in sentences like “Well, ‘cause I’m a *hikikomori*…” and “I was a *hikikomori* last weekend!” In these cases, *hikikomori* just means “someone who likes to stay indoors”. And because the word *hikikomoru* exists [which is connected to it and has many different meanings itself], its meanings are endless.”

(From the article “What does *hikikomori* mean to you? “*Hikikomori*” is actually a word with many definitions” by Kikui Yashin)

Some authors also noted the select usage of characteristics associated with “*hikikomori*”, to describe fictional characters as such:

“We should also look at some examples of broad definitions of *hikikomori*. In the descriptions of many light novels and light reads, the protagonist is described as a *hikikomori*. However, when we check their content, we find that in most cases it’s just because the character has few friends.”

(From the article “What does *hikikomori* mean to you? “*Hikikomori*” is actually a word with many definitions” by Kikui Yashin)

This usage has been discussed by many that considered the *hikikomori* troupe, either in anime (Della Chiara, 2023), manga (Heinze & Thomas, 2014) or light novels (B. Lu, 2014). This troupe is specially used in the *isekai*³² genre of popular media to describe a character as an outsider of their own world, who tends to be either the victim of bullying, a videogame addict but, almost always, someone with no social life, although not necessarily

³² The term *isekai* (異世界), literally meaning a “different world”, is a staple genre in Japanese anime, manga and light novels, and always involves a disillusioned protagonist being transported from their world (that of modern-day Japan) to another world which operates by different rules. These “different worlds” often involve fantastical, other-worldly, and videogame-like elements, usually related to the protagonist’s desires (C. Lu, 2020)

with no social skills (C. Lu, 2020). Such is the troupe that the authors find lacking in terms of explaining the complexities of the *hikikomori* issue.

Another author points out an important distinction as to how *hikikomori* is not standardly regarded as a psychological disorder:

“Because if it were a medical term, like the ones ending with the suffix “-*sho*”, it would likely only be talked about from the point of view of social issues.”

(From the article “What does *hikikomori* mean to you? “*Hikikomori*” is actually a word with many definitions” by Kikui Yashin)

The termination *-sho* (症) is often used to distinguish several disorders, including some more related to mental health, such as autism (自閉症), severe depression (憂鬱症) or dementia (認知症). Although many studies have regarded “*hikikomori*” as social withdrawal syndrome (Malagón-Amor et al., 2020; Tateno et al., 2012a) or *hikikomori* syndrome (Pozza et al., 2019) The fact is that even *hikikomori* individuals such as the authors of *Hikipos* do not perceive their condition as such. The debate on whether *hikikomori* is a disorder is still highly contested by some studies (Tateno et al., 2012b), and has yet to find a consensus among the academic community. Still, most authors emphasize their misunderstanding of what constitutes a “*hikikomori* situation”, given the fact that they shared the same perception as the general public:

“My understanding of *hikikomori* was just as biased as that of the general public. I thought of “*hikikomori*” as someone who was entirely unable to leave their home and participate in social life.”

(From the article “Working to Resolve, or Not” by Medium)

Thus, the measures that some authors have taken to try and escape the took to escape said situation, as they first perceived it, did little to soothe their inner turmoil:

“I went from being a shut-in to a housewife, but the fundamental pain in my life hasn't changed much. I still struggle and find life difficult, carrying these indescribable emotions with me.”

(From the article “What Happens When a *Hikikomori* Gets Married” by Nekota
Yoshiko)

“Once one gets a job, *hikikomori* will end.” This perception probably arises because people perceive *hikikomori* as a visible 'situation.’”

(From the article “The Perils of Working with Self-Doubt” by Yurina)

Thus, given the fluidity of the definition of “*hikikomori*”, most authors expand less of their attention on how *hikikomori* is defined, than on understanding the leading factors that cause this behavior in the first place, as they believe that only by grasping the cause is it possible to work towards a solution:

“If we don't look at the suffering and pain experienced by the person from the aspect of "mental state" and the underlying reasons that led to their reclusive state, there may never be a true ending for the individual, their family, or society.”

(From the article “The Perils of Working with Self-Doubt” by Yurina)

With this chapter on “*Hikikomori*, as defined by *hikikomori* individuals”, it was found that the public image of *hikikomori* individuals, as the author perceived, is mostly negative and based on misleading stereotypes. These stereotypes seem to be based on the assumption that *hikikomori* individuals are indulgent, potentially criminal, and inferior to other Japanese citizens. Although the claim that *hikikomori* individuals are mentally ill is somewhat supported by literature on the subject, as well as by the authors of *Hikipos*, the fact that there is a misguided stigma against mentally ill people as well is also prejudicial to the image of *hikikomori* individuals.

As for the psychological characteristics that the authors themselves revealed, these are comparable to symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders, which may give credit to the claim of *hikikomori* being considered a psychopathology. However, the author's insight also provided an articulation between these characteristics, showing how they are interconnected and how they result in social withdrawal: A feeling of alienation from their inability to foster interpersonal relationships, as well as to adapt to their environment, leads to their self-denial. Although some authors have still tried to fit in, these feelings of self-denial are exacerbated by feelings of guilt and shame, resulting in a worsening mental state. Eventually, the symptoms of anxiety and depression become so dominant in the authors'

lives, that withdrawing from society is regarded as their only resource for survival. This narrative is elucidating in the way that it presents itself outside of the norms of psychiatric examination, while still explaining the authors' mental and emotional state.

As for the definition of the term, itself, *hikikomori* individuals admit to the difficulty of this task, as they also have had misconceptions about their own condition. However, it is clear that the currently established designation of “not leaving the house for more than six months” is not applicable to the plurality of experiences that the authors speak of. As with the authors' claims, it is deemed necessary to understand the factors that drive the feelings of inadequacy that the authors speak of, in order to achieve a clearer understanding of the *hikikomori* issue.

3.2. Factors that contribute to social withdrawal

With this theme, the aim is to collect the testimonies of the authors and assess, from their experiences, the main factors that contributed to their decision to isolate themselves socially and to remain isolated.

3.2.1. Factors in school, home and work that predicate *hikikomori* behavior

This sub-theme addresses what the authors of *Hikipos* describe of their environment, before becoming *hikikomori* individuals. These environments are all considered by the authors to be extremely stress-inducing and are considered, by them, as different forms of abuse.

3.2.1.1. Culturally supported bullying

One such example of abuse is bullying during junior high and high school:

“I stopped attending school due to the bullying I suffered during my middle school years and wasn’t able to go to high school, either. I shut myself in for more than 10 years and became a *hikikomori*.”

(From the article “Endless “bullying” and the darkness of the countryside [rural areas]” by Toshi)

The recounting made by the author is not uncommon in Japan. According to Zielenziger (2006), in 1996, roughly 1.65% of students were found to have skipped thirty days or more of school to avoid bullying, which increased to 2% in 2005, for students who refused to go to school entirely. The authors often recount their experience of school refusal,

also known as *futoukou*³³, due to their growing mistrust of other people, which they regard as potential bullies. This effect lingers on and leaves them scared until adulthood:

“The perception of the outside as a scary place and the fear that “They [my bullies] are watching me!”, even though they’d gone off to college and found jobs, was as fresh as ever.”

(From the article “Endless “bullying” and the darkness of the countryside [rural areas]” by Toshi)

As some scholars discuss Japanese society as one where group acceptance is particularly pivotal, given the principles of interpersonal harmony and rule compliance that are taught to children, bullying can be seen as a rejection of the victim from their peers (Guo, 2022). In this light, some scholars tend to distinguish bullying from *ijime*, its Japanese counterpart, as they find that *ijime* is more an act of social manipulation, from a group targeting one or more “weaker” peers, thus assigning its particularity to the collectivistic nature of Japanese society and its educational values of social cohesion and “harmony” (Naito & Gielen, 2005)³⁴. Another aspect of *ijime* is the complacency of figures of authority within the educational system, as described by some authors:

“In elementary school, I was often the target of relentless bullying, and the teachers would tell me, “Since they're your friends, you should get along with them.” (...) Every time I heard that, I couldn't help but think, “That should be said to the bullies” and even more so, I couldn't accept the reasoning that “classmates are friends unconditionally”. I can't count how many times I was on the verge of saying, “Just because we're in the same cage, it doesn't mean we're “friends.””

(From the article “Do We Really Need Friends?” by Medium)

³³ *Futoukou* (不登校) refers to the act of not attending school, whereas *futoukouji* (不登校児) refers to the actual student who does not attend school. Despite this, in English-written literature on the subject still uses *futoukou* to refer to the students themselves.

³⁴ Naito and Gielen elaborate on forms of *ijime* (虐め) by such as name-calling, relentless teasing, talking behind one’s back, shunning, and other forms of social isolation. Although cases of physical abuse are still considered *ijime*, particularly amongst young boys, it is the social exclusion factor that assigns *ijime* its specificity. Whereas boys are still more apt to engage in physical kinds of bullying, Japanese girls were found to be more likely to engage in psychological acts of *Ijime*. Girls were also found to be more prone of group bullying, of nine or ten people, towards other girls (Naito & Gielen, 2005).

Although there are many cases of *ijime* where the victim chooses not to report the act, either due to fear of retaliation or to not impose on others, for those who do report them, teachers are known to be dismissive, to encourage the victim to endure the abuse or to highly incentivize a compromise with the victim, rather than the aggressor, as the author reports (Naito & Gielen, 2005). The same can also be said of parents:

“I told my parents and the school about it while crying, but no one did anything.”

(From the article “Endless “bullying” and the darkness of the countryside [rural areas]” by Toshi)

As the author claims, children who report to their parents that they are being victims of *ijime* are often dismissed, as the parents do not want to be known that their child is being abused (Naito & Gielen, 2005). To explain the dismissive attitude of parents and teachers, some scholars have proposed that they either for children to be able to resolve their issues on their own (Rosa K. Kim, 2019), or that parents and teachers do not wish to disrupt the harmony of the *status quo*. Thus, most scholars interpret the complacency towards *ijime* as culturally bound behavior, given the importance of the concept of harmony in Japanese society³⁵. However, this harmony is only true in the sense of how it is perceived. Although *ijime* could be regarded as a possible disruption to social cohesion, the attitude towards it is not to acknowledge it, as it could present the image of a disharmonious society. In this sense, interpersonal harmony has been shown to be more important than hierarchy or conservatism to Japanese people (Zhang et al., 2005). As Japanese harmony tends to be inclined toward conformity (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2014), children are expected to comply with the pretense of a harmonious social life, or in other words, to be a “good child” (*iiko* / 良い子).

35 The Japanese character for “harmony”, or *wa* (和) has a plurality of meanings, depending on the context of its use. It can range from meaning “maintaining good relations”, or “the sum of all parts”, to even the specificity of Japanese rooms / *wa shitsu* (和室),, clothes / *wa fuku* (和服), or food / *wa shiyoku* (和食). The application of *wa* denotes how intrinsic the concept is to Japanese spirituality and social conduct. The concept of *wa* is both native to Japan, within Shintoism, and heavily influenced by Confucian principles of social harmony, loyalty and filial piety (Konishi et al., 2009).

“I wanted them to understand that the “the good son they can be proud of, who went to a good school and has a good job” is no longer to be found: I threw it away in a last ditch effort.”

(From the article “Endless “bullying” and the darkness of the countryside [rural areas]” by Toshi)

The term “good child” thus applies to children who behave according to what is expected of them, which entails suppressing their emotions to be more aggregable and convenient to others, namely adults (Katsumata, 2014). Researchers have since found that children who behave as “good children” are more prone to suffer from some form of anxiety and or depressive disorder, which can easily lead to school refusal and the children becoming *hikikomori* individuals (Sarkar, 2020).

Children who are dismissed by authority figures, both at home and in school, begin to distrust not only their peers and “superiors”, but also the hierarchical system that they recognize to be at the root of the issue. Thus, they often complain about how excluding the school system in Japan is, and how it should be reformed to accommodate the students who are either being abused or who are skipping school (Concina et al., 2024).

3.2.1.2. Forms of abuse at the workplace

Same as with schools. the abusive environment at the workplace is also common in the authors’ testimonies, as it also seems linked to cultural values:

“I tried my best to adapt to my workplace, but I wound up developing a mental disorder due to all the stress of being yelled at and taking too long to become a permanent employee.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

In the case of corporate Japan, abuse takes the form of power harassment, or *pawa hara* (パワハラ), and is defined as a behavior that worsens the work environment and causes repeated mental or physical harm to a person in a “weaker social or organizational position” (Hsiao, 2015:185). The traits of *pawa hara* are quite like those of *ijime*, including the shunning from groups of peers when ordered by a superior to do so. This behavior is

predicated on the hierarchical structure that is valued in Japanese society, only second to harmony (Zhang et al., 2005). As such, bullying in the workplace is often seen as part of the training process, from the superior to the junior, to quickly ensure that the meticulous and perfectionist expectation of Japanese work is met (Katsumata, 2014). These stressful conditions, much like *ijime*, are known to lead to mental illness and suicide (Hsiao, 2015).

Although this dissertation has, thus far, refrained from discriminating against *hikikomori* individuals in terms of gender, more types of harassment seem to be experienced by female authors:

“I was subjected to a lot of sexual harassment and power harassment in a strong male-dominated society. Hierarchical relationships, social status, being popular or not...it was more hopeless than I had expected to spend time among people living under the curse of "masculinity.”

(From the article “A Father's View of Women Affects His Daughter's Life” by Yuki)

Amongst the public discourse about types of harassment at work, aside from also suffering from power harassment, women are often victims of sexual harassment (*seku hara* / セクハラ), a type of harassment that has been in the public consciousness since the 1990s. This type of harassment in the Japanese workplace mainly takes the form of verbal abuse (43%) and physical touching (39%), with a small percentage of reported sexual assault cases (4%). Additionally, women are more often expected to perform subservient tasks than men, such as serving tea or drinks in social functions, even outside the workplace (Uggen & Shinohara, 2009). Although there has been an increasing trend towards reporting such incidents, most women still opt not to report cases of harassment. Some experts believe that much like what is uttered to *hikikomori* individuals, women are culturally bound behavior to endure suffering in silence without complaining (*gaman*³⁶) (Dussich, 2001).

³⁶ *Gaman* (我慢) is a term that originated in Zen Buddhist teachings and is interpreted as “enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity .” It can also mean “to have patience,” “to endure,” or “to persevere” in times of crisis. In practice, this can manifest as “not saying too much” and suppressing “negative feelings towards others” (Littler, 2019).

3.2.1.3. Parental relationships as a precursor to hikikomori behavior

Although different forms of abuse in school and the workplace are defining factors for the authors' decision to become *hikikomori* individuals, by far, the main factor in the authors' experience is their relationship with their parents. Despite the parent-child relationships always being at the center of discussion, when it concerns the issue of *hikikomori*, many studies frame this relationship as the overbearing dependency of the child towards their parents as a modern form of *amae*. The child's decreasing desire and motivation are coupled with the economic comfort of Japanese families to justify the parents' overly protective child-rearing style that tolerates their children's indulgent behavior while supporting them financially (Tateno et al., 2012; Nakasato, 2016; Todd, 2011; Fogel & Kawai, 2007). These studies tend to support their claim through the fact that in the vast majority of *hikikomori* cases, the more involved parent is the mother (87-88%) (Teo, 2010). However, in the authors' experiences, the most common behavior among mothers of *hikikomori* individuals is over-meddling in the child's education to coerce the child to fit their mostly socially informed expectations:

“Though they asked me if I didn't want to hang out with friends, I think my parents weren't focusing on improving my personal relations, but rather confining me within the framework of some sort of social status.”

(From the article ““Go to school”: everyone was tied down by this rule” by Kikui Yashin)

Some scholars agree that Japanese society, as a collectivist society, is “characterized by high power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance” (Guo, 2022:729), which implies a strong tendential parental desire for their children to follow traditionally accepted paths of life, often leading to a feeling of guilt from the child when they fail to meet this expectation. This is reflected in the parents' tendency to force traditionally accepted educational paths:

“There's an education policy named “alternative education” (“another education”) that operates differently from the mainstream. Since I didn't take the traditional route and go to school, my parents once introduced me to a free school. However, their ultimate goal was that I'd eventually go to school like normal and they completely disregarded my feelings.”

(From the article ““Go to school”: everyone was tied down by this rule” by Kikui Yashin)

As claimed by the author, there are forms of alternative education in Japan, such as homeschooling, church schools, and free schools³⁷. Although they are seen as deviancy from the standard education system, free schools accounted for 200.000 students in 2022 (Nakaya, 2023), and are expected to continue functioning as a solution to truancy among Japanese students, at least according to governmental expectations. However, this is expected to change within the coming generations³⁸ (*Free School in Inzai*, 2023). As much as the government has recognized attendance in free schools, on the same level as public and private schools, its presumed aim for the children to reach “social independence” requires implies that a “smooth return to [regular] school becomes possible” (Takizawa, 2023:115). In other words, the aim of alternative education is still to ensure that the child returns to “regular” schools. Thus, it’s natural that the parents’ own wants mimic that of the state’s, especially when considering that the government tasks the parents as the primary guarantors of children’s school attendance (Takizawa, 2023). Thus, it comes as no surprise that, in many authors’ eyes, the parents are often seen as the primary link between them and society:

“According to the psychologist Okada Takashi, if a child’s relationship and attachment to their parents is not stable between the ages of 1½ and 2 years old, the child will become very sensitive in future personal relationships (*Aichaku Shougai*).”

(From the article “Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others” by Ishizaki Moribito)

37 Mention of free schools (フリースクール) dates back to the 1920s, under the New Education movement that sought to provide an alternative to the uniform, mechanical transfer of knowledge that the standard education provided (Alternative Education in Japan: Free Schools, 2009). Unlike the latter, free schools are operated by individuals, private companies, and NPOs, and receive no government support (Free School in Inzai, 2023).. However, as a means to fight the rising truancy among students, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has allowed attendance at free schools to count as school attendance since 1992, as truant students who did opt for free schools, instead of public or private schools were deemed as absent (Alternative Education in Japan: Free Schools, 2009).

38 Between 2018 and 2019, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology both enacted the “Act on Securing Educational Opportunities” and established its guidelines predicated on supporting children not with the aim to "returning to school" but of "achieving social independence”. In other words, the Japanese government has called on the support of all schools to recognize that “school refusal” should not mean the end of the student's careers and that there should be an alternative to avoid alienating truants (Free School in Inzai, 2023).

By referring to the psychologist Okada Takashi's *Aichaku Shougai* (Attachment Disorder), the author suggests that attachment theory is deterministic in forming *hikikomori* individuals. Following the premise of attachment theory that, for a healthy individual to develop, they need a "consistent nurturing relationship with one or more sensitive caregivers" (Hornor, 2019:613). Inconsistent and uncaring relationships during the early age of an individual can result in potentially impaired social and psychological capacities, leading to mental and emotional issues later in life. A study confirmed this by analyzing the link between the *hikikomori* issue and parental rejection of the child and display of temperament towards them (Krieg & Dickie, 2013) The study proved the impact that the lack of a first healthy interpersonal relationship has on the child's lifelong relationships, as it showed that the capacity to explore, to take risks and to engage socially can be hindered by not having an internal working model, leading to an overall lack of trust, both in self and others, then increasing the risk of social withdrawal. Further literature on developmental psychology shows the impact that the environment in which one grows has on one's future relationships, namely in the capacity to build them and in constructing one's autonomy (Branje et al., 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). As per most authors' testimonies, their parents' acceptance of them only came under certain conditions:

"My parents denied me when I behaved like my true self and forced me to conform to a certain "way of being". And by only accepting me under certain conditions, being with my parents became a trigger for my suffering."

(From the article "Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others" by
Ishizaki Moribito)

"After that, I went to high school via a so-called escalator system (an educational system that offers education from elementary or middle until university)³⁹, but in my second year of high school, I became a *hikikomori* and dropped out a year later. I think it was because I reached my limit dealing with the harsh school life and meeting my mother's expectations."

³⁹ The "escalator" system is based on university corporations that provide education from pre-school up to high school, at their own private "escalator schools" (エスカレーター学校), wherein entry to the respective university is guaranteed, regardless of the student's academic achievement. As the fees of this type of education are high, only households with sufficient income can sustain their child's whole academic career through this system (Gainey & Andressen, 2002; Smith, 2024).

(From the article “What Happens When a *Hikikomori* Gets Married” by Nekota
Yoshiko)

As explained by the authors, the parents play a crucial and active role in influencing *hikikomori* subjects’ behavior and choices. Among other factors, the pressure on the educational path of the child is the most common one. Often, parents pressure their child to study hard in order to attend a prestigious school (Rubinstein, 2016b). According to researchers, this strong investment on the parents' part is done so that the child fits their ideal image and expectation, which tends to neglect the child’s actual wants or needs (Iwakabe, 2021; Suwa & Suzuki, 2013). In turn, even when the child becomes a *hikikomori* individual, parents are sometimes still blind to their child’s plight, often bragging about their academic achievements while ignoring the insurmountable pressure placed upon the child. This is particularly the case with mothers, which some authors describe as being overbearing and meddling:

“I wanted to get away from my mother. At that time, my parents were separated, and I lived with my mother. She was incredibly overprotective and intrusive, and she couldn't bear the fact that her cherished daughter had deviated from the path. (...) Since I was a child, I've carried the heavy burden of my mother's expectations. To become her ideal daughter, I've denied my true feelings continually. In doing so, I lost the ability to enjoy life, the power to think, and even the will to live.”

(From the article “What Happens When a *Hikikomori* Gets Married” by Nekota
Yoshiko)

In Japanese society, although students’ educational aspirations are highly influenced by both parents, the mother figure is particularly decisive, mainly in school choice (Entrich, 2015). This is likely because mothers are still considered to bear the primary role in children’s education and overall behavior. Their assigned family role is to ensure that the child behaves well (in other words, as an *iiko*) while avoiding scrutiny from others, including neighbors and even the husband. Their social responsibility becomes dependent on the child, and thus, mothers can manifest emotionally over-manipulative behavior (Krieg & Dickie, 2013). The resulting relationship has been described by some as being co-dependent, as the mother depends on the child’s success as much as the child depends on the mother as their primary form of approval, thus leading to an emotionally dysfunctional family dynamic (Hattori, 2013) and, possibly, to a child who is increasingly repressed and prone to withdraw

socially (Krieg & Dickie, 2013). In more dire cases, some authors describe abusive behavior from their mothers, seemingly using the child as an output for their anxiety:

“I grew up in a household where my parents constantly fought, and I saw my mother's gloomy face all the time. My mother's unhappiness sometimes manifested as hurtful words that were cast upon me. Perhaps I was the only outlet for her daily stress.”

(From the article “Parents living their parent lives” by Wakeari Joshi)

Literature on the subject has found that mothers of *hikikomori* individuals can both display overprotective and controlling behavior, as well as threatening and rejecting one (Krieg & Dickie, 2013). As an example, a study found that in 54% of their analyzed cases of *hikikomori* individuals, emotional abuse from the parents was present, particularly shunning from the mother. In this type of shunning, designated as *mushi* (無視)⁴⁰, the mother refuses to engage with the child for long periods of time without offering any explanation. The reason for the common use of this passive-aggressive behavior is the fact that it can be performed by the mother without being noticed by the outside (Hattori, 2013). The Japanese government has since recognized the dangers of full-time childrearing stress for mothers, which can result in childrearing neurosis and, eventually, in reported cases of child abuse. To this end, as of 2006, there has been an increase in state-sponsored community spaces that provide childrearing support (Imoto, 2007). However, the balance between the time the child spends being looked after, and the time it should spend bonding with their mother, is still a highly debated issue within Japanese welfare-policy making, as the mother is still often seen as the primary decider of the child’s welfare⁴¹. As for the father figure, the authors tend to describe them mainly under two archetypes:

“When we talk to people who have been involved in or experienced withdrawal, we often find either an over-represented father or an absent father, and there are not many fathers who are just right.”

⁴⁰ The noun *mushi* (無視) is more often used in verb form, *mushi suru* (無視する), meaning “to ignore”, “to disregard” or even “to neglect”.

⁴¹ For more on the history of this ongoing debate, see “Imoto, Y. The Japanese Preschool System in Transition (2007), *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 2(2), 88-101”.

(From the article “Relationship with Father = Relationship with Society” by Ishizaki Moribito)

The combination of the “absent father” and the “close maternal bond” has been argued to commonly lead to difficulty for Japanese children to become independent adults and, in some cases, to become *hikikomori* individuals (Malagón-Amor et al., 2020). Furthermore, as the mother is left with the full responsibility of child-rearing, the children end up seeing the mother as an outlet for their pent-up emotions. Furthermore, while the mother is left with resolving the unstable household, the father is either oblivious to the situation (Koshihara, 2007) or distances himself from the situation purposefully to not create further disruption to the perceived familial “harmony”, as expressed by the father of a deceased *hikikomori* individual when describing his past situation:

“When I came home, I never saw my son again; I only heard about his situation from my wife. There were so many things going on every day at school that my mind was always occupied with them, and I didn't have time to think about my children or my wife's feelings. (...) "It's not that I 'left my son in my wife's hands,' but somewhere in my heart I may have felt that I didn't want to make waves, even to the point of stepping on my son's feelings. It's not the same as treating my son as if he were a tumor.”

(From the article “Thoughts on the Loss of a *Hikikomori* Son: Interview with Yoshihito Sasaki” by Vosot Ikeida)

Researchers still debate on whether, in most cases, fathers exclude themselves deliberately from the conflicts of their home life because they view themselves as subordinate to the mother when it comes to understanding child-rearing, or if their absence is simply a reflection of Japan’s work culture of long hours at the office (Hososaka et al., 2024):

“My father was like a tyrant. He was hardly ever home due to his tremendous workload, traveling overseas, and taking care of his clients. On top of that, it was probably difficult for him to take care of his children (...) Seeing this, I felt that I didn't want to work and didn't want to be a person who only worked and didn't care about his family (Male in his 30s)”

(From the article “I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Although not excusing fathers' lack of involvement in children's early education, scholars agree that the Japanese corporate culture bears a heavy responsibility for how working men organize their priorities. This culture serves as the main source of social validation among Japanese men and creates a proxy family within the workplace, where emotional, interpersonal, and even familial relationships are cultivated between peers, juniors, and seniors. In turn, Japanese men are incentivized to organize their primary self-identity around their careers, leaving non-work relationships receding into the background. In concrete terms, many workers work overtime, fall asleep on public transportation, and even die from overwork (the so-called *karoshi*⁴²) (Ishiyama & Kitayama, 1994). As a result, the child often feels disillusioned with Japanese working life, creating a precedent for their distaste of Japanese working culture:

“My father was hardly ever home. Seeing this, I felt that I didn't want to work and didn't want to be a person who only worked and didn't care about his family (Male in his 30s)”

(From the article “I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

No matter how demanding the situation of the company-centered man (*kaisha ningen* / 会社人間⁴³) may seem, it has been commonplace ever since the 1980s, as the Japanese government wished for companies to be the backbone of Japanese welfare, leading companies to incentivize more and more employees to demonstrate their loyalty towards the company, in detriment to their own families (Sekimizu, 2022). The distaste, or even fear, of becoming a *kaisha ningen* is expressed by Ueyama, author of *From Me Who Was “Hikikomori”* (*Hikikomori datta boku kara* / 引きこもりだった僕から) who, being the son of an absent, overworking father, saw in work and school nothing more than a path towards “slavery to the time axis” [in a society],” (Ueyama, 2001, as cited by Sekimizu, 2022:195). Regardless, the lack of an immediate male role model in a child's education is still regarded as a leading factor influencing the increase of *hikikomori* individuals in contemporary Japan

⁴² *Karoshi* (過労死), literally meaning “death from excess of work” has been recognized as a common cause of death “among chronically overworking corporate workers, especially those in their 40's and 50's” (Ishiyama & Kitayama, 1994).

⁴³ The term “company-centered man” entered the lexicon in the 1970s to describe men who prioritized the company where they work over every other aspect of their life (Sekimizu, 2022).

(Horiguchi, 2011). Despite there being some critics of the “absent father” figure, who believe the father should be more present, they still deem it preferable to assign a different role than the mother’s: that of moral educator (Nakatani, 2006). On a concurrent end, there is the oppressive and fearful father archetype:

“When I was a child, since I never knew when my father would get angry at something, I always felt scared whenever I was at home. I was more sensitive than my brothers, so this fear towards our father influenced me much more than it did them. When I was in the 2nd year of elementary school, I started suppressing my emotions at home, and I ended up becoming more and more apathetic at school.”

(From the article “Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others” by
Ishizaki Moribito)

The oppressive atmosphere described by the author, though either parent can create it, is more often created by the father as a form of tacit rule binding to the family culture. In other words, the rules of the house are not transmitted explicitly but are instead already in place, which makes it more difficult to voice opposition (Suwa et al., 2003). Thus, upon breaking said rules or going against family values, the child is often met with outbursts:

“To me, my father is an incomprehensible figure and a source of fear because he gets angry so easily. In the context of a family, where one should find a sense of security, having someone like this causes me to unconsciously be on edge at all times. When I was irrationally scolded, I was a child who would hold my stuffed animals and cry.”

(From the article “Friends Are Scary Deep Down” by Usamin Minato)

The archetypal figures of the “stern father” and the “thunderous father”⁴⁴ have been in place at least since the 1970s, highlighting their commonplace within Japanese society. In the case of *hikikomori* individuals, a study observed that 20.7 % of *hikikomori* cases have a history of maltreatment by their family, confirming that an oppressive and abusive home environment is conducive to later social withdrawal by the child (Malagón-Amor et al.,

⁴⁴ The term for “stern father” is *ganko oyaji* and comes from the combination of the terms for stubborn (*ganko* / 頑固) and father (*oyaji* / 親父). Similarly, the term for “thunder father” is *kaminari oyaji* and comes from the combination of the terms for thunder (*kaminari* / 雷) and father. It is important to note that *oyaji* can also be used as slang for “old man” when referring to one’s own father figure, which can be seen as a less polite way of calling out one’s father.

2020). Often, to adapt to their dysfunctional parents, children repress their identities and create a false front even when at home (Hattori, 2013) which, as discussed in Chapter 1, can easily lead to a low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Aside from maltreatment, the authors also recount the high standards set by their fathers, and the ensuing anguish from their attempts to meet them:

“When the over-representative father, i.e., the father is a powerful force in the home, society becomes too huge and powerful for the child, and he feels too strongly that he must excel in society to be accepted. He raises the bar of approval beyond his own limits and is crushed.”

(From the article “Relationship with Father = Relationship with Society” by Ishizaki Moribito)

“I thought I would have the same job as my father when I grew up, but I couldn't do math at all and failed the employment exam many times. I thought that if I did the same job as him, he would recognize me, and I was worried that I was a useless person because I couldn't do it. (Male in his 30s)”

(From the article “I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

A study attempted to explain the overzealous pressure from parents, for their children to succeed, by correlating the *hikikomori* issue with higher-educated parents (Umeda & Kawakami, 2012). As claimed by the study, highly educated parents not only have the means to support a non-working child, further incentivizing an overly dependent behavior but, contradictorily, their social status also pressures them to ensure their child is highly educated and employed. However, this association is still problematic, as not only did a separate study focused on this correlation found no evidence of a family's average income being a factor in social withdrawal (Nonaka & Sakai, 2021), but other researchers also claimed to have had ample experience with *hikikomori* individuals' family's financial capabilities, from blue-collar to white-collar (Horiguchi, 2011a). Although it has not been the case for the authors of *Hikipos*, there has been an increasing tendency towards examining the role of the father within the nuclear family, and their possible place as a nurturing figure (Horiguchi, 2011a; Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; Nakatani, 2006).

Another claim made by some authors is the lack of play in a home life that is overly focused on studying:

“Both my parents were passionate about education and gave me a lot of books, but they never taught me how to play. Before entering elementary school, I was the only one who did not know the rules of dodgeball or video games. Play is a way to connect with your peers and acquire social skills, so if they had given it to me early on, my situation might have changed.” (Male in his 30s)”

(From the article “I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

The author’s experience is further validated by a study that showed that 51,2% of 5th and 6th graders considered themselves as either “busy” or “very busy” after their school had ended. Instead of playing, children often go to cram schools⁴⁵ or take lessons or have hobbies based of their parents’ choosing, which often involves either sports, arts, music, or English conversation (Ishihama et al., 2022). These children are thus left with little time to socialize of their own volition, as they have to constantly meet the schedule that has been decided for them. Ironically, it has been found that it is the most compliant children (the *iiko*) that more often tend to become *hikikomori* individuals, as they feel forced to suppress their wishes to become more agreeable to their parents’ wishes until that self-denial eventually manifests itself into anxious and/or depressive symptoms (Horiguchi, 2011). Thus, even in cases where the children try their hardest, the standard always seems unreachable:

“I did as my parents told me since I was a child – from extracurricular activities to my educational path and now in my recent job search. (...) Now I question whether I have been working just to meet their expectations, especially my mother's, and to avoid disappointing them. I can't help but still see the disappointed look on my mother's face from when I quit extracurricular activities due to my perceived inadequacy as a child.”

(From the article “Get a Job or Leave” by Mikey)

⁴⁵ Cram schools (*juko* / 塾) are private facilities where children study, outside of the context of school, normally to obtain additional support or to prepare for an academic achievement test to be placed into higher quality schools (Ishihama et al., 2022).

Despite the child's plight, the parents' discourse is focused on the child's accolades, relying on the long-standing "traditional emphasis on achievement and highly competitive milieu of Japanese society" (K.-I. Kim et al., 1997:92).

Some scholars believe that *hikikomori* individuals' bursts of violence towards their parents are an attempt to communicate with them, when in this highly stressful environment, as they find no other means of being honest with them (Hattori, 2013). In fact, another factor that contributes to this self-denial, from the authors' perspective, is the lack of open and honest conversations, within the family, about the child's feelings:

"But at the time, I had no such place I could count on. I had no way of acquiring emotional literacy in the environment I lived in."

(From the article "'Go to school': everyone was tied down by this rule" by Kikui Yashin)

"At my age at the time, I could not verbalize my problems even if he said so. If he had listened to me more carefully, I might have been able to express the cause of my problems, and I could have thought of various ways to solve them, such as going to a free school."

(From the article "I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad" by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Scholars agree with the authors' perception that the lack of affection displayed between family members is always present in cases involving *hikikomori* individuals, which tends to affect the child the most, who grows accustomed to an environment where sincere communication seldom occurs (Zielenziger, 2006). A study conducted on *hikikomori* families further found an overall lack of verbal or otherwise communication between family members, namely by asking about the child's social withdrawal (Suwa et al., 2003). Another study found that in 100% of its analyzed cases, the child lost attachment to their parents, eventually distrusting them (Hattori, 2013). Often, in the argument of *amae* being one of the leading factors in *hikikomori* behavior, researchers cite the emotional neglect of parents during the child's period of growth, as the cause for their affectionate dependence (Koshihara, 2007; Saito, 2013). The cause for this lack of interaction in the nuclear family always seems to be culturally derived: either it is attributed to traditional familial roles, such as the role of the father as the stoic breadwinner (Horiguchi, 2011a); or it is attributed to the *status quo* of

the Japanese familial interaction, wherein parents, when feeling insecure about their standing relationship with their children, prefer not to acknowledge their children's issue directly, so as not to impose their worries, risking jeopardizing their relationship (Suwa et al., 2003). As the child also grows accustomed to not sharing their feelings, not even with their physicians (K.-I. Kim et al., 1997), both the parents and the child coexist while not being able to converse with one another sincerely. This behavior is particularly damaging when it comes to positive reinforcement:

"I definitely need my father to say to me in a proper way, "Thank you for being born. I am left with the feeling that my father probably doesn't love me, and I don't have an answer. (30s female)"

(From the article "I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad" by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

3.2.1.4. Parents as an extension of society

Upon discussing the relationship with the parents as a main factor in becoming *hikikomori* individuals, another correlated factor was found to be very common among the authors' description: the parents being seen as an extension of society. In one of the many *manga* present in *Hikipos*' issues, the *manga* author Katoo Kooki provides an illustrative explanation of "how to make a person that suffers from self-denial". In its final panel, the "teacher" character, serving as a surrogate for Katoo's views, points directly at the reader, alerting them of the danger of an oppressive education:



Figure 1 – Panel 9 of the *manga* “I’ll teach you how to make a person that suffers from self-denial” by Katoo Kooki”, featured in issue 1 of *Hikipos*

From right to left:

“Text balloon 1 - It’s been 4 years since I started confronting the problems within my mind [heart], but I still haven’t solved them. And the pain and suffering continue even now…

Text balloon 2 - Perhaps you are being educated in a way that will make you end up as a person that denies themselves!

Text balloon 3 - Please be careful.”

(From the *manga* “I’ll teach you how to make a person that suffers from self-denial” by Katoo Kooki)

In the same *manga*, Kooki refers to the style of education alluded to in his last panel as a “packing-style education” where the parents’ values are forced upon the child, much like forcefully fitting the child into a box. Studies validate this logic, as in cases of *hikikomori* individuals, family values are passed down from parent to child, unchanged and inflexible. Additionally, these values are backed up by the pride and confidence of the parents in them, which is not shared by the child (Suwa et al., 2003). Ueyama saw in this transmission of values a “single-track mind” (Ueyama, 2001, as cited by Sekimizu, 2022) that forces the *hikikomori* subject to believe that deviation from this track would be akin to death. However, the pressure placed by parents towards following these values is seen, by them, as gearing their child for success:

“Once I couldn't get a job, he told me "I sent you to college, but it didn't mean anything. I felt empty for trying so hard to get my father, who only saw his children as his status, to approve of me. (Female in her 20s)”

(From the article “I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

As the author claims, not only do parents tend to push their children towards success, but they do so to an extreme. They wish for them to be among the elite, be it in school, sports, or other activities with a high cultural value (Yoshikawa, 2019). However, this mindset seems to be ingrained in the culture, as some studies found that a large number of commentators, teachers, children, and even parents complain about the extent to which Japanese children are pressured to succeed in examinations, to the extent of dubbing the examination period as “examination hell” (*shiken jigoku* / 受験地獄). This pressure can lead to cases of burnout, school refusal, self-harm, bullying, violence toward parents and teachers, and social withdrawal (Goodman, 2012b). The pressure to be successful is shared among the nuclear family, as parents feel that shame upon their children will reflect upon themselves:

“The reason I withdrew was because I couldn't go to college. I had a huge argument with my father, who rarely talked about spiritual matters, and I cried a lot. He told me that many of my relatives cared about my education, but I wanted them to care more about why I couldn't go to college when I wanted to. (Female in her 20s)”

(From the article “I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Much like the author’s description, communities and extended families also play a part in *hikikomori* cases by adding to the pressure placed upon the nuclear family of the *hikikomori* subject. Parents feel the need to hide any circumstances of their *hikikomori* child’s situation to avoid being subjected to ostracism from their relatives, neighbors, and society as a whole (Bowker, 2016; Koshihara, 2007). A study found that in 18% of the cases, either the *hikikomori* subject or the family did not wish to receive any in-home assistance, highlighting the family’s fear of exacerbating the problem by confronting it (Malagón-Amor et al., 2020). Negative attention is thus seen as shameful, a burden which is also placed upon the child:

“I felt that my father, who never showed any weakness, implicitly told me, “Don’t do anything embarrassing in front of others.”

(From the article “An Indifferent Father Who Never Shows Weakness” by Yurina)

Much like the Japanese expression “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down”⁴⁶, parents thus fear the scrutiny of potentially standing out amidst their surroundings in a negative sense. As such, the propensity to seek help, even in *hikikomori* situations, is very low, given their fear of publicizing said situation. To this end, parents may go as far as hiding their children so that the *hikikomori* situation does not become known. Furthermore, the father’s high expectations for his children are felt, by some male authors, as a pressure to meet the designated male standard:

“And when I looked at my father, who demanded perfection from people, work, and himself, I felt as if the arrow was pointed at me as well. (...) Even if I could talk to them, the thought that I must be perfect always and, in every situation, haunts me.”

(From the article “An Indifferent Father Who Never Shows Weakness” by Yurina)

The role of the father as the male breadwinner is still expected in contemporary Japanese society (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020; Sekimizu, 2022), to which other characteristics

⁴⁶ The expression *deru kugi wa utareru* (出る釘は打たれる) is often cited to explain the Japanese beliefs in “groupishness; loyalty; conformity; perseverance; sense of hierarchy and belief in the importance of harmony in social relations” (Goodman, 2012a:37).

are also associated, such as the high demand for perfection in every aspect of his life, including his children, as well as the responsibility to never show any signs of weakness:

“Even now, when my father is in a bad mood, he does not go through the living room when he comes home, but goes straight upstairs to his room. If my father had come home that day after a bad day at work, I wonder if he would have said, "I'm busy and tired," and honestly told me how he felt, or shown me his weakness, would my mind be different today?"

(From the article “An Indifferent Father Who Never Shows Weakness” by Yurina)

This demand placed on both the fathers’ families and fathers themselves is a commonly observed behavior in Japanese society. Similarly, the oppression of others is a reflection of the oppression they place on themselves to stay on the side of the majority, even if it requires them also to suppress their own personalities (Sekimizu, 2022). On the other hand, no author made any claims of receiving positive reinforcement; quite the contrary:

“When I was in high school, I was molested on my way to school. I laughed and reported to my homeroom teacher that he touched my lower body from behind. Why did I laugh? Because I felt that if I, who did not have a good appearance, reported the sexual assault, they would not believe me and laugh at me. Why did I feel that way? Because I had internalized my father's view of women. I went home and reported that I had been molested, but my father remained silent. (...) Wouldn't predators who smelled my low self-esteem have approached me? Even if sexual harassment and power harassment were inevitable, wouldn't the affirmation from my father have given me the strength to fight in society? I can't help but think so.”

(From the article “A Father's View of Women Affects His Daughter's Life” by Yuki)

Some authors thus propose that their relationship with the father figure is a model for their future relationship with society:

“The words and interactions that the child exchanges with his father, the symbol of society, and the relationship that is born from these interactions become the basic attitude (or mold) that the child will adopt when he or she enters society.”

(From the article “Relationship with Father = Relationship with Society” by Ishizaki Moribito)

The father feels responsible for not only providing financial security to the family, but also for educating the child regarding how Japanese society functions, namely corporate life, through their own imposed experiences (Haveron, 2023). As a consequence of the imposed values on the child, they also start judging others' value by the titles they hold:

“When I realized this, I began to judge my father only by the titles and honors associated with him. And, over time, this became my basic way of looking at others I interacted with as a judge not only of my father, but also of the friends, colleagues, and bosses around me.”

(From the article “An Indifferent Father Who Never Shows Weakness” by Yurina)

Additionally, a great value is placed on the principle of striving arduously for success, without giving up (what in Japanese is referred to as *ganbatte*⁴⁷), and judgment is given to those who do not seem to follow this principle:

“Believing that you're doing good and living your life solely on your own strength can lead to looking down on those who live differently. I've been looked down upon by many people. The more I thought I'd lived my life through hard work, the more I looked down on others who, in my opinion, didn't make an effort. I feel a sense of superiority, thinking that my current situation, including my job and income, was achieved through my own efforts.”

(From the article “Get a Job or Leave” by Mikey)

Given the economic and social reality of post-boom Japan, the myth of hard work being enough to persevere no longer seems as valid, according to some scholars (Nakasato, 2016). Still, many still argue in favor of the mentality of persistence, provided this attitude is controlled internally by the child, and not externally imposed by the parents, as the pressure can result in the child feeling anxious (Taylor et al., 1997). Thus, failure to abide by this mindset results in feelings of inadequacy from the child that can extend beyond their home environment, as one author comments:

⁴⁷ *Ganbatte* (頑張て) is the imperative form of the verb *ganbaru* (頑張る), which means “to persevere”, “to not give up”, “to do one’s best” or “to work hard at something”. The imperative form *ganbatte* is the most commonly used form and its use is often equated with how “good luck” is used. However, in Japanese the emphasis tends to be more on the effort that is expended rather than luck. As such, children are encouraged to always try their best, no matter the adversity (Liebermann, 2021).

““Society” here is not limited to schools and companies, but refers to all relationships that involve obligations. Let me give you some examples:

What will happen to that child when he or she enters school or joins a company? He or she will be scared of what his or her classmates will say to him or her at any moment. He or she is worried that the boss will point out mistakes at any moment at work. Why, he or she feels uneasy and insecure when he or she is at school or work? He or she feels like running away from situations that require him or her to be social.”

(From the article “Relationship with Father = Relationship with Society” by Ishizaki Moribito)

The same author then poses the question of whether parents’ rigid values can be blamed on the parents themselves, or whether the problem is a long-standing social one:

“Lastly, I would like to ask: is this not a problem of society as a whole, and not only an issue exclusively related with parent-child relationships or the environment in which one grows up? (...) The low self-esteem of parents contributes to the low self-esteem in their children, passing down through generations in a chain reaction.”

(From the article “Relationship with Father = Relationship with Society” by Ishizaki Moribito)

When discussing the generational shift, Zielenziger (2006), recounts how youth unemployment reached record numbers in Japan, by 2004, with 630.000 young adults being neither employed nor studying. Thus, to a newer generation, the “hard work achieves all” mindset from their parents’ generation that “still drives Japanese life seems increasingly pointless” (Zielenziger, 2006:124). Given this fact, the authors reflect on what has changed in more recent generations to prompt this feeling of inadequacy:

“The parents I met through my parents' *hikikomori* support group tend to believe that "hard work leads to success." They love stories that follow the formula of "hard work will always pay off." For example, morning dramas on TV consistently feature these themes, and I really dislike them. My parents moved from the countryside in Tohoku to Tokyo. They believe in hard work and diligence because they think that's how they've built their lives. They want their children to uphold that perspective, which they do themselves. I felt that my own *hikikomori* condition arose from not making enough effort, and I carried a sense of guilt for not working. My current working environment

is both embarrassing and detestable. The fear of my parents telling me to leave for not working haunts me.”

(From the article “Get a Job or Leave” by Mikey)

The author’s claims are further supported by scholars who agree that there is a gap between the baby-boomer generation (called *dankai*⁴⁸) and the following one (Horiguchi, 2011; Zielenziger, 2006). Where the baby boomers could strive for a job, to then be rewarded with lifetime employment and a seniority wage system, the next generation, although possessing more material goods, feels less hopeful due to economic stagnation (Horiguchi, 2011; Sekimizu, 2022). Thus, a discrepancy ensues over the cultural value of “working hard” which, according to the authors, seems to suggest that the blame can be transferred from the parents to the enveloping society.

3.2.2. Social standing in Japanese society

This sub-theme addresses the authors of *Hikipos*’ opinions and descriptions of Japanese society, particularly the values of said society that predicate the *hikikomori* situation.

3.2.2.1. The single-track mindset

As with the previous sub-theme, the authors emphasize the role of schools in Japan, namely in how they propagate social values that the authors find oppressive:

“I was a child who tried to faithfully abide by the societal rule of “Go to school!” that the adults transmitted. And I wasn’t able to do it, so I couldn’t choose how to spend my time. There were only two choices: go to school or don’t; 100 or 0 [all or nothing]; move forward or stop—and I stopped.”

⁴⁸ The term *dankai*, short for *dankai no sedai* (団塊の世代) is the term used for the baby boom generation equivalent of Japan (born between 1947 and 1949) and its members experienced the economic growth of the post-war era as well as the bubble period of the 1980s. The same members are now part of the aging Japanese society (*Japanese Generations: Boom, Bubble, and Ice Age*, 2022).

(From the article ““Go to school”: everyone was tied down by this rule” by Kikui Yashin)

As claimed by the author, the Japanese school system is a single-track, extremely organized, and stress-inducing system (Furlong, 2008), ranging from the rigorous entrance exams before elementary school, all the way to college entrance exams. High expectations of financial and career success are placed on children, and career tracking can begin as early as junior high school. As such, academic success during junior high school and high school is predicated on long classroom hours, coupled with pressure to study everyday outside of said school hours (Nakasato, 2016). In his 1986 article *Ochikobore, Mukiryoku, Hikikomori* (Dropouts, Apathy, and *Hikikomori*), Professor Michihiko Kitao already argued that the issue with truancy and *hikikomori* was a school system issue, particularly with the uniform evaluation of all students (Sekimizu, 2022). In this mindset, from the authors’ experiences, there seems to be no nuance in failure:

“I joined the tennis club with my friends, but at this school, there was a common feature in all extracurricular activities. That feature was that “you couldn't quit.” Perhaps it was intended to discourage students from irresponsibly quitting once they made a choice, but it was akin to being part of a biker gang or a sinister religious group.”

(From the article “Friends Are Scary Deep Down” by Usamin Minato)

Researchers have found that in Japanese schools and universities, many types of rituals are practiced, both in classrooms and in afterschool activities (*bukatsu* / 部活)⁴⁹, ranging from common greetings to stricter rules. These are meant to encourage integration and solidarity among students, with their ultimate goal being to provide the experience of belonging to a group (Delakorda Kawashima, 2022). Thus, most authors pushed themselves to somehow meet this standard of compliance, no matter how much of a grueling experience it was for them:

⁴⁹ *Bukatsu* (部活), also known as *bukatsudou* (部活動), is the term for the extra-curricular activities in Japanese junior high and high schools. These activities take the form of clubs, which are divided into two types, sports clubs and culture clubs, and can involve casual or everyday participation. Although voluntary in most schools, *bukatsu* are considered an integral part of school culture, and students’ interdependence is highly incentivized (*What Is “Bukatsudo”? Club Activities in Japanese Schools*, 2022). However, the non-profit Japan Youth Conference has since petitioned for the total removal of mandatory *bukatsu*, as some schools still demand all students to join a club, signaling the recent shift in Japanese culture (Rogers, 2022).

“I thought I was moving forward. I knew very well what the right path was in terms of my studies and employment. Yet, even so, I couldn’t move forward once I got past my mid-twenties. “I have to be a perfect, ideal working adult”. “I definitely have to become a man that can earn money, so I don’t embarrass my parents or society, or else I won’t be forgiven.” I kept hurting myself with compulsive thoughts like these.”

(From the article “Running away rather than stepping out into society” by Kikui Yashin)

The perception the author had is supported by scholars who found a clear connection between the hierarchy of the school system and the employment that is eventually obtained, as top employers seek workers first from the top universities, which came from the top secondary schools, which in turn picked their students from the entrance exams they took at 15 years of age. Although the system is publicized as being fair for all, and thus of better opportunity to hard workers, privately, most families invest considerable resources in providing their children the best chances of success (Goodman, 2012b). One author points out the negative effect of having such a success-driven mindset:

“(…) it’s been pointed out that the message of “Definitely succeed!” can produce the opposite effect. *Hikikomori* with fears related to work or employment won’t be able to make a move if they’re pressured with words such as “You have to pass the part-time job interview”.

(From the article “Running away rather than stepping out into society” by Kikui Yashin)

Attesting to the author’s claims, a study correlating suicidal ideation with several aspects of adolescents’ lives (Nakano et al., 2022) found that not only is academic success a much higher concern among students (60,9%) than relationships at school (31,9%) or at home (16.1%), but the more the three concerns overlap, the greater was the risk of suicidal ideation. Another author points out how, by being successful early on in their life, the pressure became greater to have continued success:

“Since I was an honors student, I thought there was no way someone like me would become a *hikikomori*, and even the people around me thought the same. When I became a shut-in, I thought I had to go to a really, really prestigious college due to my background, or else society wouldn’t forgive me.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Given the single-track mindset instilled in Japanese children, attending a prestigious school already places a child on track to the next prestigious level of education. Additionally, even when reaching said level, the child will likely feel pressured to attend the prestigious level of education that follows it. Thus, to the child, the pressure steadily accumulates and, unless alleviated by the parents, will only pose a risk of social withdrawal in order to escape this path (Rubinstein, 2016). However, for those who are already experiencing the same mental and emotional struggle as *hikikomori* individuals, success under normal circumstances proves too difficult, given their inconsistent work output:

“However, my hope of becoming a "normal full-time employee" never materialized. Promotions within a few months were normal for those with typical work histories, but not for me.”

