

Overworking in Japan: An Analysis of the Effects of Overworking on Mental Health in Japan

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Abstract

Employees in Japan are facing the problem of overworking causing mental health issues. A significant background to this issue is based in Japanese culture and tradition, and several initiatives exist to improve the problem. This project aims to determine the scope of the problem of overworking in Japan and its effect on mental health in employees, as well as identify coping skills and public health initiatives attempting to improve the situation. In this context, overworking is defined as working beyond one's capacity with an impact on one's mental or physical wellbeing. The hypothesis is that overworking in Japan is a significant problem, and while different interventions have varying levels of effectiveness in decreasing the negative effects, more needs to be done to address this issue. Research for this project focuses on quantifying overworking in Japan, individual experiences with the issue and destressing attempts, company policies that seek to address overworking, and nationwide policies addressing the issue. The results indicate that while many different interventions exist to overcome the issue, overworking still causes prevalent mental health problems in employees in Japan.

Introduction/Context

Employees in Japan face a lot of pressures, including a culture of hard work to the point of exhaustion. This cultural focus on hard work over all else has led to a problem of overworking in Japan. To what extent are workers affected mentally by this phenomenon? Japan has a serious problem of overworking employees, and this is a serious detriment to the mental health of workers.

This study focuses on workers in modern day Japan up until the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenon is more prevalent in big cities and with men, although other demographics were also examined. The target population being examined includes young adults between the ages of 18-35 who work in some capacity, from office worker to construction worker.