(From the article “If I Could Become a Full-Time Employee... Memories of Leaving *Hikikomori* Behind and “Her”” by Toshi)

The difficulty described by the author can originate from the necessity of socializing in their jobs or due to their feelings of self-denial that prompt identity crisis, as confirmed by a study that found that a healthy identity helps in navigating the transition that adolescents make into the labor market (Hihara et al., 2022). This attempt is impaired for teenagers who are already showing signs and traits of being *hikikomori* individuals, who easily feel anxious and overwhelmed, or who may feel completely depleted only after a few hours of work (Sekimizu, 2022). Additionally, the time the authors spend in isolation often poses a problem as they struggle to justify the gap in their working history:

“However, what kind of career path can someone expect when they enter a company at the age of thirty or forty? I believe I'll inevitably end up in poverty in the future. I'm anxious about whether I'll ever be in a position to generate money. (Male, 30s)”

(From the article “Various Opinions on "Money" from *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Though there are reported cases of *hikikomori* individuals trying to reintegrate into the job market, they face not only their built-up anxiety over working but also the lack of qualifications listed on their resume (Yung et al., 2021), which can prove more difficult the

older the *hikikomori* subject is. In fact, some believe that the usage of categories like *NEET* or *freeter* is meant to distinguish those who are considered to contribute to society (*shakaijin*⁵⁰) from those who do not (Ogino, 2004). As such, some authors find that they are often seen as expendable:

“*Hikikomori* is seen as non-productive individuals who are considered expendable.”

(From the article “What Is happiness for *hikikomori*?” by *Hikipos* Editorial
Department)

As explored by some scholars (Zielenziger, 2006), *hikikomori* individuals feel impotent before a stress-inducing system of obligation and sacrifice which, in their eyes, is intolerant and uncompassionate of their plight.

When it comes to gender differences, some female authors admit to specific struggles they face due to Japanese social roles:

“At that time, the topic of marriage came up. I felt like there was no choice. After all, I was born with nothing—no education, no job history, no experience, no money, no health, no beautiful appearance. I had nothing.”

(From the article “What Happens When a *Hikikomori* Gets Married” by Nekota
Yoshiko)

As the author suggests, women are known to face more pressure to get married within Japanese society, as they are still seen as the ones mainly responsible for managing the home and raising children. In this sense, *hikikomori* women can face increasing pressure to participate in society through marriage (Horiguchi, 2011).

On the other hand, male *hikikomori* individuals are also bound to their gender-specific struggle of resigning to their assigned social path, especially since it always places them in direct comparison with their own fathers:

⁵⁰ Coming from the conjunction of the characters of society (*shakai* / 社会) and person (*jin* / 人), the term *shakaijin* (社会人) refers to practitioners of Japanese socially accepted values of financial independence, self-responsibility, self-management, being connected with other and society as a whole, using proper language and etiquette when speaking with bosses and customers, and following company rules (dixhom, 2023).

“Earning money, then getting married, having children, and eventually becoming a grandparent - by normal standards, these life milestones seem unattainable without a certain societal status. It's like I'm not following society's rules or norms, yet those are the only paths I know. For now, I'll just have to work and earn money because I can't envision any other way to reintegrate into society. Even though I earn, I know I can't surpass my father, and I don't feel like I can even catch up with regular working people. However, it's our parents who instilled these values in us.”

(From the article “Get a Job or Leave” by Mikey)

As the author claims, a study found that there are specific standards in Japanese society to measure a man's masculinity, such as sports competitions, be it at school or the workplace, and the ability to become the ideal “salaryman” (*sarariiman* / サラリーマン) and breadwinner (*daikokubashira*⁵¹), the two defining traits of the “father” as the pillar of the Japanese household (Guo, 2022). Although there is no specific reward for conforming to this hegemonic masculine image, most men still sacrifice their freedom of choice in order to abide by social expectations of them. Despite the rise of *ikumens*⁵², or nurturing fathers, Japanese corporate culture continues to be demanding of its long working hours, and company time over family time (Haveron, 2023).

3.2.2.2. Pressure to build social relations

Another aspect of this single-track success-driven mindset is the ability to build interpersonal relationships in their generation:

“(…) it is also a society built around functionalism that emphasizes relationships that involve interests, and so social anxiety is predominant and it's become very easy to fall

⁵¹ The term *daikokubashira* (大黒柱), literally meaning the “big black pillar” that supports an entire house, was employed mainly in the Edo period (1603-1868) to refer to the ideal male figure as the breadwinner and head of the family. The image originates from Shinto belief as the image of *Daikoku-sama*, the Shinto god who brings good fortune, guardian of the well-being and success of the home (*ie* / 家).

⁵² Originating as a combination of the terms *ikuji* (育児), meaning childcare, and *ikemen* (イケメン), meaning handsome man, *ikumens* (育メン) refers to a contemporary tendency of fathers who partake in childrearing responsibility. The term came about as a stark contrast to the stereotypically male-assigned role of the father as a workaholic, absent father (Robson, 2018).

under its influence. Society as a whole must realize that it has become a place where simply having a poor parent-child relationship can easily lead one to fall [mentally] ill.”

(From the article “Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others” by
Ishizaki Moribito)

In fact, building and maintaining relationships is highly emphasized in Japanese working culture (also known as *kizuna*⁵³). These relationships extend within the professional setting, and their attentive care is the key to building trust among key “stakeholders, such as clients, partners, and suppliers” (H. Watanabe, 2023) thus ensuring their long-lasting duration. This can be seen as another aspect of Japanese culture’s predisposition towards the value of harmony, as mutual trust is meant to be genuine to be able to build long-term commitment to collaboration and mutual growth, which also involves the amicable resolution of conflicts and the search for mutually beneficial solutions (Crane, 2023). To cultivate this social aptitude, mechanisms are put in place to predispose children and teenagers toward social engagement:

“Every high school student realizes that within the curriculum of their secondary education, various events are strategically placed that require them to establish relationships with specific individuals within their class, someone with whom they can comfortably interact without appearing awkward. Failure to secure such relationships during these events would undoubtedly lead to a sense of denial and psychological distress.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese
Masaki)

The school is believed to serve as a training ground for the social skills that will be necessary to navigate adult society, namely, the ability to work well with others and adapt to different social contexts. To achieve this, teachers and parents deliberately avoid interfering with the natural social dynamics between students, as they believe that children will better assimilate hierarchical roles, social ethics, and social cohesion when among peers, instead of learning it from their parents or teachers (Isaacs White, 2017; Zielenziger, 2006).

⁵³ *Kizuna* (絆), originating from the image of rope used to tether domestic animals such as horses and dogs, means the bonds between people. It is often used in professional relationships between two companies and between disaster victims in their rescue efforts (*About KIZUNA*, n.d.).

The authors thus admit being victims of the pressure towards being successful in establishing interpersonal relationships in school:

“The sense of responsibility to fulfill the expectations of adults intensifies teenagers' consciousness of the need to "make friends," ultimately leading to the denial of students who find themselves isolated. These are some background factors that can undoubtedly contribute to this phenomenon.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese Masaki)

The expectation to build interpersonal relationships begins in early childhood through group-oriented educational programs where children are encouraged to play together harmoniously (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). A study further showed that this expectation continues to worry teenagers, only second to academic success, and that the relationship between peers preoccupies them more on them than the relationships at home (Nakano et al., 2022). However, as the authors' commentaries show, the pressure from unsuccessful relationships in school is likely to result in further pressure in relationships at home.

Thus, most authors comment on how inflexible these various aspects of Japanese society are for them:

“It's somewhat similar to the “repetition of position”⁵⁴ that we see in *shogi*. Repetition of position happens when both players try to avoid bad moves and, as a result, keep repeating the same moves. (...) Myself, my parents, my teachers, society at large—we all tried to use our best moves within Japan's systems, and as a result, we arrived at a stalemate that no one wished for.”

(From the article ““Go to school”: everyone was tied down by this rule” by Kikui Yashin)

This inflexible model is presented to children, not only from their parents' values, but from other sources as well:

⁵⁴ The specific term used by the author is *sennichite* (千日手) which is used in a *shogi* match, when the same position for the pieces occurs four times in a row. It is one of the few occasions a draw is determined in a *shogi* match (“FESA – Shogi Official Playing Rules,” 2017; *Introduction to Shogi*, n.d.).

“Teenagers in Japanese society constantly receive messages from the media, their parents, and schools that emphasize the importance of graduating from high school within the standard timeframe, completing university, and submitting an impeccable resume to a prospective employer by the age of 22, or else their lives would be considered failures.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese Masaki)

Many scholars agree that not only parents, but Japanese society, see the definition of “success” as graduating from the best schools and universities, to then enter a prestigious company (Imoto & Toivonen, 2012). In this sense, they find the pressure from parents understandable to a degree, as social status is akin to educational success, which in turn is determined by the capacity to memorize facts from a given school curriculum (Goodman, 2012a). The authors further admit to realizing that their value as humans comes from their affiliation with institutions:

“Japanese people primarily talk about their affiliations during self-introductions, but I had lost what was required in Japan.”

(From the article “Deciding “How You Want to Live” is Your Choice” by Satsuki)

In the end, more than grades and social skills, educational credentials are the main representation of social status, in what is considered by some as a “credentialist society” (*gakureki shakai* / 学齡社会⁵⁵) (Entrich, 2015). Some scholars have portrayed that a Japanese individual who does not have a business card, or group to belong to, is similar to not existing at all (Zielenziger, 2006). In other words, the context in which one presents themselves might be considered even more important than the person itself. This system further highlights the core belief of “belonging to a group” that particularly permeates Japanese corporate life. Some scholars believe that mental issues arising in Japanese adults

⁵⁵ Post-war Japan became open to the ideology of providing educational opportunities to every society member, regardless of innate conditions and having said members be able to achieve high levels of education through the same standardized examination. Additionally, what some considered the “social birth” of each individual, occurring during their entrance exams, became as or more relevant than their actual birth. However, it later became clear that educational opportunities are not open to all, and that social backgrounds greatly impacted the ability to achieve higher levels of education. In other words, contradictory to the intentions of a true *gakureki shakai*, the biological birth largely impacts the “social birth” (Entrich, 2015)

must consider their “need for belonging” (Delakorda Kawashima, 2022), which further attests to the authors’ claims of emotional and mental distress whenever feeling alienated from their close social environment:

“Facing such looks, I became acutely aware of my lack of belonging to any group in the class, which dealt a severe blow to my self-esteem. It might sound dramatic, but having a place within your class is a significant factor in a teenager's self-esteem.”

(From the article “As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School” by Tatese Masaki)

Still, the authors emphasize their disagreement with the black-and-white treatment that Japanese social values impose on citizens, as most only wish to be recognized and treated as equals, thus removing the pressure to value themselves according to their effort and accomplishments:

“We want to coexist as “equals” as fellow human beings, but it doesn't come true. With a heavy heart, the actions we take to gain recognition become our silent, solitary battle that no one notices. How much time, effort, and loneliness will it take to be rewarded? Being “together” is undoubtedly reassuring. Accumulate achievements in anything, even if you can't be the best, even if you're not outstanding, as long as you can score 60 points and pass. I just want to be “recognized.” “That's all.””

(From the article “The Scars Left by “Creepy”” by ToDAMI)

As some scholars have noted, *hikikomori* individuals, being placed in the fringes of Japanese society, and even when experiencing strong feelings of self-denial, can reexamine their nature outside of their immediate social context (Sekimizu, 2022), to then question the true meaning of the concept of being successful.

3.2.3. Lack of support

This sub-theme addresses what the authors of *Hikipos* most commonly discuss as some of the conditions that pose obstacles to their daily lives after withdrawing socially. These conditions are often described as aggravating their situation and ostracizing.

3.2.3.1. Lack of mental health care

The most mentioned obstacle was found to be the overall lack of quality mental health care in Japan, as some authors comment on the overall attitude of psychiatric care, as they see *hikikomori* individuals as being unrecognized or dismissed:

“Whenever I say I’m a male *hikikomori*, every therapist I’ve had tries to brush the issue under the rug by saying “attachment disorder” and “narcissistic personality”. And I’m going to what is considered by Japanese society as the country’s leading authority in the psychiatry field. It’s a great example that can demonstrate how psychiatrists truly don’t understand a thing.”

(From the article “My relationship with my mother became the basis for everything”
by Vosot Ikeida)

As the author's comments suggest, psychiatry in Japan has struggled with reaching a consensus on a psychopathological profile for *hikikomori* individuals. As with the author’s experience, some argue that *hikikomori* individuals display narcissistic tendencies, often justifying this description with arguments of cultural laxity and parental indulgence (Bowker, 2016; Katsumata, 2014; Martinotti et al., 2021). However, these claims have been argued against for being specifically targeted towards younger generations, thus losing all analytic precision, as they tend to confuse excessive self-love, derived from the excessive praise of parents and communities, with a lack of severity and deprivation that would be a more beneficial child-rearing environment (Bowker, 2016). Another popular claim among scholars (Bowker, 2016), mainly inspired by a qualitative study conducted by Hattori (2013), is that *hikikomori* subjects tend to suffer from dissociative identity disorder (popularly known as multiple personality disorder), as Hattori deemed it to be the second most prevailing symptom among the *hikikomori* individuals he analyzed, only after “distrust of humans”. In his argument, Hattori explains that *hikikomori* individuals build a “front personality”, both to easily adapt to emotionally distant or neglectful parents, as well as to conform to what is expected of them. However, it is unclear how the same “front personality” may function to meet both ends: shielding the subject emotionally while also conforming them to social expectations. Hattori also argues that the subject’s “original personality” is repressed, and a possible treatment would involve retrieving said personality. From these

descriptions, it is not clear how much the “front personality” and “original personality” should be taken as a sign of dissociative personality disorder, as they also are very close in definition to the culturally derived concepts of *tatema* and *honne*. This doubt again revolves around the essential framing of the *hikikomori* issue: whether it should be considered a disorder or a culturally bound issue. It is clear, however, that these two divergent personalities are felt by some authors:

“There is a corny answer to this question: “Because *hikikomori* are diverse.” However, I feel like that’s not enough to explain this situation. Perhaps this wasn’t a case where *hikikomori* were split into two different groups, but rather where each individual *hikikomori* had two latent, co-existing voices within themselves that were in disorder—whether they were aware of it or not.”

(From the article “(Potential criminals) Two Voices in Disorder: The Aggressiveness within a *Hikikomori*” by Vosot Ikeida)

According to the authors, they seem to struggle not only with the suppression of their feelings but also with forming a convincing “front personality” which is not taken as “weird”. However, this does not apply to all *hikikomori* individuals as, even among the authors, some have “maintained” their original personality while still suffering from other known factors, such as parental oppression and social pressure:

“Once I lost my job and became a *hikikomori*, my relationship with my parents and relatives became very strained. My personality itself didn’t change at all, but they started treating me like a failure and telling me things they’d never said before that were really hurtful.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

According to Saito (2013), *hikikomori* individuals should not be framed as a personality disorder, as even though the subject may exhibit symptoms of a personality disorder, these symptoms will disappear once the person is cured. Unlike personality disorders, a *hikikomori* situation will not last for the rest of the person’s life (Katsumata, 2014; Saito, 2013). Saito further suggests that, although symptoms of other mental disorders may be present in the *hikikomori* subject’s life, these are not the primary cause of the *hikikomori* situation (Saito, 2013). From the author’s perspective, these claims cannot be

proved or disproved. Although many authors discuss their symptoms of anxiety and depression, because of self-denial, other authors report always having suffered from developmental disorders, which placed them in a disadvantageous position, since they had more difficulty in adapting to Japanese social and professional environments because of these symptoms. However, the same factors of either abuse at work or school, and poor parenting are always present:

“My toxic parents revealed that for almost 40 years they’d been hiding the fact I’d been diagnosed as a child with micro brain damage (my current developmental disability).”

(From the article “I, who lost my family, until I connected to the resources in my region” by Gakincho)

This seems to suggest that although mental illness can be a leading factor in causing *hikikomori* behavior, it seems to always be accompanied by other circumstantial factors that exacerbate the alienation that the *hikikomori* subject may already feel. However, the lack of consensus and the risk of being misdiagnosed continues to be a major concern among the authors, as they have admitted to the fact that hospitalization and overmedication played a role in their worsening condition:

“In the years that followed, I was hospitalized thrice in the psychiatric department, where I was told I suffered from more than 10 illnesses combined; I was overmedicated and fell in so much despair that the only thought that ran through my head was death...”

(From the article “Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others” by Ishizaki Moribito)

“I, who re-enrolled in graduate school only to quit my job again and participate in clinical trials for anti-depressants whose side effects have left me mostly bedridden.”

(From the article “A housewife, an abusive mother and a daughter” by Gakincho)

In other testimonies collected from parents of *hikikomori* individuals (Rubinstein, 2016b), they expressed their frustration at how often psychiatric help focuses on hospitalization and medication, over patient care and rehabilitation. This led some parents to become disillusioned with the quality of Japanese psychiatry, even among mental illness communities. Ishizaki shares his own views of psychiatric care in Japan:

“I believe that there is still much room for improvement in psychiatric care in Japan. Many doctors simply give short 5-minute consultations and prescribe medication, which does not seem to be very effective. In particular, there is not enough understanding of the *hikikomori* individual, and it is difficult to provide appropriate support. This is because people in a state of withdrawal are in a complex mental situation, and simply prescribing medication is not a solution.”

(Excerpt from a written response provided by Ishizaki Moribito, present in Annex B)

Furthermore, even though mental health care could assist in *hikikomori* individuals’ recovery, it may still be insufficient, as expressed by Ishizaki:

“I was in psychosomatic medicine for a while. While counseling allowed me to objectively look at my situation, it did not lead to a fundamental solution. I still feel that medical treatment alone is not enough to support my withdrawal, as there are multiple factors behind it.”

(Excerpt from a written response provided by Ishizaki Moribito, present in Annex B)

As such, the Japanese government's role in supporting *hikikomori* individuals must also be considered.

3.2.3.2. Lack of governmental support

Another obstacle discussed by the authors is the overall lack of governmental support, as they found there to be little investment in alternative forms of education and living that escape Japanese society’s single-track system. One such example is the lack of effort in legitimizing free schools:

“I wonder: if alternative education—like free schools—were more widely acknowledged, would it have prevented me from spending such a miserable, closed off childhood?”

(From the article ““Go to school”: everyone was tied down by this rule” by Kikui Yashin)

Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has made a few changes to its educational policies, such as allowing attendance at free schools to count as regular school attendance, relaxing some of its stricter school rules

and changing the nomenclature of “school refusal” (*toukoukyohi*) to “non-attendance” (*futoukou*)⁵⁶, it still has not been able to deal with the continuing high number of children and adolescent who drop out of school. Some have suggested that the solution is to be found in alternative education, where individuals who are unable to adapt to the compulsory school system, or who feel too pressured by it, can fit in (*Alternative Education in Japan: Free Schools*, 2009). However, MEXT has yet to recognize alternative education with the same validity as standard single curriculum-based education.

Some authors also comment on the lack of support in terms of employment:

“When you shut yourself in, you stop being able to advocate for your rights. Even when I asked for advice at the government offices, the conversation would stop as soon as I said I couldn’t handle a part-time job.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

From the author’s description, the choice for having financial support often seems to be between having a job, having their parents' financial support, or having a disability pension. Thus, when reaching out for help, *hikikomori* individuals are more often encouraged to secure employment, rather than seek psychological counseling (Ismail, 2018). Public aid is likely unavailable if the government deems other forms of self-help or family support as sufficient (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2014). The cause of the lack of governmental support is likely to be its long-standing policy of relying on corporations to ensure the citizens’ welfare (Sekimizu, 2022) As many *hikikomori* individuals cannot adapt to corporate society, the family has to be able to support them. Government help tends to come in the form of disability pensions, in cases where the subject is diagnosed with a mental illness by a psychiatrist and can obtain a disability certificate, or in employment centers. However, as the author noted, these employment centers only go as far as connecting the subject to the current job market.

⁵⁶ The originally used term for truancy was *toukoukyohi* (登校拒否) meaning “school refusal”. However, in 1991, the more neutrally charged term *futoukou* (不登校), or “school non-attendance”, was put in place, in order to place less blame on the child for missing school the difference in Japanese, and why it was perceived as offensive (*Alternative Education in Japan: Free Schools*, 2009).

Aside from employment, some authors also argue in favor of housing support, as a means to escape abusive home environments:

“What I really needed when I was *hikikomori* was the "Housing First" concept. At home, the pressure from my parents was intense, and it felt like actual abuse. If your energy is constantly drained at home, you won't have the strength to go outside, so breaking free from that situation is challenging. (Female, 20s)”

(From the article “Various Opinions on “Money” from *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos*
Editorial Department)

A more recent phenomenon surrounding teenage homelessness (the *Toyoko Kids*⁵⁷) has highlighted how much abusive home environments play a part in Japanese adolescents’ decision to live on the street, as opposed to their parents’ home. Some scholars argue that this is also a factor of the overreliance of the Japanese government on family resources to take care of unemployed family members. In fact, financial support for housing tends to be limited to three months and is severely restricted upon the individual’s annual income (Sekimizu, 2022). For *hikikomori* individuals who are unable to work and who wish to leave the abusive environment that triggers their social withdrawal, no options may be available other than obtaining a disability certificate, if possible. The same high requirements are in place for livelihood assistance:

“I once looked into the "Livelihood Assistance Self-Reliance Support System (*Seikatsu Konkyusha Jiritsu Shien Seido*)”, but it seemed to be aimed at people who were employed. I wondered if it was necessary to be in dire straits due to the inability to work. I provide rent, but there are interviews every two weeks, making it very inconvenient. (Male, 30s)”

(From the article “Various Opinions on “Money” from *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos*
Editorial Department)

⁵⁷ *Toyoko kids* (ト-横キッズ) are fairly recent occurrence consisting of teenagers, mainly girls, living in the Shijuku neighborhood of Tokyo. Although the same neighborhood was known to mostly house older homeless men, the Tokyo government planned new developments ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which may have driven them out. During the period of the pandemic, Shinjuku became more and more inhabited by teenage homeless, who fled from abusive home environments, and harboured a general distrust for adults, mainly their parents and the police. Toyoko kids, literally meaning “kids next to Toho”, referring to the Shinjuku Toho Cinema Building have since gained notoriety for developing into an underground culture, with its own fashion sense and social hierarchy (Kahan, 2023; Yukana, 2024).

For those who are not eligible for disability pensions, and cannot count on family support for sustenance, the *Seikatsu Konkyusha Jiritsu Shien Seido*⁵⁸ comes as one of the few eligible options, as it is intended to support unemployed people not covered by any social security benefits. Indeed, *hikikomori* individuals were one of the intended targets of this support system, as was claimed in their initial report (Sekimizu, 2022). However, this system does not seem to extend beyond providing citizens with services to prevent them from being dependent on public assistance. Even though some of the authors were able to receive public support, this only came in the form of discounts in public institutions:

“There are some people (among the authors) who receive public support. The main ones are disability pensions and discounts at public institutions. It is not easy to get them.”

(Excerpt from a written response provided by Ishizaki Moribito, present in Annex B)

Some scholars estimate that the limited governmental measures are mainly intended to attenuate the number of welfare recipients (Sekimizu, 2022). Despite considering the issue of *hikikomori*, not only as an issue of employment support but also of poverty prevention, the passive-aggressive stance of the government seems akin to *mushi*, as it has yet to allocate funds to specifically assist *hikikomori* individuals in need (Hattori, 2013). On top of this, some authors also mention the stigma of seeking public assistance as an additional obstacle:

“Thanks to this, I'm still surviving. In this country, there's a social stigma associated with public assistance, so you need the mental strength to assert your rights under the Public Assistance Act. At this stage, you also need some knowledge. (Male, 50s)”

(From the article “Various Opinions on “Money” from *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos*
Editorial Department)

Some scholars agree that because *hikikomori* individuals fundamentally ponder on the meaning of work (Horiguchi, 2017), they find no meaning in seeking the more available option of governmental support: the assistance to find employment:

⁵⁸ *Seikatsu Konkyusha Jiritsu Shien Seido* (生活困窮者自立支援制度) was established to provide public assistance in an integrated manner, as a response to the increasing number of citizens in need of public assistance. In other words, its main objective was poverty prevention by decreasing the number of citizens receiving public help (Sekimizu, 2022)

“My parents would often say, "Just work for now," but I couldn't find any meaning in work. The thought of working was inconceivable, especially when I was already afraid to leave the house. My mother would lament, "Everyone goes outside to work, and it's so pitiful that my own child can't do it." I countered by saying, "If you think everyone's doing it, then go bring those 'everyone' people here right now," and it turned into an argument.”

(From the article “Get a Job or Leave” by Mikey)

However, as the authors find a lack of support in both mental health care and government, employment presents itself not as a means of obtaining status, or of fulfilling a social role, but as a lesser evil compared to their financial issues:

“There are instances where the hardships of the workplace, fueled by fears about money or falling back, can actually make life even more challenging than it was during the period of withdrawal. Can such employment truly be deemed a 'goal'?

For individuals dealing with these challenges, what matters most isn't just finding a job to resolve financial problems and participate in society. It's about whether the 'difficulty in living' has lessened compared to the times when they were withdrawn.”

(From the article "Working to Resolve, or Not" by Medium)

Regarding this chapter's aim of understating the factors that contribute to the decision to social withdrawal, it was verified that these revolved around three main factors: stressful social environment; pressure from socio-cultural values; and lack of support. The most pronounced factor was the social environment in which the authors grew up in, and worked, and that was a constant source of stress. The abuse some authors suffered at school or work, was always paired with some form of emotional abuse at home, either by their spouses or, most commonly, by their parents. Abuse at school and work is common due to the impact that socio-cultural values, such as social harmony, respect for hierarchy and the importance of building interpersonal relationships have in Japanese culture. Similarly, parents often maintain their gender-assigned roles, and seem inflexible in changing them, even to the detriment of their child's mental health. Similarly, children refrain from asking for help, even when being victims of abuse, as they are instructed to “bear it” to be able to continue their educational and professional path toward success. Thus, any deviation from

this path causes immense stress to the child. However, the authors recognize that the parents also suffer from social expectations, which indicates that the true issue may lie with the single-track mindset, prevalent in Japanese society. Furthermore, even when attempting to seek assistance on their condition, the authors found challenges in both mental health care and governmental support. In terms of mental health care, not only are the authors victims of the prejudice against mental health, in Japanese society, but they are also overmedicated and possibly misdiagnosed, often worsening their condition. As for governmental support, this seems only to exist to either diminish the number of school absentees or to support *hikikomori* individuals in returning to the “single-track” that is the institutionally accepted school and employment correlated systems. In such conditions, many *hikikomori* individuals struggle to find ways of reintegrating Japanese society. However, in this regard, the authors of *Hikipos* offer a plurality of suggestions and thoughts on how a conciliation between Japanese society and *hikikomori* individuals can occur.

3.3. A place for *hikikomori* individuals in Japanese society

This theme analyzes the opinions of the authors on whether there can be a conciliation between contemporary Japanese society and *hikikomori* individuals, in a way that *hikikomori* individuals can feel accepted and are more prone to abandon their state of social withdrawal. This theme also means to discover if the authors' suggestions pertaining to this conciliation have grounds to be scientifically valid, by comparing them to other study cases and reports that share similar methods to the authors' suggestions. In this chapter, less consensus was found among authors, as each has a unique perspective on what *hikikomori* individuals and Japanese society should change in order to coexist. Still, the various perspectives were organized into four subthemes as presented below.

3.3.1 Reintegration into society

This sub-theme addresses the authors' strategies and suggestions to other *hikikomori* individuals on how to adapt to contemporary Japanese society, by recounting their own experiences in this effort.

As was analyzed in Part I, there have been several accounts of efforts to reintegrate *hikikomori* individuals back into society, mainly organized by institutions, companies, or psychiatrists. However, in the authors' opinion, the efforts made so far have been focused on assimilating *hikikomori* individuals back into being “subjugated” by traditional social values:

“In public initiatives, the goal of "*hikikomori*" support is often centered around employment. However, even with a job, the suffering of "*hikikomori*" does not necessarily end. I speak from personal experience; I spent my days in tension, never forming relationships with others, and faced similar issues as when I was a "*hikikomori*.”

(From the article “Rush to Take It Slow: For *Hikikomori*, Play Should Take Priority Over Vocational Training” by Kikui Yashin)

Nevertheless, reintegration seems to be important to some authors, as they believe complete separation from society can be prejudicial to all *hikikomori* individuals:

“However, if we remain in those “tepid waters” with people that are akin to us for a long time, we may also start feeling that our self-esteem is decreasing. At one point, the fact that we’re not social people becomes our pride, and we end up doing little else but licking each other’s wounds and criticizing society; is it not so? Will we spend the rest of our lives as people who aren’t accepted in society?”

(From the article “Pretending to be a “normal person” / To connect with society while being a *hikikomori*” by Vosot Ikeida)

Studies on the effect of social isolation found that people who have poor social skills, distrust of others, feelings of isolation and rejection, and negative affectivity, are more prone to have negative mood, anxiety, low self-esteem, and anger. In opposition, less isolated people tend to have high scores when tested on the same effects. (Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2005). Furthermore, much like the testimony of the author, the effects of isolation on one’s world view has been more recently studied, in the context of “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers”⁵⁹ in social media (Figà, Talamanca & Arfini, 2022). Such studies have found that social media users tend to become more isolated, as algorithms tailor the content they see by their existing beliefs. As such, users are limited to only interacting with content that does not challenge their beliefs, resulting in an intellectually unchallenged environment. The isolation thus leads them to form more negative impressions of others, while remaining “ideologically safe” (Figà, Talamanca & Arfini, 2022). within their belief system, which can exacerbate their loneliness and accentuate their intolerance of others. The authors believe this tendency needs to change:

“On the contrary, I think the most important thing is whether we ourselves accept the people around us.”

(From the article “Methods we tried to alleviate anxiety in communication” by
Hikipos Editorial Department)

⁵⁹ “Filter bubbles” can be understood “as a state of intellectual isolation determined by the preference algorithms that underlie contemporary web-based platforms such as Facebook and Google”. The communities that are eventually created by these filters, among people who share and replicate the same beliefs, are named “echo chambers” (Figà Talamanca & Arfini, 2022:20).

As Goffman writes (1955), mutual acceptance in a social context is predicated on the fact that “each of the members guarantees to support a given face for the other members in given situations” (Goffman, 1955:12). To some extent, the Japanese social concept of *tatemae* already assists in this task, as it is meant to present a “social persona” of each individual, which is more agreeable with others and with social norms. However, the authors seem to suggest that the essence of mutual acceptance lies in accepting the other’s “true self”, or *honne*, instead of a fabricated persona. In this sense, a true social relationship should be thought of “as a way in which the person is more than ordinarily forced to trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others” (Goffman, 1955:12).

3.3.1.1. To become more extroverted

Many authors focus on suggesting how to improve *hikikomori* individuals' social skills. These suggestions are based on their thoughts, as well as their practical experience in using them to become more extroverted. First, the authors believe it is critical to improve the capacity to interact with others, starting with accustoming *hikikomori* individuals to conversations, by suggesting ways of improving conversational skills, without having to engage in an actual conversation:

“◆Understand that “communication is basically a series of conversation patterns” and memorize common sentences used in conversations. Observe people who are good at speaking to see how they carry a conversation and try to mimic them.

◆Radio personalities are pros at talking and speaking. I learned how to talk by listening to the radio.

◆Record radio programs to train your conversation skills.

◆Listen to *rakugo*⁶⁰ to learn how conversations flow.

⁶⁰ *Rakugo* (落語) is a Japanese traditional form of storytelling in which a single performer tells an anecdote while remaining seated and only using a fan and a towel as props. The performance can be a monologue or it can involve several characters. In the latter case, the performer acts as every single character, only by using changes in their voice and mannerisms (“*Rakugo*” (*The Art of Storytelling*), 2015)

◆ Watch live streams on *Nico Nico Douga*⁶¹ and YouTube and write comments while doing so. It takes a long time until we can write a good comment to which the streamer or the other viewers react to, but we can fail as many times as we need until we nail it.”

“◆ Sometimes our voice doesn’t come out if we don’t use it regularly, so you can talk to tools such as Amazon Echo or AI speakers and practice your conversations that way.

◆ When I had trouble using my voice, something that worked very well was reading out loud while doing my English homework.

◆ Pretend you’re calling someone and make up an imaginary conversation.

◆ By training the muscles of my face (raising the corners of my mouth, without using my hands, and keeping that expression for 10 seconds, then repeating it several times), I felt that the muscles around my mouth became less stiff and I could smile more naturally. That made me gain more self-confidence, and I also started smiling more and my communication skills improved.”

(From the article “Methods we tried to alleviate anxiety in communication” by
Hikipos Editorial Department)

By comparing the symptoms authors claim to have in social settings with psychological disorders, the relationship between *hikikomori* and social anxiety disorder becomes evident, as both include symptoms of anxiety derived from the fear of being “scrutinized, evaluated, or judged by others” (*Social Anxiety Disorder: More Than Just Shyness*, 2022). Furthermore, the authors’ suggestions tend to coincide with known treatment methods for social anxiety disorder, namely behavioral mimicry⁶² and roleplay. For behavioral mimicry, studies indicate that the benefit of these methods is bi-directional. In other words, both parties in a given social interaction are likelier to become affiliated with the other, mimicking or being mimicked (Abbott, 2005). As for roleplay, a non-profit organization called *New Start*, which focuses on assisting *hikikomori* individuals in Japan, has already implemented this strategy to train *hikikomori* individuals who wish to join the job market. Through seminars dedicated to phone etiquette, interviews, and how to talk to

⁶¹ *Nico Nico Douga* (ニコニコ動画) is a Japanese video-sharing platform, similar to Youtube, with some differing features. However, its main use is still for sharing videos and live broadcast, which allows direct interaction between content creator and viewer, through a live chat (K. Nagata, 2011)

⁶² Behavioral mimicry is the process of mimicking the behavior of others, in an social interaction, intending to gain social acceptance from the other party (Abbott, 2005).

coworkers, *New Start* aims to raise the confidence of its participants on how to behave in social scenarios that are usually expected of college graduates who enter the workforce (Ismail, 2020).

As an alternative to learning social skills through mock practice, one author suggests using an alias to “infiltrate” society, to learn social skills from practice:

“Thinking like this, the best way to learn sociability as a *hikikomori* is to “study abroad”⁶³; furthermore, it should be for a short period of time so the *hikikomori* can immediately return to their room.”

(From the article “Pretending to be a “normal person” / To connect with society while being a *hikikomori*” by Vosot Ikeida)

In the treatment of social anxiety disorder, along with behavioral mimicry, exposure therapy is considered one of the most successful and important methods in cognitive-behavioral therapy⁶⁴. As this method involves exposure of the subject to real-life scenarios, it serves two purposes: acclimating the subject to social situations; and creating opportunities to apply the skills gained during roleplay practice (Singh & Hope, 2009). Although individuals who consider themselves introverts may resist this change in their usual behavior, studies have shown that this shift is more easily performed than the opposite shift: extroverts behaving like introverts. More importantly, dispositional extraversion has been shown to predicate positive emotions, regardless of whether it is performed by someone introverted or extroverted (Zelenski et al., 2012).

Other authors proposed the opposite, by highlighting the difference between them and the standard image of a Japanese citizen, to be able to escape the standard social expectation of a Japanese adult:

“I stopped following the appearance that is typical of a “normal” adult. By doing so, you immediately send out a message that “there’s a possibility this person doesn’t abide

⁶³ The term by the author is *ryuugaku* (留学) is a noun meaning the act of “studying abroad” which usually involves studying in another country for a temporary duration. However, it can also mean to study at another school in order to acquire a specific skill (*Definition of 留学*, n.d.).

⁶⁴ Cognitive-behavioral therapy refers to the class of interventions that “are based on the basic premise that emotional disorders are maintained by cognitive factors, and that psychological treatment leads to changes in these factors through cognitive (cognitive restructuring) and behavioral (e.g., exposure, behavioral experiments, relaxation training, social skills training) techniques” (Hoffman & Smits, 2008:2).

by the so-called ‘normal’ values”. To be more specific, I dyed my hair red, started wearing piercings and got some tattoos.”

(From the article "Methods we tried to alleviate anxiety in communication" by
Hikipos Editorial Department)

“I think dying my hair and smoking, distancing myself from the image of “a good son”, also had an effect.”

(From the article “Running away rather than stepping out into society - Kikui Yashin)

As Japanese schools have often enforced strict rules on students’ appearance, from the length of their skirts and the color of their underwear to the shape and color of their hair, some regard these rules as a form of oppression (Denyer & Inuma, 2021) Thus, the authors’ desire to dye their hair and have piercings and tattoos can be seen as a form of rebellion against Japanese society’s imposed conformity.

3.3.1.2. “Part-time” hikikomori

Many authors also argue that their behavior as *hikikomori* individuals should not be completely abandoned, as they deem the possibility of “retreating” from society as a necessary solution for escaping the reality of continuing to endure socially demanding work. Thus, they suggest being a part-time hikikomori individual as a more sustainable solution:

“When stress builds up in my relationships with others, I want to shut down. I decide, 'Today is a *hikikomori* day,' take the day off work, and cut off contact with friends. Doing that renews my energy from within. For me, having the option to comfortably *hikikomori* is happiness.”

(From the article “What Is happiness for *hikikomori*?” by *Hikipos* Editorial
Department)

“*Hikikomori* themselves are telling us firsthand that “it’s fine to run away when things are hard” and “it’s fine to shut yourself in.”

(From the interview article “Media Coverage on *Hikikomori* as Described by People in
the Field” by Vosot Ikeida)

A study has shown that people with social anxiety symptoms value their time alone as a way of recharging their “social battery”, since they feel continuously drained while

socializing with others (S. S. Y. Kim et al., 2022). Although not scientifically recognized, the term “social battery” is employed by younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) to refer to the expenditure one person has for social interactions until they no longer feel like socializing and require time alone to recharge said “battery”. The limit of each individual’s “social battery” depends on personal aspects, with introverted personalities having a lower limit (Böhm et al., 2023:94). A similar concept to “social battery” can be found in literature about the conservation of resources (COR) theory⁶⁵, which is that of “resource depletion” (Windeler et al., 2017:978). This concept suggests that continuous cognitive arousal caused by social interaction, which involves self-regulation and emotional engagement, consumes energy. This is especially the case in interactions that can feel less pleasant, in which the individuals have to actively suppress their emotions. This is often the case for interactions experienced by *hikikomori* individuals. In a study conducted on patients with major depressive disorder, participants often expressed the desire to “find a cave and crawl in”, “to hide” or to “shut down”, after having endured a state of depleted resources (Porr et al., 2010). Similarly, *hikikomori* individuals often express that their contact with society requires a large amount of energy, leading to exhaustion and the consequent desire to rest at home for days, or even weeks, at a time (Kaneko, 2006).

Without proper supervision, the consumption of the individual’s energy resources can lead to burnout, negative physiological effects, and even mental issues, including depression. As such, interruptions from this continuous resource depletion can improve well-being. In a working context, these interruptions usually come in the form of vacations, breaks, and sabbaticals, which are opportunities to replenish depleted resources (Windeler et al., 2017). In the context of *hikikomori* support groups, rest is accepted as part of the process of regaining contact with society, as many members can only increase this contact gradually, while often interrupting this contact with periods of rest, sometimes lasting a few months, before returning to their to the support group (Kaneko, 2006). Some have noted the paradox

⁶⁵ The conservation of resources (COR) theory is a stress theory which posits that people strive to gain, retain, and protect key resources, in order to manage stress, cope with adversity, and promote well-being. COR also presents a difference between personal resources, which refer to an individual characteristics, such as skills, knowledge, and self-esteem, and social resources which refer to external resources that come from social networks, such as social support, mentoring, and positive relationships. Finally, structural resources refer to tangible resources, such as financial resources, equipment, and facilities (Egozi Farkash et al., 2022; Windeler et al., 2017)

apparent with people with symptoms of social anxiety, as they both wish to be closer to others, while distancing themselves from social situations when feeling anxious (Kim et al., 2022). However, the authors have noted that this paradox is a necessary evil in order to forge new relationships:

“I couldn’t follow the shortest distance routes, such as employment or studies. But now that I have a path of retreat and a detour of my own, I can finally move. This leads me to create bonds with other people and, as an example of a consequence where right or wrong are irrelevant, it’s also given birth to social relationships. I think this is the kind of experience I had.”

(From the article “Running away rather than stepping out into society” by Kikui Yashin)

As a study analyzing the benefits and downgrades of part-time telework found, a continuous stream of interaction offers less and less opportunities to stop the loss of resources and their replenishment (Windeler et al., 2017). Thus, retreat presents itself as a necessary and viable option to afford these opportunities:

“The idea of choosing the path of retreat over the path of evolution has been supported within the medical field. Psychiatrist Nakai Hisao⁶⁶ has said that, for the sake of mental health, one must adopt the “posture of *sakaro*” and not the “last-ditch effort formation”⁶⁷. “*Sakaro*” refers to a ship equipped with oars in the back that are used to row backwards. It is said that what we need isn’t the strength to move forward, but the flexibility to be able to retreat.”

(From the article “Running away rather than stepping out into society” by Kikui Yashin)

⁶⁶ Psychiatrist Nakai Hisao (1934-2022) is mostly known for his work on the diagnosis and treatment of schizophrenia, as well as the application of art therapy in its treatment.

⁶⁷ In the original article, the author uses the terms *sakaro no kamae* (逆櫓の構え) and *haisui no jin* (背水の陣), both of which are proverbs of military background. As the author explains, *sakaro no kamae* refers to boats equipped with oars that allow that boat to be rowed backwards, in case a retreat is necessary in battle. *Haisui no jin* implies the deployment of an army, while having their back towards the water, thus implying that “it is as dangerous to retreat as it is to advance” (Seki, 2016).

3.3.1.3. Work for hikikomori

The authors also offered suggestions on types of employment that could be properly considered as work for hikikomori individuals. These suggestions take into account the specific struggles of *hikikomori* individuals and include (based on the article “I Tried It in Real Life! - Jobs Suitable for *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department):

- jobs that are result-oriented, to allow for short working periods;
- jobs with low quotas and little need for communication, such as handing out tissues⁶⁸;
- jobs with no sales targets or customers, like interacting with the elderly;
- jobs that begin with little interaction, but grow to become more socially interactive as the trust between employer and *hikikomori* employee grows;
- Menial jobs, such as inserting expense data in an accounting firm.

Some support centers that also support *hikikomori* individuals reflect the authors’ perspective on how to assist *hikikomori* individuals in having a better opportunity of employment. One example is “The Collaborative Liaison Committee”, a facility to support the transition to employment for persons with disabilities which has an office aimed at providing an “office environment” so that *hikikomori* individuals can get accustomed to it. Through a series of IT courses, the facility also offers to teach computer programming at the affordable pace of once to twice a month (Yanai, 2018). The Collaborative Liaison Committee further aims to use public communal spaces to share skills that may lead to work for *hikikomori* individuals, like computer programming. Some *hikikomori* individuals also suggest the use of computer skills as a way of becoming a freelancer. They suggest platforms such as Fiverr to serve as an intermediary for those who can acquire skills in computer programming, graphic design, or video editing which, in turn, can all be obtained with free online resources (Yamazoe, 2021).

⁶⁸ Handing out tissues is a common marketing practice in Japan, which involves employees handing out packs of tissues, usually in a commercial space. The design of the tissue package contains an advertisement for a variety of businesses: from cram schools, to restaurants, to money loan businesses. This practice is popular, as tissues can be mass-produced in all seasons, and since they are usually carried by consumers, the advertisements are more likely to continuously be seen (Yae, 2018).

Despite these initiatives, some authors prefer the entrepreneurial route, to avoid the stigma of being labeled as *freeter* or *NEET*:

“When I decided to become self-employed, it was important to introduce myself as a "self-employed person" or "freelancer." Even when there was no work, I suddenly created business cards.”

(From the article “I Tried It in Real Life! - Jobs Suitable for *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos*
Editorial Department)

The Dream Map Promotion Association provides an educational program named “Dream Map”, which encourages participants to draw a mind map expressing their dreams for the future, and then share them with others. This program has been done in schools and corporations and has proved successful in incentivizing the entrepreneurial ambitions of *hikikomori* individuals (When People Draw Dreams, They Show Their Power. Mini Dream Map Experience (夢を描くと人は力を発揮する。ミニドリームマップ体験会), 2017).

Other authors suggest volunteer work as a way of socializing and getting accustomed to a work-like environment. Said work environment is particularly relevant when related to the *hikikomori* issue, as *hikikomori* individuals are more likely to be empathetic towards similar struggles in others:

“By showing up at *hikikomori*-related activities, I was gradually recognized and asked, “Would you like to help?” for volunteer work. Even if you fail at volunteering, you can quit anytime. If your potential employer knows about your *hikikomori* experience and remembers your character, and if they are understanding, it can become an empathetic workplace.”

(From the article “I Tried It in Real Life! - Jobs Suitable for *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos*
Editorial Department)

Researchers have found that some *hikikomori* individuals not only attend support groups, but also assist in their activities, whether they are directly related to helping *hikikomori* individuals or with other volunteer activities, such as pet therapy, and arts and crafts. *Hikikomori* individuals who participate are not only exposed to social interaction in a more supportive environment, allowing them to slowly become more active (Yeung et al., 2024), but some also wish to provide a safe space for other *hikikomori* individuals and

parents to attend (Horiguchi, 2011). NPOs such as *Orenji no Kai* provide a space for both *hikikomori* individuals and their parents to interact with each other, and even offer certifications for those who wish to become *hikikomori* supporters themselves (Yamawaki, 2019). Another NPO, *New Start*, also provides opportunities for *hikikomori* individuals to interact with others, with volunteers, with foreigners, and even with the world outside, through shrine pilgrimage events⁶⁹ (Priestly, 2013).

Another possibility, per one author's experience, is to become involved in projects that seek to assist people who share the same struggles as the author. In this particular case, a project that assists those with developmental disabilities:

“I came across *OriHime*⁷⁰ – the avatar robot – and its inventor Yoshifuji Ory, and became involved in the OryLaboratory as a student intern. Furthermore, I decided the subject of my master's thesis would be developmental disabilities and studied for it in the afternoons while also going to the employment transition support center.”

(From the article “I, who lost my family, until I connected to the resources in my region” by Gakincho)

The *OriHime* robot has gained popularity as a treatment option for *hikikomori* individuals, even in a public setting. Officials of Kobe City, Japan, have already established transitional community centers where *hikikomori* individuals can interact with an *OriHime* unit, in cases where they feel unable to interact with other people. The local government further intends to support the creation of a timetable for *hikikomori* individuals to borrow *OriHime* units, free of charge. This measure was implemented as an alternative to online chatting since it allows the use of non-verbal communication cues (Montgomery, 2021). Furthermore, the *OriHime* robot is ideal for those who struggle with eye contact, or who still fear the judgment of others upon being seen (Kumazaki et al., 2021). Since its

69 The shrine pilgrimage itself is the “Shikoku 88 Temple Pilgrimage”, which includes a visit to 88 “official” temples and numerous other sacred sites. The entire route is about 1,200 kilometers long and is regarded as a religious Buddhist journey (*HENRO*, n.d.).

70 *OriHime* is a 2' cm tall tele-operated robot, equipped with a video camera and microphone, which is also able to communicate non-verbally with gestures. The robot was designed in order to increase sociability for *hikikomori* individuals within the autism spectrum, with developmental disabilities, and others with difficulty in communicating (Kumazaki et al., 2021).

implementation, it has resulted in more *hikikomori* individuals slowly feeling comfortable in leaving their homes and visiting these centers (Montgomery, 2021).

Another author suggests obtaining a disability certificate, as it helps workplaces feel more understanding towards the predicament of *hikikomori* individuals:

“Obtaining a disability certificate is a good step if you have no hesitations, as it helps workplaces understand what kind of conditions and considerations are needed”

(From the article “I Tried It in Real Life! - Jobs Suitable for *Hikikomori*” *Hikipos*
Editorial Department)

In Japan, private companies must ensure that 2,2% to 2,3% of their positions are reserved for persons with disabilities (which is planned to increase to 2,7% by 2026) (*Employment Support for Persons with Disabilities*, n.d.). *Hikikomori* individuals who can obtain a mental disability certificate are thus able to apply to these positions. Companies that do not fill the standard quota, which is still regarded as small when compared to other countries, are required to pay a fine of 50,000 yen (roughly 295€) for each “missing” employee. Still, many companies opt to circumvent this obligation, by instead sponsoring sports teams with disabilities, or by assigning people with disabilities to “low-skill, low-paying, dead-end positions.” (Rothrock, n.d.).

Despite this fact, some authors find comfort in standard corporate jobs, as some of them can provide stability without demanding too much effort of the employee. These jobs are considered, by them, to be less of a source of anxiety than other available routes:

“When I'm at work, I can forget about the unpleasant things. Trying too hard to earn or pushing productivity to the extreme is what makes you go crazy. Instead, it's better to use work as a way to escape from reality. (Male, 40s)

(...) Being a corporate drone, sometimes it's easier because you switch off your thoughts. Working while worrying about being laid off at any moment and having less salary next month is exhausting. (Female, 30s)”

(From the article “Various Opinions on "Money" from *Hikikomori*” by *Hikipos*
Editorial Department)

3.3.2. Towards self-realization

This sub-theme addresses authors' self-reflection on changes they perceive as necessary in their path toward recovery from their social withdrawal. Although most authors still consider themselves *hikikomori* individuals, they still believe that a change in specific behavior patterns helped them establish new interpersonal bonds. Furthermore, they believe their experience offers a unique perspective on social relationships and behavior in Japanese society. Some scholars have already highlighted the importance of *hikikomori* individuals' perspective on Japanese society: “*Hikikomori*, she said, actually have a higher psychological age than their peers because they spend so much time thinking about life” (Rubinstein, 2016:8).

3.3.2.1. Shift in perspective

Most authors address some form of shift in their previous perspective, either regarding their condition as *hikikomori* or regarding their previous assumptions on how to behave that hindered their recovery. One of these shifts is shedding the stigma associated with seeking help, especially when dealing with symptoms of psychopathologies, which can be hard to control:

“There’s absolutely no reason to feel shame in asking a professional for help in order to control the “unconscious” side, and I am confident that doing so will make the people who are suffering closer to achieving happiness.”

(From the interview article “Interview with Katoo Kooki, the *mangaka*⁷¹ of the “*Shinsai Neet*⁷²” by Toshi)

⁷¹ *Mangaka* (マンガ家) is the Japanese term to refer to a *manga* author.

⁷² The title of the manga “*Shinsai Neet*” was translated as “Earthquake Disaster Neet”. Although the name of the manga is not written in kanji, but in hiragana, the term *shinsai* (しんさい) likely refers to an earthquake or seismic hazard (震災). However, the term *shinsai* can also be derived from the kanji that indicates “matters decided by the emperor” (親裁). As this manga explains how a self-denying person, who gets their values imposed by their father, ends up filling their heart with anguish, both terms can possibly relate to it.

Studies have found that stigma against mental health indeed extends to a stigma against seeking help for it (Kasahara-Kiritani et al., 2018). Although anti-stigma programs and other educational tools have already proved to have positive results, they have yet to successfully change the overall stigma and help-seeking behavior in Japan. Another stigma authors find in need of change, in themselves and others, is that of “hard work” as a definitive and mandatory path to success:

“Before, I used to look at people coldly and I’d judge them all the time, but when that started happening to me instead, I understood that I’d been a really nasty person—and that, at the very least, was something positive. Now, I’ve changed my perspective and I’ve gotten rid of the prejudice that told me I had to work hard.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Some scholars suggest that, in the specific case of treating *hikikomori* individuals, overemphasizing the value of paid work, to the detriment of unpaid work hinders efforts of reintegrating *hikikomori* individuals into the workforce (Su et al., 2023). In fact, unpaid work, such as volunteering and care work, can prove to be a sustainable form of exposing *hikikomori* individuals to social and work-related environments. Further methods of reintegration can involve shadowing programs and internships, with simple hands-on experience (V. Wong, 2015), so that *hikikomori* individuals may acquire empirical knowledge and mentoring, without the associated expectation of presenting proof of “hard work”. Many authors agree with the importance of not feeling bound to the virtue of success in academics or employment and, instead, being able to make choices for their own sake:

“The psychological pressure of societal expectations such as academics and employment leaves little room for rest and play. “Taking it slow” isn’t a half-hearted endeavor; it requires strong determination and the ability to make a clear decision to genuinely rest and play. The only thing that was truly necessary for me was to explore what I truly wanted to do and to leisurely immerse myself in it.”

(From the article “Rush to Take It Slow: For *Hikikomori*, Play Should Take Priority Over Vocational Training” by Kikui Yashin)

Some researchers and activists have addressed the issue of the ability to choose how to spend one's time. As claimed by Nobuyuki Minami, the head of a "free space"⁷³, *hikikomori* individuals should be treated as humans, by giving them the autonomy to choose what to study and when (Zielenziger, 2006). However, this should be tempered by a sense of responsibility, making them accountable for cooking, cleaning, and gardening chores. As Minami believes that *hikikomori* individuals tend to be very sensitive to "atmospheric changes most adults can't discern" (Zielenziger, 2006:84), he believes that providing *hikikomori* individuals with more autonomy allows them to recover their self-confidence and become more active in socializing in his "free space" (Zielenziger, 2006). Similarly, authors also believe that to be able to build social relationships, *hikikomori* individuals must be able to clearly express themselves, even when it pertains to their negative emotions:

"The strategy that most helped me was "exposing everything". In other words, not hiding my stress or anxiety. I let the other person know that I'm anxious, by saying things like, "I'm feeling nervous" or "Talking face-to-face like this stresses me out, do you mind if I sit comfortably?" Once I started doing this, things became a lot easier."

(From the article "Methods we tried to alleviate anxiety in communication" by
Hikipos Editorial Department)

A study found that when compared to American or European educational values, children in East Asian countries are taught to not overtly express emotions, namely negative ones, as these do not "bode well for mutual support and group cohesiveness" (Ip et al., 2021:15). As such, expression of emotions such as sadness, among Japanese people, tends to be significantly less, as otherwise would be challenging existing social norms of conduct. However, authors believed this tendency should change since their own experience of expressing negative emotions and embracing negative outcomes led to changes in their self-denying behavior:

"Whether I was negative or positive, certain things were inevitable, and 'not working out' was rarely one of them, especially suffocation, which hardly ever happened. I began to forcefully convince myself, 'I'm just living. That's perfect,' and that's when real

⁷³ "Free spaces", aside from offering services similar to "free schools", also offer housing facilities which are optional for attendees of the "free school". In "free spaces", schedules are loosely planned by the staff, and no member is forced to wake up or go to bed at a specific. Instead, members are free to attend the classes they wish, as well as participate in other leisure activities, such as sports (Ogino, 2004).

change began. (...) What I valued was not denying myself even when I couldn't do something or made mistakes. Embracing failure gradually led to significant changes.”

(From the article “How I Rose from the Depths of Misfortune” by Ishizaki Moribito)

These findings seem to be consistent with previous studies on emotion regulation, showing that suppressing emotions has wide-ranging adverse effects on mental health and social outcomes, while emotional expression is related to interpersonal benefits (such as experiencing greater acceptance from others) and positive indicators of psychological wellbeing (e.g., Chervonsky & Hunt, 2017; Cameron & Overall, 2018).

Similarly, because Japanese children are trained to be more attentive to negative information about the group, they are more likely to be absorbed in self-criticism upon failure, and less prone to celebrate success, when compared to Western cultures. Thus, Japanese children are characterized as experiencing more anxiety when they fail (Lewis et al., 2010). To combat this tendency to focus on negative outcomes, some authors decide to interpret “happiness” as a duty (*gimu*), thus imbuing happiness with a culturally relevant concept.

““Human beings have a duty to be happy” (...) The result was that even if they pretended to be extroverted, they still felt happy by interacting with people. The field of happiness studies indicates that happiness doesn't increase unless you interact with others”

(From the article “Happiness Gained through *Hikipos*: We Have a Duty to Be Happy”
by Sato Manabu)

The term used by the author, *gimu* (義務), is of particular relevance. *Gimu* descends from the feudalistic concept of *giri* (義理), which is succinctly understood as “duty” or as “one’s own honor” and can be “defined as a social agreement or understanding to square one's actions with a thorough understanding of " what to do " in one's society” (Minami, 1954:155). *Gimu* has been described as a modern interpretation *giri* and carries the idea of the lifelong duty to repay one’s debt, normally to one’s own family or country (Caldwell, 2016). By interpreting this concept in the context of one’s own happiness, the author seems to suggest that pursuing one’s happiness is a continuous effort that should be considered a debt to oneself. One suggestion to achieve this state of happiness is to find hobbies that

cannot be considered work or study, to avoid associated social pressures, and enjoy them as leisure:

“In my case, by having hobbies that won’t lead to work opportunities and interests that can’t be described as “studies”, the pressure of “I definitely have to do this” started to diminish considerably.”

(From the article “Running away rather than stepping out into society” by Kikui Yashin)

The author’s claim is confirmed by studies showing the positive benefits of hobbies and other recreational activities in mental health (Hamano et al., 2010). Hobbies are usually considered voluntary non-work activities, which many studies have shown to improve the prevention and management of symptoms of anxiety and depression, which in turn is highly beneficial for *hikikomori* individuals (Fancourt et al., 2021).

3.3.2.2. Reconciling with parents

Some authors also believe that reconciliation with their parents, or forgiving their parents for their tense or abusive upbringing is an important part of their recovery:

“We tend to think that we’re the ones at fault, but oftentimes the fault lies in our upbringing or our parents, and it’s highly probable that our parents grew up suffering from self-denial, too.”

(From the interview article “Interview with Katoo Kooki, the *mangaka* of the “*Shinsai Neet*” by Toshi)

In some cases, parents were the ones that attempted to reconcile with their children, after reflecting on their family’s situation :

“It was my father, not my mother, who fulfilled that wish. At the age of seventeen, while I was in the midst of school refusal and *hikikomori*, feeling utterly hopeless, I received a long email from my father. The email didn't mention my school refusal or *hikikomori* at all; instead, it reflected on my father's life, his introspection, and his determination to challenge the bar exam for some reason. I think he also wrote something like, “You can do whatever you want.” I had expected a lecture about my school refusal and *hikikomori*, so I was pleasantly surprised. I felt a great sense of relief. “Wait a minute, my father is

trying to live his own life. Then I should be free to live my own life as well,” I thought. From that day on, I gradually became more positive.”

(From the interview article “Parents living their parent lives” Wakeari Joshi)

Researchers who conducted studies on parents of *hikikomori* individuals (Horiguchi, 2011; Rubinstein, 2016), their support groups, and the narratives they build, have found that parents often reflect upon their past actions, with some feeling remorseful. Furthermore, those who have experienced their child’s condition for some time change their initial assumption of the *hikikomori* condition. This assumption goes from “social failure” to “profound psychological” experience. Parents describe their children’s condition as a self-discovery journey, which challenges their preconceived role in society, something “akin to spiritual enlightenment (*satori*⁷⁴)” (Rubinstein, 2016:8-9). As another author notes, by providing a different perspective on the role model of *ganbatte*, some parents are able to become a more positive role model: It is no longer “you have to do your best”, but instead “You are free and able to do anything you want”:

“In this way, for children to walk a peaceful and happy path in life, they need multiple happy adult role models. Parents, who are the most significant role models, should think about their own happiness. Instead of making parenting their sole purpose, they should find purpose within their own lives.”

(From the article “Parents living their parent lives” Wakeari Joshi)

Some authors also express their desire to bond with their parents, as the parents’ old age makes the effort increasingly pressing:

“I cannot be indifferent to my father, who is nearing retirement and beginning to show interest in family contact. If there is any possibility of any change in my father's way of life in the future, I would like to devote that time to getting to know him.”

(From the article “An Indifferent Father Who Never Shows Weakness” by Yurina)

⁷⁴ *Satori* (悟り) is a Zen Buddhist concept referring to the sudden, profound realization of one’s true nature and the nature of reality that exists beyond intellectual comprehension. “It’s a concept that speaks to the possibility of deep transformation and liberation from suffering” (Fuyu, n.d.).

Still, studies have found that alienation and parental intrusion are negatively related to a tendency to forgive (Lawler - Row et al., 2011), which can likely predicate most *hikikomori* individuals' unwillingness to forgive their upbringing, as expressed by some authors:

“I couldn't forgive my abusive mother for what she'd done. Put simply, she meddled excessively.”

(From the article “A housewife, an abusive mother and a daughter” by Gakincho)

However, the same studies found that forgiveness has a positive impact on mental health and in avoiding alienating behavior in the future, thus facilitating the creation of new interpersonal relationships (Lawler - Row et al., 2011). Thus, to build better relationships in the future, *hikikomori* individuals could benefit from amending their past ones.

3.3.2.3. Self-expression

Some authors recount how they have found an outlet, creative or otherwise, that allows for the self-expression of their experiences and reflections on being a *hikikomori* individual. Some express how finding other means of expressing their feelings made them come to terms with their anguish. One such case is the use of blogs and even Twitter to express their thoughts:

“I feel like I took a new step once I stopped blaming myself. At the same time, I also started writing a blog and later on made a Twitter account (@gakincho_shogai).”

(From the article “I, who lost my family, until I connected to the resources in my region” by Gakincho)

The author's usage of Twitter as an outlet appears to be common, as a study on the usage of the term “*hikikomori*” on Japanese Twitter found that the majority of tweets on the subject are of personal anecdotes, either written by *hikikomori* individuals or by those close to them (Pereira-Sanchez et al., 2022). These tweets demonstrate a high probability of likes which can be explained by Twitter users seeking to demonstrate empathy. Furthermore, social support opportunities are also a common theme among Twitter users regarding the *hikikomori* issue. However, two aspects were found to be negative: tweet content relating

hikikomori to mental health is quite low compared to Western countries; and personal anecdotes, despite having a high like ratio display a low probability of being shared. These results seem to indicate that, although *hikikomori* individuals and people with *hikikomori* experience can share their experiences online, there are still some cultural constraints, namely with associating their stories with mental health, as well as with other Twitter users' participation in sharing their stories.

Another outlet discussed by the authors is *manga*, as expressed by the *manga* authors who collaborate in *Hikipos*:

“And once I thought that I wanted to portray [express] my life and expose my faults, for me, manga was the best way of doing it.”

(From the article “I, who lost my family, until I connected to the resources in my region” by Gakincho)

According to a study on the use of art therapy in trauma treatment, art allows the person to again engage with their traumatic experience and offers an opportunity to re-script it, by using the subject's imagination. By having a space that is within their control, the person will feel more comfortable to confront the personal trauma (Haeyen & Staal, 2021). Thus, the recounting of their experience becomes an integral part of their recovery, as individuals can piece their experience into stories from which they can extract meaning (Sullivan, 2018). Similarly, the articles of *Hikipos* also become an outlet for transforming the authors' negative experience as a narrative to inform and elicit understanding from readers:

“The fact that I was a recluse was a negative experience. Revealing it to others is almost like exposing my shame. But I managed to transform it into a source of joy for others. I became a legitimate exhibitionist. Isn't that awesome?”

(From the article “Happiness Gained through *Hikipos*: We Have a Duty to Be Happy” by Sato Manabu)

Aside from therapeutic benefit, *Hikipos* is also important as a rare form of free discourse about the subject of *hikikomori*, as *hikikomori* individuals are often hard to reach for other media attempting to approach the issue:

“As part of the media, we want to do coverages that let people know that not all *hikikomori* are as they think they are, and we also feel the need to convey the voices of *hikikomori* who can’t bring themselves to speak up.”

(From the interview article “Media Coverage on *Hikikomori* as Described by People in the Field” by Vosot Ikeida)

As commented by a journalist of The Japan Times, *Hikipos* helps to highlight the conditions in which *hikikomori* individuals are raised and how the lack of a support system, such as having friendships, can easily lead to a more isolated path in life (Okabe, 2019). As such, *Hikipos* proves its merit in drawing attention to the circumstances that lead to social withdrawal and the social values that predicate them. The journalist further argues that it is only with reciprocal understanding between *hikikomori* individuals and others that human relations can be built (Okabe, 2019).

3.3.3. *Ibasho*: A place to belong

This sub-theme tackles the authors' discussion on the importance of having a place to belong, where they can experience a sense of safety and acceptance. Most authors express their wish for a place of acceptance in order to find a release from the standard of “having to endure hardships to persevere”, which tends to exacerbate their self-denial:

““I don’t want to be weak, it’s pitiful. I want to be strong.” That’s how I used to think, but that meant rejecting and denying my weak self. What I needed the most was a place where I could vent my feelings, because I’d always lived while being rejected myself.”

(From the article “[A society that is unaware of its prejudice] On the Other Side of the Walls” by Suzuho Ozaki)

Thus, many authors found that it was only through the search for a new social environment, away from the one that caused them distress, that they were able to begin trusting others once more:

“Another thing that also had a lot of impact was distancing myself from people that were harmful to me, such as my parents and certain people that supported me, and developing bonds with people who accept me for who I am.”

(From the article “Running away rather than stepping out into society” by Kikui Yashin)

While some scholars have debated, in the last decades, over the paradox of the “Japanese home” as a place of respite and intimacy and, simultaneously, as a place of alienation, violence, and fear, which causes some to feel out of place while in a familial environment. Such individuals then seek to create other spaces that offer the sense of security that the traditional household was unable to (Kottmann, 2022). In this sense, most authors felt the need for a place of belonging removed from the mold of Japanese society:

“However, it would be great if a sense of belonging and contribution could be realized in a way unique to *hikikomori* individuals, rather than following the usual path of a regular office worker, perhaps through initiatives like self-help groups.”

(From the article “What Is happiness for *hikikomori*?” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Although not unique to *hikikomori* individuals, the concept of *ibasho* is often alluded to in the context presented by the author. The term *ibasho*⁷⁵ refers to a space where one feels comfortable and at home and can serve as a place of retreat for those who feel excluded from mainstream society (Kottmann, 2022). For the authors, these spaces often take the form of community support centers:

“Community support associations, including “*Hikizakura*⁷⁶” are a place where people with similar experiences (peers) can meet each other and build connections. In these places, people can “understand each other”, but also “look back on their own selves” and “find their own identity”. They come to understand that “I’m not the only one going through this”. They’re also places where people can strongly experience that “connections change who I am”. This kind of mutual understanding and support is called “peer support”.”

(From the article “Towards a society without suicide” by Warita Daigo)

⁷⁵ The characters for *ibasho* (居場所) allude to “a place to exist or reside”, but the term itself refers to a “place where one can be oneself” or a “safe space”. The term has been used to refer to support groups, elderly communities (*About Ibasho*, n.d.), or even new living arrangements that are distinct from the original familial arrangement (Kottmann, 2022).

⁷⁶ *Hikizakura* is an organization of *hikikomori* that is active in Yokohama City, where gatherings and study groups are held, between the *hikikomori* participants (hikizakura, 2024).

“Peer support” is a system that is not based on psychiatric models but, instead, on the mutual understanding, empathy, and respect that another who has shared the same experience and emotional distress may offer. By affiliating with others who may “feel the same way”, one can form a connection, which comes free of the constraints of traditional expert/patient relationships (Mead, 2003). Thus, for *hikikomori* individuals and parents who harbor distrust for the state of psychiatric care in Japan, community “peer support” comes as a more trustworthy alternative, given the fact that it stands apart from traditional norms. As such, the constitution of an *ibasho* can be seen as abstract and subjective, since it does not necessarily need to be place-bound (Kottmann, 2022). In the case of *hikikomori* individuals, the *ibasho* is bound to the group of people who constitute it, who aim to create a comfortable and secure place where one “feels at ease” (*anshin* / 安心), outside of the home (Horiguchi, 2017). The feeling of sharing their experience and participating in the sharing of others’ experiences has helped some authors to achieve this sense of belonging:

“Meeting others who share the same experiences might bring happiness. I used to think I was the only one. I thought I was the only one who wasn't useful to society, and I believed no one would notice even if I died. But I learned there are plenty of people like me. (...) When I return from the support group, I'm tired. But this tiredness is different from the time when I stayed at home, blaming my parents and society. The struggle doesn't disappear, but the difficulty of facing others and oneself seems to lead to happiness.”

(From the article “What Is happiness for *hikikomori*?” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Either through support groups or “free spaces”, studies have shown that “peer support” is particularly effective in allowing *hikikomori* individuals to slowly become acclimated to social interactions. Although some of the more reticent participants may not commit fully at first, the opportunity to observe others’ interactions gives them the confidence to slowly engage in social activities. Furthermore, organizers of “peer support” groups avoid being authoritative towards members, or burdening them with labels or expectations, thus allowing them to freely engage socially with others at their own pace (Li & Wong, 2015). Eventually, *hikikomori* participants also feel confident enough to rely less on counseling and, eventually,

acquire helper's licenses to assist fellow members (Ogino, 2004). Because *hikikomori* individuals share the same struggles, it becomes easier to empathize on a more intimate level:

“(...) the people I met at the self-help group, despite being complete strangers, shared a level of understanding that was even greater than that of friends I had known for thirty years. It felt like I had met "war comrades" once again. Through my participation, I realized the value of not needing to seek validation or put on a facade. It was a relief to be able to discuss my worries and trivial matters openly.”

(From the article “Do We Really Need Friends?” by Medium)

As claimed by the author, *hikikomori* individuals find it easier to interact with staff and members of “peer support” groups because they more easily sympathize with their “weak-mindedness” and are careful with their word choice so as to not say something that a *hikikomori* member may easily construe as stress-inducing. Thus, they often encourage members to discuss their specific difficulties and anxieties to garner their trust (Ogino, 2004). Aside from sharing their struggle openly, some authors also found a sense of fulfillment in being able to help others on the same path:

“I didn't kill myself because I found things such as “connections”, “the experience of being useful to someone”, “finding worth” and “a place for my heart”. By opening a community support association, I strongly realized that “even someone like me can be useful to other people”. In other words, by supporting others in their recovery processes, I helped my own recovery.”

(From the article “Towards a society without suicide” by Warita Daigo)

A study on the effects of peer support found that peer supporters experience greater quality-of-life benefits when compared to those they support (Schwartz & Sendor, 1999). This result suggests that supporters develop more confidence and gratification from their role by supporting other members of the same group, which assists in improving their self-image. Additionally, supporters can re-frame their own experience by seeing their issue in others, creating some critical distance from their struggles. The study also suggests that these benefits may only be possible when supporters and supported individuals have experienced the same situation. However, even support groups face challenges that the internet has helped to face:

“(…) there may still be obstacles such as no local meetings or perhaps some people find it easy to attend in-person meetings. (…) Speaking from experience in hosting online meetings for *hikikomori* individuals, I've found that online meetings offer several advantages for those struggling with social isolation. They allow for complete anonymity, and you can choose to speak or remain silent as you please, making them more advantageous than physical gatherings.”

(From the article “Do We Really Need Friends?” by Medium)

Before the spread of the coronavirus, more than 90% of registered groups on *Hikikomori* platforms held their meetings in person. Slowly, they began to transition to online meetings, which continued even after the state of emergency in Japan was lifted. Since then, membership in some groups has continued to increase, likely due to the possibility of participating in meetings without the need to reveal one's face or the use of one's voice, which is ideal for *hikikomori* individuals who are still not confident enough to leave their homes. Still, the preferred outcome is physical participation in meetings, towards which online meetings can become a crucial step (Murata, 2020).

In the end, the formation of a *hikikomori* community has helped to form a subculture that may also be responsible for the creation of *Hikipos*. One French reporter interviewed for *Hikipos* saw the potential of a counterculture to the hegemony of Japanese traditional social values.

“A society that fits people into molds, peer pressure... The ones who are trying to protest against such things is the *hikikomori* community, which today I call “secret society””.

(From the interview article “Media Coverage on *Hikikomori* as Described by People in the Field” by Vosot Ikeida)

3.3.4. Can Japanese society and *hikikomori* individuals conciliate?

This sub-theme addresses authors' opinions on whether Japanese society and *hikikomori* individuals can conciliate, by Japanese society accepting *hikikomori* individuals as they are. Some authors believe that, by associating the term *hikikomori* with a positive connotation, it is possible to change public perception of *hikikomori* individuals:

“Even the word *otaku*⁷⁷, which was once used in a negative way, now has a positive meaning attached to it, and the word has spread all over the world. I think depending on how we use it in the future, the same thing might happen with *hikikomori*, and it’ll end up acquiring a positive meaning.”

(From the article “What does *hikikomori* mean to you? “*Hikikomori*” is actually a word with many definitions” by Kikui Yashin)

As the author points out, *otaku* used to be associated with a negative stereotype of “unsociable types who rarely leave their homes” (Gushiken & Hirata, 2014) in Japan. In fact, the meaning of *otaku* likely refers to an old denomination of “your home” (お宅), and was used to characterize the obsessed fans of Japanese pop culture as those who prefer a domestic environment to a more sociable one. Much like *hikikomori*, the term *otaku* became more commonly known when news reports started to associate it with high-profile criminal cases, such as kidnappings, killings, and other gruesome acts⁷⁸. However, as Japanese pop culture began to have more roots in other countries, foreigners started to appropriate the term *otaku* as a positive representation of their interests. Nowadays, due to the worldwide spread of Japanese pop culture, the “negative image of the *otaku* group has begun to get a more positive perception even in Japan” (Gushiken & Hirata, 2014).

As such, some authors believe that *hikikomori* individuals should strive to reach out to media outlets that may portray them in a more positive light, devoid of the negative stereotype associated with them:

“We should pick interviewers [coverages] that are safe and go public through the media. I’m only a former *hikikomori*, so I’m not saying I can speak for *hikikomori* themselves and their feelings, but by looking back at our experiences and letting our opinions be heard, I think we can make other people understand us at least a little bit more.”

⁷⁷ *Otaku* (オタク), when employed to characterize a group of people, refers to people who admire or are obsessed with products of Japanese pop culture, namely anime, manga, J-Pop, videogames, and cosplay. Although there is no precise translation, there is some correspondence with English terms such as “nerd”, “geek” and “fanboy/fangirl” (Gushiken & Hirata, 2014).

⁷⁸ Most notoriously, these criminal cases include: Tsutomu Miyazaki’s kidnapping, murder, and mutilation of four girls, in 1987; and *Aum Shinrikyo*’s terrorist attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, orchestrated by Shoko Asahara, which killed 13 people and injured more than a thousand people. When the perpetrators of both crimes, the police found Miyazaki to be an avid consumer of manga and Japanese horror films, among other things, and Asahara of being passionate about robots. Thus, both were deemed as *otaku* by the press.

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

However, other authors believe that they cannot change people’s prejudice against *hikikomori* individuals, and thus, there is little incentive to attempt it:

“I think that’s not right, either. We can’t change other people’s prejudices, so we should just ignore them and move along.”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

A study on cross-cultural awareness programmes showed that programmes aimed at changing people’s prejudice against specific groups had been employed in the past and had shown positive results, especially for people who have the most prejudicial views of said groups (Hill & Augoustinos, 2001). These programmes employ both stereotype-disconfirming information, as well as first-hand contact with prejudiced groups. While it has been confirmed that prejudice reduction programmes are successful in raising social awareness, it has yet to be determined how much of a behavioral change these interventions produce, and how long-lasting its effects are. Thus, it has yet to be determined if prejudices can be changed with such initiatives, which provides some credence to the author’s claims.

However, other authors believe *hikikomori* individuals should, in fact, take advantage of the prejudice against them:

“Everyone thinks *hikikomori* can’t do anything because they’re *hikikomori*, so they’ll think we’re special if we put in some extra effort. (Man in his 50s)

(...) We shouldn’t try to overcome prejudice, but rather use it to turn the tables. Many people think that *hikikomori* can’t do anything because of who they are, so we should aim for some *gap moe*. (Man in his 40s)”

(From the article “The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

Gap moe (ギャップ萌え) is an *anime* and *manga* character troupe wherein the disparity between a character’s personality and appearance, or between two personality traits of the

same character, is found to be endearing⁷⁹. It is suggested that this endearment results from the unexpectedness of this disparity. Thus, the author seems to suggest that *hikikomori* individuals should take advantage of the Japanese public's low and negative expectations of them by surprising people with a contradictory trait to their portrayal. In fact, some of the reporters who were interviewed for *Hikipos*, were unsuspecting victims of this:

“In 2013, I started covering *hikikomori* while having my own notion of them. It was something like, “A child in their room, lying down in their futon” or “Helpless people who are in need of aid”. But the more I progressed in my work, the more I came across examples that didn’t correspond to those images. Rather, I met many *hikikomori* who were opposed to being seen in such a way, and it shook me and made me question why I even had that image of *hikikomori*.”

(From the interview article “Media Coverage on *Hikikomori* as Described by People in the Field” by Vosot Ikeida)

Thus, although some authors believe it impossible to correct the stereotypes that have negatively characterized *hikikomori* individuals, by leaning towards the *gap moe*, the image of *hikikomori* individuals seems to more readily change. However, as this image has only been apparent to journalists involved in investigating the *hikikomori* issue and others involved in supporting *hikikomori* treatment, it is still unclear how effective of an image change such a strategy can be.

Still, most agree that any promotion of a positive image of *hikikomori* individuals in the public eye should not compromise *hikikomori* individuals and demand them to adapt to the traditional social norms:

“Promoting the value of *hikikomori*, where their existence is recognized and appreciated without the need for them to do anything, is the key to their happiness.”

(From the article “What Is happiness for *hikikomori*?” by *Hikipos* Editorial Department)

⁷⁹ Examples of *gap moe* can be when a gruff-looking character actually has a warm and fuzzy personality or when a character is cold and aloof in some situations while warm and fuzzy in others. These opposing traits are considered to make the character more spontaneous and complex (Kemner, 2021).

Some scholars agree with this claim, critiquing support groups that try to adjust *hikikomori* individuals to society, instead of transforming society itself. As claimed by Horiguchi, “(...) *hikikomori* in its existential sense may be seen as a form of resistance against social norms and questioning the meaning of life in contemporary society.” (Horiguchi, 2017:65) This thought has been reflected by others, even those close to *Hikipos*, such as journalist Simon Constantine:

“A society that fits people into molds, peer pressure... The ones who are trying to protest against such things is the *hikikomori* community, which today I call “secret society”. Or perhaps I should call it “society of resistance” or “the other society”, because I have quite the distaste for peer pressure myself.”

(From the interview article “Media Coverage on *Hikikomori* as Described by People in the Field” by Vosot Ikeida)

In this chapter, many perspectives were grouped into topics in order to find a broad conception of how a reconciliation between Japanese society and *hikikomori* individuals can occur. Most suggestions that were made can be considered as practical advice for *hikikomori* individuals. These range from methods to become more adept in social interactions, to jobs that may pose the least danger to *hikikomori* individuals, to adopting a lifestyle that allows them to socially withdraw, from time to time. The authors also discussed their experiences to explain how specific shifts in their approach to Japanese society and their situations helped to improve their lives. Among these, were the idea to reconcile with their parents, as well as using creative outputs to express the feelings they had denied for so long. The authors also highlighted the importance of finding a place of belonging (*ibasho*) that accepts them and helps them in their social engagement, as well as finding purpose in assisting other *hikikomori* individuals. Finally, it was more difficult to find a consensus about changes to Japanese society for the sake of *hikikomori* individuals. Although most authors claim that prejudice against *hikikomori* individuals may be the biggest hurdle, they disagree with each other on whether or not it can be changed. However, most agree that the key to this reconciliation is mutual acceptance. Their effort in adapting to Japanese society should also be met with society’s acceptance of their situation, which would mean a change in Japanese socio-cultural values that deem academic and professional success as the best opportunity to be accepted by all. For the authors, to live should be enough to be accepted.

Conclusion

The main research objective of this dissertation was to understand the *hikikomori* experience within the context of contemporary Japanese society through the analysis of the self-produced narratives of *hikikomori* individuals presented in the *Hikipos* magazine. The aim was to find if the thoughts and experiences expressed in these narratives had scientific validity and if they could contribute new insight into the issue by answering the main research question: How does a *hikikomori*-made publication offer new insight into the *hikikomori* issue in Japanese society?

To accomplish this, a thematic analysis was conducted on several issues of *Hikipos*, from which patterns were selected and organized into themes. These themes were then analyzed with the assistance of literature about *hikikomori*, as well as other relevant literature, in order to answer each of the three specific research questions.

The first of these research questions was “How do *hikikomori* individuals define *hikikomori*?”. The data has shown that the confusion around the definition of the *hikikomori* issue, and of *hikikomori* individuals, is not confined to academic literature, as the authors of *Hikipos* also admitted to their struggle and indecision as to how to define their own situation. However, it seems that this lack of clarity may mostly stem from the mediatic portrayal of *hikikomori* individuals as indulgent, inferior individuals and harboring criminal tendencies. The prejudice that follows such a characterization seems to hinder *hikikomori* individuals from identifying themselves as such. Furthermore, given the plurality of experiences from the authors, it seems clear that the current Japanese government definition is also lacking in its description, as it does not equate for individuals who may already be experiencing feelings of alienation, as well as symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders, while still being able to leave their rooms and houses. Thus, from the authors’ experiences, it’s possible to conclude that a governmental reinterpretation of the term “*hikikomori*”, as well as a more comprehensive mediatic portrayal, could lead to a better acceptance of *hikikomori* individuals in the public’s eyes, as well as a broader acceptance, by *hikikomori* individuals and their families, of their own situation. Furthermore, an officially recognized redefinition of the term that accounts for the many nuances of the *hikikomori* experience could namely

help primary *hikikomori* individuals with obtaining public assistance, as they are unable to obtain a disability certificate without being diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder.

The authors also suggested the recontextualization of the term “*hikikomori*”, either by its usage as a way of saying “stay inside/indoors”, or by imbuing it with a more positive connotation (such as with the term *otaku*). Although these suggestions may be beneficial in countering the negative portrayal of *hikikomori* individuals, they may also further add to the ambiguity surrounding the term. Alternatively, the suggestion of “legitimizing” the *hikikomori* issue, by associating it with mental health issues, although it may solicit a more empathetic response from the general public, also appears to disregard primary *hikikomori* individuals. However, from the results of this study, it seems that a psychiatric framing of the term “*hikikomori*” would be the most beneficial. Even in the case of primary *hikikomori* individuals whose social withdrawal is not directly caused by mental issues, there always seem to be some characteristics that can easily relate to mental health issues, namely symptoms of anxiety and depression—especially considering that other characteristics, such as feelings of alienation, may prove more difficult to change, given that they are a negative consequence of the social principles of cohesiveness and conflict avoidance, which stem from the cultural value of harmony, ingrained in Japanese society. As such, an official redefinition of the term “*hikikomori*”, within the psychiatric field, or heavily linked to symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders, could more quickly improve both public perception and governmental support for *hikikomori* individuals.

The second research question was “What are the main factors that have led *hikikomori* individuals into social withdrawal?”. The data has shown that these can almost always be traced back to the *hikikomori* individual’s childhood. Even in cases where the authors reported instances of being abused, either at their workplace or by their spouse, there was still an instance of similar abuse in their childhood, either at school or at home. Between the two, the home environment, dictated by parent-child relationships, was the most common factor that would later solicit the authors’ feelings of inadequacy. The lack of honest conversations within the home environment could possibly counter this trend, as many authors describe their difficulty in expressing their emotions, even to themselves. This lack of communication seems to stem from the parents’ overzealous reliance on their assigned social roles: the mother, as overbearing and overdependent on the child’s social behavior and academic success; and the father, as either the absent breadwinner who does not interfere

with the child's education, or as an imposing figure who dictates the child's social values. Although some recent social trends, such as "nurturing fathers" offer some hope in changing these roles, there still seems to be an overall lack of public recognition of the negative impact the parent's insistence on maintaining these roles can have in predisposing their children towards social withdrawal.

Although many attribute their feelings of alienation to their parents, they also recognize that the social values that guide their parents extend beyond their home. The over-emphasizing of academic and professional success seems to be rooted in the precedent that one's identity in the credentialist Japanese society is determined by the individual's association with an institution, be it a company or otherwise. Furthermore, given the importance of hierarchy in Japanese society, the more prestigious the institution one belongs to, the better their overall social standing is. These values transverse generations and may prove difficult to change since they are ingrained in Japanese culture and are manifested privately within each household. However, this study found that some of the authors' suggestions towards a reform in education, with the integration of free schools as a legitimate alternative to Japan's single-track educational curriculum, may provide a place for *hikikomori* individuals, and other outcast groups, to be still able to carve a place for themselves in Japanese society, without making them feel misplaced. To achieve this, the Japanese government must recognize free schools as a legitimate educational path.

The third research question was "How can *hikikomori* individuals conciliate with Japanese society?". The authors offered a plurality of suggestions, such as the aforementioned governmental support towards alternative education, as well as the re-defining of what constitutes a *hikikomori* individual. The authors further suggested housing support for *hikikomori* individuals, which can be particularly helpful for primary *hikikomori* individuals, who may not be able to obtain a disability pension, and who may have no other choice but to live in an oppressive home environment.

However, the most prevalent form of assisting *hikikomori* individuals seems to be the *ibasho*, as it provides a sense of belonging that can normally only be obtained by succeeding in academics, or by belonging to a company. Just as with the suggestion of housing support, the *ibasho* suggestion indicates that a new environment, which the *hikikomori* individual considers safe, is a crucial first step towards recovery. Furthermore,

the existence of spaces such as support groups seems to have assisted in developing the authors' social skills and emotional literacy. Thus, it assisted in their self-realization as individuals, outside the pre-defined roles indicated by Japanese social values, as well as providing them the confidence to reintegrate Japanese society and help others in their predicament. Finally, despite some authors' reluctance towards battling the prejudice against *hikikomori* individuals, publications such as the *Hikipos* magazine still have the potential of offering the same emotional validation that the *ibasho* does, as they share the experiences of *hikikomori* individuals, from their own words, much like *hikikomori* support groups do. *Hikipos* could prove particularly fruitful for *hikikomori* individuals who do not have access to a support group, or who do not yet feel confident enough to attend one.

Recalling the main research question (How does a *hikikomori*-made publication offer new insight into the *hikikomori* issue in Japanese society?), this study concludes that *hikikomori* personal narratives have proved to be crucial and indispensable in understanding the *hikikomori* issue from within. This claim is made not only because many of the recounted experiences validate some of the existing claims made on the *hikikomori* issue, but especially because they also challenge other assertions. No other case is more obvious than the effort to frame the *hikikomori* issue as either a culturally bound or psychiatric issue. Even though it may not be possible to extract a definitive answer from the authors of *Hikipos*, it is still evident that framing the issue within the realm of psychiatry could more promptly benefit the public perception of *hikikomori* individuals.

Although many of the authors' perspectives do complexify the *hikikomori* issue, as *hikikomori* individuals themselves do not all share the same views, through the thematic analysis, this study still allowed for the extraction of the main themes of their experiences. Namely, the prevalence of symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders in *hikikomori* individuals, despite the overall difficulty in defining a "*hikikomori* individual", as well as the main factors that contributed to their continued isolation being predicated on long-standing social values. Additionally, the authors, from their perspective as "outsiders" of Japanese society, provided a unique insight into the social values that most contributed to their anguish. This perspective is instrumental, as although some of these aspects have already been discussed in the literature, only the perspective of the subjects themselves could confirm their validity.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the authors continue to attempt to find ways to conciliate with Japanese society. These attempts highlight the hurdles *hikikomori* individuals still face in Japanese society and the changes that are required, namely from the Japanese government, for this conciliation to be possible.

Despite being broad in its scope of understanding the *hikikomori* issue, this study still faced some limitations. Namely, it analyzed a publication entirely written in Japanese. Aside from the financial and time-consuming task of translating the many articles, it was still impossible to account for other aspects of the analysis of the *Hikipos* magazine, such as its impact on Japanese readers. As the magazine is written in Japanese, there are few accounts of it in the English language, and, as such, it was not possible to account for any other perspective other than the one developed in this study.

Future investigations would benefit from an analysis of the impact of the *Hikipos* magazine on Japanese readers, and its possible potential to change preconceived notions about the *hikikomori* issue. Other investigations could also be done on the magazine section dedicated to foreign *hikikomori* individuals, to offer a comparative analysis to find the commonalities and differences between the *hikikomori* individuals of different countries.

I hope future studies into the *hikikomori* issue will account for *hikikomori*-produced narratives, as well as the narratives of *hikikomori*-affected families. Their insight will surely continue to prove fundamental in understanding the complexities of the *hikikomori* issue and should, as such, be integrated into the academic debate.

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Annexes

Annex A: Theme and code hierarchy⁸⁰

Code System	Frequency
1. Definition of <i>hikikomori</i>	191
Public perception of <i>hikikomori</i>	42
Indulgence	10
Inferior to other people	16
Mentally ill	7
Potential criminals	9
Psychological characteristics of <i>hikikomori</i> individuals	124
Alienation	21
Inability to engage and maintain social relations	16
Inability to adapt to a workplace environment	13
Predisposition towards isolation	3
Pretense to fit in	9
Self-denial	30
Guilt and shame	14
State of despair	18
<i>Hikikomori</i> as a "visible" and clearly defined situation	25
2. Factors that contribute to social withdrawal	159
Factors in school, home and work that predicate <i>hikikomori</i> behavior	108
Bullying	8
Abuse at the workplace	3
Relationship with parents as a precursor	61
Parents as an extension of society	36
Social standing in Japanese society	37
Lack of support	14
Lack of mental health care	7
Lack of institutional support	7
3. A place for <i>hikikomori</i> in Japanese society	122
Reintegrating into society	33
To become more extroverted	13
"Part-time" <i>hikikomori</i>	6
Work for <i>hikikomori</i>	14
Towards self-realization	44
Shift in perspective	24
Reconciling with parents	15
Self-expression	5
Ibashi	33
A place for <i>hikikomori</i> in modern Japanese society	12

⁸⁰ This table was extracted from MAXQDA, at the end of the dissertation writing. It contains the final selection of themes and respective codes

Annex B: Written interviews with the Ishizaki-san, editor-in-chief of *Hikipos*

This annex contains the original questions that were made to Ishizaki-san, editor-in-chief of *Hikipos*, during the analysis part of this dissertation. For documenting purposes, the questions are presented in both Japanese and English. I will be referred to as “F”, and Ishizaki-san will be referred to as “I”.

Original interview (in Japanese)

F:『ひきポス』をつくるはアイデアはいつどうやって生まれたのですか。

I: 私はひきポスの全身に「ひきこもり新聞」という新聞の副編集長していました。

そこで当事者の手記が一番読者に好評だったため、それ単体のメディアを作ってみようと思ったのです。

それまでのひきこもりの報道というのは、主に専門家が語るもので、当の本人が語ることは少なかったのです。しかし、ひきこもりは事件ではなく、体験です。体験をした人の語り、もっとも現実を表すものだと考えています。

F: このプロジェクトを始めるための資金的手段はどのように見つけたのですか。

I: 資金は独立する際に一部ひきこもり新聞からと、冊子版を販売売上から回収しました。ただ、基本的にボランティアで行っている、高額な資本金は必要ありません。

F: 著者の何人かは、他人と「普通に」交流できるためには、他人のふりをしなければならぬと書いています。引きこもりではない他の人々も同じことをしているとしますか？日本人は「社会的仮面」をかぶるのが普通だと思いませんか？

それは建前と思いませんか？

I: ひきこもりに限らず、多くの人が社会生活の中で「仮面」をかぶることはあると思います。日本社会では特に、建前を重んじる傾向があるため、本音と建前のギャップに悩む人も少なくないでしょう。ただ、ひきこもりの場合は、ひきこもりであることを隠さないといけないため、その葛藤がより深刻になりやすいのではないかと感じています。本来の自分のことを一切話せず、その場にふさわしい会話をする事しかできなければ、それは「他人」を演じているのと同じようなものです。

F: 日本の精神科医療の現状についてどう思いますか？

I: 日本の精神科医療には、まだ改善の余地が大きいと考えています。多くの医師が、5分間の短い診療と、ただ薬を処方するだけであり、効果があるとはあまり思えません。特にひきこもりに対する理解は十分とは言えず、適切な支援につながりにくい現状があります。ひきこもり状態の人は、複雑な精神状況にあり、薬を処方するだけで解決するという状態ではないからです。

F: 引きこもりの中に犯罪をしたいと考える人がいるのはなぜだと思いますか？

I: ひきこもりイコール犯罪という図式は適切ではなく、これは典型的なひきこもりに対する偏見の一つです。もちろん、長期のひきこもり状態が続くと、孤独感、焦燥感、嫉妬心などから、歪んだ考えを持つようになるケースも中にはあるのかもしれませんが。これは欧米で言うインセルの問題構造と似たようなところがあります。しかし、それが実際に実行に移されることはほぼありません。ほとんどのひきこもりの人は、むしろ人一倍繊細で善良な人たちばかりです。フラストレーションがたまったときに、他人を攻撃できず、自分を攻撃してしまう傾向があり、それがひきこもりに結びついていくのです。

F: 日本で精神の医療の現状についてどう思いますか？正しい診断と治療ができていると思いますか？

I: 公的支援を受けている人もいるとは思いますが。主なものは障害年金や公共機関での割引です。取得するのは簡単ではありません。

F: 石崎様については、なぜ自分をひきこもりだと思わないのですか？

I: この質問の時間軸がわからないので、適切に答えられるかわかりませんが、少なくとも過去の出来事なので、今は私自身をひきこもりだとは考えていません。
(あなたは昨日の夜にお酒を飲んで酔っ払いでしたが、なぜ今は酔っ払いだと思わないのですか?という質問に似たところがあります)

F: 心療内科での治療はどうでしたか?

I: 私は一時期、心療内科に通院していました。カウンセリングを通して、自分の状況を客観視する機会になった一方で、根本的な解決にはつながりませんでした。やはり、ひきこもりの背景には複合的な要因があるため、医療だけでは支援としては不十分だと感じています。

Translated interview (in Japanese)

F: When and how did you come up with the idea to create *Hikipos*?

I: I was the sub-editor-in-chief of a newspaper called *Hikikomori Shinbun* (The *Hikikomori* Newspaper) during my entire career at *Hikipos*. The personal accounts of those involved were the most popular among readers, so I decided to create a stand-alone media outlet. Until then, reports on *hikikomori* had mainly been written by experts and rarely by the people themselves. However, withdrawal is not an incident, but an experience. We believe that the narratives of those who have experienced it best represent the reality.

F: How did you find the financial means to start this project?

I: Funds were partially collected from *Hikikomori Shinbun*, and when we became independent we also obtained funds from sales proceeds of the printed versions. However, since we are basically a volunteer organization, we do not require a large amount of capital.

F: Several of the authors wrote that in order to be able to interact "normally" with others, one must pretend to be someone else. Do you think other people who are not *hikikomori* do the same? Do you think it is normal for Japanese people to wear "social masks"? Do you think it is *tatema*?

I: Not only *hikikomori* individuals, but many people may put on a "mask" in their social lives. In Japanese society, in particular, there is a tendency to value *tatemae*, and many people may be troubled by the gap between their real intentions (*honne*) and *tatemae*. However, I feel that in the case of *hikikomori* individuals, the conflict tends to be more serious because one has to hide the fact that he or she is a *hikikomori* individual. If you cannot talk about your true self at all, and can only have conversations appropriate to the situation, it is as if you are playing the role of a "stranger."

F: What do you think about the current state of psychiatric care in Japan?

I: I believe that there is still much room for improvement in psychiatric care in Japan. Many doctors simply give short 5-minute consultations and prescribe medication, which does not seem to be very effective. In particular, there is not enough understanding of the *hikikomori* individual, and it is difficult to provide appropriate support. This is because people in a state of withdrawal are in a complex mental situation, and simply prescribing medication is not a solution.

F: Why do you think some *hikikomori* individuals want to commit crimes?

I: It is not appropriate to equate *hikikomori* with crime, and this is one of the typical prejudices against *hikikomori* individuals. Of course, there may be cases in which long-term withdrawal leads to distorted thinking due to feelings of loneliness, frustration, jealousy, and so on. This is similar in some ways to the problem structure of incarceration in the West. However, it is seldom put into practice. Most *hikikomori* individuals are more sensitive and good-natured than others. When frustration builds up, they are unable to attack others and tend to attack themselves, which leads to withdrawal.

F: What do you think about the current state of psychiatric care in Japan? Do you think that correct diagnosis and treatment are being provided?

I: "Until then, reports on social withdrawal had mainly been written by experts and rarely by the people themselves. However, withdrawal is not an incident, but an experience. We believe that the narratives of those who have experienced it best represent the reality."

F: Do you know if any of the authors have the mental disability certificate and receive public support? Was it difficult for you to get it?

I: There are some people (among the authors) who receive public support. The main ones are disability pensions and discounts at public institutions. It is not easy to get them.

F: As for Mr. Ishizaki, why don't you consider yourself a social recluse?

I: I don't know the time frame of this question, so I don't know if I can answer it adequately, but I don't consider myself a recluse now, at least not since it happened in the past. (You had a drink last night and were a drunk, why don't you consider yourself a drunk now?)

F: How was your psychosomatic treatment?

I: I was in psychosomatic medicine for a while. While counseling allowed me to objectively look at my situation, it did not lead to a fundamental solution. I still feel that medical treatment alone is not enough to support my withdrawal, as there are multiple factors behind it.

Annex C: Translated articles

This annex contains all the translations that were made for the purpose of this dissertation. In terms of organization, this annex will present the articles in order of each released issue, from 1 to 10, and in their order of appearance in said issues. These translations have taken into account the prosaic tone of the authors of *Hikipos* and, as such, they may not always follow strict English grammar rules so as to respect the original articles.

Issue 1:

“Why did I become a *hikikomori*?: “Causes” as told by those involved”

自己否定・主体性・つながり感 (“Self-denial, identity, and the sense of being connected to others”) by Ishizaki Morito (p. 1-2)

I’ve always been looking for the answer as to why I became a shut-in (strictly speaking, I’m not really a *hikikomori*, but I have a lot of things in common with people who are, in fact, *hikikomori*). If I took this [question] to the extreme, I would likely have to take the creation of the universe itself as my starting point in order to finally find an answer I could be satisfied with; but this time around, I would like to take the period between my childhood and adulthood, and the influences it brought on me, as the starting point.

It began before I had even developed a sense of what was going on around me. My mother was hospitalized when I was 2 years old, and I lived apart from her for about half a year. According to the psychologist Okada Takashi, if a child’s relationship and attachment to their parents is not stable between the ages of 1½ and 2 years old, the child will become very sensitive in future personal relationships (“*Aichaku Shougai*” [愛着障害], *Kobunsha Shinsho*).

In my case, the very first cause [for my shutting myself in] was the fact that my attachment towards my mother was never properly developed.

When I turned 5 years old, a kind elderly couple once tried to take me to the park's "missing child" area . At the time, I thought I was about to be kidnapped and resisted with all my strength. Back then, we were living in a time when society had just been struck by the Miyazaki Tsutomu incident , and I was influenced by the concern expressed by my parents and all the TV reports, so I felt incredibly scared. What I still remember, even now, is that it was from that moment on that I became extremely sensitive and easily scared by every small thing. It was at that point that my childish innocence and my days of living with no fear came to an end.

To make matters even worse, my father was the type of person who had a repressive personality and pushed his ideas of what was "right" onto other people; he refused to compromise [he was fastidious] and didn't really understand other people's feelings. He resembled what we nowadays call "大人の発達障害" ["an adult with developmental disorders"]. He was abnormally strict towards me in terms of discipline from a very young age, and it goes without saying that he would punish me by hitting me . He had three sons so it was obvious that things got very noisy [in the house], but he would yell at us as soon as they did . And then he would force us to listen on and on to whatever stories of the past he wanted to tell. To a young child, it was torture.

When I was a child, since I never knew when my father would get angry at something, I always felt scared whenever I was at home . I was more sensitive than my brothers, so this fear towards our father influenced me much more than it did them. When I was in the 2nd year of elementary school , I started suppressing my emotions at home, and I ended up becoming more and more apathetic at school.

My mother, who was a worrywart, would always be concerned about me, asking "Is Moribito alright?" Influenced by my mother's unease, every little failure made me think, "Ugh, things ended up just like how my mother worried [feared] they would...", and I lost my confidence little by little. A sensitive, apathetic scaredy-cat with no self-confidence —

needless to say, my life at school was bound to go poorly. I couldn't do sports, I wasn't good at studying, my friends became targets for bullying, and so I ended up at the very bottom of the school's pecking order.

My only salvation was entering my own world, and I always felt very depressed before getting home. My thought process was that three bad things would happen per day: if only two happened, that meant I was lucky; if four happened, it was hell.

Gradually, my self-denial became stronger, and by the time I enrolled in middle school I thought I was the worst human being on the planet. Many things happened after that I could go on and on about, and though there were some periods when I was mentally stable, I started going to the psychosomatic department at the hospital when I was just approaching my 20s. I attended college while taking antidepressants and just barely managed to find a job, but then my depression got so bad I tried to take my own life. I resigned after three days and shut myself in. In the years that followed, I was hospitalized thrice in the psychiatric department, where I was told I suffered from more than 10 illnesses combined; I was overmedicated and fell in so much despair that the only thought that ran through my head was death...

Peace of mind connects people

I will now try to look back on that half a lifetime of mine through the lens of the present.

For starters, since I could never feel relaxed as a child, the only way I could sustain myself [preserve my sense of self] was by suppressing such feelings. In order to feel "fine" in an environment where there is no peace of mind to be had, we have no option but to suppress the feelings that make us want to seek such peace of mind in the first place. If I had been able to share such emotions with someone else, perhaps things would've turned out differently—but I never had such a person in my life. Killing my natural feelings slowly morphed into denying my very existence. Because, after all, it was my very own self that was producing those feelings that I had to kill. And so, as I grew up, my sense of self-denial became stronger and stronger. This self-denial is quite troublesome, to the point I believe it becomes the source of many mental issues.

Plus, due to carrying that sense of self-denial, I was unable to develop my “identity”. This “identity” is the power to value one’s feelings and to make choices in society that are comfortable for us. In other words, it means to lead a life that is favorable to us and to the people who matter to us. People who are mentally healthy may think this is an obvious thing that should go without saying, but when we have feelings of self-denial, we become unable to put it into practice. Just like no one thinks about doing a favor to someone they despise, when we start hating our own selves, we stop living with our comfort in mind. At the root of it all, we don’t believe we have any value, and to fill in that void we weigh ourselves up based on other people’s standards and give ourselves some not-so-gentle peptalk, trying our hardest. But since this effort does not stem from a voluntary [intrinsic] feeling, it winds up withering away. We are unable to live with our own feelings as the central piece [of things].