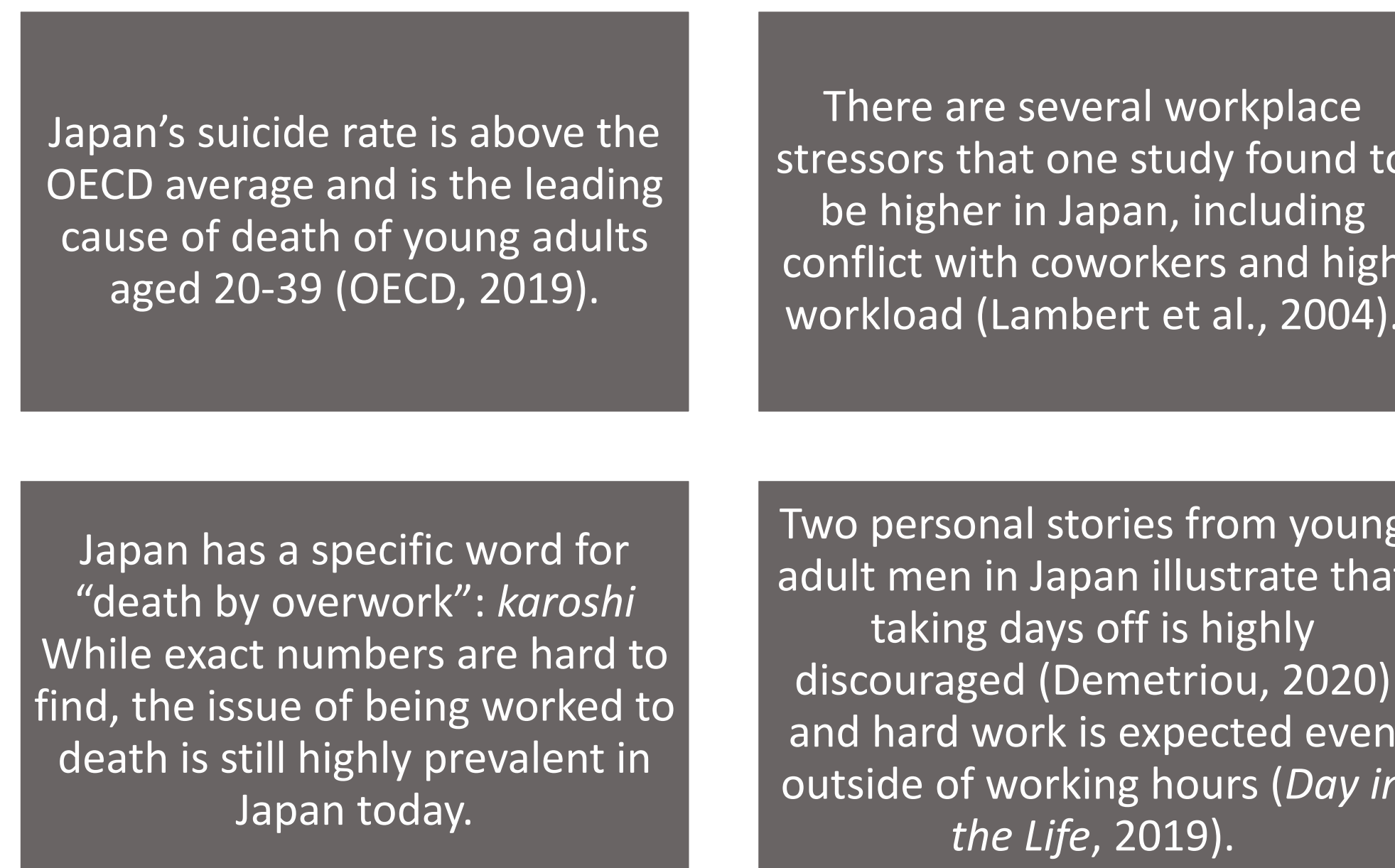


Figure 1. Listed is evidence of the overworking problem in Japan.

Research Methods

This research consists of a literature review surrounding topics of overworking, mental health, and destressing techniques in Japan. Information on public health initiatives and statistics was collected from official documents and government websites and utilized to quantify broader arguments relating to the topic. Additionally, a couple of oral histories were utilized to get a more personal perspective on the effects of the issue.

Analysis

Japan has a culture of overworking that has been prevalent for a long time and is heavily backed in tradition. Due to Japan's highly collectivist society, working to serve others is highly encouraged, and breaking for one's own health is not. This has many quantifiable consequences, including a high suicide rate, higher workplace stressors, and overworking resulting in death (Listed in **Figure 1**). The culture of many Japanese workplaces pushes towards working past one's capacity to work.

Individuals and workplaces have some awareness of the overworking problem and have attempted to relieve the stress to varying degrees of success. Individuals in Japan often lean towards negative coping mechanisms, such as heavy smoking/drinking in Japanese "salarymen". Other more positive preventions do exist in Japan, such as exercise and meditation, but they still tend to only address symptoms of the problem.

The federal Japanese government has a large health initiative, entitled "Health Japan 21," that has a goal of improving physical and mental health of Japanese citizens. Their targets include primary prevention of lifestyle diseases, social environment improvement, and improvement of regular health maintenance (NIHN, n.d.). The targets seem to address specifically the quantifiable problems relating to overwork and the culture that led to it, but measurement of improvement in many of these areas is difficult in the short-term. Social reform, particularly social reform led by the government, can take a period of decades to see improvement, so these reforms are ambitious. (**Figure 2**).

Individual	Workplace	Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Male smoking rate of 30% (OECD, 2019)Coping mechanisms such as self-control (Lambert et al., 2004)Meditation, tea drinking, exercise, etc.Vacation time, which is rarely used (Demetriou, 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Workplace exercise (Jindo et al., 2020)Workplace mental health preventions (OECD, 2019)Communication improvements (Demetriou, 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Health Japan 21 (NIHN, n.d.)Work Style Reform Bill (2018)What next? Continued improvements into coronavirus pandemic

Figure 2. Listed are examples of interventions for overwork from three different levels – individual, workplace, and government.

Synthesis

The problem of Japanese overworking is rooted in a history and culture of hard work over all else, and it leads to many negative consequences for the people it affects. Individuals, workplaces, and the government all have attempted to rectify the problem in several ways with varying degrees of success.

Conclusion

The problem of overworking in Japan can be attributed to cultural tradition and has led to severe sociological issues. Most attempts by individuals and workplaces to rectify the effects of overworking address only symptoms of the problem, when really the focus should be on changing the culture of the workplace and decreasing mental illness stigma. While the public health initiatives seem to be heading in the direction of a shift in culture, their effects are difficult to measure. The problem of overworking is being addressed to a point, but more efforts need to be made at all levels to significantly improve the situation.

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