This isn’t something that only happens to me; people who grew up as gifted children have similar tendencies—they lived their whole life doing what they were told, so they end up forgetting what their own feelings are, and, in turn, can’t choose what’s truly good for them. Since their efforts aren’t really good for themselves, they end up burning out. I feel like there are a lot of people like this.

I also think another reason why it was very hard for me to go to school and work was because I didn’t feel connected to other people. My parents denied me when I behaved like my true self and forced me to conform to a certain “way of being”. And by only accepting me under certain conditions, being with my parents became a trigger for my suffering. Parent-child relationships become the model for all other social and personal relationships, which, in turn, means that I convinced myself that all relationships came with certain “conditions”. If we keep holding these beliefs, before long we’ll see personal relationships as nothing more than things that revolve around certain interests, and we won’t feel any sort of emotional connection to others. Words such as “love”, “comradery” and “mutual help” will sound like hypocrisies, and even if we were to build relationships (neglecting [forsaking] ourselves in an effort to accept one another), they would become nothing more than relationships of dependence.

These three main reasons—suffering from self-denial, not developing my identity, and having no connections to others (and, thus, not wanting to partake in society)—became huge impediments in my social life.

Lastly, I would like to ask: is this not a problem of society as a whole, and not only an issue exclusively related with parent-child relationships or the environment in which one grows up? In fact, my father was disciplined in much the same oppressive way by my grandmother. And she, too, went through a similar experience, forming an intergenerational chain. But the reason they didn't end up like me—despite the difference in our personalities likely being one of the factors—is because their society was still a rural [pastoral] one, and because they had relationships with other adults beyond their parents. They had a great number of uncles and aunts who also raised them, and that was surely a huge contributor. Currently, we live in a society that revolves around the concept of a nuclear family, and the collapse of communities [cooperative systems] leads us to hold fewer and fewer connections to adults other than our parents, which means we are much less likely to have our feelings accepted by adults other than them. At the same time, it is also a society built around functionalism that emphasizes relationships that involve interests, and so social anxiety is predominant and it's become very easy to fall under its influence. Society as a whole must realize that it has become a place where simply having a poor parent-child relationship can easily lead one to fall [mentally] ill.

母との関係が、すべてでの基盤になった (“My relationship with my mother became the basis for everything”) by Vosot Ikeida (p. 5-7)

Doctor, that's not it!

“The reason you're a shut-in is because you're emotionally attached to your futon. It means you're still carrying your spoiled attitude from when you were a child. Every *hikikomori* has narcissistic personality disorder, so they all think they're adorable darlings. They're too scared of being hurt, so they can't bring themselves to go out into society.”

My therapist reclined in their office chair as they always did and said those words.

Whenever I say I'm a male *hikikomori*, every therapist I've had tries to brush the issue under the rug by saying “attachment disorder” and “narcissistic personality”. And I'm going to what is considered by Japanese society as the country's leading authority in the psychiatry field. It's a great example that can demonstrate how psychiatrists truly don't understand a thing. I will now try to put into words the reason I became a *hikikomori* using

the limited number of pages I've been given, without falling for the story fabricated by my doctor.

Days spent deceiving myself

“I am fundamentally different from the people around me in some way...”

I started becoming truly aware of this feeling of discomfort—which, if I were to use a smartphone or a PC as an analogy, I could describe as having a “different operating system”—right after I entered college. Because once I did enroll in the college my mother had ordered me to, I expected there to be lots of people with similar views as mine as well as the opportunity to make lifelong friends—but there were absolutely no signs of that at all.

“That professor is very lenient with their grades, so I'll pick that course.”

“I'll join that sports club because it'll benefit me when I apply for a big company.”

“I'll go to that driving school because they get lots of female students from so-and-so women's college.”...

Their motivations were all like that, and they behaved under the logic that “the world just works this way.” Whatever things they spoke of passionately, I had no interest in at all. And the things I saw as valuable, they, in turn, thought were completely worthless. For this reason, [my] personal relationships started to come apart at the seams here and there. However, since it would be quite troublesome to run into issues in my life as a student, I pretended to hold the same values as them and lived by deceiving myself every day; but, as was to be expected, things became progressively more unbearable. After I left college and started job hunting, I thought, “This draining [tiresome] life will proceed at full tilt from now on, huh”—and that was the moment my body stopped moving [froze on the spot]. And so, I became a *hikikomori*.

The feeling that my values and those of other people were fundamentally different made me think that I was a foreigner. I think Albert Camus experienced the same feeling when he titled his work “L'Étranger” [The Stranger]. The problem is, even if I looked back at my ancestors, there's no two ways about the fact that I am ethnically Japanese, and the people around me did not see me as a foreigner. What should I do to be recognized as a

foreigner, then? Driven by pain, I found a solution: I, myself, have to go to a foreign country. If I did so, the people there would see me as a foreigner, which means I would, in fact, be recognized as one.

This last resort plan was a huge success. Overseas, whenever I behaved in a way different from the people around me, they'd go, "Oh, this guy came from the far East so he does things differently from us, huh?" and understand. By being reduced to an ethnicity they did not know [understand], my existence was accepted by them. Thus, my escape from Japanese society became not the "inside" of my room, but the "outside" of the country, and I spent my 20s as a *sotokomori*.

However, the effect of this medicine—going to a foreign country in order to have one's existence accepted—does not last very long. Spend about a month living in the same city and you'll grow used to its routines, and the "privileges" of the foreigner start growing stale. For that and other reasons, I moved back to Japan right around when I entered my 30s, with no particular goal in mind. I tried working one way or another, but I couldn't do anything about the fundamental differences between me and the people around me. And, after only a few years, I fell into a deep depression once again, and this time around spent 4 years in a dark room as an *uchikomori*.

The reason we become unable to meet other people

It seems that people who have never shut themselves in do not understand the mechanism that makes people who have depression unable to meet others. Meeting someone else means playing a role and assuming a personality that won't be seen as "weird" by the other person. However, in order to be able to carry out such mental work, the neurotransmitters in our brains need to be at suitable levels. It's the same thing as how you need to have a certain amount of RAM in order to start up a phone app. In brain physiology terms, having depression means that we have an insufficiency of those neurotransmitters, so we can't play the role of someone who won't be seen as "weird". That doesn't mean we can just be defiant and let ourselves be seen as "weird", though, because that also requires neurotransmitters, which means we can't do it either. At the end of the day, things boil down to: "Then it's best not to meet up with anyone." This entire train of thought happens in the blink of an eye and in an unconscious way, and so people with depression become unable to meet others.

In my case, I didn't shut myself in in my parents' house, which meant I was totally alone and my personal relationships quickly broke down. For people with depression, things such as exchanging New Year's cards—the kind of work that interpersonal relationships demand, based on the “operating system” of society—are particularly difficult. So, we don't do them. And if we don't send New Year's cards, we stop hearing from the other person. Likewise, most people with depression don't want to go to alumni meetings; and if we don't go, the connections we had from our school years disappear.

Still, things turning out this way is also a choice made by the person afflicted by depression. In my case, I even thought of it this way:

“What have other people even done for me?”

Thinking back, I had no recollection of my relatives or colleagues doing anything for me. From society's point of view, people would think they have done several things for me and that I was “kept alive by society-sama” , but from my point of view, I didn't ask them to do any of that. In fact, there are many cases where I wish they hadn't done anything, and if they're telling me to “feel grateful” [for what they did], it doesn't add up with the balance sheet of my feelings. So the reason my personal relationships crumbled was also because I thought of others as irritating and decided to cut them off myself.

The first “Other” we meet in this world

Tracing this feeling back to its root, I reach my relationship with my mother as a child. My abusive mother meddled excessively in certain affairs and did things I didn't want her to for her own self-satisfaction; as if that weren't enough, she forced me to feel grateful for it afterwards. However, whenever I did want her to do something for me, she'd get angry, saying, “I see relying on me is the only thing you're good for!”. She'd ridicule me for begging, then refuse my request.

Other times, she would do what I asked, but then she'd demand I repay her for it forevermore. From a very young age, I became afraid of my mother's exorbitant emotional “invoices”. And so, I became a child that did not depend on their mother.

For human beings, the first “Other” we meet is our mother. Our relationship with this first “Other” will become the basis for all of our future encounters and relationships. Thinking that “I don't really need other people” and my choice to cut my relationships when

I had depression—in other words, my becoming a *hikikomori*—goes all the way back to my relationship with my mother, whichever way I look at it.

Hikikomori is somewhat addicting [has an addicting side to it]. Once you enter the spiral, it's very hard to break free from it. In my case, not even the fear of “if I keep being a shut-in, I'm gonna use up all my savings” was enough of a motivator to stop being a *hikikomori*. In fact, the resignation—like, “If I use up all my savings and die, then I'll just die, I'm fine with that”—even lights up like a glimmer of hope.

When I shut myself in, I realized that the reason for my mental illness was the abuse I had suffered from my mother and the unhealthy family environment I had had, and I thought of taking myself and my family, to family therapy. That was the impetus that got me out of my 4 years as an *uchikomori*.

However, my parents and younger brother refused my request. Rather than admit that there was something wrong with our family, it was easier to just make it seem like there was something wrong with me—that way, they wouldn't have to suffer any shame, either. And so, that's what they did. By pushing me out for “saying dangerous things”, my family managed to sustain their reputation in front of our relatives and society as a whole. And I, who have been made out to be the bad guy, have begun developing a chronic gloomy mood. And yet, my psychiatrist understands none of this.

自己否定人間の作り方教えます("I'll teach you how to make a person that suffers from self-denial") by Kato Kooki (p. 9-10)⁸¹



Figure 2 – Panel 1

Text balloon 1 - Hello there, everyone!

Text balloon 2 - Today I'll be giving a lecture on how to easily make a human that suffers from self-denial, using my own example as reference.

⁸¹ In this specific translation, the original *manga* will be presented, panel by panel, followed by the translation of each section of text, in what is referred to in comic book lingo as “balloons”. Note that, unlike Western comic books, in *manga* the balloons should be read from right to left, top to bottom.

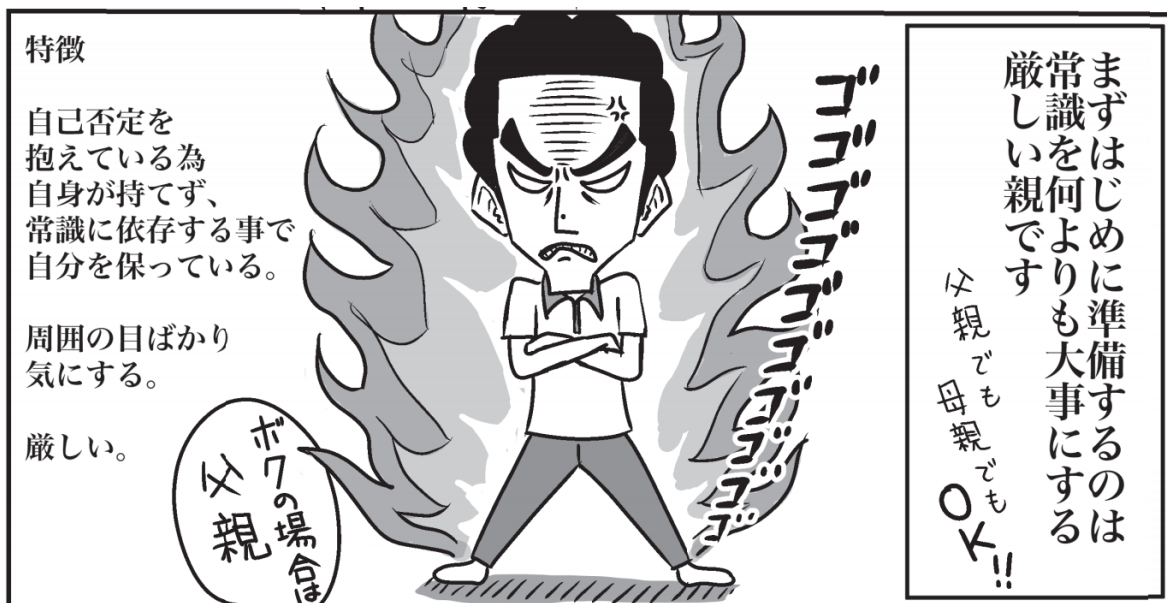


Figure 3 – Panel 2⁸²

Text box to the right - The first thing you need to prepare is having very strict parents who value common sense above everything else. (It could be a father or a mother, either one's ok!)

Text balloon - In my case, it was my father.

Text to the left - Characteristics: In order to sustain himself [stay sane], he is deeply fixated on the idea of “common sense”. He worries about what people around him think. Very strict.

⁸² The characters to the right of the father character are *gogogogogogogogogo* (ゴゴゴゴゴゴゴゴゴ) a commonly used onomatopoeia in *manga* to indicate either that a character is angry, or that a situation is menacing.



Figure 4 – Panel 3⁸³

Text box - He shouts and yells at people, using fear to control them, and denies their personality.

Text on top - He boosts his self-esteem by admonishing others.

Text balloon - What the hell are you doing, dumbass?!

83 The characters next to the child are bikubiku (ビクビク) which is an onomatopoeia to indicate that someone is shivering out of fear.

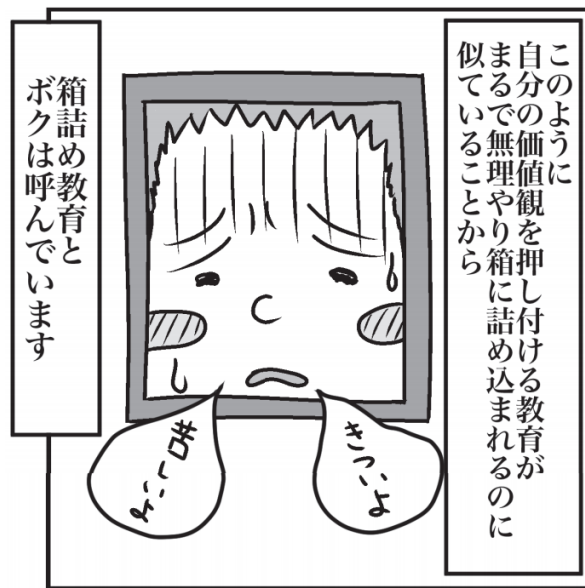


Figure 5 – Panel 4

Text box 1 - This style of education [upbringing], which forces one's values onto others, is very much like forcefully stuffing someone into a box.

Text box 2- This is why I call it “箱詰め教育” [“packing-style education/upbringing”].

Text balloon 1 - This is harsh...

Text balloon 2 - It's so painful...



Figure 6 – Panel 5

Text box - People who have undergone the “packing-style education” are robbed of their own free will and lose their desire for curiosity and challenge, shriveling.

Text balloon 1 - I’m a worthless human being. I can’t do anything.

Text balloon 2 - If I’m gonna fail at something and get yelled at, then I might as well not do it at all...

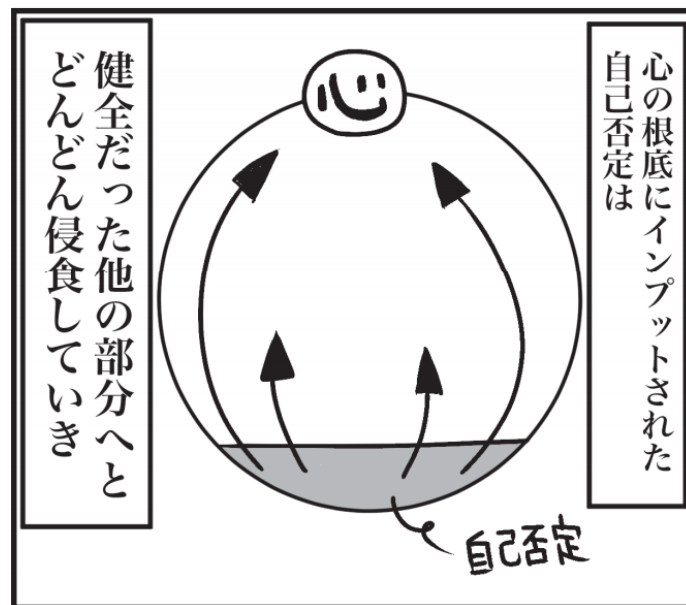


Figure 7 – Panel 6⁸⁴

Text box 1 - The self-denial that was “input” into the root of their minds [hearts]

Text box 2 - gradually eats away at the other parts of the mind that were healthy.

⁸⁴ The character at the top of the panel is *kokoro* (心) meaning “heart” or “mind”, while the characters at the bottom are *jikohitei* (自己否定) meaning “self-denial”.

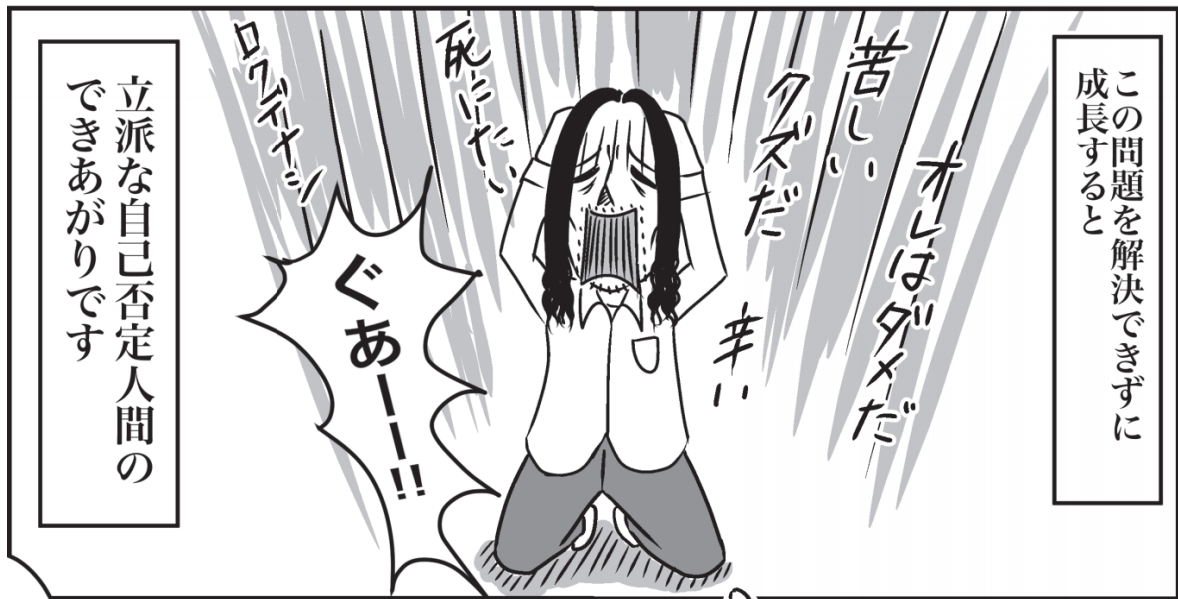


Figure 8 – Panel 7

Text box 1 - And if you grow up without resolving this issue,

Text box 2 - You end up with a magnificent person that suffers from self-denial.

Text surrounding the character - I'm worthless! This is so painful! I'm trash! It hurts! I wanna die! I'm a good-for-nothing!

Text ballom - Aghhh!!



Figure 9 – Panel 8

Text balloon 1 - How did you like it, everyone?

Text balloon 2 - As you've just seen, it's honestly quite easy to create a human being that denies themselves.

Text surrounding the character - Scary, isn't it? Terrifying, , isn't it?



Figure 10 – Panel 9

Text balloon 1 - It's been 4 years since I started confronting the problems within my mind [heart], but I still haven't solved them. And the pain and suffering continue even now...

Text balloon 2 - Perhaps you are being educated in a way that will make you end up as a person that denies themselves!

Text balloon 3 - Please be careful.

しんさいニート」著 漫画家カトーコーキインタビュー! (“Interview with Kato Kooki, the mangaka of the “Shinsai Neet” [Earthquake Disaster Neet]” by Toshi (p. 11)

Mr. Kato Kooki’s debut manga series, “Shinsai Neet” [Earthquake Disaster Neet] (published by East Press), is set after the Tohoku earthquake of March 11th, when the author lost his hometown of Fukushima. Eventually, he fell into depression and began confronting his life thus far. It’s a thoughtful essay-based manga where the author portrays, among other things, his strained relationship with his father, who pushed his values onto him. This time around, we interviewed the author to ask him why he thought of drawing this manga.

“Shinsai Neet” [Earthquake Disaster Neet] (East Press)

The author, who has suffered from severe self-denial from a very young age, was hit by the earthquake in Minamisoma, Fukushima on March 11th, losing his hometown. Though he started a new life in a different place, his self-denial only grew in strength. Eventually, he fell into depression and lost his job...

Kato Kooki, born in Minamisoma, Fukushima. He leaves his hometown after the Fukushima nuclear accident at the Daiichi power plant and moves elsewhere. Previously a potter, he starts working as a mangaka. Since April 2016, he has also been active as a radio personality in Kokoraji, a Community FM hosted by Kouriyama city (Fukushima).

What made you start writing this manga?

It all started when I fell into depression and my counselor told me, “For the time being, just do whatever you feel like doing.”

I think I wanted to be reborn. My father, who was very strict, would push his rules and values onto me and wouldn’t let me deviate from them. Since he expected me to follow what was considered “common sense” and succeed that way, I wasn’t allowed to fail at all.

For example, if we try to tell a joke to make other people laugh but we aren’t allowed to fumble, then we stop trying to tell jokes, right? When we start constantly thinking “What if I fail? [What if I do this wrong?]”, we lose interest in just about everything. Then we make excuses like, “I didn’t even want to do it to begin with”, which are like armors that we put on to protect ourselves. But in order to be reborn and start anew, I had to take off all those armors.

When I fell into depression, I was embarrassed of the things I'd done to my partner and the fact I'd resigned from my job and become a NEET; they weren't things I could tell other people about. However, I had to disclose them without hiding anything in order to start my life anew. And once I thought that I wanted to portray [express] my life and expose my faults, for me, manga was the best way of doing it.

Katoo Kooki's experience as a *hikikomori*

It was painful for me that I'd had no happiness even before I was 10 years old, and I felt like I had to pretend I was a happy child. But I wasn't aware of the pain I was going through, and I kept mulling over why I couldn't build relationships.

My father had educated me in a way that planted the idea that “not thinking is a crime” in my mind, so I kept thinking and thinking in an effort to find the answer—but in the end I couldn't find it, and I just kept repeating the process over and over again. I think I'd fallen into a vicious cycle where I went, “I was brought up denying myself, so the only way I can affirm myself is by denying others.”

The most striking episode were the dark ages of my college years.

I moved to Tokyo thinking I'd find something there and started doing music, which I'd always liked, but I ended up not being able to value myself and suffered for it. I couldn't form connections with other people, either, so I ended up closed off and excluded. My mind started going darker and darker places, so I spent my days shut in.

I'm the really bothersome type that's like “I keep my heart closed off, but I want to be around other people”. Since my “inside” is empty [void], I put on a front in order to protect myself. And in both high school and college, I was very dependent on women. When they told me they liked me, it reaffirmed my existence, but I ended up doing to them the things my father had done to me, and I broke up with my fiancée. That was the decisive moment. I realized that someone who can't love themselves can't possibly love other people.

Even though I figured out that the reason for all this was my relationship with my father, that wasn't enough to provide me with a solution. Trying to make up for the mistakes I'd made in my childhood was extremely painful, like being half-dead. And after the earthquake and the nuclear accident, and the changes in my environment that followed, the bubble popped .

There's no reason to blame yourself

I think a huge reason why people shut themselves in is because they suffer from “self-denial”. We tend to think that we're the ones at fault, but oftentimes the fault lies in our upbringing or our parents, and it's highly probable that our parents grew up suffering from self-denial, too. The reason I started thinking, “Maybe it's not my fault?” is because I fell way into the deep end. You might live like a half-dead person until you come across a truly shocking incident in your life, but what I want to strongly assert is that it's not your fault, but your environment's, and even if you can't improve it, there's no reason to blame yourself.

The part of “ourselves” that we can control is the “conscious” side of our minds [hearts]; we can't control the “unconscious” side. There's absolutely no reason to feel shame in asking a professional for help in order to control the “unconscious” side, and I am confident that doing so will make the people who are suffering closer to achieving happiness. We weren't born into this world to be unhappy, and it's fine to laugh and be happy. And I think that's something that we can make come true.

専業主婦と、毒母と、娘と (“A housewife, an abusive mother and a daughter”) by Gakincho (p. 12)

A hikikomori called “housewife”

Before becoming a housewife, I worked fulltime while fighting depression, and I believed I could handle housework and child-rearing as well without any compromises. Until the Fall of 2009.

In April 2010, I enrolled in evening classes at a graduate school and pretended to live like a normie . But my personality during the day was completely different.

My depression was so bad to the point I was participating in clinical trials for new drugs, and I couldn't take care of the housework or my daughter. Whenever I tried my best to cook or clean, which were things I wasn't good at, I'd end up bedridden due to house dust allergies, and the house became messier and messier.

My daughter was busy with school and private tutoring, just like she'd been when both my husband and I worked, and whenever she had days off, I'd have my parents-in-law who lived nearby take care of her.

Eventually, my husband lost it and yelled at me.

I was unemployed and thought I was a useless good-for-nothing, and whenever I listened to my husband yelling at me, I blamed myself. I was scared of him and became unable to leave my room, where my things were kept.

From outside the room, I could hear my husband direct his anger at our daughter and her crying. I couldn't do anything for her. Anger directed at other people felt like anger towards me, and I reacted in a very sensitive way whenever I heard yelling.

I didn't realize that my cognition was becoming progressively more distorted, and the persecutory delusions made my depression even worse. Even if I wanted to go outside for a change of pace, I felt bad for doing no housework, and we lived in a city that had such a pseudo-celebrity atmosphere about it (despite the transportation being really inconvenient) that it was painful for me, so in the end I rarely left my room except on days when I had classes.

Even when we went outside together as a family, it was extremely painful to pretend that we were friendly with each other. I wanted to keep my family together [secure], somehow. That was all I could think about.

However, I couldn't stand being around my husband—who looked like he had borderline personality disorder—and his yelling anymore. The week following the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011, we sat at a family restaurant after our daughter's grade school graduation ceremony, and my husband asked for a divorce. I agreed. And I also took a break from college.

After our divorce, my ex-husband moved in with my parents-in-law, and I started living as a single mother. Still, I remained unemployed, and my job hunting was unfruitful. Without telling me anything, my ex-husband took our daughter to an izakaya after she entered middle school, and he'd frequently come to our house to visit her. I, who didn't want to see my husband at all, started shutting myself in more and more.

Even when I got a job, it didn't last long because I was bad at personal relations. I shut myself in once again, and that's when my daughter said, "I wanna go live with dad after all."

Thus, as if I were doing a moonlight flit, I was kicked out of my house, and my life as a single mother was brought to an end in September 2012.

An abusive mother who meddles excessively

After being kicked out of my house, I firmly decided that I did not want to move back in with my abusive mother. The morning after I phoned my parents to let them know about the divorce, she came to our house and made a huge ruckus about the divorce around the neighborhood and tried to abduct my daughter and I to her house. I couldn't forgive my abusive mother for what she'd done. Put simply, she meddled excessively.

I moved to a certain place in the city that had good transportation, but I wasn't able to meet my daughter with the same freedom my husband had enjoyed previously, and that made my mother's excessive meddling even harsher to withstand.

Thinking back, when I was a college student, the one who told me my mother was abusive and meddled excessively in my affairs was my ex-husband. I was so happy at the time that my parents-in-law had accepted me, that I immediately married my ex-husband as soon as I graduated college. My ex-husband and parents-in-law protected me from my abusive mother's meddling.

I don't want my daughter to go through what I did. I thought I was raising her not by relying on my own policies [standards/values], but by relying on the cooperation of our family and society. But it seems that I have raised her in a neglectful way, the complete opposite of my meddling mother. Because of my work and depression, I couldn't even take my daughter to get her shots [vaccines].

A daughter I can't meet easily; a loud, meddling, abusive mother; and I, who re-enrolled in graduate school only to quit my job again and participate in clinical trials for anti-depressants whose side-effects have left me mostly bedridden. And at the time, I had no way of knowing that my daughter was not going to school [was a truant].

終わりなき“いじめ”と地方の闇(“Endless “bullying” and the darkness of the countryside [rural areas]”) by Toshi (p. 13-14)

Unable to go to middle school, I became a shut-in for 10 years

I stopped attending school due to the bullying I suffered during my middle school years and wasn't able to go to high school, either. I shut myself in for more than 10 years and became a *hikikomori*.

It all started in middle school when they would badmouth me, hit me with tennis rackets and crowd me to beat me up, among other things... I felt at my wit's end both physically and mentally, and stopped going to school. And just as I was about to get some rest, they would come over to my house to eavesdrop on how I was doing and make fun of me.

I became very afraid of being seen by other people and started closing the curtains. I spent most of my adolescence and young adulthood, between the ages of 14 and 26, in a closed-off world.

Why was I influenced by my middle school years for so long? Why did I fear walking outside for more than 10 years, and why do I still, to this day, sometimes feel the urge to destroy all my personal and work relationships due to the fear and anger that remain from that time?

At the end of last year, I had the opportunity to return to my hometown. At the time, I took a stroll around the place because I wanted to get a sense of what my environment had been like back then, but this time seeing things from my current perspective.

To make a long story short, what I felt was that if I'd spent the rest of my life here [in my hometown], I would've been a *hikikomori* for way longer than 10 years—perhaps 20, or even 30.

I call my hometown “the prison village”.

The “devil's middle school” where even the teacher bullied me

At my middle school, the bullies were devious: they would often mess with the kids they didn't like, then turn around and deftly lie to the teachers, telling them they'd been

bullied instead. They would violently hit, throw and kick our desks and partner up with other classmates to threaten us, and the teachers didn't do anything about it. Once I became their target, the classmates I was friends with started changing their attitude towards me, all so they could avoid trouble and remain safe.

Once, I was walking home and talking to one of them when he suddenly hit me 10 times on the head with a tennis racket. I told my parents and the school about it while crying, but no one did anything. After that—and I don't know if it was due to being struck hard in the head—I started stumbling over my words a lot more.

The teacher in charge of the 1st year of middle school once approached me and told me that he and my father were both participating in some local activities in our region. But since my father was in a position that was superior to his, he started badmouthing my father. And when I stopped attending school, he believed one of my classmate's lies when he told him that I'd "brandished a knife [against him]". From that point on, I realized that there was no place for me at that school, and I grew very resentful of people, whom I saw as dirty things.

Several other classmates of mine stopped attending this school as well, and I've dubbed it "the devil's middle school".

The "prison village" that made me a *hikikomori*

My hometown was originally intended as a commuter town for Tokyo, and it was built on a mountain. Many houses and apartment complexes were built there, to the point of being excessive. The population has barely increased since my childhood until now, there are very few stores nearby; even bulletin boards from 20 years ago remain as-is.

Large stations and supermarkets are more than an hour away on foot, and it's pretty much guaranteed that you'll come across classmates or people from the area. I was scared of people talking about me like, "There goes the guy who stopped going to school!", so I stopped walking outside and spent my days at home in a pitch-black room, where I would burn away my hatred. The only conversation buddies I had were either the TV, videogames, or a rudimentary internet system that didn't even come with a search engine built in. My family, the school and the region itself all worked to lock me up in an invisible prison.

Locked in a "prison above ground"

As for high school, I went to a place that has no tests and specializes in children that stopped attending school. The standard score [deviation value] at the time was around 62-68, but at one point my parents and teacher decided—without me knowing—that because I didn't have enough attendance and wouldn't be graded, it would be impossible for me to take the entrance exam.

From one moment to the next, I wound up unable to attend high school and simply remained [officially] enrolled in it. Once, someone invited me out and I rode the train (which I usually didn't), and I found a classmate who'd bullied me in my middle school years. He stood in the same carriage as me on purpose and started telling another classmate—loud enough so I could hear—how much of a “weirdo” I was. He kept telling him lies about me but I couldn't do anything other than watch, and I felt so angry and frustrated that I was about to cry.

In the end, I stopped being able to ride the train and was expelled from school. I completely lost the one and only “exit to the outside” that I had. Even now, I still have dreams where I think, “I'm gonna be expelled!”, even though I left that school so many years ago.

I started thinking that I was a good-for-nothing. In terms of definitions, I believe I belonged to the “Level 5 *hikikomori*” (the ones that shut themselves in their rooms), which are said to comprise 3% of all *hikikomori*.

And so, I grew up in the same condition I'd been in as a child, with the only difference that my body became that of an adult's. My parents moved me to a small room and closed the curtains and shutters.

The perception of the outside as a scary place and the fear that “They [my bullies] are watching me!”, even though they'd gone off to college and found jobs, was as fresh as ever. The people around me, however, thought I was lazy and did nothing but play videogames and browse the internet...

I, a “broken doll”, and my parents

The day after I walked around the prison village and reminisced about many things, my mother suddenly came into my room. She was very worked up and started pushing clothes into my arms, yelling, “No one will you give you the time of day unless you start

dressing and thinking just like I tell you to!” It was like she was telling me I’d shut myself in because I didn’t do what she said.

However, I stopped being able to think for myself because my parents forced me to do as they said and because I didn’t express my feelings. I wanted them to understand that the “the good son they can be proud of, who went to a good school and has a good job” is no longer to be found: I threw it away in a last ditch effort.

First of all, I just wanted them to admit—at least once—that the place they’d chosen for my upbringing, the “prison village”, was a mistake. But I’m sure that day will never come.

Being a *hikikomori* for such a long period of time was perhaps the result of being made to think, “I mustn’t see myself as someone that can manage on their own” when I was vulnerable... I feel like if I’d stayed in the prison village, I would’ve kept being a *hikikomori* at the age of 40 or even 50. Perhaps my classmates who [also] stopped attending school during my middle school years are still in the prison village.

There are still many people suffering even now

Luckily, later on I came across the opportunity to leave the prison village and come to Tokyo. It was a place where my devilish classmates were nowhere to be seen and where no one knew who I was; a place where I could walk freely. I was poor and confronted several dangerous situations, but after several years, the fear of being observed, which I’d experienced in the prison village, became much less severe.

Afterwards, for about 5 years I was intent on getting back the time I’d spent as a *hikikomori*, so I pushed myself past my limits and went to work 6-7 days a week. I got scolded at my workplace, which brought back memories of being bullied. My doctor then told me I was “unfit for work”, and so I left my job. It was during this period that I came across “activities for *hikikomori*” and made friends with other *hikikomori*. It was the most meaningful time of my life.

Now, I can ride the train once again, and I can even buy books and go outside to have fun. Living under totally different circumstances from those I experienced in the “prison village” has given me unimaginable strength. And I can also speak about my past experiences to my heart’s content, without lying. I moved to Yokohama in order to stay

involved in *hikikomori* activities, which have given me so much strength, and I work about 4 times a week at a regular job as a management assistant.

A world where it's fine to have a heart

In the “prison village”, I wasn’t allowed to have my own heart [mind]. And I think the reason I’ve realized that is because now I live in a world where having a heart is allowed.

I won’t go back to the “prison village”. But when I think about how things ended with me having to give up on reconciling with that scary world... and when I think that there are still many people who have shut themselves in, I feel so incredibly sad that I start crying all of a sudden, and this has been happening more and more as of late.

「ガッコウへ行け」のルールに全員が縛られた (“Go to school”: everyone was tied down by this rule) by Kikui Yashin (p. 15-16)

I just didn’t have anywhere to go

In my entire life, I have never once talked to a 14-year-old.

I’ve spoken to some 13-year-olds—two or three of them, on the day of the entrance ceremony at that place. As for 15-year-olds, I met one for a very brief time after I’d already turned 20. But as for 14-year-olds, even when I was that age, and even now that I am several times that age, I’ve probably never spoken to a single one.

During the three years one spends attending that place called “middle school”, I spent most of that time in my house. If we were to put it under the definition of *hikikomori*, then I think we could probably describe it as the classical example of “someone who doesn’t attend school and then ends up a *hikikomori*”.

I had trouble attending school ever since I was 8 years old, so I knew middle school wouldn’t work out for me. Even so, I didn’t try to argue with my parents about it again. “(There’s no helping it.) (I knew this would happen.) (Ugh, this again?)”—these kinds of resignations were powerful, dominantly so, and I spent my years as a middle school student at home.

Still, it’s not like I wanted to be at home, and it’s not like I’d decided I wouldn’t meet other people, either. Frankly put, I just didn’t have anywhere else to go other than school,

and I didn't have people to meet up with, either; it was as simple as that. It all started with my humble home, and from then on, my life where I made no contact with other people simply became an obvious, natural thing.

“Don't you feel like hanging out with friends?” I went shopping and I went to the library, too, and I still interacted with my parents. It wasn't a fun time, but we shared dinner at the same table every night. Most times, I would pretend to be watching the loud variety show playing on TV and eat as little as I needed to before quickly returning to my room—that's how most dinners went. My parents had criticized me time and time again about school, so I had no hopes of holding a conversation with them. Us sitting together around the table became a mere formality, a simple representation of our minimal form of interaction.

Even so, my mother would sometimes talk to me, and one such time she asked me if I didn't want to hang out with friends. She asked me other questions after that, such as if I didn't want to find a girlfriend, and other things having to do with sexual topics. I think those blunt questions rushed out of her mouth because my parents were concerned over the fact I'd lived isolated for so many years.

I evaded the issue by shaking my head and giving her a vague reply in return. If I were to put into words how I felt at the time, I think my honest answer would've been “I don't want one” or “I don't feel anything”. Things weren't the result of a conscious decision or my own personality; I was just adapting to the situation.

If we spend a lot of time with someone we're friends with and suddenly they disappear, we'll probably feel lonely. But if we don't have anyone we're close to and if we spend most of our days by ourselves to begin with, then we have nothing to feel lonely about. It's not that I didn't feel lonely—but at the time, it was like I was paralyzed, and perhaps because I'd never had the experience of being close to someone, I ended up forgetting what being lonely felt like.

If I'd found a place where I could meet people whom I could befriend, then I think my feelings would've sprung up. But at the time, I had no such place I could count on. I had no way of acquiring emotional literacy in the environment I lived in.

The reason I stopped interacting with people

If I were to cite one of the major reasons why I had no interactions with other people, the public system called “school” would come up.

To my parents, a child who didn’t go to school was a problem child that had pathological issues. I was scolded, reproached, and deeply hurt an innumerable amount of times. People who went to school were completely different from me and it was like we belonged to totally different cultures, so I would never go out of my way to interact with them.

Even outside of school, one has the opportunity to build friendships in places like free schools or by joining a group that shares a hobby. However, my parents and teachers didn’t suggest [never suggested] I go to such places.

- 1 A child who goes to school but is lonely.
- 2 A child who doesn’t go to school but has lots of friends.

If they were to pick between these two options, both my parents and teachers had it in their minds to immediately pick option ①. Though they asked me if I didn’t want to hang out with friends, I think my parents weren’t focusing on improving my personal relations, but rather confining me within the framework of some sort of social status. (Which one do you consider a “normal” child? If you hesitated for a few seconds, then you might’ve already come up with the answer to the question “Why I stopped interacting with people”).

Either way, even if I’d interacted with people outside of school and enjoyed it, my parents would probably have said, “If you’re that full of spirit, then go to school”. Whenever I became more active [lively], my parents would bring back the question of “Why can’t you go to school?” and start denying me once again. Considering my position [situation] at the time, there were drawbacks to my interacting with people.

I couldn’t interact with people who were part of the school. And I shouldn’t interact with people outside of the school, either. Thus, I didn’t interact with anyone. ...If we look at things like this, with the public education system at the center of it all, the reason why I stopped having personal relationships is really this simple.

There's an education policy named "alternative education" ("another education") that operates differently from the mainstream. Since I didn't take the traditional route and go to school, my parents once introduced me to a free school. However, their ultimate goal was that I'd eventually go to school like normal and they completely disregarded my feelings. If I went to school, I was a good child; if I didn't go to school, I was a bad child. I'd completely lost the strength to go to a different place.

I wonder: if alternative education—like free schools—were more widely acknowledged, would it have prevented me from spending such a miserable, closed off childhood?

The repetition of position known as "*hikikomori*"

I was a child who tried to faithfully abide by the societal rule of "Go to school!" that the adults transmitted. And I wasn't able to do it, so I couldn't choose how to spend my time. There were only two choices: go to school or don't; 100 or 0 [all or nothing]; move forward or stop—and I stopped. I spent my days at home without interacting with others, and many years went by without me having any other options; I think it was inevitable that things went like that. (However, I definitely don't want [my] parents or supporters to use these words [to put things in these terms I've just used]. I don't want anyone to stand in the position of criticizing my situation).

It's somewhat similar to the "repetition of position" that we see in shogi. Repetition of position happens when both players try to avoid bad moves and, as a result, keep repeating the same moves. Consequently, the game doesn't progress. Comparing this to my situation at the time, I tried to live my life at home by using the best moves possible: I didn't turn to crime, and I didn't kill myself either. My parents and teachers, too, used their best moves: they pressured me because they were convinced that children could only grow up in school. Myself, my parents, my teachers, society at large—we all tried to use our best moves within Japan's systems, and as a result, we arrived at a stalemate that no one wished for. Everyone was trying to save their own skin, and I think this situation was truly inevitable. This endless repetition of position just went on and on, with no one calling out a forbidden move and no one leaving the public education system's [shogi] board.

So long as the rules of education don't undergo great changes, this type of situation will likely continue to occur in the future. So much so, that it makes me believe that even if we were reborn and did things from scratch, we would end up in the same stalemate.

Issue 2:

“This is how I connected with people: People with *hikikomori* experience talk about “how to connect with others””

私たちが実践したコミュニケーション不安を和らげる方法 (“Methods we tried to alleviate anxiety in communication”) by Hikipos Editorial Department) (p. 6)

We asked the members of *HIKIPOS*'s Editorial Department about ways of reducing anxiety when communicating that they have tried for themselves.

Not knowing how to talk

- ◆ Understand that “communication is basically a series of conversation patterns” and memorize common sentences used in conversations. Observe people who are good at speaking to see how they carry a conversation and try to mimic them.
- ◆ Radio personalities are pros at talking and speaking. I learned how to talk by listening to the radio.
- ◆ Record radio programs to train your conversation skills.
- ◆ Listen to rakugo to learn how conversations flow.
- ◆ Watch live streams on Nico Nico Douga and YouTube and write comments while doing so. It takes a long time until we can write a good comment to which the streamer or the other viewers react to, but we can fail as many times as we need until we nail it.
- ◆ Chat with foreigners. I feel a sense of connection when my words are understood. You can look for foreigners who are learning Japanese; for example, through Facebook pages for Japanese courses overseas, or on forums like Reddit.
- ◆ Ask the clerks at the supermarket to look for the items I'm searching for. Like: “Excuse me, do you have apple cider vinegar?” That way I don't need to make small talk, and even

when there is some sort of a conversation, it's usually only a question, so it's easier to reply to.

◆ Understand that "simply listening to what someone has to say is enough for a conversation to take place". A long time ago, I heard Ishida Jun'ichi say that answering "yeah" and "you're right" was enough to charm women, and once I tried it out for myself, I was able to chat even with women whom I wasn't very good at handling.

When your voice doesn't come out

◆ Sometimes our voice doesn't come out if we don't use it regularly, so you can talk to tools such as Amazon Echo or AI speakers and practice your conversations that way.

◆ When I had trouble using my voice, something that worked very well was reading out loud while doing my English homework.

◆ Pretend you're calling someone and make up an imaginary conversation.

◆ By training the muscles of my face (raising the corners of my mouth, without using my hands, and keeping that expression for 10 seconds, then repeating it several times), I felt that the muscles around my mouth became less stiff and I could smile more naturally. That made me gain more self-confidence, and I also started smiling more and my communication skills improved.

Tension when talking to other people

◆ The strategy that most helped me was "exposing everything". In other words, not hiding my stress or anxiety. I let the other person know that I'm anxious, by saying things like, "I

m feeling nervous" or "Talking face-to-face like this stresses me out, do you mind if I sit comfortably?" Once I started doing this, things became a lot easier.

◆ Thoughts such as "would it be weird if I talked about this?" only increase our anxiety and worries, so the important thing is to start by talking to people whom we know we can discuss anything with and feel comfortable around.

◆ Greet people in a clear, energetic way.

◆ I stopped following the appearance that is typical of a "normal" adult. By doing so, you immediately send out a message that "there's a possibility this person doesn't abide by the so-called 'normal' values". To be more specific, I dyed my hair red, started wearing piercings and got some tattoos.

Conversations in groups

◆ Realize that, when you're talking to several people in a group, it's enough to simply be present in the conversation, and you don't have to force yourself to think of a topic to talk about. We can be silent people (Golgo 13).

◆ In order to give off a sense of presence even without saying anything, you can play some type of role in that group. For example, you can play the role of the person who handles the shopping. By creating our own place of belonging, we feel a sense of relief. Consequently, this helps spark conversations and it can also make chatting easier.

◆ We hurt more easily if we're always concerned about whether or not the people around us accept us. At the end of the day, the people who participate in a given gathering aren't there so others accept them. On the contrary, I think the most important thing is whether we ourselves accept the people around us. (END)

「ふつうの人」になりすます / ひきこもりのまま社会とつながるために (“Pretending to be a “normal person” / To connect with society while being a *hikikomori*”) by Vosot Ikeida (p. 17–18)

In the shopping district in front of the neighboring village’s station, which is about a train stop away from where I live, the liquor store hosts a get-together where the residents participate and bring homemade food along with them. I show up there every so often. In those occasions, I am not “Vosot Ikeida”. Neither am I a *hikikomori*, or an unemployed man. I use a fake alias, infiltrate civil society and pretend to be a “normal person” with a job.

Why “pretend”?

For a long time, I felt concerned over the fact that I, as a *hikikomori*, could not connect with “normal people”.

When we’re *hikikomori*, we feel more comfortable interacting with other *hikikomori*. We understand each other much faster, because our view of the world is similar.

However, if we remain in those “tepid waters” with people that are akin to us for a long time, we may also start feeling that our self-esteem is decreasing. At one point, the fact that we’re not social people becomes our pride, and we end up doing little else but licking each other’s wounds and criticizing society; is it not so? Will we spend the rest of our lives as people who aren’t accepted in society? Every time that concern crosses my mind, I feel the need to interact with “normal people” somewhere and learn some sociability. Just what kind of life do “normal people” lead? How do they think and how do they act? That’s what I want to know. But who exactly is a “normal person”? What does it mean to be “normal”? I tried to pursue a “normality” whose true form is incomprehensible, and my search gave little fruit.

I want people to accept the *hikikomori* lifestyle, but I don’t think humanity is remarkable enough to change its tone and say that *hikikomori* are right. I only think how good it would be to be able to live as a *hikikomori* in a society that doesn’t see them as a problem. What I mean to say is, there is a part of me that appears to be outside of society and utterly averse to it but, in truth, wants to live in that same society. However, in order to

be able to live in society, I also need to learn and acquire some sociability. This, too, in order to avoid misunderstandings such as the one that says *hikikomori* are “selfish people that cause trouble to the people around them.”

Like a Japanese person at the end of the Edo era

So, where should a *hikikomori* learn that sociability? Perhaps I could do it through “employment” or “reintegration into society”, but that would imply “naturalizing myself” in that other world, and I know that’s impossible for me. What I imagined was something just like the Japanese at the end of the Edo era did, when they went to visit the West in order to assimilate modern culture. I don’t intend to live the rest of my life on the other side. As soon as I’m done absorbing the information I was looking for, I want go to back to my homeland and make the most of that knowledge. Thinking like this, the best way to learn sociability as a *hikikomori* is to “study abroad”; furthermore, it should be for a short period of time so the *hikikomori* can immediately return to their room.

In my case, a single session of “studying abroad” corresponds to one day. If I spend any longer than that interacting with “normal people”, I start feeling anomalies in my mind and body, and I fear I might start saying things I shouldn’t.

I picked the shopping district in front of the neighboring town’s station as my study spot for safety reasons. If I go to the closest station to where I live, there’s the danger people will find out my true identity. I might even come across the lady who lives next to me, or something of the sort. But in the neighboring station, that is less likely to happen. And it’s close enough that I’m still familiar with the territory. Even if local topics come up, I can pretend to be a local resident and keep the conversation going. And the fact that I can immediately hop on my bike and go back home is also quite appealing, thanks to how short of a distance it is.

They don’t know I’m a *hikikomori*. Neither do they know that I’ve been going to the psychiatrist, that I have a mental disability certificate, that I’m unemployed despite “being too old for that”, that I’m living on welfare and, as such, on the tax money the citizens pay, since many years ago. On the contrary, they think that I have a job and a family, that I don’t go to the psychiatrist, that I catch a train filled to the brim with people every morning and evening to commute to and from work; in other words, they think I’m a middle-aged

gentleman who leads a “normal” life appropriate for my age. I faithfully pretend to be that image they’ve painted of me. In a certain way, “pretending” is a cooperation task carried out by the one who pretends and the one who is deceived.

I have to pretend, otherwise things turn out like this

There are also people who preach their sound arguments to me, saying, “Don’t pretend, just be who you really are and face things like that”.

A certain *hikikomori* like me was receiving welfare assistance in a different town. A lady from his neighborhood came up to him and asked, “What kind of person are you? Don’t worry, I’m on your side. Tell me, tell me.” Since she was quite eager, he ended up telling her his life story. Not long after, people around town knew all about it. “You’re poor, aren’t you? I feel sorry for you, so I’ll give you this.” Here and there, several people started visiting him to offer him food that was nearly spoiled or side dishes they were about to throw away. But the truth is that these people just wanted to peep on him. They brought him things, like, “I can’t bear throwing this out, so I’ll have pity and give it to you, who’s below normal citizens”. This maliciousness disguised as good will is the hardest one to handle.

Poor people like us also have dignity, and no matter how poor they are, they don’t eat spoiled food at other people’s houses. However, if he were to refuse it assertively – “I don’t need this!” –, then it would start rumors and people would say, “What’s his problem? Doesn’t he realize people are going out of their way to offer him something? Well, I guess it makes sense why he’s going to the psychiatrist”. Since he had no choice, and also to avoid conflict, he accepted their things and threw them away. In other words, he became the neighborhood’s trash can. And this time, they criticized him behind his back, saying, “He says he’s poor, but he sure throws out a lot of trash. Maybe he actually owns a bunch of things?” Apparently, people were always criticizing him, no matter what he did.

To be honest, this is the destiny that awaits those who decide to expose themselves. It’s just like a modern version of Shimazaki Touson’s *Hakai*.

It can’t be helped if people want to know my social identity — that I’m a “middle-aged *hikikomori*”, that I “go to the psychiatrist”, that I’m “unemployed” and “live on welfare”, among other things. But they won’t understand me and accept me even if they learn this. Most likely, they just want to ask me all kinds of questions to satisfy their curiosity

and, once they've done so, I'll be little more than a topic for their idle gossip. If I were to tell them my identity, sooner or later it'd turn into a rumor like "there's a suspicious man living over there" which would spread throughout the whole town. I don't want to have to change houses because it became too hard to live in my area. I have depression; I don't want to move.

That being so, the simple idea of telling them my true identity is ridiculous. Where I live, the best thing to do is not to tell the truth. And yet, I want to connect with "normal people". So, the best solution for me is to "pretend" and "study abroad".

The manners of a "pretender"

There are many advantages to pretending to be a "normal person" and infiltrating civil society, but there are also a few tricks and manners involved. Firstly, we mustn't trick other people of a single yen, unlike those insolent con men who pretend to be people they're not so they can scam people into wiring them money. If we're pretending in order to put an end to the idea that "*hikikomori* are useless people with no social skills", it would be completely wrong to cheat people out of money, as it would worsen our image and we'd end up losing everything.

In my case, when I have to split the bill with the people from the shopping district, sometimes I end up rounding up the value to the nearest whole number and paying a larger sum than the "normal people" — me, who's living on welfare. It's obvious my wallet hurts whenever I do this. However, "studying abroad" implies paying tuition. I can't be stingy in these situations, for fear that people will say things like, "You're so stingy. Are you poor, by any chance? Are you one of those people we're feeding with our tax money?" and it'll trigger a domino effect that will lead them to unveiling my identity. In order to "pretend", we need to be flexible in situations like this.

There are many other things to keep in mind while "pretending", but I think I'll publish the rest irregularly on the web version of *HIKIPOS*, together with stories of my personal experiences. I ask anyone who might be interested to please read them. (END)

社会に出ていくよりも、逃げること (“Running away rather than stepping out into society”) by Kikui Yashin (p. 13)

Compulsive thoughts

When a toy car hits a wall and stops moving, seen from the outside it's as if it were “stopped”. Even if the car accelerates to the maximum possible speed and wears the motor away, it still can't move forward – not even a little bit – because of the wall. To the people around it, it's as if it were slacking around without moving its wheels, but it wouldn't be able to keep moving even if they yelled “Move forward!”.

... Just like that toy car, I thought I was moving forward. I knew very well what the right path was in terms of my studies and employment. Yet, even so, I couldn't move forward once I got past my mid-twenties. “I have to be a perfect, ideal working adult”. “I definitely have to become a man that can earn money, so I don't embarrass my parents or society, or else I won't be forgiven.” I kept hurting myself with compulsive thoughts like these.

... Time went by, and now that I'm in my 30s, I have formed relationships with people who are close to me and I make a living by working part-time. But I managed all of this not because “I followed the path I had to follow”. Rather, I accomplished it because I acquired “a path of retreat where I can fail”. I relieved the pressure on the wheels and changed directions slightly, as if I were making a detour; I needed that leeway, that comfort.

In my case, by having hobbies that won't lead to work opportunities and interests that can't be described as “studies”, the pressure of “I definitely have to do this” started to diminish considerably. I think dying my hair and smoking, distancing myself from the image of “a good son”, also had an effect. Another thing that also had a lot of impact was distancing myself from people that were harmful to me, such as my parents and certain people that supported me, and developing bonds with people who accept me for who I am. Of course, these changes didn't happen in the span of days or months — they took many years.

Posture of Sakaro

The idea of choosing the path of retreat over the path of evolution has been supported within the medical field. Psychiatrist Nakai Hisao has said that, for the sake of mental health, one must adopt the “posture of Sakaro” and not the “last-ditch effort formation”. “Sakaro”

refers to a ship equipped with oars in the back that are used to row backwards. It is said that what we need isn't the strength to move forward, but the flexibility to be able to retreat.

Even in situations of lending support to *hikikomori*, it's been pointed out that the message of "Definitely succeed!" can produce the opposite effect. *Hikikomori* with fears related to work or employment won't be able to make a move if they're pressured with words such as "You have to pass the part-time job interview". Rather, it'd be a lot easier for them to make a move if they had someone who'd tell them, "Go and come back after you've failed some 5 interviews or so." I can't even imagine how much my mental health would've benefitted had my parents had that spirit.

The path of retreat, and not the path forward

The toy car that crashed against the wall backs up a little and moves in a different direction. By doing so, it starts driving smoothly in its own way, as though everything that happened to it were a lie. "Definitely", "without failing", "I have to move forward" – if I were still trapped by such thought, I think I would've kept living a life without any bonds with other people. I couldn't follow the shortest distance routes, such as employment or studies. But now that I have a path of retreat and a detour of my own, I can finally move. This leads me to create bonds with other people and, as an example of a consequence where right or wrong are irrelevant, it's also given birth to social relationships. I think this is the kind of experience I had. (END)

家族を失った僕が、地域の資源とつながるまで ("I, who lost my family, until I connected to the resources in my region") by Gakincho (p. 16)

The fact I was bad at housework despite being a full-time housewife coupled with my ex-husband's psychological abuse led me to never leave my room. I divorced him and became a single mother, but my daughter became spiteful towards me as I shut myself in, and so I ended up being forced from our home and living by myself.

Acquiring a mental disability certificate and diagnosis of developmental disability

I began a new life in downtown Tokyo. I made the right choice moving into the downtown area, where people are more empathetic. I live on the second floor of the landlady's place, who is several times older than me in my 40s. She, a Christian, lives on her

own on the first floor and kindly healed the wounds my ex-husband and my toxic parents had left in my heart.

I found a job as a network engineer and became employed once again, and also returned to my studies in 2013 by attending evening courses at a college, yet my ex-husband's shouting and yelling came back to me as flashbacks almost every night. I was transferred to a different psychiatrist and began a new clinical trial for my depression, but the medication only made me feel sluggish and I ended up bedridden. I was at a dead end both in terms of work and human relations, and my depression caused me to take a sick leave and, eventually, to leave my job.

Back home, my parents became worried about me for being bedridden and started treating me like a disabled person. I started wondering if my condition was really that bad, so I consulted with our family doctor and received a disability certificate for my depression.

At the division for Disabled Persons Welfare at the ward office, I was introduced to the public health nurse in charge when I went to pick up my certificate. Surprisingly, the landlady on the first floor knew this nurse very well. A long time ago, the landlady also worked at the ward office as a home care nurse, and they were colleagues back then. I felt relieved, and it was a huge help that I could ask that nurse about any problems I had.

Still, why did my parents treat me like a disabled person...? I became suspicious and decided to ask them. My toxic parents revealed that for almost 40 years they'd been hiding the fact I'd been diagnosed as a child with micro brain damage (my current developmental disability). If only I'd known that some 20 years earlier, perhaps I could've avoided losing my job and my family... I couldn't forgive my parents, even more so than before.

When I spoke to our family doctor about the "micro brain damage", which wasn't a term I was very used to, we stopped my clinical trial for depression and changed the medication to a developmental disability one. I can't forgive my parents, but I also felt like the pieces were finally in place once I knew the source of why it was so difficult for me to live. I feel like I took a new step once I stopped blaming myself. At the same time, I also started writing a blog and later on made a Twitter account (@gakincho_shogai).

Energy loss and facing the fluctuation of my gender identity

Despite being a *hikikomori*, I managed to attend the evening courses at graduate school. In my classes there, I came across OriHime – the avatar robot – and its inventor Yoshifuji Ory, and became involved in the OryLaboratory as a student intern. Furthermore, I decided the subject of my master’s thesis would be developmental disabilities and studied for it in the afternoons while also going to the employment transition support center.

However, the side effects of the medication I was taking for my developmental disability made me lose 20kg, and I started having symptoms similar to menopausal disorder. My energy decreased and I couldn’t reconcile school and work, so I ended up quitting the employment transition center. I developed a hormonal imbalance and started experiencing fluctuations in my gender identity. I’d experienced some discomfort regarding my gender ever since I was a child, but I decided to once again face my sexuality, which I’d sealed away before my divorce.

The impetus to my put my life back on its feet

One day after having left the employment transition support center, the public health nurse from the ward office found me unable to move and worn-out and took me to a nearby community center. I was having flashbacks and crying a lot, and the head of the facility kindly came to my house and listened to me. He came with me to buy a closet for my house, which was a mess filled with trash, and since he was also in charge of the helpers’ planning consultation at the center, I was able to put my life back on its feet.

The “Support Center Azalea” is an important place to me; the center is also open on weekends and even non-residents and non-concerned parties can use its services for free. I recommend it to everyone who is going through troubles like me.

...And after all this, I am also being supported by the connections I’ve built with other people like me. I would also like to introduce them one day, if I ever have the chance ☆ (END)

自殺のない社会へ (“Towards a society without suicide”) by Warita Daigo (p. 20)

Mr. Warita Daigo belongs to “*Hikizakura*”, a center that builds a place for *hikikomori* and organizes other peer support activities on a regular basis. The other day, upon receiving the Kirara Award, he said that he not only wanted to make the best of the *hikikomori*

experience, but also “work towards a society without suicide”. He kindly wrote his thoughts on the subject.

Connections change us

Community support associations, including “*Hikizakura*,” are a place where people with similar experiences (peers) can meet each other and build connections. In these places, people can “understand each other”, but also “look back on their own selves” and “find their own identity”. They come to understand that “I’m not the only one going through this”. They’re also places where people can strongly experience that “connections change who I am”. This kind of mutual understanding and support is called “peer support”.

This is why I feel charmed by the idea of peer support and keep increasing the number of peer activities little by little. I have 2 goals in mind: I want people’s individual lives to improve (including in terms of their mental health), and I want to encourage and facilitate their recovery.

Recovery means to “find a life of our own and walk forward by making decisions of our own will”. This obviously implies there are ups and downs, and people can change paths as many times as they want to. The goal is not to unreasonably try and regain things they can’t do, but to increase opportunities of things they can do. This kind of mentality really helped me, and even now I keep doing what I want to do.

When I confronted suicide

When I was a *hikikomori*, I always thought about “death”. I didn’t understand “the meaning of being alive”. For a period, I looked up how to kill myself on the internet and practiced self-harm on a regular basis. I even told my family, “Sorry for being alive”.

When I was in my 20s, I thought about dying. That feeling didn’t change even when I stopped being a *hikikomori*. In fact, nothing had changed within me even though I’d stepped outside. But starting with “*Hikizakura*” when I was 28 years old, several support activities were rapidly increasing in number. By participating in them, the feeling of wanting to die started dissipating, and once I realized it, I’d already turned 30 years old.

I think we live in a day and age where it’s very easy for people to wind up in situations where they feel so much pressure that they “want to die”. Perhaps “visible services”, such

as welfare, have become more substantial and widespread than before; however, the same does not go for the “places for our hearts” – quite the opposite, our choices are becoming more limited than ever.

From my conflict with death to my current activities

The reason why I work in my current activities is because I want to “reduce the number of people going through similar painful thoughts”. I didn’t kill myself because I found things such as “connections”, “the experience of being useful to someone”, “finding worth” and “a place for my heart”. By opening a community support association, I strongly realized that “even someone like me can be useful to other people”. In other words, by supporting others in their recovery processes, I helped my own recovery.

Even now, I’m sometimes assaulted by a suffering so strong that it makes me want to die. However, I keep on living. If I keep on living, there are things I can take back and regain. I might even be able to walk a path of life of my own, in my way. “*Hikizukara*”’s activities, among others, gave me this kind of hopeful view on life. I think that “living” is not about striving for success, but “truly feeling that we’re walking on the present moment”.

Towards a society without suicide

What is a society without suicide? It is a society where prejudice and discrimination have decreased, and where we can accept each other. I think it’s the kind of society where everyone’s lifestyles are respected. I only hope that people who are feeling despair towards their lives can feel at least a little bit better through peer support activities.

It is unknown whether or not a society without suicide can truly be accomplished. However, we have to work towards it proactively, or it will never come true. Suicide eliminates all the pain, anger, expectations and sorrow that we’ve experienced. The proof that we lived despite our suffering ends up being forgotten as time passes. If our personal experiences are going to wind up being for naught, then can we not live and “understand each other” instead? This is what I think.

Society, common sense, normality. Every single person has their own definition of these terms, and neither of them has a true form. In that case, isn’t it better to dismiss what people around us think and contemplate the future in terms of “for our own sake”? In order to acquire “a life of our own”, we have to choose the path we want to follow of our own will,

and walk on it while confronting ups and downs. I think we need a society that can safeguard having such a leeway.

Issue 3:

“*Hikikomori* and Love / Marriage”

ひきこもりが結婚してみたなら (“*What Happens When a Hikikomori Gets Married*”) by Yoshiko Nekota (p. 3-4)

"When you hear the word 'marriage,' what kind of images come to mind? When I was in elementary school, based on the knowledge I gained from shoujo manga (girls' comic books), I had imagined it like this: When you become a junior high school student, you'll fall in love with someone, maybe a classmate or a senior in a club. Then, when you become a high school student, after various twists and turns, you'll start dating. And eventually, you'll break up. Repeat this process, and when someone you want to marry comes along, you get married.

While it may not be a perfect path, I thought that having these romantic experiences would come naturally. But the reality for me was quite different, and I feel like I completely skipped these steps and went straight to getting married. It's precisely a “*hikikomori's* marriage.”

I've had almost no romantic experience. During elementary school, I spent time in a quiet girls-only group, and from junior high onward, I ended up attending an all-girls' school at my parents' request. It was one of those prestigious girls' schools with a strict rule - 'no

dating between boys and girls.' If having a boyfriend was discovered, it meant a stern warning and, in some cases, suspension. Even during cultural festivals or sports festivals, males other than family members were prohibited from entering. These rules were enforced rigorously. My mother also kept a close watch, so despite being a bespectacled, acne-covered otaku girl, I lived with the kind of pressure that's similar to a famous idol group's 'no dating' rule.

In junior high school, I was only approached once by someone trying to pick me up. I was at a bookstore when a boy in a school uniform approached me and said, 'Excuse me.' He seemed like a serious boy from my age group. He asked, 'Could you give me your contact information?'... 'Huh?!' This was the only conversation I had with a boy during my junior high school years. By the way, I promptly ran away after that. The feeling of 'I'm so scared' outweighed any joy of talking to a boy my age. For me, who had been educated that “love is a sin” real-life men had become objects of fear.

After that, I went to high school via a so-called escalator system (an educational system that offers education from elementary or middle until university), but in my second year of high school, I became a *hikikomori* and dropped out a year later. I think it was because I reached my limit dealing with the harsh school life and meeting my mother's expectations. At first, I tried various part-time jobs, but gradually, going outside became more difficult, and from my early twenties, I spent most of my time at home. My health deteriorated rapidly, and I suffered from various symptoms like dizziness, abdominal pain, and insomnia. At the worst point, my body became so weak that I couldn't even stand. But since my relationship with my mother worsened when I stayed at home, I forced myself to study for a real estate-related qualification. At that time, I thought I was barely maintaining a connection with society, but looking back now, I think I was a *hikikomori*. Romance was no longer on my mind. Just getting through each day was a struggle.

Having a Boyfriend

At the age of 25, while living this kind of life, I entered a relationship with a man. When I write it like this, it might seem like “being in love!” But in my case, that relationship was incredibly difficult. I met him at a cram school for qualifications, and he was what people would call a 'normal' person who had graduated from college and was working at a

regular company. On the other hand, I had dropped out of high school due to *hikikomori*. I couldn't date him while carrying the reality of who I was.

The Challenging Relationship

It was difficult because I had to hide the fact that I was carrying 'things that shouldn't be known.' It was painful because I wasn't good at lying or hiding. If only I could have presented my true self, it would have been so much easier. But at that time, I couldn't accept myself. I didn't believe that others would accept someone like me, who had nothing. I was more overwhelmed by the fear of men than the joy of being able to talk to boys my age. I was living with that burden, just like an 'idol group rule' of 'no dating.'

One day, after about three years of this desperate relationship, the topic of marriage suddenly came up. I was completely taken aback. Could someone like me, who had no qualities, really get married? Would I not become a burden to the other person? Was this even a romantic relationship? Many questions and anxieties flooded in. Despite all this, I decided to get married.

The Reason for Marriage

I wanted to get away from my mother. At that time, my parents were separated, and I lived with my mother. She was incredibly overprotective and intrusive, and she couldn't bear the fact that her cherished daughter had deviated from the path. The atmosphere at home was suffocating, and small disputes erupted over trivial matters. We would vent our accumulated frustrations and sufferings, hurt each other, cry, apologize while crying, and then argue again. It was like living in a hellish environment, a love-hate relationship. This kind of life continued for over ten years, and I was at the point of no return. I felt that the only way to escape from here was death.

At that time, the topic of marriage came up. I felt like there was no choice. After all, I was born with nothing—no education, no job history, no experience, no money, no health, no beautiful appearance. I had nothing. So, if there was even a slight chance that marriage could make my life less of a hell compared to the current situation, I thought I should give it a try. It was a marriage driven by desperation.

I didn't have a wedding ceremony. I had no friends to invite, and, most importantly, I couldn't bring myself to feel happy. I got married even though I'm a *hikikomori*. Some

people might find this behavior cowardly, and I think so too. But at that time, I was at a crossroads between life and death. I chose to live. Marriage seemed like the only "path to life" left for me during that time.

Summary

I want to write about what happened after I got married. I went from being a shut-in to a housewife, but the fundamental pain in my life hasn't changed much. I still struggle and find life difficult, carrying these indescribable emotions with me.

The root of my suffering lies in my naturally sensitive personality and, above all, the significant influence of my mother. Since I was a child, I've carried the heavy burden of my mother's expectations. To become her ideal daughter, I've denied my true feelings continually. In doing so, I lost the ability to enjoy life, the power to think, and even the will to live.

This suffering didn't magically disappear with marriage because, even as a housewife emerging from isolation, I'm still me.

Lastly, I want to convey that within the "shut-in community," housewives face particular challenges. I've been looked at with skepticism at self-help meetings, questioned about why a housewife would attend. After sharing my story, it's often concluded with, "But you're ultimately a housewife, right?" That feeling of despair.

Being a housewife doesn't automatically equate to happiness, and housewives can also struggle with isolation. I used to believe differently before marriage, but the reality is, I'm still in pieces.

I believe that healing this shattered heart is something only I can do. It's an incredibly lonely and painful journey, one that takes a long time, with its ups and downs. That's why I want to attend support groups.

Despite the differences in their content, I want to meet people who have carried similar burdens in life. With them, I hope to transcend various barriers and, if possible, live together, sharing our struggles.

「正社員になれたら...」ひきこもりを出た頃と「あの子」の思い出("If I Could Become a Full-Time Employee... Memories of Leaving Hikikomori Behind and 'Her'") by Toshi (p. 7)

I Knew I was a 'Loser' Myself, but...

What comes to mind when you hear the term "adolescence"? Perhaps stories of children growing into adults, naturally falling in love, and enjoying their youth.

However, for me, adolescence was a period from the age of fourteen to twenty-six when I was forced into *hikikomori* due to bullying at school. The hatred I felt during that time continued even after my *hikikomori* life ended, following my move to Tokyo. I couldn't find stable work, and when I spent most of my time in my small room, all I could think about was my past anger.

Whenever I had enough money for train fare, I would venture out to attend events I found interesting online. Not all of them were high-quality, but being able to talk to people was enjoyable, and I even joined post-event gatherings.

It was at one of these gatherings that I struck up a conversation with a girl about her thoughts on the event. She seemed anxious by herself, and when I approached her to chat about her impressions of the event, she seemed relieved and said, "Thank you for talking to me." She continued to engage in conversation with me at the next event, and we connected on social media, eventually even exchanging phone calls.

However, I responded to messages on social media too quickly, and she figured out that I wasn't employed, which made me feel like a failure.

I tried to create gaps in my online activity, and I made multiple visits to the Hello Work (employment service center), but I couldn't even understand how to fill out the paperwork.

One day, she took me to her family's workplace volunteer event, where we made cotton candy and spent time talking to children. It was a fun time. I couldn't help but wonder why she would bother being with someone like me, whom she considered a neet (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), but I couldn't bring myself to reveal that I had also been a *hikikomori* from high school onwards.

As we talked, I felt a burning passion building inside me. When our call ended, I felt a restless energy. I wanted her to see me, even a little, so I started vocational training at Hello Work for a job similar to the volunteer work she introduced me to. I kept textbooks for advanced qualifications by my bedside and worked for about four and a half years, six to seven days a week. I hardly spoke with her during this time.

However, my hope of becoming a "normal full-time employee" never materialized. Promotions within a few months were normal for those with typical work histories, but not for me. I couldn't be proud of anything in front of her. I became anxious at work due to my impatience, which led to me quitting. At my next workplace, I was diagnosed as unable to work due to a mental illness.

I am not Qualified to Talk to Her

I found myself alone again, spending days just staring at the ceiling. Although I didn't actively cut ties with her, our phone calls stopped. I blamed my incompetence, hesitated, and eventually forgot her number. I began to think, "I never had any hope from the beginning." Despite this, I continued to engage in *hikikomori* activities. But one day, I remembered a strange story she had shared.

"You know, Toshi-san, you had a reason for becoming a shut-in, right? But I became unable to move without any reason. For about six months, I couldn't do anything... But I was able to enter a classroom smoothly one day. At that moment, I thought, 'I can still fight.'"

She had always talked to me from outside my overwhelmed perspective.

When we met once afterward, I told her that I didn't just drop out of junior high school but also quit high school. She opened her eyes wide, listened attentively, and seemed genuinely kind.

My Heart Softened Just a Little

Then, during the time I was preparing to go to Yokohama, I found old photos on an old digital camera.

They were pictures from the time I had gone to meet her in Yokohama a few years ago. I had forgotten about them but ended up liking them a lot. The pictures didn't capture

the breathtaking night view from the place we visited afterward, which was incredibly beautiful.

During my ten years of *hikikomori*, I couldn't convince myself that "I deserve to live." Even when others told me, "It's okay to live," it didn't reach me. However, when she expressed her wish for me to live, I began to wonder if she felt the same way about me. I felt a faint spark of "heart," something I had been told about after such a long time.

When I sent her an email after a long while, she was doing well.

「キモい」がつけた傷跡("The Scars Left by 'Creepy'") by ToDAMi (p. 8)

Group life

It probably started in kindergarten, but since everyone was around the same age, I didn't feel much of a difference. However, when I entered elementary school, the age range expanded from 1st to 6th graders, and the differences in appearance and the act of comparing oneself to others began to lead to feelings of being hurt. The first things I realized when compared were being "short," "pale," having "brown hair," and being "too skinny."

These might not be things that bother most people today. But around 40 years ago, I had all of these qualities, and from the beginning of elementary school to high school graduation, I was considered a "creepy" presence.

Assuming the handicap of being born in late March, my height never fell behind the last ten people from the front, and I was the lightest among the boys in my class, no, in my entire grade.

* At the time of elementary school graduation, I was 143 cm tall and weighed 29 kg.

* At the time of junior high school graduation, I was 156 cm tall and weighed 37 kg.

This was discovered when I started my first job after graduating, but thickening my wrists and broadening my body's width were physically impossible due to my body

composition. Since elementary school, I was called "skin and bones," and people would say, "Eat more!" and "I want to give my body fat to you" every day.

In junior high school, girls would say things like, "I don't like boys with skinnier wrists than me" and "He doesn't seem like he could protect me." Most importantly, the word "creepy" with "white, skinny, and unpleasant" always carried a sense of "defeat" filled with bitterness and sadness, as if it questioned, "Am I even seen as a human?"

Words That Deny One's Existence

I desperately wanted to overcome these body image issues. To break free from being called "creepy," I had to start with physical appearance changes, but no matter how much I ate or exercised, I couldn't gain any muscle or make my bones thicker.

I even entered a junior high school that wasn't the one assigned to me by taking an entrance exam, just to hide my physical flaws a little better, but it had no effect.

During the summer vacation of my third year in junior high, there was an overnight event with a ghost story contest in class. That night, we were supposed to pair up—one boy and one girl. Due to a last-minute protest by the girl I was supposed to pair with, I ended up with a girl in our school who was disliked by everyone.

I later heard that she had refused, saying, "I don't want to be with that creepy guy!" What should I do? The result of being compared to others was "creepy." Am I the only one who feels that being showered with that word makes it feel like my existence is denied?

I'm not considered for anything. I'm passed over in line. I'm seen as incapable and not given the chance. The greatest pain of all is being criticized for my efforts and results. I have an intense need for approval, more than anyone else. Isn't this a common trait among those called "creepy"?

We want to coexist as "equals" as fellow human beings, but it doesn't come true. With a heavy heart, the actions we take to gain recognition become our silent, solitary battle that no one notices. How much time, effort, and loneliness will it take to be rewarded?

Being "together" is undoubtedly reassuring. Accumulate achievements in anything, even if you can't be the best, even if you're not outstanding, as long as you can score 60 points and pass. I just want to be "recognized." That's all.

Issue 4:

“*Hikikomori* and “Work”: Is employment the goal?”

自己否定を抱えたまま働く危うさ Title: "The Perils of Working with Self-Doubt" by Yurina (p. 2)

"What You're Doing is Futile."

Unable to accept myself and trust others, I find that the desire to isolate myself has never really left me, even as I continue to work.

"If I stumble in my work, I might just revert to being a *hikikomori*," I often think to myself.

I grapple with this sense of instability every day, heading to my workplace while carrying the precariousness of my existence.

A year ago, I found myself unable to go to work and confined to my home. It was a culmination of years of self-doubt and the complex interpersonal relationships in my workplace that led to my social anxiety.

The new workplace I joined after changing jobs had a toxic atmosphere. During work hours, it was common for colleagues to criticize and gossip about one another without any consequences.

Even my veteran boss, who was supposed to teach me the job, had mood swings and was often quite authoritarian. I remember during training, he would cross his arms and give me stern looks, making me feel as though I were constantly being watched over.

Influenced by past experiences like bullying during my school years and my parents' discord, I had lived my life lacking self-confidence. Everything I did was taken to heart, making that environment unbearable for me.

Every hurtful comment like "What you're doing is pointless, and your overtime pay is a waste" deeply wounded me.

The combination of existing self-doubt and external rejection at work led me to the conclusion that "I'm unnecessary in this world." As I tried to go to work, this equation dominated my thoughts.

Every day, I silently prayed for the day to end, feeling my physical and mental strength slowly deteriorating.

On the Verge of Harming Someone

Despite being cornered, I continued going to work out of a sense of duty. One day, a pivotal incident occurred.

It happened during a car ride with my boss when we were returning from a business trip. After completing their work, I was entrusted with driving back.

There was an awkward silence in the car, and the tension was palpable. My hands gripping the steering wheel were trembling, and my gaze was fixed on the road. I thought, "Just a little more, and I'll be free from this space once we reach the workplace."

But it was at that very moment, just as I was about to turn into the workplace's rotary, that I nearly hit a pedestrian coming from the left. I hadn't checked the side with my boss, as I was too afraid to look at him.

I slammed on the brakes just in time, preventing an accident, but my mind went blank.

I was overwhelmed with shame at having almost collided with someone during work and the fear of being reprimanded by my boss. I couldn't even press the accelerator pedal anymore.

My heart raced, my breathing was erratic, and my self-doubt exploded within me, leading me to cry out in the car.

"I'm just a hindrance to you. I'm sorry. I'm useless, and I'm causing nothing but trouble."

From the next day, I couldn't even open the office door by myself.

With the help of a colleague, I managed to enter the room, but the fear of being looked at overwhelmed me when I was at work. I couldn't focus on the documents in front of me. Memories of bullying from my school days resurfaced, and my workplace desk felt like a school desk, rendering me incapable of working. Word of yesterday's incident spread through the workplace as gossip:

"Why was someone like her even hired?"

"That person seems a bit odd, don't you think?"

The thought that such comments were being made behind my back made it impossible for me to even sit at my desk.

"I can't keep living while continuously denying myself here."

I eventually sought a leave of absence as my last resort. The feeling of not being able to forgive myself for stepping out of society, the inability to perform my job properly, the imperfection of my existence, the loss of belonging to society, all filled my heart.

***Hikikomori* as a “Mental State”**

I sought societal validation, status, and belonging, and in my haste, I looked for a job and found a new workplace. However, the relationships within this new workplace were chaotic, and every day felt more like a descent into hell. During that period, I intensified my self-doubt even further.

Even if I managed to place myself in a new workplace, continuing to work without valuing myself deepened the darkness in my heart and added more reasons for distancing myself from others.

"Once one gets a job, *hikikomori* will end." This perception probably arises because people perceive *hikikomori* as a visible 'situation.'

If we don't look at the suffering and pain experienced by the person from the aspect of "mental state" and the underlying reasons that led to their reclusive state, there may never be a true ending for the individual, their family, or society.

Even if I return to work, the existence of "myself as a recluse" remains connected. There's no need to rush towards the most rational and irresponsible goal that society, family, and supporters expect.

ひきこもりへの偏見で苦しめられた- 大企業に入社できたけれど("Suffering from Prejudice Against Hikikomori - I Got into a Major Corporation, But...") by Wakeari Joshi (A Girl with a Reason) (p. 7)

The feature of this month's magazine asks the question, "Is employment the ultimate goal?" My answer, in a nutshell, is, "I thought so, but it turned out differently." Here's my story.

I became a *hikikomori* in the summer of my first year of high school. I couldn't step out of my room and stayed in isolation for three years. Up until that point, I had been on the path of an honor student. When I turned nineteen, I thought I had to somehow rebuild my life, but I couldn't get my thoughts to shift from that perspective. Being an average person from an ordinary family, with no outstanding talents, I couldn't think of any way to reintegrate into society other than studying, passing exams, and getting back on the track of an education-based society. So, dragging my ailing mind and body affected by depression, medication, and trauma, I went through three tumultuous years that couldn't be written on my resume. Eventually, at the age of twenty-two, I finally entered Keio University's Faculty of Letters.

From *Hikikomori* to the Elite Path?

After entering university, I somehow managed to maintain the appearance of a "normal student." I rarely attended classes because I couldn't get up in the morning, but I was actively involved in extracurricular activities. Even so, I didn't deviate too far from being an average Japanese university student. I graduated in four years, found a regular job just

like everyone else, and inexplicably secured a general position at a major telecommunications company.

At the time in 2012, new graduate recruitment was in a transitional phase. Old customs such as age limits of "within the current year plus two years" persisted, but there were also efforts to recruit diverse talents under the banner of "diversity." I boldly presented my history as a *hikikomori* as a "strength" in every job interview. In almost every interview, I was asked about overcoming difficult experiences and adversities. I must have made a good impression because they were quite interested in hearing my story. I believe I was effectively hired through diversity recruiting.

Wasn't This the Ultimate Comeback?

However, within six months of joining the company, I experienced workplace harassment from my superiors. It all began when I fell ill after my mother's sudden illness. I offered to take a short sick leave upon the doctor's recommendation, but my boss consistently rejected my requests. No matter how many times I consulted, my concerns fell on deaf ears, and I was gradually cornered.

Being forced to go to the office when I couldn't go felt eerily familiar, reminiscent of the terrifying days during my period of non-attendance when my parents, teachers, and society would threaten me with "Go to school." To make matters worse, my boss, incredibly, delved into my past history of non-attendance and mocked me. Finally, he said, "If you don't come to the office tomorrow, I'll come to pick you up."

From that day on, I completely lost the ability to move my body. Once again, I despaired like never before about my *hikikomori* self, even though I had worked so hard to obtain an education and a job, thinking, "I'm no good after all... I've lost everything." That's what I thought.

But looking back now, it doesn't make sense that despite hiring a former *hikikomori*, my past wasn't respected at all when I was assigned to my department. My illness and my history of *hikikomori* were unrelated, yet they looked at me with the attitude of "That's why former *hikikomori*..." It's incredibly frustrating. I believe that society's prejudices, filled with such biases, hinder the challenges of *hikikomori* and reproduce the difficulties of living.

"Goal" Was Outside the Rails

Life is uncertain. When I left that company and changed jobs to a venture, life suddenly became enjoyable. Everyone there had not only deviated from the rails but also didn't care about where the rails were. It was liberating.

The concept of a "goal" is undoubtedly connected to the notion of "rails." It's a worldview where there's a "right path," and by steadfastly following it, you'll eventually see the "goal."

However, in this age of individuality, it's only natural to think that for the question, "What is the goal of your life?" there would be a hundred different answers for a hundred different people. So why is it that *hikikomori* is only presented with the goal of "employment"? Isn't it a manifestation of the rigidity and lack of imagination in modern Japanese society that there's no path to self-realization outside of "working"?

ひきこもりのゴールが就労ではない理由 (“Why the Goal of a Hikikomori Isn't Employment”) by Katoo Kooki (p. 9-10)



Figure 11 – Panel 1

Text ballon 1 - Hello, everyone!

Text ballon 2 - Today, we'll explain the following.

Text ballon to the right - Why the Goal of a *Hikikomori* Isn't Employment



Figure 12 – Panel 2

Text balloon 1 - Why have "I" been struggling in society?

Text balloon 2 - Let's start by looking at that.



Figure 13 – Panel 3

Text balloon 1 - Why can't I work like everyone else?

Text balloon 2 - I messed up again...

Text box to the left - "I" couldn't overlook unfair situations and that has caused trouble in almost every workplace "I" have been in.



Figure 14 – Panel 4

Text balloon 1 - In "my" case, it was not only the trauma ingrained by "my" father but also the heightened sensitivity shared by people struggling with *hikikomori*, truancy, or difficulty adapting to society.

Text balloon 2 - Highly sensitive individuals tend to pick up on things that others may not notice at school, work, or home. The gap that forms in dealing with the world leads to suffering.



Figure 15 – Panel 5

Text box to the right - After moving to Tokyo and quitting "my" second job at a beauty salon, my counselor Mr. Akutagawa smiled in delight.

Text balloon 1 - Oh! You quit your job!

Text balloon 2 – It's really wonderful that you realized it didn't suit you and quit!!



Figure 16 – Panel 6

Text balloon 1 - Doing something unpleasant is part of being in society.

Text balloon 2 - If "I" can't adapt, "I" will never be ordinary. Then, no one will accept me!

Text box to the left - Until then, "I" had been trying to fit into society. However, the result of persisting in doing so was the breakdown of "my" heart.



Figure 17 – Panel 7

Text to the right - Excuse me.

Text balloon - Thanks to Mr. Akutagawa's advice, "I" started to view "myself" not in the context of society's standards and conventions, but rather as someone with strong sensitivity. "I" learned to shape "myself" by "my" own standards, considering "my" sensitivity, while connecting with society.



Figure 18 – Panel 8

Text to the right - Hmm, how can I connect with society without working?

Text balloon - Oh! I've got it! Creative activities like manga and music! Using those, I can communicate my own experiences and feelings to connect with society!

Text box at the left - By letting go of the belief that I had to get a job to be a respectable person, I found a new way to connect with society.



Figure 19 – Panel 9

Text balloon 1 - 'I' voluntarily abandoned the traditional employment path.

Text balloon 2 - This decision not only paved the way for him but also positively impacted his mental well-being. It goes to show that there isn't just one path in life.

Figure 19 – Panel 9



Figure 19 – Panel 9

Text balloon 1 - Forcing yourself into employment, even when it makes you unwell, is not the answer.

Text balloon 2 - Instead, consider what you truly want and what will maintain your mental health. From there, you're likely to find a path.

"どう生きたいか、を決めるのはわたし("Deciding "How You Want to Live" is Your Choice") by Satsuki (p. 11)

I cried all night, unable to do anything productive, but I had to face the morning. It was during my university days, close to an impending test.

My mother had urged me to attend university, but I found studying for exams excruciating.

Despite having an interest in the subject, I hadn't wanted to go to that faculty. Yet, I didn't realize that until later.

No, I had been aware of it for a long time, but I pretended not to. I decided it would be difficult to graduate and withdrew into *hikikomori*.

My memories from the time I was a *hikikomori* are vivid, yet they are also clouded by contradictory feelings.

Various thoughts swirled inside me, but the overwhelming one was the intense feeling of "I'm running out of time."

I dropped out of university, deviated from the path, and wondered what to do next. At the same time, I felt tremendous anxiety about losing my title and attributes.

Japanese people primarily talk about their affiliations during self-introductions, but I had lost what was required in Japan.

Returning to the rails by working

To regain my titles, and to return to the rails of life, I started working once again, with determination.

My primary duties involved customer service and administrative tasks. However, I had responsibilities that went beyond my job role, which caused me trouble.

My boss pushed work onto me so that I couldn't slack off, and my colleagues tried to put the blame on me for their mistakes. I also received harsh words from customers often.

Moreover, I have a wide emotional range. Minor events can greatly depress me, and if something happy happens, my mood shoots up. But if something unfortunate occurs

afterward, my spirits plummet. These emotional ups and downs drain my energy and become a source of stress.

Furthermore, displaying extreme emotions in response to mood swings or unjust events is generally unfavorable among customers and colleagues. Suppressing feelings of sadness and presenting a composed demeanor, as well as not allowing emotions to dictate one's actions, became a significant source of stress.

Life-Changing Lyrics

I was struggling, wondering, "Others endure these things, and yet I'm so weak and pathetic."

It was during this period that I happened to hear a certain set of lyrics while watching a music show. The moment I read these lyrics, it felt like an electric shock surged through my body.

"But since I know how I want to live, whether I'm happy or unhappy, rich or poor depends on me."

It was from the song "*Seiiki* (Sanctuary)" by Masaharu Fukuyama. As I carefully read these lyrics, I was struck by the idea that I can decide how I want to live. I had failed to make such decisions for myself for a long time.

I'd like to make a small excuse: the reason I hadn't decided anything myself was due to my mother's interference, as she ended up making decisions for me.

Whether the chicken or the egg came first, it's difficult to say. Both had a skewed relationship but maintained an exquisite balance. However, by continuing such a relationship, I found myself in a state where I didn't know what kind of life I should live.

This was a major challenge that persisted while I was a *hikikomori* and continued after.

In the end, these lyrics led me to the conclusion that "I want to live peacefully." I wanted to avoid the suffering of being yelled at or witnessing conflicts, which allowed me to live calmly.

And that's why I returned to *hikikomori*. While I still experience ups and downs, it's much less frequent than when I was working.

Each Person Has Their Sanctuary

So, I returned to being a *hikikomori*, but I'm not as susceptible to emotional fluctuations as I used to be. I'm now writing this article with a calm heart.

What brings happiness and what causes suffering is a matter for each individual to decide, and that's their sanctuary.

Therefore, pushing one's own values and way of life unilaterally is equivalent to violating the other person's sanctuary.

Deciding how to live is a challenging task, but as you read this, I hope you find a way to live a life that suits you best.

実際にやってみた！「ひきこもり系が向いている仕事」 ("I Tried It in Real Life! (Jobs Suitable for Hikikomori)") by Hikipos Editorial Department (p. 13-14)

The theme is "working," but where can one work? What was everyone's first step, one might wonder. If you're from the *hikikomori* background, you're likely to have such questions.

So, we conducted a roundtable discussion on the theme of "Jobs Suitable for *Hikikomori*" with 13 individuals who have experienced *hikikomori*. We've summarized the experiences and insights that emerged from this discussion. We hope it can be a hint of some kind.

Jobs You Can Do Alone

- IT Remote Work:

This type of work allows you to choose your hours freely, unlike the traditional office work with an 8-hour time card system. It operates on a results-oriented basis, so if you finish your work in 4 hours, no one will complain if you sleep the rest of the time. However, finding such job listings can be quite challenging. They don't often appear in web searches.

Additionally, when you become a full-time employee, there are still quotas to meet. (Male, 50s)

- Writer:

Writing articles in your area of interest and submitting the manuscripts to magazines or publishing houses can surprisingly work. The income may be low, but the job is enjoyable. (Male, 50s)

Product Surveys and Feedback on Product Copywriting. This job involves providing feedback on advertising content and gathering user opinions. The reading experience during *hikikomori* days can be useful. (Male, 30s)

- Auctions, Mercari:

Selling old manga or unused items on online auctions without discarding them. You can gain experience in procurement, product descriptions, and shipping, which is like running your own business. It can also serve as rehabilitation for work.

Mercari, in particular, is simple as it only requires scanning the barcode on books, and all the information, including the selling price, is automatically registered.

At the time, there were fluctuations in health and productivity. There were times when I couldn't do anything for a month, and I received numerous complaints from buyers. This led to one of my selling accounts being restricted. Nevertheless, the experiences gained from challenging these setbacks were more valuable than the failures themselves. Subsequently, I persisted and created a new account. It might be a good idea to start within your capabilities, perhaps listing items one at a time. (Male, 30s)

Reselling Idol Goods like "Momoiro Clover" and "AKB48". Reselling idol merchandise, especially items related to popular idol groups like "Momoiro Clover" and "AKB48," can be profitable. Goods and tickets from before their big breakthroughs can sell for tens of times

Suitable Jobs

- Tissue Distribution:

A job that involves handing out tissues without the need for communication. The quotas were not very strict, and many of us ended up taking home or discarding tissues that couldn't be distributed. There was no pressure, and it was a good form of rehabilitation. It's quite physically demanding since you have to stand all day. (Female, 30s)

- Exam Proctor:

This job doesn't require qualifications, and you mainly have to stand. In the past, you could find job listings in magazines, and now they are available online. I was introduced through a university circle connection. Depending on the location, wearing a suit and arriving at 9 AM may be required. (Male, 30s)

- NPO Office Work:

Listening to the war experiences of elderly individuals and performing simple office tasks for an hourly wage of 900 yen. There are no sales targets, and there are no customers. Job listings can be found in regular part-time job ads. (20s, Male)

- Post Office Part-Time Work:

My *hikikomori*-affected sibling started this part-time job. Initially, it was just sorting New Year's cards, but as trust was gained, it transitioned into a job that involved interacting with people and receiving mail. This increased interactions with people, and maybe it helped in developing conversational skills. (20s, Female)

- Clinical Trials:

During university, I earned around 20,000 yen for a one-night, two-day stay, working mostly passively at a rate of 900 yen per hour. Sometimes, it can be physically demanding, and I even had to endure having a testing device inserted through my nose into my stomach for three days as part of an acid reflux study. (Male, 30s)

- Office Work:

Inputting expense data for an accounting firm. Typing in about 1,000 receipts one after the other. There's no need for customer service, and even if you lack knowledge of accounting, you can work from home if you're proficient with accounting software and can

responsibly keep customers' receipts. As long as you meet deadlines, it's okay to work late into the night, making it suitable for *hikikomori* individuals.

The first three months are challenging until you understand the job, and there were considerable difficulties in workplace relationships. However, once you get past that, it's quite good. (30s, Female)

- Entrepreneurship:

During my job search after quitting a large company, I thought a regular office job would be impossible for me. So, I tried working at a social venture that nurtures entrepreneurs, and it turned out to be a perfect fit. It's full of unique individuals, including people with developmental disorders, so it's very comfortable. With discretionary labor, you can work as you like throughout the day, and you can work freely when you don't want to. (30s, Female)

When I decided to become self-employed, it was important to introduce myself as a "self-employed person" or "freelancer." Even when there was no work, I suddenly created business cards. Later, I attended free web-related vocational training and started with tasks from the company my brother had established. Initially, I was paid 50,000 yen. We still work together. (30s, Male)

The First Step to Work

- Self-Esteem:

My brother and mother told me, "You're good at teaching people," and I thought, "Wait, maybe I can do it?" This moment of increased self-esteem was when I took the first step. (30s, Male)

- Friends:

A friend told me, "I won't forgive you if you're not working the next time we meet," and that ultimately got me started. (20s, Male)

- From the *Hikikomori* Community:

If you try to get a part-time job straight away, you have to do interviews, make phone calls, and write resumes. Even after ending your *hikikomori* lifestyle, you might not have completed proper job hunting.

By showing up at *hikikomori*-related activities, I was gradually recognized and asked, "Would you like to help?" for volunteer work. Even if you fail at volunteering, you can quit anytime.

If your potential employer knows about your *hikikomori* experience and remembers your character, and if they are understanding, it can become an empathetic workplace. (30s, Male)

- Volunteer Work:

Activities in the local neighborhood close to volunteering, such as replacing the printer for the elderly's computer. The 500 yen reward went to the local neighborhood association, but I occasionally received gift certificates and the like as the elderly individuals were grateful. This allowed me to buy dinner and my favorite ice cream.

When I said, "I don't have a job," they would respond with things like, "Would you like some vegetables? I made extra dinner, so would you like to eat more?" That effectively became my actual wage. Since I was a school refusal student from elementary school, this became well-known in the local community, and they viewed me with warmth. (40s, Male)

Disability Employment and Vocational Transition Support

- Consideration Provided:

The vocational transition support facility I used would match you with a workplace and help you find a job after 3 to 6 months. I was able to secure a job through this, but I felt it wasn't the right fit, so I quit. Current vocational support seems to prioritize individuals with a disability certificate, as companies seek to employ people within disability employment quotas. Obtaining a disability certificate is a good step if you have no hesitations, as it helps workplaces understand what kind of conditions and considerations are needed. (30s, Male)

- A Sense of Belonging:

I am currently going to vocational transition support. They provide strong mental care, and I've become attached to it like a place of belonging. I think we may be at a loss with the name "employment support." I believe it's a great system that should be more widespread, and if it had a different name, I'd recommend it to *hikikomori* individuals. (50s, Male)

- Trying Employment in Disability Employment:

I found postal work through a disability employment support center using my disability certificate.

At first, I was placed in the section for mental disabilities and was considered incapable of doing much. I spent a lot of time operating a shredder. Since there was no one around, I had to entertain myself and got creative with the shredder. The job didn't require many skills, so I'd dance while shredding and challenge myself to see how many sheets I could insert. I started with 30 and eventually got to 35.

I set out to become the world's best Shredder Man and made a boring job creative. Towards the end, they had me do regular sales work, which was overwhelming, and I ended up quitting. (40s, Male)

Issues with Hello Work (Public Employment Services in Japan)

- Potentially Hazardous Job Postings:

There was a poster saying "Part-time job openings" near my house, and they were hiring anyone because they were short-staffed. It was demanding, but they never fired me, and I got paid per hour just for sitting there.

Hikikomori individuals are originally more susceptible to precarious job postings. Parents might wonder why their child, who had a smooth job, isn't just finding work at Hello Work. However, there are many potentially hazardous job postings. (30s, Male)

What Made It Easier to Consider Work

- For Health:

Working itself is good for your health. However, working five days a week is bad for your health. A simple job, three days a week, would be better. If you go in early in the morning and come home in the evening, it's good for your health. (40s, Male)

- Non-Restrictive Interpersonal Relationships:

Short-term, limited employment is good, as it allows you to see the end. Long-term relationships are burdensome. (50s, Male)

- Tolerance for Mistakes:

A work environment that allows for mistakes is very important. It's incredibly tiring when even one mistake is not tolerated.

My job as a call center operator allowed for mistakes. In my view, office work doesn't make mistakes as visible, and once you've learned the format, you can write it accordingly. Once you get used to it, it becomes easy to do, even after the initial training period. (30s, Male)

- Employment Type:

It's important not to choose employment as a regular employee. I was a regular employee when I quit last time, but my salary decreased while my responsibilities increased. I was sternly reprimanded and often engaged in unpaid overtime work despite the official eight-hour workday. When you work part-time and meet the minimum work hours, the responsibilities become lighter, and it's easier to quit.

If you're a regular employee and try to quit, the bosses collectively try to prevent it. I was only able to quit when I provided a medical certificate. (30s, Male)

- The Issue of Feeling Forced:

The problem isn't necessarily about the difficulty of the work or long working hours but more about the feeling of being forced. Without that feeling, work could potentially be manageable. (50s, Male)

- In case of illness:

If your mind is unwell, it's better to seek treatment before working. Being unwell is not a form of indulgence. (30s, Male)

- Who You Work with Matters More than What You Do:

It's not so much about the job's content but more about the nature of the people around you. The entrepreneurial community is interesting, and I think it's a good match with *hikikomori* individuals. (30s, Female)

就労して解決すること、しないこと(“Working to Resolve, or Not”) by Medium (p.15-16)

Having experienced both the life of a *hikikomori* and that of a working individual, especially considering the often discussed question of whether "the goal of overcoming *hikikomori* is employment," I would like to share my thoughts as someone who has lived in both roles.

I found myself unable to adapt to university life, and shortly after enrolling, I began to exhibit *hikikomori* tendencies. After spending about five years merely registering as a student, I eventually dropped out. Even during this time, I continued to be a full-fledged *hikikomori* for about two more years. Fortunately, I had acquired programming skills as a hobby since middle school, and I was able to find employment by leveraging this skill, given that it was still the era of the bubble.

Over the course of my life, I have worked at various companies for twenty years.

However, it's essential to note that I did not stay with one company continuously. I would work at one company for a couple of years, experience adjustment disorder, resign, and then take several years to find another job. Looking back, I realize that my inability to adapt to the workplace and the subsequent resignations were likely due to my previously undiagnosed developmental disorders.

At the age of 42, I was fortunate to secure a job in an entirely different field through an introduction from friends I had met locally. I put in a lot of effort with the intention to make a long-term commitment there. However, in my third year, my contract was terminated. This experience shattered me, and I began to believe that working within an organization was no longer feasible for me.

In my case, even though I experienced depression and struggled with it, I still managed some level of social activity. For a long time, I didn't consider myself a "*hikikomori*," which meant I had no connection to people within the *hikikomori* community. Therefore, my understanding of *hikikomori* was just as biased as that of the general public. I thought of "*hikikomori*" as someone who was entirely unable to leave their home and participate in social life.

Subsequently, I was fortunate enough to discover support groups for people with developmental disorders and "places" for *hikikomori* individuals. Through interacting with people who shared similar difficulties, I stopped blaming myself for my struggles. About a year ago, I started attending a vocational transition support program and began working for a company that allowed me to work remotely. While remote work provided an ideal environment for a *hikikomori* by eliminating the need for commuting, unnecessary meetings, and unimportant interpersonal interactions, it also came with its challenges. My physical stamina eventually ran out after about six months, despite making efforts, along with my colleagues, to improve the situation as much as possible.

This is how I came to realize, at the age of over 50, that I was a genuine "*hikikomori*."

What Does Working Solve?

During the time when I was a *hikikomori*, I suffered greatly from "pressure from parents," "feelings of inferiority," and "impatience."

Parents who persistently pressure their children to "become regular employees as soon as possible" are common and can exacerbate a child's *hikikomori* status. This is generally an unreasonable demand. The economic conditions today are different from those of the parents' generation. If you deviate from the path of becoming a regular employee through the standard route of new graduate hiring, returning to such a position is not easy. Comparatively speaking, my generation had it somewhat better, but the hurdles for re-entry were still much higher than those faced by the parents' generation.

Fortunately, when I was experiencing *hikikomori*, my parents had reached a point where they almost gave up, saying, "Your situation is different from ours. So, we won't push you anymore." However, there are still many individuals experiencing pressure from their parents who insist on "unrealistic employment."

Why do parents continue to exert such "employment pressure"?

I believe the desire to maintain their own "social standing" is a more significant factor than their concern for their children's well-being.

These attitudes are undoubtedly conveyed to their children. If parents only demand their children to "go outside" and "work," their children will naturally perceive it as, "You're only concerned about your own social standing, not me." This would lead to a deterioration of the parent-child relationship and a further complication of the situation.

Understanding the "Social Standing" Issue

Let's consider the true nature of the "social standing" that parents are so concerned about.

The first aspect is the awareness that "it's shameful for one's child to be a *hikikomori*."

I believe there is a "Showa Era mindset" that views it as embarrassing that one's child, who has reached a certain age, is not part of a decent organization. And many people are still bound by this mindset. The so-called "marriage pressure" may be similar in nature. Parents who think, "Once you reach a certain age, you should get married, establish a family, and become a fully-fledged adult," still seem to be the majority.

The second aspect is parents' desire to "cover up their failure in child-rearing." Being controlled by the "Showa Era mindset" that says, "A child becomes a *hikikomori* due to poor parenting," parents can unintentionally cause more suffering to their children. This failure to recognize this might be a tragedy.

Instead of thinking that "good parenting" is about enabling a child to lead a happy life, it appears that many parents still view "good parenting" as sending their child to a well-known university and getting them into a prestigious organization.

It's possible that this mindset hides behind the causes of various issues related to *hikikomori*, such as the "80/50 problem."

From my experience, I can say that even if you manage to secure employment due to pressure from your parents or your own "Showa Era mindset," it often leads to a loss of

long-term self-esteem, increased isolation from society, and a higher susceptibility to depression.

Is Employment the Ultimate Goal?

When told, "Let's overcome *hikikomori* and get a job. That's the goal," I've come to realize that this might be a goal only for parents and the people around me.

Being a *hikikomori* is challenging for the individual. They cannot leave their home, they face pressure from their parents, and they experience increasing worries about their future, coupled with a sense of isolation. This state, in itself, is profoundly challenging.

Ideally, employment can reduce this challenge for the individual. For example, it can alleviate parental pressure, offer financial relief, provide a sense of belonging, and reduce isolation through interactions with others. If these aspects are improved through employment, the individual's overall challenges may lessen. However, no one can completely eliminate life's difficulties; the goal should be to reduce these challenges to the extent that they become bearable and fall within the range of "common difficulties" that everyone faces in life.

Everyone, at some point, will experience the challenges of work, whether it's demanding, uninteresting, or involves difficult workplace relationships. However, as long as you can find a reasonable level of acceptance in the sense that 'it's just part of the job,' even if there are minor annoyances, that's okay.

Nevertheless, when the accumulation of 'difficulty in living' surpasses the limit you can bear, it's time to be cautious. There are instances where the hardships of the workplace, fueled by fears about money or falling back, can actually make life even more challenging than it was during the period of withdrawal. Can such employment truly be deemed a 'goal'?

For individuals dealing with these challenges, what matters most isn't just finding a job to resolve financial problems and participate in society. It's about whether the 'difficulty in living' has lessened compared to the times when they were withdrawn.

When you are dreading a return to the state of withdrawal out of fear, pushing yourself until you're no longer able to move, and clinging to a situation that makes the workplace unbearable, can you really expect to find hope on the other side? When you're immobilized and forced into resignation, significant damage has likely accumulated. In

reality, it took me several years to reach a point where I could say, 'I want to recover and go outside.'

Now, I've adopted a mindset that says, 'I won't overwork myself for money,' and 'participating in society' doesn't mean being a part of an organization but rather maintaining connections with people to the extent that I don't feel isolated.

The goal, in the end, is not what parents or those around you see, but rather, it's about reaching a point where you can accept 'difficulty in living' to an extent that's manageable for yourself.

Perhaps, considering employment as one of the options from the perspective of 'reducing the difficulty in living for oneself' might get us closer to that goal, if it's possible.

Issue 5:

“*Hikikomori* and Happiness”

親が親の人生を生きる (“Parents living their parent lives”) by Wakeari Joshi (p. 2)

When contemplating “*Hikikomori* and Happiness,” people tend to focus on the individual's mental and environmental aspects. However, sometimes this approach may inadvertently push the individual further into a corner. Imagine the days when you are relentlessly questioned by everyone around you, “Why are you unhappy?” or “What can you do to be happy?” Is that really happiness?

What the author believes is essential for a happy life is not the pursuit of the causes of unhappiness but being surrounded by happy people. Happiness is contagious. Those who live happy lives make others happy as well. The influence of others, especially during childhood, is significant. And for today's children, parents are the most significant others. In other words, a parent's own level of happiness greatly influences a child's life.

Unhappy Parents

I was one of those children. I grew up in a household where my parents constantly fought, and I saw my mother's gloomy face all the time. My mother's unhappiness sometimes manifested as hurtful words that were cast upon me. Perhaps I was the only outlet for her daily stress. That curse lingered for years, significantly hindering my own happiness.

If my mother had been a happier person, she might have been able to heal that stress through conversations with friends or by immersing herself in hobbies or work, rather than directing her anger towards me, her child. For me, seeing my mother's happy smile would have brought great peace to my heart. From a young age, I had always wished, “I want my mother to live her own life and be happy.”

A Turning Point: Email from Father

It was my father, not my mother, who fulfilled that wish. At the age of seventeen, while I was in the midst of school refusal and *hikikomori*, feeling utterly hopeless, I received a long email from my father. The email didn't mention my school refusal or *hikikomori* at all; instead, it reflected on my father's life, his introspection, and his determination to

challenge the bar exam for some reason. I think he also wrote something like, "You can do whatever you want." I had expected a lecture about my school refusal and *hikikomori*, so I was pleasantly surprised. I felt a great sense of relief.

"Wait a minute, my father is trying to live his own life. Then I should be free to live my own life as well," I thought. From that day on, I gradually became more positive.

A Happy Adult Role Model

I believe my father's determination gradually changed my mother too. My father not only confronted his own life but also thought about how to deal with my mother. My mother, who had been craving my father's love and expressing her dissatisfaction to him constantly, gradually calmed down. Now, they get along very well. I was again surprised to see the change and decided to accept it. The couple no longer argues, and they converse amicably. Finally, I could find peace in seeing them this way.

In this way, for children to walk a peaceful and happy path in life, they need multiple happy adult role models. Parents, who are the most significant role models, should think about their own happiness. Instead of making parenting their sole purpose, they should find purpose within their own lives. When parents find purpose in their own lives, children will not suffer from the belief that they are causing their parents' unhappiness. The most terrifying thing for a child is to think, "This child's life is unhappy," or "I am unhappy because I have a *hikikomori* child."

The life of a *hikikomori* individual is not necessarily an unhappy one. *Hikikomori* is a time when individuals are searching for how to be happy. Therefore, the happiness of the individual should be left up to the individual, while those around them, including family, should strive to fulfill their own happiness.

ひきこもりこそわが幸福 (“*Hikikomori Is My Happiness*”) by Vosot Ikeida (p. 3-4)

March 20, 1982. I made the first announcement of my acceptance to my parents' house in Nagoya from a phone booth on the University Street in Kunitachi, the suburbs of Tokyo. On the other end of the receiver, my mother ordered me briefly, with no particular excitement, as if giving military orders.

"Yes. Well, come back soon. Quickly!"

On the day I got into the university, I resisted the urge to go straight home without any detours and instead wasted my time alone in a cafe near the south exit of the station. I became a shut-in. By the time the Shinkansen approached Shizuoka on the way back, the night's curtain had already fallen outside.

A Rewardless World

As I gazed out the window at the lights of the houses receding into the distance, I found myself lost in thought.

"What on earth does my mother intend to do now?"

I sat there, idly tapping my fingers, waiting for something. However, I couldn't quite grasp what I was waiting for. It was as though something inside me was swelling, moving towards an eruption.

"My mother has wanted me to get into Hitotsubashi University since I was little. It seems she had a boyfriend who attended Hitotsubashi before she got married. Today, I've fulfilled her wish. First, 'Congratulations,' then 'Thank you,' and finally, I want her to apologize for all the abuse she has subjected me to over the years. She's made me kneel in a cold kitchen, ordered my father to whip me with a belt, and execute me without having committed any crimes. From today onwards, the tables should turn, and she should be the one kneeling and apologizing to me."

The Shinkansen had passed Toyohashi. As I gazed at my reflection in the nighttime window, I couldn't discern whether the emotions welling up within me were joy from my success or anger.

"To control a child, you use both rewards and punishments, carrots and sticks. My mother, however, has raised me only with sticks. The punishment she wielded was the specter of her own death."

"Next time, if you score like this again, I'll die, you know!"

Day after day, I was threatened in such a manner. For me, it would have been somewhat easier to bear if I had been threatened with being killed instead. If you're going to

be killed, you can run away or fight back. But when you're threatened with "I'll die," the hostage is held in the hands of the very person making the threat, so I was utterly powerless.

As time went on, I developed obsessive-compulsive disorder from my kindergarten years. People often casually say, "It's so painful I could die," but studying for the middle school entrance exam while suffering from such a disorder was literally "painful enough to die."

I was nothing more than a racehorse, relentlessly whipped, running with all my might just to escape the pain. I was done with running...

There's No Happiness There

When I returned to Nagoya, it was said that we would celebrate at a yakiniku restaurant. After the toast, my mother immediately spoke up.

"Now that you've gotten into Hitotsubashi, you should start studying English from tomorrow."

"What?"

I was taken aback. Wasn't studying over now that the exams were finished? To my silent protest, my mother, who seemed to be pressured by my doubtful silence, continued.

"Because, do you really think you can keep up with the classes at Hitotsubashi with your English skills? There are many students there who have lived abroad, and their English level is amazing."

I was at a loss for words.

My mother wanted me to get into Hitotsubashi University and become a successful businessman. She would want to say it's for my happiness, but that's a lie. She wants it for her happiness. She wants to be praised by relatives, friends, and society for raising an outstanding son. The rewards she wants to give me are for my future life, but can such things be considered rewards? Rewards should bring happiness.

For example, people dream of buying a big house as happiness. But my head was filled with anger accumulated since childhood, and I couldn't even start cleaning it. If I were

to buy a big house, there would be more places to clean every day. There's no happiness there.

Some say that if you don't want to clean, you can just earn money and hire a maid. However, that means taking on a new relationship with the maid. Furthermore, the maid would have access to your private life, just like how my mother read all my diaries without permission. There's no happiness there.

It's not just about big houses. My mother would probably say, "If you graduate from a good university and work for a good company, you'll get a good wife." What does a "good wife" mean? It means a woman who values a man based on his education and income, essentially someone like my mother. It's horrifying. There's no happiness there.

"If you work and earn money, you'll be happy." But that's just a shared illusion among people who lack the ability to see reality and are deceiving each other. While poverty may not bring happiness, if being rich doesn't bring happiness either, people should seek time rather than money.

All the time in my life has been plundered for my mother's self-realization. I don't want my remaining time to be taken away anymore. Can I become the first-rate businessman my mother wants me to be? I can't exchange my life's time for a big house and a "good wife". If fulfilling such obligations of labor is the case, please tell it to my mother, who has stolen my time, rather than me...

The Feast Turns into a Battlefield

On the night I passed the university entrance exam, I was lectured to "start studying from tomorrow," but my anger was too great to find an outlet, and it never flowed out in words. Instead, my eyes glaring at my mother shimmered with a sharp knife's gleam.

"What's with those eyes?"

My mother noticed and instantly looked alarmed. My father, sensing the atmosphere, hastily put down the yakiniku he was about to eat and turned to face us.

"That's right. What's with those eyes you're giving to your parents?"

He added something like that to avoid being blamed by my mother later. I didn't answer.

In response to my silence, my mother, with an insidious tone as if a slug were crawling up from under the table, began saying something like this.

"You know, you may not know, but do you have any idea how much preparation it took to get someone like you into Hitotsubashi University? I had to bow to Uncle Masataka and have him work behind the scenes, and many people worked for you. Who do you think helped you get in?"

Incredibly, it seemed that my mother wanted to claim that my acceptance was due to a backdoor arrangement.

I don't know how common this kind of "backdoor" entrance is in the real world. But even if it were a backdoor, wouldn't ordinary parents prefer to present their child's acceptance as a result of the legitimate route? After all, they use the term "backdoor" because they want to hide it. However, with my mother, it was the opposite. She seemed to want to make it seem like even if I had succeeded on my own through legitimate means, she had orchestrated it from behind. It was to make me realize my powerlessness, imprint her own value even deeper on her son, and do nothing else. My mother's nephew, who worked as the head of an educational publishing company, was dragged into the conversation without his consent. My mother was capable of such things.

I said vehemently:

"It's impossible. No matter how influential Uncle Shoriku may be, he doesn't have the power to manipulate a national university. Remember when I got accepted to Keio University the other day, Mom? You said similar things then. I stayed silent that day, but I won't entertain such baseless claims today. I won't just bow my head and say 'Yes, I understand.'"

In response, my mother arrogantly retorted, "Hmph, what does someone like you know about the world? You don't understand anything, so you should just obediently listen to what your parents say and say 'Thank you.'"

The celebration turned into a battlefield. Beside us, my father and younger brother quietly nibbled on *yakiniku*.

My university life began the following month, but I never attended classes properly. And four years later, when I received a job offer, I became a *hikikomori*.

みんなの意見 「ひきこもりにとって幸福とは何か」 ("Everyone's opinions: What Is happiness for hikikomori?") (p. 7-8)

The theme of this issue is "*Hikikomori* and Happiness." To understand what *hikikomori* individuals and those with experience consider as happiness, we must ask them directly. On February 23, 2019, we collected opinions from *hikikomori* individuals and those with experience on the theme of "What Is Happiness for *Hikikomori* Vol. 2" at the *Hikikomori* Future Session An. We are grateful to those who participated.

Happiness in Acceptance as You Are

I always have societal expectations like occupation and income at the back of my mind, causing a perpetual sense of urgency. It's like the guilt and rush of not having finished summer homework. When I'm freed from that and can immerse myself in something, that's when I'm happy. (Male, 30s)

I've always wanted to be recognized in society by obtaining an education. I had fun in college, making friends and such, but when it came to job hunting, the five years of *hikikomori* on my resume always haunted me. I realized I couldn't achieve a normal life.

I felt pushed to lead a special life when I didn't want to. It's difficult to find happiness unless the experience of *hikikomori* is valued, and you're recognized as a part of normal society. (Male, 30s)

Even in the case of a *hikikomori*, there is always a desire to belong somewhere and to be of help to someone. However, it would be great if a sense of belonging and contribution could be realized in a way unique to *hikikomori* individuals, rather than following the usual path of a regular office worker, perhaps through initiatives like self-help groups. (Male, 20s)

I wonder if parents have forgotten how they felt when their children were born. Parents of children with disabilities say, "Just being alive is enough," but parents of *hikikomori* have desires like "get a job" and "get married." There needs to be a way to convey, "Just being alive is enough." Besides employment, there's also a need for a place where they can simply exist. However, social support is lacking. Feeling needed by society just for being alive can bring happiness. (Female, 30s)

Having a safe place, trustworthy friends, no one getting angry when you can't work, and a supportive environment even when you can't work. When you're told to "move" or "do something" during tough times, it's challenging. But having people who understand, when few do, and places where you can feel secure - if there were many such places, you could find peace, be yourself, and be happy. Perhaps accumulating these things leads to happiness. (Male, 40s)

The individuals in question became *hikikomori* due to some discord in their surroundings. People who see benefits in stimulating the economy (such as parents or the government) consider *hikikomori* as a "problem" and try to approach it. However, if one adheres to this reasoning, it can lead to further discord and an unfortunate situation for the individuals involved.

The more *hikikomori* individuals try to change from their *hikikomori* state, the more anxiety follows them - the fear that they won't be accepted if they don't "do something." There's an obsession with accomplishing something.

Happiness may be achieved when the individual's current state is acknowledged as much as possible. (Male, 40s)

Hikikomori is seen as non-productive individuals who are considered expendable. However, there are words that can only be spoken by those who have experienced *hikikomori*. It is crucial to acknowledge that *hikikomori*, just by their existence, contribute to the diversity

of society. Promoting the value of *hikikomori*, where their existence is recognized and appreciated without the need for them to do anything, is the key to their happiness. We must continue to contemplate how to realize this notion of being valuable simply by existing within the current system. (Male in his 30s)

Hikikomori, in a way, equals "taking a break." Accepting *hikikomori* as one of life's ways of being makes it easier, regardless of whether you're a *hikikomori* or not. (Male, 30s)

Happiness Through Empathy

Meeting others who share the same experiences might bring happiness. I used to think I was the only one. I thought I was the only one who wasn't useful to society, and I believed no one would notice even if I died. But I learned there are plenty of people like me. (Male, 30s)

Attending support groups for *hikikomori* and being able to relax when away from those who've had similar experiences was comforting. But I thought that because we had similar experiences, others would understand my feelings. However, everyone has had diverse experiences, so I wasn't as understood as I expected. The support group wasn't the paradise I thought it would be. When I return from the support group, I'm tired. But this tiredness is different from the time when I stayed at home, blaming my parents and society. The struggle doesn't disappear, but the difficulty of facing others and oneself seems to lead to happiness. (Male, 20s)

Being able to meet people who can understand each other due to similar circumstances. The most challenging part was being isolated, staying alone at home with nothing to do, cutting ties with friends. I always wanted friends. I started going to support groups, but I couldn't empathize with everyone, and there were people I didn't get along with. Still, I met people with different values from mine, people I could empathize with. The

struggle doesn't disappear, but there are times when I vaguely feel that I'm happy now. (Female, 30s)

Unable to Attain Happiness

I once experienced *hikikomori* but returned to work as normal. People who knew me from before say, "It's good you got out of *hikikomori*," but I haven't changed at all. I'm not happy at all, and I don't know what's good. My younger brother was diagnosed with a developmental disorder and has been living in a *hikikomori* state for about three years, not doing housework and surviving on disability pension. He seems more energetic and happier than me. I have no idea what will make me happy. (Male, 30s)

While in the midst of *hikikomori*, it's tough and not an ideal situation for oneself. Therefore, I don't think you can truly be happy in the sense of the word. (Male, 20s)

Happiness Unique to *Hikikomori*

When we ask parents who have *hikikomori* children about their thoughts on their children's happiness, many of them believe that their children can only be happy if they go outside, work, and earn an income. At the root of this belief is the idea that happiness equals income, money, economics, and consumption activity. It's not that poverty equals happiness, but in a world where new products are constantly being presented, making choices and consuming is bringing about unhappiness. *Hikikomori* individuals often want to rest their minds and escape from making choices. Happiness for *hikikomori* might mean not making choices, not consuming, and not being exposed to others' judgment. (Male, 50s)

I had been thinking about how I could be useful to society for a long time, but I was wrong from the start. I became more at ease when I started thinking, 'Maybe it's okay to live even if I can't be of use.' When I was in *hikikomori*, it was a chance to redefine my own standards. Until then, I had been conforming to what others expected of me and societal

norms, but I realigned my standards to focus on what I could do and what I wanted to do. I feel more like myself now than before I became a *hikikomori*. Without experiencing *hikikomori*, it's hard to realize the happiness of being able to live even if you can't contribute to society in any way. I felt happy when I acknowledged my own existence, rather than seeking validation from others." (Female in her 30s)

When stress builds up in my relationships with others, I want to shut down. I decide, 'Today is a *hikikomori* day,' take the day off work, and cut off contact with friends. Doing that renews my energy from within. For me, having the option to comfortably *hikikomori* is happiness." (Male in his 30s)

Happiness might involve having a certain degree of discretion. Being in a state where you can decide your own time, work, and breaks may not be a condition for happiness, regardless of whether you are a *hikikomori* or not. (Male in his 40s)

I work as a stylist, a job that helps me regain my self-esteem. I wonder if others could find happiness by restoring the self-esteem they were born with. I had been working with low self-esteem, and it eventually wore me down. However, experiencing that low self-esteem led me to my current job. The low self-esteem of parents contributes to the low self-esteem in their children, passing down through generations in a chain reaction. I want to use the experiences of *hikikomori* and depression to benefit my future life. (Female in her 50s)

あなたのためを思っては偽善である ("To do it for your sake is hypocrisy") by Yoshida (p. 10)

You've probably heard the phrase, 'I'm saying this for your sake.' How did you feel when you heard that? Did you genuinely think, 'They're saying this for my benefit, and I appreciate it'?

Whose benefit is it for?

I support female idols and often attend their events. Here, I'll recreate a brief interaction from a handshake event with a female idol and one of her fans:

- Idol: "Thank you for coming today."

- Fan: "You dyed your hair brown; I was surprised."

- Idol: "I've wanted to have brown hair for a while. Do you think it suits me?"

- Fan: "I think you look more mature, but as an idol, I think black hair suits you better."

- Idol: "Hmm, I see. I've already graduated from high school, so I wanted to look a bit more mature."

And then the fan says, "No, you should keep your hair black. It's not just my preference; I'm saying this because I want you to become more popular. I'm doing this for your sake."

Looking at this exchange, do you think the fan is genuinely speaking for the idol's benefit? Most people would probably feel that the fan is imposing their ideal image on the idol. In the world of female idols, this interaction is relatively mild, as many fans give lengthy, unjustified lectures. When idols slightly push back against this, fans become angry and retort with, 'I'm saying this for your sake.' If you include exchanges on social media like Twitter, it's common to witness scenes where people use 'for your sake' as a prefatory phrase and start lecturing every time something goes against their ideal.

In a *hikikomori* support group for those with experience, there was a discussion about things that people didn't like hearing from their parents or supporters. One remark made by a supporter in a role that encourages employment received unanimous agreement:

"Parents won't be around forever, you know. So, you have to work and live on your own. I'm saying this for your sake."

The person who received this comment started avoiding the supporter.

This phrase, as a well-intentioned remark, is not limited to supporters alone; parents, relatives, or even third parties tend to use it. Those who are told to work already know that parents won't be around forever. When such an obvious truth is wrapped in words like 'for

your sake,' it becomes even more aggravating. Ultimately, this supporter is not pushing for *hikikomori* to find employment for their sake but for the sake of their own self-esteem.

What should parents do?

I find it physically and mentally challenging to strive for what is considered 'normal.' I, as someone who faces the difficulties of living with such conditions, would like to express my hopes from the perspective of a child in such a position. "I hope you work as a parent's wish," convey it strictly as a desire. Do not mix it with undue good intentions, as it can discourage dialogue. When doing this, do not set high goals, such as 'full-time employment from the get-go.' Instead, please watch over them, starting with short-term volunteer work, and gradually step up. Everyone has their own pace, and the timelines might not align between parents and children. Please be patient. Moreover, there may be complaints and setbacks during this process. Instead of admonishing them with well-founded arguments, please just listen, no matter what. A simple nod of agreement is sufficient.

In the *hikikomori* community, the importance of 'dialogue' is often emphasized. However, in parents' groups, I often hear about parents trying to initiate dialogue with their children but facing rejection. Dialogue requires equality. The moment you say something like 'for your sake,' the relationship is no longer equal. I urge you to reconsider the way you approach dialogue.

ひきポスで得た幸福感- 僕らは幸せになる義務がある ("Happiness Gained through "Hikipos: We Have a Duty to Be Happy") by Manabu Sato (p. 13-14)

"Human beings have a duty to be happy," as stated by Alan, one of the three major philosophers of happiness in the world. It sounds cool to think of it as a duty rather than a right.

According to Alan, happiness is contagious, so if you're not happy, those around you won't be happy either. Therefore, being happy is a duty.

People who experience withdrawal often assert their rights but often fail to fulfill their duty to be happy. I indeed haven't fulfilled my duty to be happy. I deeply reflect on that.

An Inconvenient Truth For *Hikikomori* In the Field of Happiness Studies

It seems that people feel happy through their connections with others.

For example, there was a study that found when a close acquaintance is happy, one's own happiness increases by about fifteen percent. Even if it's a friend of a friend who's happy, your happiness still increases by eight percent. It seems that even if it's a friend of a friend of a friend who's happy, your happiness still goes up. However, once you go beyond the fourth degree of separation, your happiness is no longer affected. This is quite remarkable. Happiness truly seems to be contagious. And this is an inconvenient truth for *hikikomori* people.

There was another experiment. People going into Starbucks are divided into two groups. One group was instructed to interact actively with the staff, while the other group was only allowed minimal conversation. The results showed that the group with more interaction felt a higher level of happiness.

There was also an experiment where introverted individuals were asked to pretend to be extroverted and engage in conversations. The result was that even if they pretended to be extroverted, they still felt happy by interacting with people. The field of happiness studies indicates that happiness doesn't increase unless you interact with others, confirming some of the claims made by classic happiness philosophers like Alan and Russell.

Post-*Hikikomori*

However, some people might say that they are happier being *hikikomori*. Still, I wonder if continuing to be *hikikomori* won't reduce happiness. I'm afraid of that. If you love alcohol, you might think that drinking ice-cold beer on a hot summer day is incredibly delicious. However, as you have your second and third rounds, it may no longer taste as good. There seems to be a baseline for money too. Once your annual income exceeds eight million yen, your happiness doesn't significantly increase beyond that point. Interestingly, this holds true for both Japan and the United States. So even for Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, their income-related happiness is unlikely to increase any further. Considering these research findings, it's natural to assume that there might be a baseline for being *hikikomori* as well, even if someone finds happiness in it.

I've heard this story before. To truly enjoy your favorite chocolate, you should take breaks from eating it. I can relate to that. I haven't eaten chocolate for Valentine's Day in ages, and I'm tired of waiting.

Paradoxically, to become a healthy and cultured recluse, you shouldn't stay in isolation forever. You might not even be able to call it *hikikomori* anymore. I'd like to call it "Post-*Hikikomori*."

Everyone is Different; Everyone is a *Hikikomori*

When I quit my job and became a *hikikomori*, I was searching for a place to belong. Not a place provided by medicine or welfare but a place specialized for *hikikomori*. It was quite comfortable there.

Of course, it wasn't all good. Unlike me, some people spoke in a structured manner. There were muscle-bound individuals who looked like they were about to erupt into flames. There were also stylish people who looked like they'd just returned from Paris Fashion Week. I thought, "Is it all just fake?" Yes, I was jealous.

But then, I realized something: "Everyone is different, yet everyone is a *hikikomori*." Even among *hikikomori*, there are various types of people. Some are good at speaking, while others aren't. Some *hikikomori* individuals change drastically every few years, like Frieza from Dragon Ball, who goes from the first form to the fourth form (final form).

Maybe someone is thinking I'm fake. But isn't it strange? To willingly desire the stigma of being a *hikikomori*. But I'm aware of the same structure elsewhere. Have you ever seen elderly people in hospitals competing to brag about their illnesses? The winner is the one with the most severe illness. Whether they're winners or losers, it's hard to tell.

But I can somewhat understand the feeling. I want to be treated normally, but I also want to be treated as something special. In short, I'm being selfish. I'm aware of that.

Anyone Can Become a Legitimate Exhibitionist

I've been pondering what makes me truly happy for a while now. It didn't come to me immediately, and I began to feel down, wondering if there was ever any happiness in my life.

In the monotheistic world, it's interpreted that the world exists because there is a god. You exist in this world because God wished and acknowledged it. At the moment of your existence, you've already been approved by God. Desires for approval and the like are unified in faith towards God, making it quite straightforward, like centralizing the pension system.

In my former self, my mother was my god. When you're a *hikikomori*, you lose contact with people outside your family. Interactions with that family also tend to weigh heavily on your mother.

I've been a school refuser since I was in the third grade. What happens to a child with no judgment capabilities who has no contact with the outside world for an extended period? A cult forms within the family. And it doesn't improve even when you become an adult. Do you think someone raised by wolves can suddenly adapt to human life when they grow up?

Now, I've converted from the monotheism of "mother" to a polytheistic faith. To escape the world of "mother," I gained various knowledge and relativized many things. For me, iPhone, Google, and books are my gods. But these gods don't acknowledge me. I can't find happiness in them.

However, I felt happy when readers praised the articles I wrote for Hiki-Pos. Being acknowledged by people is significant. I'm not sure if this is what happiness is, but it feels closer to happiness than any antidepressant I've tried. At first, when a few readers praised my articles, I was cautious. I thought, "What are these people up to? What's their ulterior motive? Are they trying to sell something?" But when the number of people praising me exceeded ten, I thought, "Oh, I can believe in this."

The fact that I was a recluse was a negative experience. Revealing it to others is almost like exposing my shame. But I managed to transform it into a source of joy for others. I became a legitimate exhibitionist. Isn't that awesome?

Pain is Optional

In one of Haruki Murakami's essays, he mentioned the words of a marathon runner: "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional." People suffer more from pondering why unfortunate events happened than from the events themselves. The former can't be avoided, but the latter is up to us. We have the choice of how to suffer.

I consider my time as a recluse unfortunate. I lost many possibilities. I wouldn't want to be a recluse even if I were reborn. The fact that I was a recluse can't be changed. But the suffering from pondering it can be chosen. I turned my past suffering into the suffering of creation. Pain is optional.

If something is difficult, write about the difficulty. If something is sad, write about the sadness. If you want to cry, write about wanting to cry. Maybe someday, it will resonate with someone's heart.

Because there were people who sought out what I wrote, I felt like I became a little happier. If I become happier, those around me become happier. When those around me become happier, the world does too, you know? Happiness spreads, much more than you might think.

References:

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- "The 'Capital' of Happiness" (Rei Tachibana, Diamond-sha Publishers)

不幸のどん底から立ち直った方法 ("How I Rose from the Depths of Misfortune") by Ishizaki Moribito (p. 15-17)

Happiness seemed farther away than anything else. During my time as a recluse, I used to think that way.

Reflections – Emotions Amidst the Whirlpool of *Hikikomori*

"Why... did it have to turn out like this?" Even though it wasn't summer, I was sweating profusely. Alongside a feeling of impatience, sweat oozed from my back and scalp. If I hadn't taken a long bath, every time the sweat came out, my pores would itch, and it would start to feel like a prickling pain.

With the sound of a newspaper delivery motorcycle, I could tell that dawn was approaching. I was smoking a cigarette on the balcony under the dim, gray sky.

"I can't believe... why me?" I questioned myself. With each question, my anxiety grew, and each time, sweat dripped from my forehead and armpits. Sweat on non-hot days is cold.

I felt nauseous after taking a drag from the cigarette. My organs were weakened from excessive smoking. To mask it, I took a sip of water, repeating this cycle. The cigarettes were reaching their limit, but I couldn't quit, not with this endless stress as my companion.

"I'm finally twenty-seven... I've been stuck in this state for over two years now," I muttered to myself. Growing another year older weighed too heavily on my heart. I hadn't accomplished anything. I hadn't achieved anything. It felt like the end before anything had even begun... The thoughts never stopped.

"Why me?" I repeated the same thought in my head without asking anyone. I swayed my body while staring at the worn and discolored slippers. Among the seven billion people in the world, I happened to be born in Japan, in this particular house, experienced a painful childhood, suffered a mental breakdown, became unemployed, and turned into a *hikikomori* by sheer chance.

"It's a lie. I can't believe it. Is this really my life, my supposed bright future? It's all a lie. It has to be a lie." By repeating that it was a lie, I felt like I could wake up from this nightmare, but I wasn't crazy enough to believe it fully. I was literally hunched over in exhaustion from this overwhelmingly difficult reality. My mind felt heavy, as if it were filled with mud.

Parents, Checking In

There were clattering sounds downstairs. My parents had woken up and were in the bathroom. I hurriedly returned to my room from the balcony, turning off the lights while stepping on the garbage-strewn floor.

I was out of breath from the sudden movement. The pounding of my heart resonated in my temples. Surely, after using the bathroom, my parents would check if light was leaking from my balcony.

If they found out I was awake, they might casually come upstairs to see how I was doing. I hated that. "Up until this hour..." I felt like they would say something like that. In

my mind, their words transformed into a relentless tirade about how I was living a comfortable, lazy life without working, while everyone else endured tough jobs early in the morning. And that if I ever had to work, I would be too weak to endure it.

I knew they were worried. But their immense "sociality" was suffocating me. I knew that more than anyone else, I couldn't continue like this, and being told "you can't continue like this" only pushed me further into despair.

Whether I liked or disliked my parents, whether I wanted their forgiveness or resented them—thinking about those things was a taboo within myself. Once I delved into the parent-child relationship, I believed there would be no turning back, like opening Pandora's box. If I thought it might be due to their way of raising me, the anger would be irreparable. Moreover, I would have to admit that I had drawn a genuinely bad lot in life, something beyond anyone's control.

Still, I was immobilized by the emotions that welled up to my throat, a mixture of love and hate, and a guilt so intense it made me want to throw up. "I'm sorry. I'll do better someday," and "Just disappear already," these conflicting emotions bubbled up simultaneously. It was still early in the morning, my time.

Comparing Myself to a Young Salaryman

Once my parents' presence had completely vanished, I went out onto the balcony again to smoke a cigarette. From the neighborhood, I could hear the clanging sound of the aluminum fence being opened. It was 5 a.m., the daily starting time for a 23-year-old elite salaryman who returned home every night at 11 p.m.

Instinctively, I muttered, 'Sorry,' in my mind. I knew that after I took my sleep medication and slept for 14 hours, he would still be out there working, and the stark difference between our realities weighed heavily on me. The younger guy from the neighborhood, attending a prestigious school, graduating to a renowned university, and now working for a top-tier company, building his career so diligently, all while crossing paths with me at 5 in the morning. The next wave of terror that would hit me was the realization that even at these top companies, the working conditions were grueling. If I were to work at a blacklisted company, it would undoubtedly be even worse. Even working half his hours would be impossible for me. Trying to work while dealing with depression, bipolar disorder,

mood disorders, psychosomatic issues, and developmental disorders was just unthinkable. I got exhausted to the point of muscle pain from walking just five minutes to the convenience store, let alone working. Engaging in a simple conversation with someone made me feel as though I'd applied glue to my face, and the anxiety was unbearable. I wondered if someone like me deserved to live. As I heard the sound of his dry leather shoes fading away, I cursed myself repeatedly, calling myself a useless scumbag.

"But when his footsteps faded away, I'd think, 'Damn, isn't it easy for those living normal lives? It might be tough, but they're fortunate to have bodies and minds capable of handling it. Moreover, they have salaries and approval from those around them, something I won't have for a long time. You guys should try experiencing 'me' for a day...' Irrational, venomous thoughts like this would also surface. And thus, every day, all sorts of negative emotions and thoughts would swirl incessantly throughout my entire being, endlessly..."

How I Managed to Turn My Life Around

Now, I'd like to briefly share how I managed to turn my life around from such a state of despair. It was a period of unending despair, to the point where I felt an overwhelming desire for suicide. When I seriously contemplated death, I realized I didn't want to burden my mother and siblings with a lifetime of sorrow. That's when I became aware that I was deeply rooted in this world with affection. Instead of focusing on despair or death, I decided to focus on simply living. However, living was not enough to stave off boredom, so I started searching for ways to alleviate my suffering.

****Stop Self-Denial Gradually****

As mentioned earlier, I used to constantly think of myself as worthless, even when it seemed like rational thinking in that turbulent state. However, I realized that this self-denial was one of the main sources of my depression. Hating yourself for no reason is an immense energy drain. I started by trying not to engage in self-denial for even just three minutes, regardless of any mistakes I made. By understanding the futility of self-denial and realizing that I could maintain myself without it, I gradually stopped self-denying.

****Maintain Hope****

Maintaining hope seemed impossible, considering my circumstances. But I now understand that hope is necessary for moving forward in life. My hope was not about

securing a stable job and family life, but rather, it was based on the words of Ikkaku Senkin: 'It's okay, it'll work out somehow.' I initially defined 'not working out' as not being able to breathe and suffocating. Indeed, that state was inexcusable, so I decided that if I could still breathe, I was 'making it work.' Therefore, I repeated 'It'll work out somehow, it'll work out somehow' to myself, even when I felt immense panic. I didn't aim for any grand achievements. Just staying alive was a major success. Ultimately, humans are animals. Until then, I had tried to avoid disappointment by always thinking negatively, but the recorded results of thinking positively or negatively showed little difference. Whether I was negative or positive, certain things were inevitable, and 'not working out' was rarely one of them, especially suffocation, which hardly ever happened. I began to forcefully convince myself, 'I'm just living. That's perfect,' and that's when real change began.

****Gradual Progress****

When you've been a *hikikomori* for a long time, even opening the front door of your house can become frightening. I started small, initially saying, 'Today, I went to the toilet at noon, so that's good.' Then, little by little, I progressed to, 'I opened the front door for five seconds, so that's good.' Attempting to accomplish something perfectly or deciding to go for a walk right away could add unnecessary pressure and make me feel paralyzed. What I valued was not denying myself even when I couldn't do something or made mistakes. Embracing failure gradually led to significant changes.

****Stop Comparing to Others****

I used to compare myself to the young, accomplished salaryman and fell into despair because I didn't match my 'ideal self.' Comparing myself to someone else, whether it's about money or any other aspect, usually ends up making everyone feel lacking except the wealthiest person in the world. It's a never-ending cycle. Comparing myself to someone nearby is natural, but if I ever surpassed that person, I'd find someone else to compare myself to and feel down again. The source of my anxiety was not being 'better' or 'worse' than others but the act of comparison itself.

****Recognize When It's Impossible****

I thought I wasn't pushing myself too hard because I was just lying in bed all day, but in reality, I was continually pushing myself. My entire body remained tense 24/7, which

contributed significantly to my energy drain. This constant internal struggle was nothing short of exhausting. To mitigate this, I started differentiating between 'doable' and 'impossible.' I redefined the state of 'not doing anything' as one where I couldn't breathe and was suffocating, which, of course, is a rare occurrence. Therefore, it was mostly 'doable.' By adopting this mindset, I managed to release a tremendous amount of energy.

****Identify the Source of Anxiety and Fear****

I believed that my chronic anxiety, social anxiety, and other issues were remnants of my childhood fears and anxieties that had persisted as 'reactions,' even after the causes had disappeared. Therefore, I began to verbalize my childhood fears and anxieties, grasping and understanding them, while also reassuring my unconscious mind that those environmental factors and triggers were no longer present. As I recalled and expressed past traumas, the rigid 'reactions' within me began to loosen.

****Forgive Your Parents****

Forgiving my parents was a turning point for me. I realized that they, too, were victims of their own circumstances, carrying the poison they inherited from their parents. Holding onto resentment towards them was toxic and only burdened me. Forgiving them was not for their sake but for my own. Accepting that my parents, like everyone else, were shaped by their own destinies allowed me to accept my own life.

****Meditation****

After breaking free from the *hikikomori* lifestyle, I was tormented by a raging anger that seemed ready to explode for a while. During those times, I started practicing meditation, and it proved to be effective. It became a practice of stopping the loop of my thoughts. Additionally, when I felt anxiety creeping in, doing lower back stretches was also effective. Physical aspects should not be underestimated.

****Not Hiding Weaknesses****

I used to think it was impossible to talk to people about my weaknesses or problems. I was always in combat mode when interacting with others. However, when I took the lead in revealing my vulnerabilities, especially during self-help group sessions, the social anxiety I had always felt gradually diminished. In fact, showing your vulnerabilities tends to make

people like you more. It's better to discontinue associations with those who take advantage of your weaknesses. It's all for the better. It's perfectly fine to fail or show your weak points in front of others.

And Now

Thinking back on those times, I believe that people can find happiness from any point in their lives.

It has been eight years since then, and I have crawled out of rock bottom. There were countless experiments and explorations that I cannot fully describe here, and they led to success.

I believe the essence of happiness lies in being able to affirm the present moment, to feel like you could continue living just as things are. If you can think, 'I wish it could stay like this forever,' it brings about a sense of happiness.

Despair may be unavoidable, but if you don't give up entirely and find a way of living that suits the 'lesser' you in the moment, your life will naturally find balance, and you will eventually experience happiness.

Even now, there are times when life feels incredibly tough, and I want to give up on everything. However, compared to when I was a recluse, my life is a hundred times easier. Life may always have its challenges, but it can also be a hundred times more enjoyable. That's something I want to convey.

Issue 6:

“Hikikomori and Fathers”

父親の女性観が娘の人生を左右する (“A Father's View of Women Affects His Daughter's Life”) by Yuki (p. 5)

I became a recluse after graduating from high school, and after working as a part-time and a full-time employee for a while, I became lightly reclusive again.

I can't say that it was my father's fault, but I can say that my relationship with my father is a major part of the reason for my difficulty in living and my low self-esteem.

My father's Habit of Criticizing Women

Ever since I was a child, I have listened to my father comment on female celebrities on television. He is the kind of person who would say such things at mealtime with his daughter standing right next to him. "She's a proud woman," "She's thirty years old," "I don't know any women like her." And that's not all. Whenever the news reports sexual violence, prostitution, or sexual harassment, he says, "It's bad for women to go to dangerous places," "It's bad for high school girls who go into prostitution," or "They must have been set up by women who were after their money.

When I was a child, I thought my father knew society and was saying the right things, so I sympathized with him, but from the time I reached puberty, mealtime was a painful time for me. As I began to be treated as a woman by the world, the reality of women I knew and the reality of women my father told me about became misaligned.

I began to deliberately look uncomfortable and object, but my father just looked at me with a blank stare and continued eating as if nothing had happened.

Behaving in a Reasonable Manner

When I was in high school, I was molested on my way to school. I laughed and reported to my homeroom teacher that he touched my lower body from behind. Why did I laugh? Because I felt that if I, who did not have a good appearance, reported the sexual assault, they would not believe me and laugh at me. Why did I feel that way? Because I

had internalized my father's view of women. I went home and reported that I had been molested, but my father remained silent.

In the Cage of Masculinity

After the first withdrawal, I began working in the same physical labor world as my father. I had no money, no education, and no social experience, so I had no choice about my job.

I was subjected to a lot of sexual harassment and power harassment in a strong male-dominated society. Hierarchical relationships, social status, being popular or not...it was more hopeless than I had expected to spend time among people living under the curse of "masculinity.

Not only did I not know what was right or wrong in the industry, but I was also hindered by the view of women that had been imprinted on me by my father over the years, and I could not confidently judge what was right and wrong.

Wanted Affirmation from My Father

I once told my father about the harassment in the field, but he did not make eye contact with me while he listened. He nodded at my criticisms of them, but looked somewhat annoyed. Then he said, "The level of that site is low," as if to say that he was different.

Those were not the words I wanted to hear. You can be angry when someone touches your body without your permission. You can be angry when someone makes fun of you. You can be angry when someone tramples on your dignity as a human being, regardless of your appearance or gender. You don't have to forgive them, and I don't forgive them either. If you had told me that from a young age, if you had been angry with me, I wouldn't have had to laugh at them for molesting me. Wouldn't predators who smelled my low self-esteem have approached me? Even if sexual harassment and power harassment were inevitable, wouldn't the affirmation from my father have given me the strength to fight in society? I can't help but think so.

Let's Break the Curse

I then became an employee and a little later quit. I was friends with my bed for about six months. I was in a hurry to do something about it, but my father's loud reviews of female

entertainers coming from the living room forced me to replay the hellish days in the field in my head. Even though I try to maintain my mental health, the sound of his father's soliloquy in my ears makes me want to die.

My father must be exhausted by the curse of manhood. I understand that. Even if that is the case, do I have to be kind to him? My father doesn't even know what I'm talking about.

Recently, my father changed a bit when I sent him an email stating, "You can think of me as a noisy woman, so will you refrain from insulting women so that I can leave the house? Otherwise, I want to die". He seems to be trying to release his stress by watching interesting videos and going on solo trips. My mind has also become a little calmer.

I am now working part-time at a place that is 50-50 split between men and women. It's a practice ground for self-affirmation, as being mean can be embarrassing for the men. There is no such thing as hell wherever I go. I have finally realized such an obvious thing.

***弱みを見せない、私に無関心な父* ("An Indifferent Father Who Never Shows Weakness") by Yurina (p. 6)**

"The Father"—

In my mind, he represents a solemn and solitary figure, existing as a perfected specimen. My father was devoted solely to his work, showing no interest in parenting or child-rearing. Even now, I have yet to encounter a moment when he shows interest in me as his daughter.

Continuously feeling unimportant in his life, I start to question whether I'm genuinely recognized as his daughter or if I exist for him at all.

"What am I to you, father?"

I want to ask my father, but I feel as if I have lost my way to define the value of my existence, and when the whole family spends time together in the same place, I find myself wandering around, losing sight of where I stand.

I spent much time with my mother but barely shared any with my father, leaving my young and immature heart in the past, reaching to today.

Memories of playing with my work-focused father are scarce. My interactions with him were limited to brief encounters in the hallway, spontaneous family drives, and overhearing arguments between him and my mother.

The time I have shared with my father is too scanty for me to know him, and on top of that, it is littered with fragments of cruel memories.

I began to feel subconsciously that I did not live in my father's mind.

When I realized this, I began to judge my father only by the titles and honors associated with him.

And, over time, this became my basic way of looking at others I interacted with as a judge not only of my father, but also of the friends, colleagues, and bosses around me.

My father's Way of Life Bound Me

Positions, titles, and honors. These were so embedded in my father's self-confidence that I was hesitant to approach him or ask for his advice.

I felt that my father, who never showed any weakness, implicitly told me, "Don't do anything embarrassing in front of others."

And when I looked at my father, who demanded perfection from people, work, and himself, I felt as if the arrow was pointed at me as well.

When my mother said, "I still have never heard the word 'tired' from that man's mouth," my body trembled as I realized that my father's attitude was not only thorough at work, but also at home.

And that obsession still binds me to this day.

Even when I feel the urge to get close to someone, I hesitate to approach him or her. Even if I could talk to them, the thought that I must be perfect always and in every situation haunts me. Even when I am able to enjoy conversation with others, I am still unable to lose my politeness, and I lose sight of when it is time to be open with others. Unable to treat people honestly, they always try hard to make themselves look good. I don't know how to take advantage of others, and I become relentlessly stubborn and finally retreat into my shell.

My relationships have been shaped and broken by these repetitions, and I have always lived my life conscious of the distance between people.

My father's way of life has seeped into my body over a long period of time, making it difficult for me to live with myself.

My father does not show his heart even inside the house.

Perhaps there were many people around him who strongly urged him not to express his thoughts to others, no matter how close they were to him.

I wanted him to face his "honest thoughts"

Even now, when my father is in a bad mood, he does not go through the living room when he comes home but goes straight upstairs to his room.

If my father had come home that day after a bad day at work, I wonder if he would have said, "I'm busy and tired," and honestly told me how he felt, or shown me his weakness, would my mind be different today?

As I imagine such things, I find myself still searching for a "father figure" somewhere in my heart.

Every time I look at the specimen known as my father, I have spent time living a clumsy, bitter, painful, prickly life.

I cannot be indifferent to my father, who is nearing retirement and beginning to show interest in family contact. If there is any possibility of any change in my father's way of life in the future, I would like to devote that time to getting to know him.

His icy stare and the angry shouts I heard would leave a mark on my body. But I wanted more time to get to know my father. I wanted him to notice and face these feelings.

みんなの意見 「こうして欲しかったよお父さん」 ("Everyone's Opinions: I Wish You Would Have Done This, Dad") by Hikipos Editorial Department (p. 7-8)

There are many harsh opinions about fathers in this feature. So what should fathers have done?

The theme of this year's roundtable discussion was "What I Wish My Father Would Have Done".

We asked the participants to share their opinions on what they wished their fathers had done for them, what they said to their fathers when they were not attending school, and what was painful for them.

What I wish my father had done for me

Both my parents were passionate about education and gave me a lot of books, but they never taught me how to play.

Before entering elementary school, I was the only one who did not know the rules of dodgeball or video games. Play is a way to connect with your peers and acquire social skills, so if they had given it to me early on, my situation might have changed. (Male in his 30s)

My father was a strict man who often told me, "You won't make it in society if you are like that. "In fact, my father was the "socially inept" person floating around the company. He was very competent at his job, though, so he barely made it. I wanted him not to put his own anxiety that he was not doing well into it. (Male in his 30s)

I was severely abused by my mother. When I complained of the damage, I think the situation would have been different if she had been paternalistic and neutral like a judge in order to settle the family. (Male in his 50s)

There is not much that I wanted him to do directly. If they force me to do something for my sake, or for the sake of raising my children or for the sake of the house, I would rather they leave me alone because it would be harmful.

However, since the house was closed and my mother and I had a close relationship, I wanted my father to do what he liked to do, such as work and hobbies, and bring a third party into the house. I think that would have created a connection with the outside world and made our home a little more open. (Male in his 30s)

I thought I would have the same job as my father when I grew up, but I couldn't do math at all and failed the employment exam many times.

I thought that if I did the same job as him, he would recognize me, and I was worried that I was a useless person because I couldn't do it. (Male in his 30s)

Memories of Family Computer (NES)

When I was in elementary school, I promised to buy a NES and went to a toy store, but was told at the last minute that I could not. I had no choice but to buy a gauge and a model train for the same price, but they were completely different from the Famicom.

I was not a fan of this kind of thing in my childhood. I wish he would have fulfilled his promise and not lied or stopped at the last minute. (Male in his 40s)

My mother was addicted to Mario, so she bought me a NES. I invited my father to play baseball games, but when he lost, he stopped playing. I came to work, baseball, and NES because I wanted my father to leave me alone, but it didn't happen. Recently, my father's work has decreased due to his age, and he has started to pay more attention to me, so I might be a little happy if he watches baseball or plays racing games with me. (Male in his 30s)

Absent Father

My father was like a tyrant. He was hardly ever home due to his tremendous workload, traveling overseas and taking care of his clients. On top of that, it was probably difficult for him to take care of his children, and if I were in the same position, I would probably abuse them. Recently, I have come to think that my father must have had a hard time too. (Male in his 40s)

My father used to leave early in the morning and come home late at night, so I don't remember him taking care of me. Seeing this, I felt that I didn't want to work and didn't want to be a person who only worked and didn't care about his family (Male in his 30s)

My father was hardly ever home. It was just my mother and I at dinner, and all of my mother's frustration and anger was directed at me. Even when my father was home, which was rare, he did not soothe my mother who exploded and did not take care of me when I was crying (Female in her 30s)

It must be hard for my father to be at home when both his wife and daughter hate him.

He seems to be finally maintaining his identity as a person by converting his feelings into "thanks to whom do you think we can live?" I wish he would talk to his wife and daughter about his feelings and realize himself within the family. (Female in her 20s)

I think that the only way to feel the presence of the father is through involvement.

Whether physically or mentally, if I cannot talk to my father, listen to him, or ask him to teach me, I think it is difficult to have a good father figure in my life. (Female in her 30s)

When a kid stopped going to school

When I told my father that I didn't want to go to school because I was alone all the time in high school and despaired of my senior year class, he just said to me over my head, "You should go". At my age at the time, I could not verbalize my problems even if he said so. If he had listened to me more carefully, I might have been able to express the cause of my problems, and I could have thought of various ways to solve them, such as going to a free school.

I want him to admit that it was a mistake to force me to go to school and apologize. It was the father's mistake. I can't deal with him when he suddenly talks to me in a frightening manner. (Male in his 20s)

I was bullied at junior high school, but my parents did nothing about it. I think I could have felt my parents' love if they had thought of ways to overcome the situation together or taken action, but there was none at all.

Then I got the idea that parents don't protect their children. I wanted my father to use his experience working in society at least at times like this, and I expected him to do so because he was a man, but he betrayed me even then. (Female in her 30s)

I wanted my father to accept me as I am, as I am, with all the difficulties in life.

From elementary school to high school, I was bullied all the time, but all they would do was abuse me and say, "Why are you the way you are? They praised me for my good grades, so I managed to keep myself out of school, but when I was job hunting, I developed an eating disorder and was hospitalized. Once I couldn't get a job, he told me, "I sent you to college, but it didn't mean anything.

I felt empty for trying so hard to get my father, who only saw his children as his status, to approve of me. (Female in her 20s)

The reason I withdrew was because I couldn't go to college. I had a huge argument with my father, who rarely talked about spiritual matters, and I cried a lot. He told me that many of my relatives cared about my education, but I wanted them to care more about why I couldn't go to college when I wanted to.(Female in her 20s)

On caring for parents

I work as a caregiver. My grandmother needed nursing care, and my father, perhaps feeling close to his own care, said that he might be able to take care of my father for me.

I thought it was upsetting that my father forced me to go to school, so I stopped going to school because I distrusted people, and from there I became poorly educated, which is one of the aspects of being a caregiver. (Male in his 20s)

My sons usually told me that they would never be my caregivers. Recently, he removed himself from the house and remodeled it into a house that his father could live in when he was eighty years old. A perfect environment with a caregiver staying in the house and a bathroom and toilet all in one.

It is good that he doesn't have to take care of his son, but it is a pity that he can't trust his son that much.

I don't understand what caregiving is in the first place. I just wonder why I have to take care of my father who has not been taken care of. (Female in her 30s)

When my father passed away

I kept my distance from him after I withdrew. I didn't want to talk to him because he would say, "What are you going to do now? Eventually, he got terminal cancer.

Perhaps it was a man's pride, but when I went to my father's hospital room, he just sat there without talking. I wasn't an apple-picking character myself, and my father, who couldn't stand the awkwardness, told me to go home.

He told me to go home. I regret not being able to speak better with other men. If only we had been a little more honest with each other....

I think what happened between us will drag on until I die, no matter what I do. I wish there had been something more I could have done. (Male in his 40s)

My father committed suicide. I cried repeatedly at night for years. I definitely need my father to say to me in a proper way, "Thank you for being born. I am left with the feeling that my father probably doesn't love me, and I don't have an answer. (30s female)

How to be involved in the future

My grandfather's generation still had authority just by being the father, but those days have passed. My father thought he could be a father without doing anything, just like my grandfather, but the reality is different. We are the children of such a generation. (Male in his 30s)

I would be scared if there was a powerful and unknown being. I imagine that there is a big creature named Father in the deep sea, and a child is floating around in a small boat. But if we can communicate with it, it will become closer to us. (Male in his 30s)

I feel it is similar to the relationship with social withdrawal. The more the relationship disappears, the more both the child and the parent think of each other as a very big thing. (Male in his 30s)

How would my father have existed? I think he existed with a sense of trust if he emotionally accepted me when I told him I wanted him to buy me a game or that I was alone at school, saying, "I was like this too, well, good luck. (Male, 20s)

A farmer father I know exists as a member of the family because he is close to his daughter and has a close relationship with her. And they say he shows them various behaviors right in front of them. I think the best fathers are the ones who show their life-size in that way. A father who doesn't know whether he is there or not would be an existence that only brings money. (Male in his 30s)

When I was 4 or 5 years old, I was happy to be taken camping with my father and his friends. I was a shy child, so I was stimulated by the company of my father's friends, and I was able to see that there were adults like them. (Male in his 20s)

My father used to not watch TV at all, but now he suddenly starts watching TV and taking care of the rest of the family. As a human being rather than a daughter, I feel most comfortable when he takes an interest in what I am interested in. (Female in her 20s)

ひきこもりの息子を亡くして想うこと- 佐々木善仁さんインタビュー (“Thoughts on the Loss of a Hikikomori Son: Interview with Yoshihito Sasaki”) by Vosot Ikeida (p. 9-10)

On my way back from the *Hikikomori* Dialogue Exchange Meeting on March 11, eight years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, I visited Rikuzentakata, a coastal disaster area in Iwate Prefecture. I was there because I wanted to hear Yoshihito Sasaki's story once again. Mr. Sasaki lost his wife Mikiko (56 years old at the time) and his second son Hitoya (28 years old at the time). Hitoya stopped going to school in junior high school, and after graduating from high school, he became a social recluse, not stepping outside for three years.

That day, everything changed

There was a big earthquake. A tsunami was coming.

The eldest son, a part-time elementary school teacher, immediately went outside and started the engine of his car so that the three people in the house could evacuate. Mikiko, the mother, tried to persuade the second son, Jinya, who was holed up on the second floor. Although no one heard the conversation between mother and son that took place there, the mother must have told him to run away because a tsunami was coming. Jinya did not come out of his room.

The tsunami continued to come closer and closer. Mikiko made the hard choice of leaving a case of bottled drinking water and rice down the stairs from Mr. Ninya's room and ran outside. She tried to escape in her car, which her eldest son was revving the engine, but the road was already flooded with seawater. He was forced to abandon the car, enter a tall house across the street, and climb onto the roof. Sasaki recounts that her eldest son saw Jinya being swept away with the house.

The roof with both mother and son on it drifted away in the muddy waters. As far as the eye could see, there were only two buildings in the city of Rikuzentakata protruding

above the water: a high-rise hotel and a shopping mall. Eventually, debris came between them as they moved onto a tin plate, and they were separated. Mikiko was later found dead.

Ms. Sasaki recounts:

“From the window of our room on the second floor, we could see the civic gymnasium right there. I think my second son (who was holed up there) would have been able to see that there was a huge wave coming in that swallowed the gymnasium, but (now) I can't ask him about it, so I don't know for sure. I can't help but feel a pang of pain when I think about how my second son must have felt when he opened the window.”

Even after the disaster, Mr. Sasaki could not leave his workplace, Hirota Elementary School, about eight kilometers from his home. He handed over the children in his care to the families who had come to pick them up. He set up a "disaster response headquarters" at the elementary school. With so much work to do, it was only a week later that he was able to leave the school to search for his family.

My son's body was tagged 'Yonezaka 3,' " he said. It meant, 'He was the third one brought to Yonesaki Junior High School, the morgue.

This showed that he was found early in the day. He must have been found the day after the disaster. It was written that they were found at a shopping center.I recognized him immediately. I said, 'Oh, it's my son. Jinya had not left the house for a long time, so his skin was completely white and his hair had grown all over. At that time, I cried a lot.

The Beginning of Withdrawal

Teachers are often transferred. When Jinya was in junior high school, Mr. Sasaki was transferred to a new job and had to work alone. In his absence, a war broke out between his wife and mother-in-law. Out of necessity, Mr. Sasaki and his family of four left his grandparents' house and moved from Rikuzentakata to Kamaishi.

“But then Jinya, the second son, said, "I don't want to change schools. I want to stay in Rikuzentakata. He had already spent a year at the junior high school in Rikuzentakata, and he must have gotten used to it. So I thought about leaving Jinya alone in Rikuzentakata. I asked my parents, who were living with me, to let Jinya stay with me, but they said, "It is too much for an old person to handle during the sensitive period of junior high school. They

said, 'Take him with you. I could not persuade his father, so I decided to take Jinya to Kamaishi as well.

At that time, Jinya declared, 'If I change schools, I won't go to school anymore. And when we moved to Kamaishi, Jinya stopped going to school as he had declared.'

Before moving to Kamaishi, Jinya was a good tennis player and was a semi-regular member of the junior high school tennis team, even though he was only a freshman. In June of that year, 2005, he played in a citizens' tennis tournament in Kamaishi. His first match was against a high school girl from Kamaishi. Jinya went into the match with high hopes that he could win, but the game gradually turned out to be a disadvantage.

“Then Jinya abandoned the match on his own in the middle of the match. After that, Jinya stopped playing tennis. He also stopped leaving the house.”

During his adolescence, Jinya hit the furniture and sliding doors in the house and beat them up. “He also beat up his mother to the extent that she was not injured. He also beat his mother to the point of injury, probably because his second son and wife were the only ones at home during the day.”

Mr. Sasaki left home every morning at 6:00 a.m. and returned home as early as 8:00 a.m. and as late as 10:00 p.m. He was the vice principal of the school. He was a vice principal.

As the vice principal, a managerial position in the school community, he had to see to everything and be the last one home from school, after the principal. He never drank or smoked.

‘When I came home, I never saw my son again; I only heard about his situation from my wife. There were so many things going on every day at school that my mind was always occupied with them, and I didn't have time to think about my children or my wife's feelings.’

Jinya managed to graduate from high school. He managed to graduate from high school, but failed the university entrance exam and became a reclusive person again.

“I wanted to somehow get my son out of the house, so I told him that I couldn't drive a car because of the pain in my legs, and I asked him to drive me to work. By doing this, I gave my son a chance to get out of the house, even if only a little.”

"It's not that I 'left my son in my wife's hands,' but somewhere in my heart I may have felt that I didn't want to make waves, even to the point of stepping on my son's feelings. It's not the same as treating my son as if he were a tumor."

I had no proof, but I thought, 'It's my son, he will get over it someday. My wife, however, seemed to be concerned and thought, 'If we don't deal with the situation properly, there will be nothing we can do about our son's withdrawal. I don't know who had the better attitude toward him, my wife or me.

To fathers around the country

What is Mr. Sasaki's message to fathers across Japan who seem to be so absorbed in their work that they are running away from confronting their withdrawn children? I asked him.

"I am someone who has never had the opportunity to face my kid properly, so I can't say anything to these fathers from a higher perspective, such as, "This is the way to go.

However, he gave me some points:

"I wondered if I should have had a real discussion with my child. Parents tell each other what the parents have to say, and children tell each other what the children have to say. It doesn't matter if they don't understand each other well, they at least get to know each other to the point where they say, 'That's what I'm thinking.'"

Most parents may think, 'Life is long, so even if I don't have to face my children now, I will face them someday. However, this is not the case to a certain extent. However, this is a way of thinking based on the assumption that there is a certain degree of "future" in life. In reality, you never know what will happen suddenly, like an earthquake or a tsunami.

So, when we think about such things.... So, we should not say "someday" or "later" but "when it comes to mind. I think it is important to do it when you think of it, not 'someday' or 'later. I regret that I did not do so."

--What exactly do you regret?

"There were years when we only saw each other twice a year even though we lived in the same house. Even at those times, Jinya, perhaps out of pride, would not change his

behavior pattern. Then I couldn't even say 'good morning' or 'hello' to my son. I was already so flabbergasted, I didn't know what to say. What exactly did I regret? I should have at least greeted him normally.”

“Now that the earthquake has passed, I live with my eldest son, and even when we see each other in the morning, I don't say 'good morning' to my own son," he said. We don't talk about anything deep. We do talk about politics, though. What is this? Maybe it's my lack of self-confidence.”

The full interview with Mr. Sasaki is voluminous. We plan to publish it as a serial series on the web version of *HIKIPOS*.

「父との関係性 = 社会との関係性」説 (“The “Relationship with Father = Relationship with Society” Theory”) by Ishizaki Moribito (p. 18)

This is my hypothesis, but I believe that when children face society, they tend to project their relationship with their father. Society" here is not limited to schools and companies, but refers to all relationships that involve obligations. Let me give you some examples.

Let's say there is a child who grew up in a home where the father was always anxious and atrophied, and would get angry with the child if the child deviated from his father's rules in any way. What will happen to that child when he or she enters school or joins a company? He or she will be scared of what his or her classmates will say to him or her at any moment. He or she is worried that the boss will point out mistakes at any moment at work. Why for he or she feel uneasy and insecure when he or she is at school or work? He or she feels like running away from situations that require him or her to be social. I confess, this was “me” a long time ago. The relationship with my father that I am projecting here is the "anxious and atrophied" part.

Let me give you another example. Let's say there is a family in which the father is always absent and unable to show interest in the children. The children do not know how to interact with their father, and they feel that he does not care about them. When such a person goes out into the world, he or she is not sure how to live in society, and will always be concerned about what others think of him or her.

In this case, the relationship with the father becomes "not knowing how to treat him," and an attitude of asking for his interest, and this affects his sense of distance from society.

To take another example, a child who has a good relationship with his father and grows up always feeling secure and trusting, when he enters society, he will not suspect anything even if it is a little unreasonable, but will trust him and work through it. They adapt well to society.

This is not particularly true for shut-ins, but also for those who work in society. People who do not get along well with their fathers quickly fight with their bosses and move from one workplace to another. Those who have grown up repressed and atrophied will soon crumble under the pressure of their superiors. Are there any such people around you?

Of course, not all of them are the same, but I suspect that this rule applies to many of them. I am thinking that this is the case for many people.

Fathers are the symbol of “society”

Most fathers are the main source of income for their families, and they work in society. Society is a set of rules and regulations that are not dictated by one's own will, and it is the opposite of freedom.

For a young child, the only connection to the mysterious society is the father, who is like a gatekeeper (this does not necessarily mean only the biological male parent, as long as he is the one who has more contact with society).

So society is always visible behind the father from the child's perspective. The words and interactions that the child exchanges with his father, the symbol of society, and the relationship that is born from these interactions become the basic attitude (or mold) that the child will adopt when he or she enters society.

Without this mold, the child would have to compare his or her inner self to the myriad rules of society at every turn, and would become submissive, exhausted, or otherwise unstable.

This will lead to an unstable relationship, such as being slavery, exhaustion, and other unstable relationships.

When we talk to people who have been involved in or experienced withdrawal, we often find either an over-represented father or an absent father, and there are not many fathers who are just right.

When the over-representative father, i.e., the father is a powerful force in the home, society becomes too huge and powerful for the child, and he feels too strongly that he must excel in society to be accepted. He raises the bar of approval beyond his own limits and is crushed.

And in the case of the absent father, because he cannot learn how to treat people, he does not know how to interact with society, and when there is trouble, he withdraws from society, unable to overcome it. My experience leads me to believe that such a tendency exists.

After I discovered this hypothesis for myself a decade ago, I chose to reconcile with my father in order to reintegrate myself into society.

I believe that this decision has played a role in my current stable connection with society. Each time my tension with my father decreased, I had a sense that my own tension in social situations was decreasing.

This is just a hypothesis, but it may be worth a try if you are interested.

Issue 7:

“Hikikomori and Prejudice: Media, Image, Potential Criminals”

特集 「ひきこもりと偏見 —メディア・イメージ・犯罪者予備軍—」 (“Special edition: “Hikikomori and Prejudice: Media, Images and Potential Criminals [hanzaisha yobigun]”) by Hikipos Editorial Department (p. 1)

The first reports that came out after the incident in Noborito, Kawasaki City, in May 2019 included headlines that read “the criminal had *hikikomori* tendencies”.

“They’re spoiled”, “they’re lazy”, “they’re pitiful”, “we should avoid them”, “they’re potential criminals”... These negative opinions about *hikikomori* permeate society, and often times *hikikomori* themselves are the ones who are most aware of them. However, should we really accept these images? These negative impressions held by society are precisely one of the things that cause *hikikomori* to suffer. Regardless of whether they’re a *hikikomori* or not, anyone will suffer if the inevitable circumstances they find themselves in are viewed in a negative light. This, in turn, can lead people to isolate themselves. What our society needs is the power to reflect on what scorning people who are already vulnerable will lead to.

“Prejudice” in and of itself is a broad topic, but this issue of the magazine approached it directly, in a straightforward way. We hope you’ll listen to these people, whose words were born from personal experiences.

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We look forward to your feedback. Please send any emails to info@Hikipos.info.

〈偏見に無自覚な社会〉 壁の向こう側 (“[A society that is unaware of its prejudice] On the Other Side of the Walls”) by Ozaki Suzuho (p.3-4)

The World on the Outside

“People who want to die should just die by themselves [alone].”

I was in a large office where many people work when suddenly those cold words pierced my left ear.

I raised my head as if being pulled and started looking for the person who'd said them. Two young male employees were sitting with their backs turned to me, looking at each other. It seemed like they were talking about the incident that had occurred in Kawasaki. I turned my face back towards the computer screen.

This again..., I whispered in my heart.

Indeed—no matter one's circumstances, taking someone's life is unforgivable. However, this wasn't the first time I'd heard those words, either. I'd heard them on the train when it stopped due to an accident; at the gym I used to go to; at my workplace, and countless other times. But not a single person in my life ever challenged those words. Whenever I hear people say this, I feel like I'm being ostracized in this big, vast world and that they're telling me I “should just die”. This is because, in the past, I once lived while only thinking about dying.

Eight years have passed since I managed to break free from my lifestyle of staying cooped up at home. But it's times like these when the seeds of hardship sprout forth.

And the mood in the office was calm, as though nothing had even happened.

***Hikikomori* Are Right in Front of You**

“Did you watch the news? Seems like a mentally ill person was behind the incident! Apparently, they don’t charge you as long as you have a disability certificate, even if you kill someone. Isn’t that scary?”

I heard those words a few weeks later, during lunch break. The woman who said them was opening her homemade bento in front of me and sounded excited, going on and on about it. Of course, what she said was patently false. She’d probably heard that reckless affirmation on a variety show and gobbled it up without thinking twice. I tried to clear up the misunderstanding and explain it to her, but I’m not sure how much of it got through. I also didn’t tell her that I had one such certificate in my bag.

That “gruesome incident” became a common topic for conversation at lunchtime, just like talking about “today’s weather”. When people find an enemy in common, they criticize it and fall into conformity. They ascertain with each other that they are not like the perpetrator and feel relieved about it. When people criticize others, they always believe that they are the ones in the right. The news reports on the incident talked about why someone is categorized and simplified as a “*hikikomori*” or a “mentally disabled person”. And in all this, there is no space for the “individual” who is connected to a wide array of circumstances. Eventually, the incident will cease to be a topic and people will forget all about it. And the only thing that will remain is the “prejudiced look” towards those categories.

The ones who wield this prejudiced look aren’t necessarily special or different. Even people who are kind in the workplace and make bento for their children at home can have them. Categories have no faces, which is why people end up thinking that they have nothing to do with them and that they’re practically nonexistent. However, in reality, the targets of those prejudiced looks do exist—and they are very close by.

The “Prejudiced Look” Within Me

Once, a *hikikomori* appeared in a television drama and caused a huge impact on the viewers. The character showed up in a city at night and was yelled at “monster!” by several policemen, who then chased after him. At home, he wore a pair of white briefs that was half taken off and shut himself in a locked room. Inside, there was a huge pile of trash, leftovers on the floor and several cockroaches scurrying about. He was incredibly abusive and violent towards his family to the point of causing them to vomit blood, and at night he would

rummage through the fridge for mayonnaise, which he ate whole. This was the kind of *hikikomori* that was portrayed in that television drama. Furthermore, during and after the broadcast of this drama, the channel would report on incidents that had taken place in which “the perpetrator was a *hikikomori*”. Twenty years have passed since then, but I think the image the media shaped about *hikikomori* still remains in people’s memories and hasn’t changed.

And I was one of the people who upheld that image the most. When I was a *hikikomori*, there weren’t as many places as there are now where *hikikomori* can interact with each other. For that reason, I never met another *hikikomori*, not a single one, before escaping that lifestyle. In my perception of things at the time, I thought that *hikikomori* were men who chose not to go outside. As for me, I always wanted to go outside as long as I felt physically well, and I even had hobbies I wanted to continue. And in terms of relationships, I kept in touch with friends via social media and had a partner. I might have been a shut in because I couldn’t go outside, but I wasn’t like the *hikikomori* that were shown on television. I was just recovering from my illness—that’s what I thought.

That way of thinking didn’t change even after I escaped the *hikikomori* life. Every morning, I’d go to work on a train that was packed full. I’d fix my superior’s mistakes, who clearly had no intentions of learning how to do his work, and I’d be yelled at in his place. Even though I wanted to quit my job for good, I had no hopes that moving elsewhere would improve my situation. I was trying my utmost to adapt to the world around me, and thus my memories of the past were just hindrances that I wanted to erase altogether. However, what I didn’t realize at the time was that my suffering was actually tied to my wanting to reject my *hikikomori* past and erase it.

Unraveling

Six years after I stopped being a *hikikomori*, I happened to be given the opportunity to participate in an event where the main topic was *hikikomori*. Looking back, that’s when everything started to change.

The speakers talked about their life experiences as *hikikomori*, and it was during one such conversation that I came across my past self. “She’s talking about me”, I thought. She’d felt entrapped by harsh school regulations, had stopped attending school and then dropped

out halfway through. She was the eldest daughter in the family and had a shaky relationship with her mother. Even the story she shared about wearing clothes her mother prepared for her felt familiar. Every single thing she spoke of brought back a fleeting image of my past self, who had been in so much suffering. What did the time I'd spent as a *hikikomori* mean to me? I had the feeling that if I looked back at my past and unraveled its strings, I would come to find the answer.

In the summer of that year, I walked up a long slope on my way to a *hikikomori* gathering. The venue was quite a distance away from the station, so sweat would form on my back whenever I so much as walked a little. It was my first time meeting other *hikikomori*, but I was more afraid than I was excited. The vibe is probably going to be very dark, what should I talk about...? Those were the kinds of thoughts I had while heading towards the venue.

But it turned out that my anxiety had been for nothing. The people who were standing beyond the door to the venue were no different than the people outside it. At that moment, the image I had about *hikikomori* completely dissipated, and that didn't change even after we started talking to each other. Issues with parents and bad relationships with mothers, the self-awareness of being bad at forming relationships... Those were things that troubled me and that I had discussed with other people, but which they'd never really understood. And there, I felt empathy and I felt accepted. Before I realized it, the venue was filled with laughter here and there, and time went by peacefully.

For the first time in my life, I was able to come to terms with the fact that I'd been a *hikikomori*. And by doing so, I was able to figure out what I'd been struggling so much with throughout my life. In other words, it gave me the chance to rethink on how to improve my future life.

What Lies Beyond

After accepting my past as a *hikikomori*, I started going to several places to talk about my experiences. Thanks to that, I was able to build many relationships which still bring me joy and encouragement to this day. "I don't want to be weak, it's pitiful. I want to be strong." That's how I used to think, but that meant rejecting and denying my weak self. What I needed the most was a place where I could vent my feelings, because I'd always lived while being

rejected myself. The hardships I feel at my workplace haven't changed, they're still there—but now, I strongly believe that I don't want to become someone who gets used to them and feels nothing.

The prejudiced looks we send other people will end up rebounding and coming back to us. When we criticize others for being “spoiled”, that in turn becomes a strict constraint that tells us “we can't rely on other people”. When we criticize them for “not being productive”, we're telling ourselves that “simply living is not acceptable—you have to do more than that”. I think that many people are in pain and suffer because of these constraints.

We often feel uneasy towards things we don't understand, and we end up wanting to build walls around us to distance ourselves from them. By doing so, we give birth to prejudice.

However, there is something beyond those walls—and who knows, it might just be your own self, seeking for help.

**〈犯罪者予備軍〉混濁する二つの声 ひきこもり当事者の中の加害者性
 (“(Potential criminals) Two Voices in Disorder: The Aggressiveness within a Hikikomori”) by Vosot Ikeida (p. 5-6)**

It is said that, in his younger days, the philosopher Hegel watched the French Revolution developing in the neighboring country and struggled to understand the discrepancy between the lofty ideals of “freedom, equality and fraternity” being preached, and the gruesome bloodshed and violence that were being carried out by la Terreur. However, by understanding the spirit [mind] behind the movement, he came to the conclusion that there was no discrepancy after all. The times are different, but for a short while after the Kawasaki stabbings, it can be said that I, too, was given a similar task.

(La Terreur came to an end with Robespierre's execution. Source: Wikipedia.)

The Dangers of Own Goals

“Please don't discriminate us *hikikomori*. Please don't call us potential criminals [hanzaisha yobigun].”

That was the message sent by a representative of *hikikomori* three days after the Kawasaki stabbings.

Despite that, several *hikikomori* started writing messages such as these on the internet immediately after:

“I understand the feelings of the perpetrator, though.”

“I’m also a potential criminal.”

This was quite odd. It was like scoring an own goal in soccer. It would give reason for people who have no connection whatsoever to *hikikomori* to say:

“See? I told you.”

“I was right: *hikikomori* are dangerous people.”

And other similar things.

Why did the *hikikomori* send out two messages—“Don’t call *hikikomori* potential criminals” and “I, a *hikikomori*, am a potential criminal”—that are so utterly incompatible with each other? Why wasn’t there a single voice?

There is a corny answer to this question: “Because *hikikomori* are diverse.” However, I feel like that’s not enough to explain this situation.

Perhaps this wasn’t a case where *hikikomori* were split into two different groups, but rather where each individual *hikikomori* had two latent, co-existing voices within themselves that were in disorder—whether they were aware of it or not.

The Fear of Being Left Behind

Even normal people could easily understand why *hikikomori* said “we’re not potential criminals. Don’t discriminate against us”, because no one wants to be thought poorly of. However, it was likely very difficult for non-*hikikomori* people to understand why some *hikikomori* said, “I understand the perpetrator’s feelings. I am a potential criminal”.

Why were they dissatisfied by the fact that the message being spread out to the public was that *hikikomori* were all pure and rightful, and why did they risk scoring an own goal? I believe therein lies dormant the key to understanding *hikikomori*.

To put it simply, it's because they thought they were going to be "left behind", and because they feared loneliness.

If *hikikomori* are seen solely as "pure, rightful and beautiful" people with no impulses whatsoever towards criminal acts, what will happen then?

Within some of our hearts there is a dark suffering whirling about, and it is not so simple and tidy that it can be described as anger. People who have this feeling and hide it are not included in the group of "pure, rightful and beautiful" *hikikomori*. They are afraid that Japanese society will leave them behind in its search for a solution to the *hikikomori* issue, and that it'll end up heading in a totally misguided direction. And then they'll be left behind, all alone, like someone left at a deserted bus stop in the cold weather...

"I have dangerous feelings, so I don't count". In turn, this implies that "I won't be able to speak of what caused me to have these feelings in the first place anymore". It means that the parents, society, schools, workplaces and neighborhoods—in other words, the perpetrators that are not officially recognized as such—will end up being acquitted due to the absence of their prosecutors.

That anger—"As if I'd let them!"—winds up making them say things such as "You know what, I sympathize with the perpetrator", regardless of the fact that it actually puts them at a disadvantage. It's a denunciation that they can't help but do.

Sticky-Notes Pointing to the Past

At the "*Hirou-kai*", a gathering I organize every now and then for middle-aged and elderly *hikikomori*, a woman in her fifties once shared this story: she was abused by her parents as a child, and now stays cooped up in a trash house. She is often approached by supporters who say, "Do you want help cleaning up? It feels quite good to declutter and live in a clean space." However, she says that she tells them this in return: "But if I get rid of that junk, I feel like I'll be getting rid of my past, too. I'll lose everything I can show to other people as proof of why I ended up this way. That's why I refuse to."

For people who have a hard time cleaning up, the trash that piles up around them represents the dangerous feelings that lie within them. It is similar in nature to the dark suffering that makes them sympathize with the perpetrators, which I mentioned before.

Normal people think that “getting rid of trash is a good thing”. But for her, seeing the dirty trash piled up before her very eyes is a reminder that she has past feelings she has yet to come to terms with, and it’s like the sticky-notes people leave on fridges so they don’t forget certain things. If she loses it, she’ll forget that she has a past she hasn’t dealt with yet.

“Let’s forget about the past”. Only those who can achieve happiness by forgetting their past can afford to say such cheerful things.

Humans are accumulations of memories, and memories are our assets [property]. If she were to forget her past, she would stop being herself. That’s why she’s unable to throw away all the trash, which symbolizes her past self, and that’s also why she continues to live as someone who can’t clean up, despite society rambling on and on about decluttering and the KonMari method.

Our condition as *hikikomori* is akin to this woman’s trash. If we remove it by force, we’ll end up harming that person’s life. This is also why violent *hikikomori* support groups should never use force to drag *hikikomori* outside. And this is also the reason why I want the peace of mind and safety provided by “Hirou-kai” to stem from it being “a space where you can struggle with your thoughts as much as you desire”.

The Wails of Those Who are not Rewarded

Some may say “I am also a potential criminal”, but, in fact, there is a very wide gap between actually committing a crime and not doing so. However, this also raises another question: will the *hikikomori*, who are themselves excluded by society, choose to exclude criminals?

We have no intentions of “excluding” them. Even people who have committed crimes are, by nature, similar to the rest of us humans, and I think that anyone can be a criminal depending on their circumstances. However, we do end up “othering” them. And to put it simply, I believe this is an acknowledgment of *hikikomori*’s perseverance.

Hikikomori who live day after day with dangerous feelings in their hearts show endurance when they refuse to give in to their impulses and refuse to commit crimes. Regardless of the fact that they were harmed by others in the past, they practice self-restraint every day and resist to the utmost so they do not inflict the same harm upon other people.

Even in this magazine, *HIKIPOS*, many contributors have confessed that “they shut themselves in to stop themselves from committing crimes”. By shutting themselves in, they were saving other lives.

This perseverance should be appreciated and valued. Otherwise, it’ll mean that there is no point [worth] in showing perseverance; and this, in turn, could lead these people to snap, and it could lead to a society where crime runs rampant.

Othering, by extension, is also the power to try and remain as oneself.

People who are not *hikikomori* are already valued simply for not being *hikikomori*. They can find employment somewhere, work there, and reap their rewards. Or they can build a family and raise children. To the individual in question, that kind of ordinary daily life can pose challenges in terms of finances, or they could have no one around them who’ll praise them for their work, and they might wonder “What exactly am I being valued for?”. However, when they go outside, when they hand in a document of some kind at some place, when they meet their neighbors or relatives, they are acknowledged simply for living their daily life. This kind of acknowledgment, whose existence becomes as natural and obvious as air and water, means being valued. And this is what *hikikomori* lack.

A life without being valued is a hollow thing. It makes us feel that there is no worth in living. There is no reward for going through the struggle that is life. And that is why we end up wishing for death.

Even so, shouldn’t *hikikomori* at the very least be valued for not committing crimes and harming innocent people, and persevering as *hikikomori* instead of going down a criminal path? “Your perseverance is amazing, good work. You’re a good person.”

To sum up, the two voices that at first sight seem to be direct opposites — “*Hikikomori* are not potential criminals” and “I, a *hikikomori*, am a potential criminal” — are like a wail that is squeezed out of the very depths of the *hikikomori*’s souls, who want their suffering to be understood and acknowledged.

One of the predicaments of *hikikomori* is the fact that they can only communicate their messages through crooked means such as these. This is because the very act of *hikikomori* stems from paradox and discord, things so deeply loved by Hegel.

みんなの意見 「今までに受けた偏見」 (“Everyone’s Opinions: The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now”) by Hikipos Editorial Department (p. 7-10)

After the incidents in Kawasaki and Nerima, some of the media coverage was filled to the brim with prejudice towards *hikikomori*, and there were even people who said “*hikikomori* who are old enough to know better should be cracked down on [supervised].” With that in mind, this time we opened a round-table discussion with *hikikomori* and former *hikikomori* to discuss the topics of “prejudices they’ve faced until now”, “prejudices within themselves” and “how to overcome such prejudices”.

The Prejudices We’ve Faced Until Now

When people found out I’m a *hikikomori*, their attitude towards me changed.

Once I lost my job and became a *hikikomori*, my relationship with my parents and relatives became very strained. My personality itself didn’t change at all, but they started treating me like a failure and telling me things they’d never said before that were really hurtful. (Woman in her 30s)

When the people around me came to the conclusion I was a *hikikomori*, their attitude changed. I have things I can and things I can’t do, but the moment they realized I was a *hikikomori*, they started thinking I was helpless and couldn’t do anything at all. They took all the power I was supposed to have and made me feel like I had to rely on someone else. I think when people perceive me as a *hikikomori* first and foremost, and not as an individual (as myself), I lose the power I was supposed to have. (Woman in her 20s)

I once participated in a lecture held at a mental facility, and one of the supporters sitting next to me said “I really don’t understand *hikikomori*’s feelings. They don’t come outside at all...” When I told them I was a *hikikomori*, they were very startled and froze on the spot. (Man in his 30s)

I was talking to someone normally, but once I revealed I was a *hikikomori*, their attitude changed and they started treating me like I was pitiful. I think they were trying to be

kind, but it felt like they were putting some distance between us, and they made me think I had to behave as expected of a *hikikomori*. (Woman in her 20s)

“*Hikikomori* don’t do things like this.”

I was hanging out with a friend after a long time, and just because I used a Suica card at the ticket gates, they told me, “Oh, you’re a *hikikomori* but you have a Suica?” They were probably joking, but it really shocked me. (Man in his 30s)

People think I’m not interested in hobbies around my age. They won’t even invite me to karaoke, so when I say I’m going, they’ll answer, “Wait, you’re going?” And when I talk with other women, they never discuss love gossip or ask me if I have a boyfriend or anything like that. (Woman in her 20s)

Even though I’m a former *hikikomori*, when I told other people I used to be in the sports club at school, they’d ask me “Is that even possible?” (Woman in her 20s).

I invited a friend to go clubbing and he said “Even *hikikomori* go to clubs, huh?”, like he was really impressed. (Man in his 40s)

I told someone I used to be a *hikikomori* and now worked as a supporter for other *hikikomori*, but he didn’t believe I’d ever been one. I had to tell him some people can recover from being a *hikikomori*. (Man in his 20s)

A *hikikomori* told me I was weird for having a cellphone despite being a *hikikomori*. A few years later, that same guy got a job at a company and not only bought a cellphone, but also a car. (Man in his 40s)

Prejudices After Finding a Job

When I was trying to start working, I sought advice from someone and told them I was a *hikikomori*. They asked me, “Can you go to work on time?” That person was actually very kind and I think they were only worried if I could adapt to the job, but all I could think was: “Even I can do that little.” (Man in his 30s)

People never believe me when I say I used to be a *hikikomori*. Someone asked me “Where did you work before this?”, and I told them nowhere because I didn’t have a job, and they replied, “There’s no way that’s true. Where were you working before?” This conversation went on and on, and I had no idea how to get the message through. (Woman in her 20s)

I didn’t have many options when it came to finding a job and ended up at a workplace where there are many women working part-time, but they had a bad impression of me from the very start and they’d blame me for mistakes that weren’t even my own. It’s really hard being rejected just because you’re a man, even though you’re taking things seriously. (Man in his 30s)

At the high school I used to attend, I was told I could never find a good job as a high school graduate, and I believed those words myself. In reality, there were many positions for high school graduates at public offices and companies, but I ended up not going to college and not getting a job. I sought to become a novel writer to turn things around and prolonged my condition as a *hikikomori*. (Man in his 20s)

During an interview for a part-time job at a convenience store, once I shared that I’d been a *hikikomori* for a long time, they stopped looking me in the eye. Another time, I was asking my career counselor for advice on finding a job and he told me that I had great communication skills and asked me if I’d truly been a *hikikomori* in the past. (Man in his 30s)

Prejudice in Our Daily Lives

Someone who didn't know I was a *hikikomori* said to my face, "People who've been *hikikomori* for more than a decade aren't human". My only thought was that I'd only been a *hikikomori* for seven years, so I was still barely human. (Man in his 30s)

I feel like people think I'm weird just because I'm a *hikikomori*. It could just be my mind playing tricks on me, though. (Man in his 30s)

When I told someone I was trying to build a place for *hikikomori*, they replied "Hikikomori are so despicable. They're like cockroaches who show up at night." When I told them I was a *hikikomori*, they didn't go to that extent. (Woman in her 30s)

When I was at a mental facility, some employees who were clearly less educated than me would treat me like an idiot and like I was trash. That went on for a long time. (Man in his 50s)

I was in my early thirties when I stopped being a *hikikomori*, and I'd only go to work about twice a week as part-time. When we first met, a permanent employee who worked at my job told me "You're that old, yet you're not a full-time employee? And you're not even married?" and my only thought was that I really didn't want to work there. It was incredibly humiliating to be called a useless person time and time again by people who were obviously dumber than me. I didn't want to end up like them, so I started getting into philosophy books. (Man in his 30s)

A neighbor of mine started prying into my life left and right because I stayed cooped up in my house all day and they wanted to know what I was doing. (Man in his 50s)

An acquaintance of mine who dropped out of college once told me that he was really into mathematics and kept studying it by himself, but his parents didn't understand him even when he explained it to them, so they just thought he wasn't doing anything with his life. He said it was really frustrating. (Man in his 30s)

Normally my family alienates me, but when we have to meet up for things like memorial services, they force me to play the role of caring uncle. It's the only time they do so. (Man in his 50s)

I feel like people draw a line between me and them just because I'm a *hikikomori*. (Woman in her 20s)

The Prejudices Within Us

What *hikikomori* and former *hikikomori* think a “*hikikomori*” is.

I once met a *hikikomori* who seemed very gaudy and was really good at striking up a conversation, so I thought it was weird, but others told me he was also a *hikikomori*. I thought his attitude must be from before he shut himself in, and he must have it hard, too. (Man in his 40s)

When the word “*hikikomori*” comes up, what I imagine is someone in a room with the curtains closed, either sitting on the floor while hugging their knees or lying down in bed. Even after meeting other *hikikomori* at different events, that image hasn't changed. It remains tightly associated to that word, like how we imagine red objects when we hear tomato. (Man in his 30s)

I really adored Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, so I always thought it was only natural that people hated me, because I was an insect. If I'd had people who understood me from the very beginning, I think I could've avoided having those prejudices altogether; but once I

accepted society's prejudices as they were, I stopped being able to do anything. (Man in his 30s)

My mother made a place for *hikikomori* at our house. At first I thought it was a little scary, because there were a lot of men dressed casually coming in and out all the time. I got used to it little by little, but an acquaintance once asked me "There's a lot of strange men at your house. Is everything alright?" I told them everything was fine, but I realized it seemed strange to the people around us. I think people fear what they don't understand. (Woman in her 50s)

I was able to talk about my depression, but I couldn't bring myself to talk about being a *hikikomori*. Within me, I was prejudiced towards *hikikomori* and thought being one was worse than having depression. I was ashamed of my past and wanted to forget it. (Woman in her 30s)

I'll be treated differently from "normal people", anyway.

I always thought I couldn't do the same things normal people did. I ended up limiting my own possibilities, and from the get go I'd think I could never achieve the same things normal people did, no matter how much I wanted to, and that I'd be treated differently from them anyway. In reality, the people around me accepted me much more easily than I'd expected, and in hindsight I think I was just being stubborn. (Woman in her 20s)

I read a book by a specialist on *hikikomori* and thought the descriptions applied to me, so I started calling myself a *hikikomori*. Eventually, I ended up applying everything to my situation and convinced myself that I was bad at communicating and limited my own potential. Once I stepped outside and started meeting all sorts of people, essentially escaping the category of *hikikomori*, I became able to do a lot of different things. (Man in his 30s)

Prejudice towards *hikikomori* that we also inflicted upon ourselves

Even when people told me harsh things and treated me poorly, I thought it was only natural because I wasn't working, and I kept blaming myself. It was like self-neglection, and I think my feelings were "I'm hurting myself this much and I'm facing my punishment, so please forgive me." (Woman in her 30s)

Since I was an honors student, I thought there was no way someone like me would become a *hikikomori*, and even the people around me thought the same. When I became a shut-in, I thought I had to go to a really, really prestigious college due to my background, or else society wouldn't forgive me. Looking back, I think I should've gone somewhere that was appropriate for my level of academic skill and I should've just studied at a college I fancied, but I couldn't bring myself to think like that at the time. I even thought I had to go to a famous college to make up for my past as a *hikikomori*. (Woman in her 30s)

Because I was a *hikikomori*, I thought I knew society's ridiculous aspects better than anyone and I thought everyone else in general were just fools. I got it into my head that I had to read difficult books and treat the masses as idiots, otherwise I couldn't deal with myself. Even now, when I get really stuck up, that side of me still rises to the surface. (Man in his 40s)

When you shut yourself in, you stop being able to advocate for your rights. Even when I asked for advice at the government offices, the conversation would stop as soon as I said I couldn't handle a part-time job. I couldn't even look interviewers in the eye, and it made me wonder if I really had to say it out loud that I'm troubled and need help. (Man in his 30s)

I used to work very hard and reaped my own rewards for it, which in turn helped me acknowledge myself, but all of that went down the drain when I shut myself in, and I began to think I was worthless. Before, I used to look at people coldly and I'd judge them all the

time, but when that started happening to me instead, I understood that I'd been a really nasty person—and that, at the very least, was something positive. Now, I've changed my perspective and I've gotten rid of the prejudice that told me I had to work hard. (Woman in her 20s)

I tried my best to adapt to my workplace, but I wound up developing a mental disorder due to all the stress of being yelled at and taking too long to become a permanent employee. Even so, I kept thinking the blame was on me, and somewhere in my heart I held the prejudice that people who couldn't work were just lacking in effort; I think that prejudice backfired on me, as well. (Man in his 30s)

When I was a *hikikomori*, I thought I was worthless because I couldn't work, but in truth that was only because I held a prejudice against people who can't work. (Man in his 30s)

Our own prejudice, which still continues today

I don't like the expression “(they were) forced to shut themselves in”. Regardless of how much pressure society puts on you, you are still the one who internalizes it and shuts yourself in. When I open the door to go shopping, I see the old ladies of my neighborhood gossiping about me for staying home all day. If I were truly strong-willed, I think I could force my way through and carry on with my shopping anyway; but I can't, and I think that's because I have an inner prejudice somewhere within me. (Man in his 50s)

When the Kawasaki and Nerima incidents happened, I openly said “We shouldn't be prejudiced against *hikikomori*.” But then, when the KyoAni incident happened, anger completely took over me and I couldn't stop myself from feeling very prejudiced things such as “People like this should be taken into custody as a preventive measure!” and “He should get the death penalty, at the very least.” It's like there are two sides of me. (Man in his 30s)

I tend to think that the things I overcome are obstacles everyone will face in their lives. But then I often forget how painful it was in the past to have hit that wall and remain stuck, and I wind up thinking that anyone can overcome it if they just try hard enough. (Man in his 30s)

How Can We Overcome Prejudice?

Hikikomori are not special.

Being a *hikikomori* isn't special, and it can happen to anyone. People were just living their lives as normal, until one day they shut themselves in. I also held certain prejudices when I wasn't a *hikikomori*, so I always try to keep that in mind when I speak about my experiences. (Woman in her 30s)

Many news reports state that people committed a certain crime because they were a *hikikomori*, but no one is born a *hikikomori*. People shut themselves in because of their surroundings [circumstances] or their experiences while growing up, so I wish people would consider that, too. (Woman in her 20s).

Hikikomori shouldn't be thought of as monsters, so I always tell others that *hikikomori* are also normal people. (Man in his 50s)

Once, after choosing the right place and the right people, I shared my past as a *hikikomori*. Actually, *hikikomori* is a topic that is close to many people, and they often have experience with it or know others who used to be *hikikomori*. Thanks to this, I stopped thinking "they probably don't know anything about this issue [being a *hikikomori*]". (Woman in her 30s)

We need to accept our weak side and our strong side. I think that my experiences aren't something to be embarrassed about; they're precious things. So I always tell the people I want to be close with that I used to be a *hikikomori*. Before, I'm aware that I wanted to put on airs in front of other people, but now I've started thinking that I want to show them my less positive sides, too. I don't want to try too hard around others, and I want them to feel comfortable in my presence. It's precisely because I know what being a *hikikomori* is like that I'm trying to be someone who can acknowledge others for who they are, and vice-versa. (Woman in her 20s)

It's been twenty years since I was a shut-in, but compared to back then, I feel like I have a lot less prejudice towards *hikikomori* now. I also have depression, so I used to get told that "I had no ambitions" and people didn't understand me at all. But now, society has become quite understanding towards these struggles. I think prejudices go away as time passes. (Man in his 30s)

Sending messages through the media and *hikikomori*-related activities

If we work and participate in *hikikomori*-related activities with simple honesty on a daily basis, we stop caring about the "noise" produced by other people. We just have to do what we can do. (Man in his 40s)

Be a *hikikomori* in the outside world. Even if we have to deal with prejudice, I want us to stand before the media as *hikikomori* and let others know that people like us exist. Though I'm certain they'll say awful things about us. (Man in his 50s)

If we don't voice our opinions, [TV] programs will just spread whatever image [of *hikikomori*] they want. We should pick interviewers [coverages] that are safe and go public through the media. I'm only a former *hikikomori*, so I'm not saying I can speak for *hikikomori* themselves and their feelings, but by looking back at our experiences and letting

our opinions be heard, I think we can make other people understand us at least a little bit more. (Woman in her 30s)

Currently, I'm thinking of what can be done to make the upper classes understand us. If we tell it to them straight, they often shut us down, so I'm thinking of doing a presentation where I can draw comparisons to their personal experiences [to make it more relatable]. (Woman in her 40s)

Once I started writing a personal account of my experience as a *hikikomori*, I started to gain more understanding from others. When I published pictures of when I was fat, back in my *hikikomori* days, one person told me "I sometimes get stressed out over my boyfriend and end up eating a whole cake". By sharing my past experiences and telling others that I managed to overcome my difficulties, it makes it a lot easier to move forward. (Man in his 30s)

How to live in a society where prejudice persists

Can we truly overcome prejudice? In order to try and overcome the prejudice that others have about us, it makes it seem like we have to try hard, and I think that's not right, either. We can't change other people's prejudices, so we should just ignore them and move along. (Man in his 30s)

There are many people who have no connection whatsoever to *hikikomori*, and it's tiring trying to get them to understand us. Rather, I think it's a lot easier and it brings us a lot more happiness to be open about who we are and find an environment where we are accepted. (Woman in her 20s)

Just let them say what they want to say. The only people who think it's an issue that someone close to them might become a *hikikomori* are the people who are prejudiced themselves. (Woman in her 20s)

Isn't it more meaningful to think about why prejudice is born in the first place, instead of trying to erase it altogether? (Man in his 50s)

When we're at our wit's end, we shouldn't try too hard. Sometimes, if we try to surpass our own limits and confront prejudice face-to-face, we'll end up worse off than before. That's why I only try to disseminate my values when I have some mental leeway. (Man in his 30s)

Everyone thinks *hikikomori* can't do anything because they're *hikikomori*, so they'll think we're special if we put in some extra effort. (Man in his 50s)

We shouldn't try to overcome prejudice, but rather use it to turn the tables. Many people think that *hikikomori* can't do anything because of who they are, so we should aim for some *gap moe*. (Man in his 40s)

We have to accept that we hold prejudices within ourselves, and we should try to come to grips with that. Pitting prejudice against prejudice will only lead to suffering and, in turn, even more prejudice. I think what's truly important is that people confront the prejudices they've internalized. (Woman in her 20s)

〈内なる偏見〉偏見の源流を辿る (“[Internalized prejudice] Tracing the Source of Prejudice”) by Yurina (p. 15)

Living was incredibly painful for me, but my consciousness rejected the idea of attributing the reason behind my pain to the fact I was a “victim” and speaking of “myself”.

In March 2018, I was hospitalized at a university hospital for an exam on developmental disorder, and I wound up being diagnosed with social anxiety. At the time, my heart was in turmoil and I had contradictory feelings.

“No way. There’s no way I have a mental illness.”

“I knew it, there was something wrong with my heart [mind], and now I’m mentally ill.”

I wanted to figure out why living felt so hard and even doubted the fact I had a developmental disorder. Yet, regardless, these two incompatible feelings went together like oil and water, never converging, and I couldn’t accept my diagnosis. And when I traced the source of my feelings, I found out that I had a prejudice towards mentally ill people.

My mother’s attitude on the phone

In my family, there is a woman who suffers from bipolar disorder. I never met her face to face, but whenever she wanted to talk to my mother, she’d phone our house. And once, when the phone started ringing and the caller’s name was spoken out, my mother let out a sigh.

“She’s calling again.”

She picked up the receiver and started talking to the woman on the other side as though she were a child. To me, it sounded like she was making fun of her disorder. And when the call ended, my mother simply said, “It’s troublesome having a mentally ill person among our relatives.” Unbeknownst to myself, looking at my mother’s expression then, who seemed annoyed and bothered by the fact she had to deal with her, became the starting point for my developing the idea that “If we get sick or suffer from mental illness, people will shun us.”

I started to become afraid.

“I’ll never be mentally ill. Because otherwise, my mother — no, lots of people will hate me.”

By thinking that way, I tried more than ever to remain mentally healthy and gradually started drawing a line between “healthy people” and “victims”, almost without even realizing it.

However, once I became mentally ill, that same prejudice turned against me.

Until that point, I would send cold looks toward mentally ill people even when my mother wasn't around and I'd hurt them by thinking they were bothersome, despite not knowing a single thing about them. But the thought that I'd experience the very same attitude I'd shown them made me fearful of other people's eyes, and I started to despise the side of me that had upheld that prejudice. Every time I recalled my mother's words, so very filled with contempt, I couldn't help but acknowledge that I, myself, wasn't healthy.

Realizing my inner prejudice

Every time someone looks at another person with prejudice, behind that feeling there is the desire to reaffirm one's identity and belong to the same group as the majority, though they are, in fact, oppressed by a feeling of anxiety towards living in the present. In other words, the feeling of wanting to preserve one's safety slips in and out of view.

But is cowering behind such baseless opinions, scorning people, and sending them dirty looks and words truly a logical means of progressing toward the future?

Between the end of May and June of this year, we saw the Kawasaki stabbings and the Nerima *hikikomori* homicide happen, and these incidents revealed people's prejudice towards *hikikomori*.

The hurtful words spouted without hesitation on the internet saw *hikikomori* as foreign objects, and they brimmed with fear and anger, desiring to expel *hikikomori* from society and cut them off entirely.

But this is what I thought: perhaps the time has come for people to realize that each and every one of us holds their own prejudices.

If we limit ourselves to perceiving prejudice as something distant, ambiguous and vile, we end up going along with the images people already have. If we continue to rely on false images that are baseless, unilateral and violent, we'll never be able to argue in a pragmatic way.

Prejudice lies silently in wait, wanting to take control of us; it risks growing beyond proportion if we forget to question things and keep ignoring small signs of discomfort.

“What is prejudice?” “Why is prejudice born?” Every single one of us needs to reflect on the process through which prejudice is brought about and carefully unravel it.

Furthermore, I also believe that everyone needs to accept the fact that they have prejudices, and doing so is the first step towards confronting them.

メディア人が語るひきこもり報道 インタビュー(“Media Coverage on *Hikikomori* as Described by People in the Field”) an interview organized by Vosot Ikeida (p. 17-18)

Throughout this issue of *HIKIPOS*, we’ve seen several *hikikomori*’s firsthand perspectives on how the media covers the topic of *hikikomori*. Then, how do empathetic people who work in the media field see us *hikikomori*? Furthermore, what cares do they take in reporting about *hikikomori*? This is an issue that is tightly connected to this magazine, and I had the opportunity to speak with four journalists who work in the front lines.

Covering *Hikikomori*: Difficulties and Significance

*Takahashi Daichi, NHK Network News Department

Covering *hikikomori* used to be very difficult, because they were “people who didn’t leave their rooms.” In recent years, they’ve started communicating more actively, and we can now listen directly to the thoughts and feelings of the *hikikomori* who are able to do so.

But then came a new problem: we started hearing criticism towards this attitude, with some saying “if they can come outside into society and communicate like that, then they’re not really a *hikikomori*.” I think this is because there is a very widespread, biased image that “*hikikomori* are all people who live in dark rooms and never come out, and they can’t communicate.”

As part of the media, we want to do coverages that let people know that not all *hikikomori* are as they think they are, and we also feel the need to convey the voices of *hikikomori* who can’t bring themselves to speak up. Still, we can’t forcefully bring them out

and make them talk, which is why we've recently started using social media to gather *hikikomori*'s voices.

During my coverage of this topic, I started to realize that a lot of *hikikomori* shut themselves in because of hardships and difficulties derived from relationships at school or work, which meant the struggles they faced weren't so different from our own. I realized that thinking of *hikikomori* as "lazy" or "spoiled" was, at the end of the day, an act of self-sabotage. In my opinion, thinking that "*hikikomori* are different from us" only ends up giving rise to more *hikikomori* and making society as a whole a more difficult place to live in.

If a great number of people start lending an ear to *hikikomori*'s voices, society will definitely change as a result. *Hikikomori* themselves are telling us firsthand that "it's fine to run away when things are hard" and "it's fine to shut yourself in". I continue reporting on this issue with the thought that if everyone were to put their minds together, we could make a society that is much kinder to everyone.

The Pitfalls of "Easy to Understand"

*Kiyokawa Takashi, Senior Staff Writer at Asahi Shimbun

For people who work in the media field, "[being] easy to understand" is an incredibly important aspect. If we depict a complex phenomenon as-is no one will read the article, with the exception of people who are particularly interested in it. However, when one covers a topic like *hikikomori*, the journalist's task of "making it easy to understand" can become a dangerous pitfall.

What does it mean for an article to be easy to understand? I think there are two main points to consider here. Firstly, it consists in removing as many elements that are difficult to understand as possible and simplifying it. Secondly, at least 50% of the information contained in the article should be information that most readers are already familiar with, and it should conform to the image the readers already have regarding the subject matter. In other words, the readers should be able to read the article safely, thinking "Yes, I understand [this]" towards at least fifty percent of its content.

Conversely, if 70-80% of an article's content consists in concepts or information that are completely new to the readers, I think it'll be quite difficult to get them to read it until the end.

What I came to understand from my coverage of this topic is that *hikikomori* is a phenomenon that is complex and hard to understand. Sometimes we feel a world of difference, almost as if we're dealing with completely different issues, depending on whether we listen to the parents' side or the children's side of the story. It was very surprising for me to learn that there are many *hikikomori* with excellent communication and writing skills, such as the writers of *HIKIPOS*. Vosot Ikeida said that, "No two reasons or experiences are the same when it comes to shutting oneself in, and one *hikikomori* cannot speak for another." When dealing with a limited amount of space [character limit], if we simply omit complex elements such as these and try to make things easy to understand, we risk writing an article that reproduces preconceptions and prejudices towards *hikikomori*. The question lies in how to draw attention to the article and convey the truth—which will lead to substantive understanding—and which wording to use, even if it makes it difficult to understand. The balance between these elements is a struggle I often face.

The More We Cover It, the Less We Understand

*Nagasawa Haruki[?], Kyodo News

I've covered *hikikomori* for a long time now, but there is a side to it where the more I do so, the less I understand about *hikikomori*.

In 2013, I started covering *hikikomori* while having my own notion of them. It was something like, "A child in their room, lying down in their futon" or "Helpless people who are in need of aid". But the more I progressed in my work, the more I came across examples that didn't correspond to those images. Rather, I met many *hikikomori* who were opposed to being seen in such a way, and it shook me and made me question why I even had that image of *hikikomori*.

For seven years, while carrying out my reporting, I came to think that it'd be so much better if there were a word that could substitute "*hikikomori*". No matter what, the word *hikikomori* is tightly associated with the images I initially held about *hikikomori*. In my opinion, the people we generally call *hikikomori* are made more difficult to understand by us calling them so.

Simply forcing ourselves to change negative expressions into positive ones will probably do little; however, when we changed "*toukou kyohi*" [absenteeism] into "*futoukou*"

[non-attendance], and “*chihou*” [dementia] into “*ninchishou*” [dementia], that resulted in a kind of “reset” of people’s opinions about these concepts. Would the same not happen in the case of “*hikikomori*”? The Kawasaki and Nerima incidents brought out into the open the fact that society has an extremely negative perception of *hikikomori*. Perhaps we can improve this situation if we change the word for a different one.

Since I now know what the world of *hikikomori* is like, I consider it a duty of mine and wish to continue covering *hikikomori* in the future.

A Shocking Encounter with Anti-System Rebels

*Constantin Simon, France 24

In April 2019, I was invited to one of *HIKIPOS*’ editorial meetings. There, I was profoundly shocked.

There were no fools or anti-social people whatsoever to be found among them. Rather, there were even *sotokomori* who had traveled all over the world and picked up my mother tongue, French, in the process, which they spoke fluently. I was greatly charmed by these people, but at the same time, I also felt a little perplexed as to how I should perceive these *hikikomori*, since they were so sophisticated and extraordinary.

I fully understand that not all *hikikomori* reject society as a whole. However, I certainly feel something in *hikikomori* that is opposed to society.

A society that fits people into molds, peer pressure... The ones who are trying to protest against such things is the *hikikomori* community, which today I call “secret society”. Or perhaps I should call it “society of resistance” or “the other society”, because I have quite the distaste for peer pressure myself.

To put it bluntly, meeting *hikikomori* who engage in activities made my reportage of the issue more complex. Like other journalists, my goal was to film, in their rooms, the *hikikomori* who don’t want to leave their houses and don’t want to see the world outside.

I was criticized by *hikikomori* for this, but I don’t think it’s stereotyped reporting. I wanted to film *hikikomori* when they were alone, by themselves. I didn’t care whether they were a man or a woman, whether they were young or old—I just wanted to film them in their rooms, because I think that’s where everything connected to a *hikikomori* begins. Doesn’t

everyone become a *hikikomori* themselves when they return to their rooms? I wanted to include such questions [in my work], too.

あなたの「ひきこもり」はどんな意味？実は広い「ひきこもり」の定義 (“What does hikikomori mean to you? “Hikikomori” is actually a word with many definitions”) by Kikui Yashin (p. 20)

<Search results on Twitter for the word “*hikikomori*”>

I’m a *hikikomori* myself, and I reflect deeply about this issue and try my best to explain to *hikikomori* supporters what a *hikikomori*’s true experience is like, and... Wait, hold on a second! It’s a little late to be bringing this up, but what does “*hikikomori*” mean, after all? The word actually has different meanings depending on how it’s used. In order to avoid any confusion, I want to take this opportunity to review this word thoroughly.

For starters, what is its official definition? According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *hikikomori* refers to the condition where “one does not go to work or school, barely has connections to people except their family and shuts themselves in their house for longer than six months.” This definition is used in official surveys on *hikikomori* and is split between the narrow sense of *hikikomori*, and the broad sense of *hikikomori* (semi-*hikikomori*). *Hikikomori* who fit the narrow sense are those who “are usually at home, but also go to the convenience store nearby” and “those who almost never leave their rooms”. Meanwhile, in the broad sense of *hikikomori*, we find people who “are usually at home, but will leave their houses only when it concerns an interest [hobby] of theirs”. In terms of *hikikomori* in the broad sense, people like teleworkers and housewives (or househusbands) probably fit the bill, and it’s not like they’re particularly excluded from it, either. Even in surveys that target *hikikomori* exclusively, we find that they encompass a large variety of people.

In Sekimizu Teppei’s “The Sociology of the *Hikikomori* Experience” (SAYUSHA, 2016), *hikikomori* are described according to the image on the left.

Level 1: Have relationships with their friends and engage in activities in their area.

Level 2: They do not have any relationships with others but do go outside.

Level 3: They can’t go outside, but they move freely within their house.

Level 4: They can't go outside, and there are spaces within their own house that they avoid.

Level 5: They shut themselves in their room [and don't come out].

According to this book, *hikikomori* in Level 5 correspond to about 3% of all *hikikomori*. We also now know that there are many women and middle-aged/elderly who are *hikikomori*, and that one can still be a *hikikomori* even if they are active in the outside world.

We should also look at some examples of broad definitions of *hikikomori*. In the descriptions of many light novels and light reads, the protagonist is described as a *hikikomori*. However, when we check their content, we find that in most cases it's just because the character has few friends.

Also, if we search *hikikomori* on social media platforms, we'll see many dressed up [fashionable] youngsters using this word with zero seriousness in sentences like "Well, 'cause I'm a *hikikomori*..." and "I was a *hikikomori* last weekend!" In these cases, *hikikomori* just means "someone who likes to stay indoors". And because the word *hikikomoru* exists [which is connected to it and has many different meanings itself], its meanings are endless.

I think this might actually be one of the advantages of the word *hikikomori*. Because if it were a medical term, like the ones ending with the suffix "-sho", it would likely only be talked about from the point of view of social issues. However, *hikikomori* is a word that is very easy to use, even in daily conversations. Even the word *otaku*, which was once used in a negative way, now has a positive meaning attached to it, and the word has spread all over the world. I think depending on how we use it in the future, the same thing might happen with *hikikomori* and it'll end up acquiring a positive meaning.

Issue 8:

“*Hikikomori* and Friends”

友達は心の奥底では「怖い」 ("Friends Are Scary Deep Down") by Usamin Minato (p. 2)

Do you ever feel uncomfortable when you have friends? For instance, when you send a message, and although they usually respond promptly, today, there's no reply.

Could it be that I've upset them? You go back and read your message, but you can't find anything that could have upset them. However, humans are unpredictable creatures, and it's challenging to predict what might set them off. Some people get angry if you're ten seconds late for an appointment, while others might think you were talking badly about them just because you were discussing food. So, even a seemingly innocuous message might have upset them.

As someone with a strong tendency toward negative thinking and paranoia, I often find myself spiraling into thoughts like, "I must have upset them. It's over..." I then feel down.

Later, when I receive a perfectly normal reply, I feel relieved and think, "Phew, they're not mad." But then, I start to wonder if they're just pretending that everything is fine on the surface while secretly being angry. My paranoia goes into overdrive.

The Only Source of Comfort is My Stuffed Animals

Why am I so on edge about upsetting others to this extent? I attribute it to two factors: my father's personality and my experiences during junior high school.

My father is easily irritated and quick to anger.

There have been times when he got angry because I didn't open the shutters in my room. Apparently, it was because the weather was nice, and he wanted more sunlight inside, but I couldn't understand why he needed to get so upset. Another time, he drank coffee I had

bought and left in the fridge, and when I asked him not to, he scolded me. It was my own trigger for anger, so why was I the one being scolded?

To me, my father is an incomprehensible figure and a source of fear because he gets angry so easily.

In the context of a family, where one should find a sense of security, having someone like this causes me to unconsciously be on edge at all times. When I was irrationally scolded, I was a child who would hold my stuffed animals and cry.

Children Are Said To Be Pure, But They Can Also Be Cruel

My experiences in junior high school also contribute to my distrust of people. I joined the tennis club with my friends, but at this school, there was a common feature in all extracurricular activities.

That feature was that "you couldn't quit."

Perhaps it was intended to discourage students from irresponsibly quitting once they made a choice, but it was akin to being part of a biker gang or a sinister religious group.

In the tennis club, the upperclassmen occupied the court, and the baseball and soccer clubs used the schoolyard. All the first-year students did was pick up balls, hit balls against walls, and practice swings. We did this for hours every day. At first, I tried my best to keep up, but it was so incredibly boring that I started feigning illness to get out of it.

One of my friends, who had been practicing against the wall, must have thought, "This guy isn't one of us," when she saw me skipping practice. Even though we used to play together all the time in elementary school, she started excluding me. There were even instances of mild bullying.

What happened to the days when we used to play together?

Was I the only one who considered her a friend, while she never really cared? Maybe I'm at fault for feigning illness. But inside, I felt like I had been betrayed.

Both my father and my friends are untrustworthy. People, even those who seem close, can betray you at the slightest provocation. I learned that at a young age.

I Don't Feel a Sense of Security Around Anyone

There's a song by Kaien-tai called "Okuru-Kotoba (Words of Endearment) and the lyrics are 'rather than lamenting the inability to trust and hurting oneself, it's better to trust people.' I agree that it's better to trust people.

But I just can't do it.

Once you've etched into your heart and mind that you can't trust people, it becomes nearly impossible to genuinely trust anyone. I can't help but think that even my mother or friends, who have been close for decades, would abandon me if the right circumstances arose. I don't feel any sense of security.

Sure, spending time with friends can be fun. But deep down inside, there's this lingering 'fear' that I can't shake.

Friends have become something scary for me. That's the unfortunate truth within me.

学校で友達が一人もできなかった結果 ("As a Result of Not Making Any Friends at School") by Tatese Masaki (p. 3-4)

"The Gazes of 'Not Part of the Usual Group'"

I found myself in a state of solitude just five days after entering high school.

Due to my shy personality, I hesitated to initiate conversations with my fellow students in the first few days of school. On the fifth day, I realized that the class had already formed tightly-knit groups.

This meant that if I were to join any of these groups, I would have to overcome a significant obstacle - the scrutiny of their gaze. Imagine I hesitantly approached one of these groups. In response, the members of that group would all turn their surprised and somewhat judgmental expressions toward me, essentially saying, "I'm not currently close to Masaki Tatese."

Facing such looks, I became acutely aware of my lack of belonging to any group in the class, which dealt a severe blow to my self-esteem.

It might sound dramatic, but having a place within your class is a significant factor in a teenager's self-esteem.

In reality, I was filled with anxiety at the thought that I might not fit in with any group, and this fear of the gazes amounted to a terrifying situation that would inflict immense emotional damage.

There were not just one but multiple gateways to overcome. Even if I managed to withstand the scrutiny and lingered on the periphery of a group, if the next class involved changing rooms, the members of that group might not invite me to join them, leaving me abandoned and vulnerable to another round of emotional distress.

The barriers I had to overcome were numerous. So, on the fifth day of school, I gave up on the idea of joining any group. At that moment, I adopted a stoic expression, which I liken to a "mask of indifference." Throughout my high school years, I couldn't help but wear this mask and avoid eye contact, reinforcing a habit of keeping to myself.

So, why did this psychological transformation happen to me?

I pretended to be someone who didn't care about expanding their social circle, someone who possessed the "civilization" of not needing a network of friends. I did this to hide my true feelings of loneliness at school, fearing that others would notice my vulnerability.

By doing so, I hoped to reduce the possibility that when others saw the situation where there was space around me in the classroom, their expressions would change to "smirk" or "pity," and they would conclude that I was "unfortunate" in the state I had fallen into.

In other words, I tried to lower the chances of others acknowledging the weaknesses I was already self-conscious about. I attempted to minimize the likelihood of experiencing psychological damage by using this psychological mechanism. As a result, throughout my time at school, I developed the habit of maintaining a stern expression and avoiding eye contact with others.

Yes, during that time, I feared being told, "It's pathetic that you have no friends and can't enjoy high school life." No, the situation was even more serious than that.

Unable to Explain My True Feelings

I couldn't even explain my true feelings. Before I feared being pointed out by others, I couldn't even articulate my true emotions within my own inner thoughts.

Expressing something like "I haven't made a single friend in high school" in a lengthy statement was nothing more than a pipe dream. Just thinking about basic words like "school," "classroom," and "group" was painful.

Even though I could sense a surge of sadness associated with taking the action of "going to school," trying to understand the reasons behind it led to thoughts like this: "Why do I feel so uneasy every day?... Maybe it's because of reasons like this... Maybe I don't have friends in my class... No, it's nothing!"

Whenever I attempted to create phrases that touched upon the core of the issue within my inner voice, a burning sensation, like magma scorching the back of my throat, overwhelmed me with anxiety. This pain interrupted my thoughts, making it impossible for me to continue.

Consumed by the Facade

The intensity of a teenager's consciousness about needing to make friends is profound, and the misery and difficulty it entails when it doesn't happen are immense.

The mechanism of the "facade" that I explained in the previous sentence became clear to me only in the years following high school graduation.

I didn't consciously decide to adopt this facade as a means to avoid being pitied with comments like "Poor guy, he doesn't even have any friends."

The initial sensation of being entrapped by this facade was like an unspoken alarm signal triggered by an instinctive protective mechanism within my brain. My facial muscles moved reflexively, and I wore that "facade."

As a result of this facade, I couldn't make a single friend throughout my three years in high school, and I became a recluse and a NEET right after graduating.

Despite appearing strong on the surface, the private me, hidden behind the mask, suffered deeply. I witnessed the exclusion I felt every day during lunch breaks when my classmates gathered in close-knit groups, or during physical education classes when they

formed pairs and called out to each other. The pain of being left out during activities like group assignments for research projects or room assignments for school trips was agonizing. During the room assignment process for our school trip, a "rock-paper-scissors tournament to avoid sharing a room with Masaki Tatese" was organized in the center of the classroom, with the participation of most of the male students in our class. On that day, for the first time, I experienced the sensation of food refusing to pass down my throat. As I embarked on new social endeavors like attending university or entering the workforce, I no longer had the strength to endure the sense of isolation.

Looking back while writing this article, I realize that my preoccupation at the time with whether I could establish connections with my classmates was abnormal.

However, it wasn't just me; it seemed like other students, those who were already part of some group or clique, were also actively maneuvering to maintain their close-knit bonds.

During the short breaks between classes, even over something as mundane as going to the restroom, they would invite each other, ensuring they were never apart. It was as though they believed that without these constant efforts, their bonds would melt away like ice cream in the sun.

It wasn't so much that they delighted in sharing their time with friends during high school; rather, they seemed to be driven by the thought that if they couldn't make friends in high school, their lives would be over. This pervasive notion instilled fear, anxiety, and a sense of being pursued deep within their hearts.

"Why the Conscious Need to Make Friends?"

Why does preserving peer relationships within a class become an absolute value judgment for teenagers?

I remember reading in a National Geographic article about research findings that suggested, "Teenagers have an excessive secretion of hormones that drive them to make friends to avoid being alone in the future." While this theory about excessive hormone secretion makes sense, I also believe that there are significant societal factors at play.

Teenagers in Japanese society constantly receive messages from the media, their parents, and schools that emphasize the importance of graduating from high school within the standard timeframe, completing university, and submitting an impeccable resume to a prospective employer by the age of 22, or else their lives would be considered failures.

Naturally, this mindset also includes the notion that dropping out of high school is out of the question. Every high school student realizes that within the curriculum of their secondary education, various events are strategically placed that require them to establish relationships with specific individuals within their class, someone with whom they can comfortably interact without appearing awkward. Failure to secure such relationships during these events would undoubtedly lead to a sense of denial and psychological distress.

Moreover, if the accumulated psychological distress within the school environment becomes overwhelming, it might lead to the dreaded "high school dropout" scenario, which adults abhor.

The sense of responsibility to fulfill the expectations of adults intensifies teenagers' consciousness of the need to "make friends," ultimately leading to the denial of students who find themselves isolated. These are some background factors that can undoubtedly contribute to this phenomenon.

「友達」って本当に必要? ("Do We Really Need Friends?") by Medium (p. 15)

Classmates ≠ Friends

It's not uncommon for people who have experienced *hikikomori*, and I was no exception. In elementary school, I was often the target of relentless bullying, and the teachers would tell me, "Since they're your friends, you should get along with them."

Every time I heard that, I couldn't help but think, "That should be said to the bullies," and even more so, I couldn't accept the reasoning that "classmates are friends unconditionally." I can't count how many times I was on the verge of saying, "Just because we're in the same cage, it doesn't mean we're 'friends.'"

However, I learned in elementary school that "classmates are not necessarily friends," so in junior high and high school, I didn't have unrealistic expectations of my classmates and chose my friends selectively.

But shortly after entering university, I began my period of *hikikomori*, and by the time I dropped out five years later, my circle of acquaintances had dwindled to a handful. Even today, thirty years later, I'm still in touch with two of them, but conversely, it means that those two are the only friends I have.

The Departed are Forgotten

As the years went by, I became estranged from those who had left my life, and by the time I turned twenty-five, I had developed a pattern of working for two to three years, followed by *hikikomori* due to adjustment disorder. During my working years, I would occasionally go out with colleagues privately, but after retiring, we would gradually drift apart, and the connections would be severed. There's an English saying, "Out of sight, out of mind," which I believe aptly describes this situation.

In addition, I had "drinking buddies" because I had spent twenty years drinking in the same town, but I could count the number of times I met these people outside of the bar on one hand, and most of those meetings were limited to once or twice.

In the end, the only people I can call friends are the two from junior high and high school. Even in my twenties to forties, which were the heaviest years of *hikikomori*, I would meet with them during New Year's and the summer, but at the time, our emotions were frayed, and honestly, it wasn't always enjoyable.

War Comrades

About five years ago, I happened to attend a "self-help group," which became one of the catalysts for my recovery. Until then, I had given up on the world, believing that no one could understand my struggles.

However, the people I met at the self-help group, despite being complete strangers, shared a level of understanding that was even greater than that of friends I had known for thirty years. It felt like I had met "war comrades" once again. Through my participation, I

realized the value of not needing to seek validation or put on a facade. It was a relief to be able to discuss my worries and trivial matters openly.

By the way, when it comes to connecting with fellow peers facing similar challenges, what should you do?

Nowadays, it has become easier to find support groups not only for *hikikomori* but also for various reasons related to social difficulties on the internet.

However, there may still be obstacles such as no local meetings or perhaps some people find it easy to attend in-person meetings. In such cases, there are online meetings that you can join with just a smartphone, even from the comfort of your own bed.

Speaking from experience in hosting online meetings for *hikikomori* individuals, I've found that online meetings offer several advantages for those struggling with social isolation. They allow for complete anonymity, and you can choose to speak or remain silent as you please, making them more advantageous than physical gatherings.

If you're interested, I've written a detailed article on the benefits of online support groups for *hikikomori* individuals, which you can read on the web version of "*Hikikomori* Post."

★You can access it via the QR code below.

[QR Code: Link to the web version of "The Benefits of Online Support Groups for *Hikikomori* Individuals" on *Hikikomori* Post]

"The Friendship of the Wise is as Light as Water"

Even without knowing each other's names or contact information, the connections formed through support groups or online interactions, where you can confidently seek advice and share your thoughts, often hold greater significance than 'real-life friends' with whom you simply spend time out of habit.

There's a saying that goes, 'The camaraderie of true friends is as light as water,' and perhaps, human interactions were meant to be straightforward and simple from the beginning.

By the way, the continuation of this thought is that 'relationships among insignificant people are as sticky as sweet rice wine.' I wonder if it's an exaggeration to associate it with

those so-called 'real-life enthusiasts (Ria-Ju)' who often try to showcase their fulfilling lives on social media?"

「急いでゆっくりしろ」ひきこもりが真剣に取り組むべきは就労訓練よりも「遊び」 (“Rush to Take It Slow”: For Hikikomori, Play Should Take Priority Over Vocational Training”) by Kikui Yashin (p. 20)

I believe the opposite of "*hikikomori*" is a "playful person."

During the years I spent in isolation, my sources of enjoyment had withered away. To outsiders, it may have appeared as if I was casually napping or playing games, seemingly at ease. However, without a job, there was no real rest. Internally, I was constantly driven by something, and I perpetually blamed myself. For me, games were not a form of entertainment; they were a means of escaping reality, like a tranquilizer, and certainly not enjoyable. Just as taking medication may bring relief but is not enjoyable in itself, continuously playing games was not enjoyable either.

In public initiatives, the goal of "*hikikomori*" support is often centered around employment. However, even with a job, the suffering of "*hikikomori*" does not necessarily end. I speak from personal experience; I spent my days in tension, never forming relationships with others, and faced similar issues as when I was a "*hikikomori*."

If I were to propose a goal for "*hikikomori*" individuals, it would be to "find joy in their hearts and play wholeheartedly." It's about making decisions solely based on what you want to do, rather than what you think you should do. When I was in a "*hikikomori*" state, I focused solely on "what I should do" and failed to consider "what I want to do." Consequently, I had no leisure time for unburdened "play."

The presence or absence of "play" is what distinguishes between "*hikikomori*" and "NEET." In terms of not pursuing education or employment, "*hikikomori*" and "NEET" may seem the same, but "NEET" individuals can engage in leisure activities. They can enjoy what they like, are unafraid of going out with people, and do not live in fear of such outings. However, that wasn't the case for me. In this sense, I was a "*hikikomori*."

Serious Relaxation is Necessary

There is an ancient Roman proverb that says, "festina lente," which means "make haste slowly." It's an adage that suggests you should act cautiously, especially in urgent situations, similar to the Japanese saying "*isogaba maware*." I, however, reversed this notion and told myself, "rush to take it slow." This was because I believed it was crucial to take a step back without being driven by "what I should do" and to release the physical and mental tension within me.

For me, the most urgent task was taking clear and deliberate rest. This was not an easy endeavor.

The psychological pressure of societal expectations such as academics and employment leaves little room for rest and play. "Taking it slow" isn't a half-hearted endeavor; it requires strong determination and the ability to make a clear decision to genuinely rest and play. The only thing that was truly necessary for me was to explore what I truly wanted to do and to leisurely immerse myself in it. "Rush to take it slow." This is the keyword to achieving my goal during my "*hikikomori*" period.

Issue 9:

“*Hikikomori* and Health”

ひきこもって極度の運動不足になるとどうなるか (“What Happens When You Become Extremely Sedentary Due to Hikikomori”) by Ishizaki Moribito (p. 5)

"There was a job where you could earn 1.7 million yen just by sleeping for sixty days..."

I remember a recruitment notice like this from NASA, the American space agency. Space conditions lead to issues like muscle atrophy, decreased bone density, and changes in blood circulation. Astronauts returning from long missions at the International Space Station sometimes require three weeks of rehabilitation because they can't even get up by themselves. It's to measure these effects that they conduct such trials, akin to the conditions in zero gravity.

A Day with Twenty Hours in Bed

Can you imagine a life where you sleep for twenty hours a day, even without earning a penny? My *hikikomori* period was exactly like this.

I would wake up in the evening, but I wouldn't get up. To escape reality, I would try to sleep as long as possible. I'd move back and forth between dreams and reality until I had to get up to use the restroom, given my bladder's limits. I would eventually fall out of bed and make my way to the toilet. After passing concentrated dark urine, I'd return to a darkened room. Feeling miserable, I'd return to bed, either browsing the internet on my smartphone or watching anime and movies on my laptop while lying down.

Usually, my parents would come to their bedroom at around 9 PM. By then, I'd be hungry, but the sensation wasn't hunger; it was the pain caused by an empty stomach that sent signals to the brain. So, I'd sneak to the kitchen and rummage through the prepared food. I'd take my meal to my room, spending an hour or more consuming it while watching something. Since I'd spend so much time eating, I could eat a decent amount, but my stomach would still ache due to stuffing an empty stomach. To distract myself from the stomachache, I'd return to bed and continue consuming content. I wanted to fall asleep again before my parents woke up, so I'd take a large amount of sleep-inducing medication around 5 AM and go to bed. This was the cycle of my days.

Just like the astronaut trials, my body was hardly in use. Let me share the results. Have you ever experienced your body stiffening and feeling unwell after being bedridden for days due to a cold? Well, that's what happened. Prolonged inactivity led to chronic nausea. Just going down to the first-floor living room and back would make my muscles sore. Since I was always lying in bed, my back would hurt, and it eventually led to breathing difficulties because the back muscles became too tight. The position of lying down for extended periods caused my spine to curve in a way that compressed nerves, resulting in chronic pain from my neck to my left arm. Neglecting to brush my teeth often led to multiple cavities. All of this happened in just two and a half years of living this way. I even developed bedsores, and my legs would shake like a fawn when I tried to walk a bit, as if I were an elderly person.

Don't Despair

During my *hikikomori* phase, I couldn't maintain a 'healthy' mindset regarding my body or health. The daily deterioration of my physical health had an impact on my mental state, amplifying depression and a sense of powerlessness, creating a vicious cycle. More than ten years have passed since then, but the numbness and pain from my neck to my arm is still there. My spine remains slightly bent, and I still can't wear a watch on my left arm.

The lack of physical activity is a serious issue. However, discussions about *hikikomori* rarely touch upon the physical aspect, which is why I wanted to write about this topic.

But there's no need to despair. There's room for rehabilitation. After I left *hikikomori* behind, I started with just a few minutes of walking around late at night. Over time, I could

walk for hours while listening to my favorite internet radio shows. I had always been interested in fitness, so I researched efficient muscle-building methods online, started strength training, and began taking protein and supplements. Three years later, I had more muscle and endurance than I did in my twenties. I even started jogging.

It's been said that even in old age, you can increase muscle mass with exercise. If your body has become like that of an elderly person due to a lack of activity, it might be helpful to consider senior-oriented exercise routines.

I had always felt despondent about my lack of physical fitness since childhood, but I realized that the main cause of my exhaustion was expending energy on unnecessary worries. As my anguish diminished, I discovered unexpected physical strength in myself. (END)

みんなの意見 : ひきこもりと健康とコロナ ("Everyone's Opinions: Hikikomori, Health, and COVID-19") by Hikipos Editorial Department (p. 15-16)

In this issue, we find ourselves creating content amid the global spread of the new coronavirus, with the declaration of a state of emergency and nationwide self-isolation. The *hikikomori* and social withdrawal communities have been significantly affected, as many activities and events had to be canceled. In this context, we hosted an "Hikipo Editorial Meeting" online, where many *hikikomori* individuals and those with related experiences came together. Please listen to their voices.

The "*Hikikomori*" During the Pandemic

After ten years of *hikikomori*, I started to find staying in my room difficult and would often go outside. Now, I can't go out, and my condition has deteriorated significantly. During my *hikikomori* days, I led a life of just posting on the internet, and I fear returning to that period. (Male, 30s)

I don't think *hikikomori* has been legitimized due to COVID. I don't particularly like or dislike the casual use of the word *hikikomori* by the general public. However, I believe the stigma surrounding *hikikomori* (negative bias) still exists. To claim to have gained

citizenship for having endured prolonged suffering is not something I would say lightly.
(Male, 30s)

In this unusual situation, where everyone is living an atypical life, people are on edge and vigilant. This increased sensitivity to others' emotions and concerns makes it challenging to live in peace. (Female, 20s)

There is an overload of negative information. I feel emotionally drained when I look at Twitter. (Male, 30s)

I think there are fewer places for everyone, not just *hikikomori* individuals. People who couldn't leave their homes originally didn't consider their homes as their space, and the sudden change in that regard doesn't apply to them. (Male, 40s)

I'm working from home now, and it feels similar to my former *hikikomori* state. It's tough because I don't have opportunities to talk to anyone other than my family. Since my family is also working from home, we are too close, and I can't find a comfortable space. What's most distressing is that I can't meet my friends. (Male, 30s)

The Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic and "Difficulty in Living"

I have sensory hypersensitivity due to developmental disorders. My own breath trapped in the mask makes me feel unwell, and if alcohol touches my skin, it turns red. So, I feel pressured to use masks and alcohol, and it's tough. I'm diligent about washing my hands, so please understand.(Male, 50s)

I have obsessive-compulsive disorder. I've had a strong fear of infectious diseases since I was young, spending up to four hours in the bath and constantly washing my hands at home. It became significantly worse during this pandemic. A psychiatrist once speculated that the pandemic might alleviate obsessive-compulsive disorder, but in reality, I've become more anxious about various things. (Male, 30s)

I've been feeling the weight of 'corona' even before the pandemic due to conditions like depression. Sooner or later, we'll all die in a hundred years anyway, that's what I thought. What scares me the most is the idea of dying before experiencing love. I'm afraid of dying before having someone to mourn me.(Male, 40s)

I'm concerned about the relationship between alcohol dependence and the situation of staying at home. I've heard that people tend to drink a lot when they're living as recluses. It seems that high-proof alcohol is selling well during the pandemic. I believe it will have various impacts on society. (Male, 30s)

From a psychoanalytical perspective, during the era of COVID-19, people's desires and drives have been suppressed and are coming out in various ways, including alcohol addiction. There might even be a baby boom in the next ten months. People will flock to pachinko parlors and such, and I think such phenomena will occur everywhere. (Male, 50s)

My health and functioning deteriorated, and I panicked, thinking I might have contracted COVID-19. At that moment, I felt a strong desire not to die. Feeling the threat to my life made me realize that I've come to a point where I value my current life. (Male, 30s)

The Majority's 'Nesting' and the Minority's '*Hikikomori*'

When I was *hikikomori* before the pandemic, it was difficult in its own way. The hardship of *hikikomori* comes with the assumption that you can go out if you want to. Even though you could step out, you question why you're *hikikomori* in the first place. It's distressing. But now, I can't go out even if I wanted to. Perhaps the fundamental premise of "*hikikomori*" has changed. (Female, 30s)

"*Hikikomori* (Nesting)" during the pandemic simply means staying at home. "Social *hikikomori*" implies distancing oneself socially and mentally from society. It seems like the same word, but they refer to different things. People who aren't *hikikomori* casually use the term, and I think the difference in perception suddenly became apparent during the pandemic. (Female, 20s)

While many people think about it as "it could happen to me too" regarding getting infected with COVID, they don't think they'll become *hikikomori*. Is that the difference with COVID? (Male, 40s)

The distance with my family has become shorter. Superficial interactions and contact have increased, and it's harder to live as myself. My mother often hears about COVID on TV and enters my room to talk, trying to keep things peaceful. Her consciousness of "let's at least get along inside the house" intensifies the feeling of suffocation. (Female, 20s)

After *hikikomori*, I didn't have many options for work, so I started working in caregiving. During my commute, I see people taking actions with infection risks, like not wearing masks, in order to avoid clusters at facilities. This makes me angry. I also feel like I'm attacking the majority, and I wonder if it's the same as the discrimination I experienced as a *hikikomori*. (Male, 30s)

Sharing Information during Pandemic

I thought about what to do if I were to get infected with COVID, but since most people are staying at home, I considered that if I were to upload videos about this situation on YouTube, there might be demand for it. Since I had been *hikikomori* and had already experienced discrimination, I felt like I had nothing to lose. (Male, 40s)

I was approached for an interview about how *hikikomori* were coping and what lessons we could learn from them. I declined the interview, but it made me realize that there is indeed a demand to learn from *hikikomori* themselves. (Male, 30s)

Due to the inability to hold meetings for parents of non-attending students or mothers' associations that were formed in public halls, we started using mailing lists and LINE. While it's not face-to-face, we can now exchange updates more frequently. (Female, 40s)

Although it felt somewhat like returning to my *hikikomori* state of the past, through online meetings for *hikikomori*, I was able to hear everyone's voices, and it made me feel a bit better. (Male, 30s)

In a Society Where No One Can Move

In normal times, it often feels like everyone is progressing except oneself, but now, it's an abnormal situation, and no one is progressing. However, if production activities continue to progress in this situation and everyone starts producing, I think even those who stay at home will find it hard to forgive themselves. I believe I couldn't forgive myself more than anyone else. I think I couldn't accept my own condition more than others not affirming me. (20s, Female)

While everyone is stagnant, some people feel a sense of guilt for not participating in society. They simultaneously carry the feeling that they are sorry for not contributing. (30s, Male)

Now there are no places to go, and even if I want to go out, I can't. It makes me lose interest in what current *hikikomori*, who want to go out now, feel. It feels like being forcibly in a *hikikomori* state, and the feeling of 'I need to do something' that leads to something useful to society or the next step is overwhelming, but there's no sense of accomplishment no matter what you do. It's like a resurgence of the impatience of the days just passing during *hikikomori*. (30s, Male)

To Break Free from the Mindset of 'I Must not Get Sick'”

I don't think infected individuals need to apologize, but I feel like there's an atmosphere that leaves them no choice. (30s, Male)

I'm not sure if this is only in Japan, but I sense a strong health-first mentality. When I go to a bookstore, I see health-related books, and there's a strong message that you must stay healthy, or else you might get sick. I personally had a period of becoming unwell and then withdrawing from society, and the pressure to disengage from society was tough.

Everyone might get sick, or they might become socially withdrawn. There's also the possibility of getting infected with COVID or infecting others, yet there's a strong emphasis on personal responsibility. Perhaps we should be a bit more tolerant.

When our sole purpose becomes being healthy, we might inadvertently impose the idea of being healthy on others. That's why we end up thinking that we must not get sick or infected. (Female, 30s)

Issue 10:

“*Hikikomori* and Money”

**私が「働きたい」と思った理由 (“*The Reasons I Wanted to Work*”) by Kikui Yashin
(p. 2)**

Why do we have to work?

In government support for "*hikikomori*", employment is often emphasized as if it were the ultimate goal. Even if one has been withdrawn for a long time, it seems that working will solve everything. But why are we told that we "have to work"? I think there are not many supporters who can answer this question effectively. If it's just a matter of living expenses, there is assistance available from parents or the government. In terms of social connections, there should be activities or volunteering as well. Just like unemployed seniors or stay-at-home parents, not working itself shouldn't be considered a bad thing.

I spent my childhood to my mid-twenties in social isolation. However, over the years, I built relationships with people and society, and now I live on my own while working part-time. My current life is not easy both mentally and physically, but I believe it has more advantages than being unemployed.

Why should one work? My answer is to "secure social freedom." "Earning your own money and being able to use it" leads to an important form of freedom when it comes to building relationships with society and others.

The Landscape Changes with Money

When I was living a lonely life, I had little desire for material possessions. I didn't spend the allowance I received from my parents, and even when I needed something, I would only buy second-hand items of the utmost necessity. "Parents' money" felt like accumulating debt, and I had a strong sense of guilt about spending it. But with "my own money," I can choose and buy the things I like without guilt. This kind of financial independence can lead to a separation of strong parent-child bonds and greater individual independence in relationships.

Having "my own money" changed the way I perceived things. When I went to the supermarket after starting to work, I could "see" items like seasonings and vegetables rather than just inexpensive products like cup noodles and snack bread. Before, even when there were various products in front of me, I felt like they had "nothing to do with me," so I was buried in the landscape.

I also started to pay attention to care products, buying things like eye drops, moisturizing cream, and a small massager. Being able to think "I can have it" led to better daily self-care. Before I could say "care products improve my health," I found that "being able to buy care products myself" made it easier for my health to improve.

By having access to things I like, the emotion of "liking" something becomes more common. Needs are not created by the desire for money, but rather, money creates needs.

Just to be clear, this is not a story about "people should work." It's a personal story about how gaining "my own money" increased my personal level of social freedom. I believe that everyone can relate to the fact that simply setting employment as a goal doesn't necessarily increase the motivation to work. If you have experienced the freedom brought by "your own money," it changes your motivation to work. For those who think that the goal of "*hikikomori*" is about employment, it might be worth reconsidering the question of "why we have to work."

「働かないなら家から出ていけ」(“Get a Job or Leave”) by Mikey (p. 3-4)

Money and Effort and Suffering

Money is necessary. It's required for everything. However, I don't know how to earn it. The only thing that immediately comes to mind is getting a job. I couldn't imagine anything else since around my high school years. My father had a job where he left early in the morning and returned late at night, but I couldn't see any signs of him working. My mother would endlessly complain about her part-time job. Watching my parents, I felt that "earning money" involved a great deal of effort and hardship.

When I entered high school, all my friends who took the same entrance exam failed except for me. I chose a public high school to lessen the burden on my parents. Throughout my three years in high school, I didn't make any friends. I struggled with both my studies and extracurricular activities, eventually giving up on going to school.

I couldn't visualize how to "earn money" even during my school years. I couldn't remember ever achieving anything in my studies, extracurricular activities, or even leisure. Everyone around me was applying for jobs, so I followed suit, but deep down, I didn't believe I could work. Unsurprisingly, I failed in my job search.

At the job cafe, they told me, "It's better for you not to come for a while," and at the employment office (Hello Work), I was told, "You're not a child." At that time, I didn't know any way to go outside other than to work. The exit seemed closed, and I became a recluse. Every day, I despaired about my future and trembled at the thought of having no future. My parents said, "It's pitiful," and I also thought, "It's pitiful."

One day, my mother's patience reached its limit. She said, "If you don't work, then you must leave!" I was obedient, and I was afraid of being abandoned by my parents. I couldn't find any other options besides searching for a job. It seems my mother still believes I can be a "normal, working individual." This belief continues to this day.

Everyone Is Out Working

I did as my parents told me since I was a child – from extracurricular activities to my educational path and now in my recent job search. My mother often says, "You should decide your own life!" like a mantra. But I wonder if I have ever really made my decisions purely on my own, without being influenced by my parents' opinions, the community, societal expectations, or concerns. Now I question whether I have been working just to meet their expectations, especially my mother's, and to avoid disappointing them. I can't help but still

see the disappointed look on my mother's face from when I quit extracurricular activities due to my perceived inadequacy as a child.

Job hunting was incredibly challenging, given my already difficult circumstances. I'm still not comfortable with making phone calls. I would receive weekly job magazines, and I'd put a circle around the positions I thought I could possibly apply for and leave the others blank because they seemed unattainable. On such days, my mother pressured me with her classic ultimatum: "You must choose between this and that!" My mother has always had a tendency to present two options, likely stemming from her preference for such limited choices within her own narrow world. Back in the day, she once told me to choose between a video game and a toy train, and I ended up selecting the video game, only to later give it up. "You love games, so go work in the gaming industry!" she insisted, and I complied. Even after starting work, my heart remained in the same reclusive state. I had no belief that I could make money, and I thought I was incapable of doing anything. In the beginning, when I started working, I faced daily torment, ridicule, and mistreatment. I also struggled with the relationships in the workplace. My parents would often say, "Just work for now," but I couldn't find any meaning in work. The thought of working was inconceivable, especially when I was already afraid to leave the house. My mother would lament, "Everyone goes outside to work, and it's so pitiful that my own child can't do it." I countered by saying, "If you think everyone's doing it, then go bring those 'everyone' people here right now," and it turned into an argument.

Parents Forcing Success

I wanted to continue being a *hikikomori*, but my mother's efforts forced me into the world half-heartedly.

The parents I met through my parents' *hikikomori* support group tend to believe that "hard work leads to success." They love stories that follow the formula of "hard work will always pay off." For example, morning dramas on TV consistently feature these themes, and I really dislike them. My parents moved from the countryside in Tohoku to Tokyo. They believe in hard work and diligence because they think that's how they've built their lives. They want their children to uphold that perspective, which they do themselves. I felt that my own *hikikomori* condition arose from not making enough effort, and I carried a sense of guilt

for not working. My current working environment is both embarrassing and detestable. The fear of my parents telling me to leave for not working haunts me.

Usefulness Comes from “Earning Money”

"Why aren't you doing anything? You look like someone who would do something, considering how much you respect that person." My father said this and looked at me. In his mind, anyone who is useful to society works, and they play around if they're not. He concluded that I must be playing around because I can't make a living."

This quote is from Soseki Natsume's novel "Kokoro."

It seems like many parents, especially fathers, tend to believe that "everyone who's useful goes out into the world, attains a considerable position, and works." My father is no exception, and he unknowingly instilled a common sense of inadequacy, which many *hikikomori* individuals may harbor - the feeling that they can't earn money. It's from this perspective that parent-child relationships evolve, and it appears to be a recurring pattern. My parents were no different in this regard. The drama "*Komoribito*" that aired recently featured Tetsuya Takeda playing a father who criticizes his child for not earning money. This situation often leads to strained relationships between parents and their children.

Both my mother and father were raised with the belief that if they couldn't earn money, they weren't truly living, especially in the countryside. They were brought up to rely solely on their own abilities, and that's what they believed in. Then, they moved to the city.

My father has led an accomplished life, and as a child, I thought I would follow in his footsteps with a similar profession. However, I became a *hikikomori*, distancing myself from the rails of life. There's no going back now, and I still carry a sense of guilt towards my father. Even if I had money, I doubt I could surpass my father, and it seems like there's no way to beat him except through a dramatic turnaround.

I have this feeling of inferiority that I can't work, and I can't work like my father.

Earning money, then getting married, having children, and eventually becoming a grandparent - by normal standards, these life milestones seem unattainable without a certain societal status. It's like I'm not following society's rules or norms, yet those are the only paths I know. For now, I'll just have to work and earn money because I can't envision any other

way to reintegrate into society. Even though I earn, I know I can't surpass my father, and I don't feel like I can even catch up with regular working people. However, it's our parents who instilled these values in us.

In my view, primarily among males, *hikikomori* individuals have a strong tendency to hope for a "dramatic turnaround" because they want to prove themselves to their parents, to gain their recognition. However, among the former *hikikomori* people I've met, there are those who don't share the same values as their parents, and they are already recognized for who they are. They aren't being pressured to conform or to fulfill their parents' expectations, and they are much easier to get along with.

Inferiority Complex Between Parents and Children

In a phrase from *Shinran*, a Buddhist monk, it says, "One should rely on oneself, trust in one's own heart, and have faith in one's own strength."

Believing that you're doing good and living your life solely on your own strength can lead to looking down on those who live differently. I've been looked down upon by many people. The more I thought I'd lived my life through hard work, the more I looked down on others who, in my opinion, didn't make an effort. I feel a sense of superiority, thinking that my current situation, including my job and income, was achieved through my own efforts.

My parents, among others, do not accept the idea that "simply living is enough," no matter how much I think about it. They always insist that you're not "good" unless you make money and have a purpose in life.

I've constantly heard, "Why can't you do something simple like this?" from my parents. They've been continuously blaming me, saying that I must not be making enough effort. Parents tend to think that there's no way their child could be on the side that can't make an effort, that there's no reason their child can't do the same things as they can. They think their child is making them look bad. On the other hand, the children think, "Why can't I do the same things as my parents? This is embarrassing."

それぞれの意見 わたしたちにとっての「お金」(“Our Various Opinions on “Money””) by
Hikipos Editorial Department (p. 15-16)

For this edition of the *Hikikomori* Post editorial meeting, we convened during a period when the COVID-19 situation had calmed down, using a hybrid format (a limited in-person gathering with online streaming). In this roundtable discussion, individuals with lived experiences of *hikikomori* and those who have been grappling with profound difficulties long before the pandemic shared their stories and insights related to "money."

Challenges Faced Due to Lack of Money

It's incredible how your mind becomes distorted as you strive to save money. I had decided to limit my daily food expenses to 800 yen, so every time I went to the supermarket, I saw so many things I wanted to eat but couldn't buy. Each time, I was painfully aware of my inability to earn money, and it gnawed at my heart. (Male, 30s)

Besides my disability pension, I have no other source of income. I've never had a credit card because I didn't think I'd pass the credit check. Recently, with the shift to a cashless society due to COVID, I've found it inconvenient because there are situations where I can't pay with cash. (Male, 30s)

During the early stages of my *hikikomori*, a friend invited me to a drinking party. I said, "I don't have money," but they offered to treat me, so I went. At the gathering, someone I didn't know asked, "What do you do?" I replied, "I'm unemployed; my friends are treating me." Then, he scolded me, saying, "So you're drinking without paying for yourself? He's a great guy. You won't even pay for your share." It was tough. (Male, 30s)

When I was in the depths of *hikikomori*, I was still in contact with my friends, but I was anxious that I might lose touch with them if I couldn't pay my phone bill. I feared that I would lose contact with the few friends I had and end up living completely isolated. (Female, 30s)

I started to look beyond my severe *hikikomori* situation and developed an interest in courses and activities. I wanted to try out the things I found interesting, but I had no money because I wasn't working. I thought my parents might give me money if I asked, but it made me feel like I was relying on them again. I realized that without money, I couldn't do anything. (Female, 20s)

In a family restaurant, around forty-year-old *hikikomori* and former *hikikomori* gathered, and because we were all unmarried, we discussed buying a joint burial plot. It costs about 400,000 yen even in Shibuya, so we thought we could buy it for 80,000 yen each. When we get older and need a place to go as *hikikomori*, instead of making new friends, it might be a good criterion to say we can share a grave with these guys. (Male, 40s)

The Ongoing Struggles Despite Employment

I started living on my own, but a significant portion of my income goes towards rent. I thought working five days a week was impossible, so I switched to four days a week, but it's a real struggle. I enjoy creating a sense of belonging and participating in *Hikikomori* Post editorial meetings, but I'm always on a tight budget, and I can't afford to have peace of mind. Of course, I can't save any money either, so I'm anxious about what might happen in the future, but right now, I'm just focused on surviving the present. (Female, 20s)

My immediate goal is to earn around 100,000 yen a month, in addition to my disability pension. To achieve that, I need to make several thousand yen on my own, but I can only earn a few hundred yen with online side jobs. Even if I want to work, I find it physically challenging to work for just two or three hours a day, so I hope to be able to work for thirty minutes or an hour at a time. (Male, 30s)

Regular people graduate and work for a company where they gradually climb the corporate ladder. However, what kind of career path can someone expect when they enter a

company at the age of thirty or forty? I believe I'll inevitably end up in poverty in the future. I'm anxious about whether I'll ever be in a position to generate money. (Male, 30s)

Escaping Reality Through Work

When I'm at work, I can forget about the unpleasant things. Trying too hard to earn or pushing productivity to the extreme is what makes you go crazy. Instead, it's better to use work as a way to escape from reality. (Male, 40s)

Being a corporate drone, sometimes it's easier because you switch off your thoughts. Working while worrying about being laid off at any moment and having less salary next month is exhausting. (Female, 30s)

I thought about going for an interview in hopes of improving my situation even a little. At the employment center, they told me, "Wait a moment, let's have a counseling session because we're concerned." However, I thought that taking action for now would help me forget about the anxiety, and since it's directly related to money, maybe things will get a bit better. (Male, 40s)

Not Wanting to Return Home Even When Financially Struggling

While I do have worries about having to return home if I can't sustain my current lifestyle, I don't aspire to be in a state where I can consistently make money, and even if I were to reach that point, my struggles wouldn't disappear. More than anything, the desire for freedom is overwhelmingly strong. (Female, 30s)

In the first place, it's strange that in a society where running out of money means you have to consider returning home. Currently, the only way to sustain oneself without returning

home is through public assistance, but many people feel ashamed and don't apply. While there are those who want to return home, there is a need for methods to sustain one's independent living for those who don't wish to return. (Male, 30s)

What I really needed when I was *hikikomori* was the "Housing First" concept. At home, the pressure from my parents was intense, and it felt like actual abuse. If your energy is constantly drained at home, you won't have the strength to go outside, so breaking free from that situation is challenging. (Female, 20s)

Regarding Disability Pensions and Public Assistance

After being a *hikikomori* for about six months, I was financially in a dire situation, and it was further deteriorating my mental state. When I consulted a doctor, they recommended disability pension, saying that I wouldn't be able to work for a while. It took about a year to start receiving it, but it provided around 60,000 yen per month and alleviated the mental burden. This also allowed me to purchase books to learn about my condition, which ultimately improved my health. (Male, 30s)

Having a disability certificate was advantageous because it allowed me to travel to the city for free by bus and train. Additionally, I could enter museums and art galleries for free. While I was struggling with *hikikomori* and in a feeble state, I remember seeing a Salvador Dali painting, which left a lasting impression. (Female, 30s)

Waiting until things become life-threatening before being offered a disability certificate is too late. There was a period when my parents were seriously ill, and my part-time job wasn't going well, but I didn't know when my condition was bad enough to go to the hospital. (Female, 30s)

I learned about the public assistance system in a social studies class, but I never thought I'd be eligible for it. I almost became homeless at one point, but a hospital case worker told me that I could apply for public assistance myself. Thanks to this, I'm still surviving. In this country, there's a social stigma associated with public assistance, so you need the mental strength to assert your rights under the Public Assistance Act. At this stage, you also need some knowledge. (Male, 50s)

I once looked into the "Livelihood Assistance Self-Reliance Support System (*Seikatsu Konkyusha Jiritsu Shien Seido*," but it seemed to be aimed at people who were employed. I wondered if it was necessary to be in dire straits due to the inability to work. I provide rent, but there are interviews every two weeks, making it very inconvenient. (Male, 30s)

Regrets When Caring for Family

When my father was hospitalized in the terminal stage of cancer, I wished he could have a private room for his last moments, but it cost 15,000 yen per day. We weren't that well-off, so we struggled for the money to be with him. I regret not working and saving money for this. I was too consumed with money worries, and I couldn't talk to my father much. This will probably haunt me until I die. (Male, 40s)

When it might be the last time to see your parents, you want to go back home on the Shinkansen as soon as possible, and you don't care about the travel expenses. But my family was worried about my money situation and hesitated to call me. (Male, 30s)

I want wisdom to obtain money, something like a source of income that anyone can receive, bringing in a few thousand yen a month. (Male, 30s)

Wisdom Related to Money

Some credit cards can be obtained even if you receive a disability pension or when you are unemployed. If you check the option for pension recipients or are registered with a temporary staffing agency, you can sometimes get a credit card. (Male, 30s)

If you use a card with easy installment payments to buy something around 30,000 yen in 24 installments, it's less than 2,000 yen per month. It's still a big burden, but it makes a significant difference. Most people in society can buy things on installment even if they are expensive, but we are often rejected during the application process, resulting in a much larger price gap. (Male, 30s)

When I had almost no money, I didn't know about Mercari or Yahoo! Auctions, so when I sold books at a used bookstore, a thick book became only 100 yen. With that money, I had a 200 yen beef bowl without the beef to satisfy my hunger. (Male, 30s)

With the internet, you can learn a lot for free. For people without a connection at home, there's free Wi-Fi at train stations and libraries, so you can download videos there and watch them at home. (Male, 30s)

What I Think About 'Money'

Being wealthy doesn't necessarily mean happiness. In the world, they make a big show of what's considered happiness on TV and the like, presenting it as "this is desire." But from my perspective, that often isn't happiness. (Male, 50s)