

IF WE NEED TO STAY AT HOME, WE MIGHT AS WELL ENJOY IT

Matsuko (77) from a provincial city in Japan, retired, lives in a detached house together with her husband, daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren

NO ONE TO TAKE OVER MY ROLE

My husband has been serving as president of the neighborhood association for 14 years. The neighborhood association is a voluntary organization of residents, where people interact and discuss various issues, and is closely related to the local government. It is a traditional organization, some areas are functioning and some are not. I also work in the background, like a welfare commissioner, to go around the neighborhood and check on older people. It's hard to find someone to take over my role, so I'm still doing it.

CHERRY BLOSSOM VIEWING

I'm also involved in activities at the community salon, a place for social gathering, and an exercise group. At the salon, we organize events around five times a year. We started these activities after being encouraged by the social welfare council. It's been around for over 10 years. We have a New Year's party in January, cherry blossom viewing in spring, another event in summer, an art festival in fall, for that we also make works, and one more event around the end of the year. As a welfare commissioner, I'm also involved in an exercise program to prevent frailty and a shopping club. We have the exercise group once a week since we started in November 2017. I was asked by a local welfare officer commissioner in the neighborhood, a volunteer to support the elderly and children appointed by local government.

DIVIDING MEMBERS INTO GROUPS OF FIVE

We have a lot of people at the salon, around twenty. That would really conflict with the COVID-19 rules, so we can't restart the group. We still can't do the exercise program either because the city office told us not to. But a handicraft club, organized by the senior citizens club, has started by dividing up the members into groups of five. They teach us how to make Japanese sandals with unused T-shirts. We did that last Wednesday. I think that's the only thing that has started. With the exercise group members, when the program was closed, we went for a drive together, took them shopping, and visited each other. We do stay in touch. About the salon, since the members are from the community, we all look forward to having it again too.

LUCKILY, I HAVE MANY HOBBIES

My hobbies? I'm lucky I have many. I enjoy a calligraphy club, but it closed down because of COVID-19. It finally opened in June. When you do calligraphy, you do it quietly, right? The club started about 15 to 16 years ago as a class at a community center. It's the oldest class there. There are now 14 members, and it's been doing great.

We've also launched a singing class at the community center, but we can't have it now. Too bad. At the art festival in the center, our calligraphy works would be exhibited and the singing class members would perform on the stage.

FOLK DANCING AND SINGING

I also do folk dancing, for exercise. I didn't care much for it, but a friend of mine invited me after I quit my job. I worked for a car manufacturer for about 20 years, making car seats, and quit at age 58. So, I've been dancing for quite a while too. I go to two places, but both of them are now closed because of COVID-19. Oh, I enjoy Japanese postcard art too, but the group also stopped. Since I love drawing, a coop member invited me there. The place is a little far from home, but I enjoy going there. So, let's see, twice a week for calligraphy and singing, three times a week for folk dancing, and once a week for Japanese postcard art.

MAKING FACE MASKS FOR KIDS

When the Japanese postcard art class was suspended, I started doing it on my own at home and gave some to one of my classmates and the instructor. I did it twice. But during the 'stay-at-home' period, I was able to do some really small things I hadn't done, like taking time to organize and clean up the house, housewife stuff. So it wasn't that bad, I think. Also, since I used a sewing machine when I was working, I made some face masks. The elementary school in this neighborhood has only 20 students. The kids asked me to sew, so I made some, put 2 masks and a pocket tissues pack in a bag I'd got at a dollar store, and gave them to these kids. Later, they sent me thank you letters. I treasure them so dearly, and I got them thanks to COVID-19. So, I hardly get bored.

A DRIVE IN THE MOUNTAINS

Also, the other day, I went to see a friend of mine who had invited me to go see her hydrangea. Around June, I thought restrictions were gradually lifted, so I started doing things like these to get some fresh air. We went deep into the mountains. Since the driver was old, we got to be careful, right? I went with a close friend of mine. But we needed to avoid closed spaces, so we left the windows open while driving.

AVOID THE 3CS

Also, I go shopping for a friend of mine. Another friend has Parkinson's disease, so I take her to the hospital. She has her own children, but they have to work. I used to go to hot springs with my friends, but now I can't. So, I would call them and say hi. My neighbors too, I can't see them, so I call them. With my younger sister and brother, I talk on the phone. I used to visit them before the COVID crisis, but we kind of hesitate now. You know, we got to follow the rules to avoid the 3Cs: Closed spaces, Crowded places, Close-contact settings.

KOREAN TV DRAMAS

Do I have any problems? Not really. We don't need much money, and we don't spend much money for gas. Well, 'stay-at-home' isn't too bad once you get used to it. I guess humans do have coping skills. If we need to stay at home, we might as well enjoy it. We

can enjoy ourselves even at home, like watching Korean TV dramas I'd missed all this time. I can enjoy that. Considering our ages, it's not too much of a problem to stay at home. Since I live in a large family, my daughter and grandkids would go get something from stores so that I wouldn't need to do too much shopping. But I'm still healthy, so I ride a bike to go to stores in the neighborhood. So really, I don't have a problem. If you think about what's going on, it's best to follow the rules and stay at home. Everyone else is doing it, so I don't mind doing it, to avoid COVID-19.

LATE AFTERNOON BEACH WALK

When it wasn't too warm, around March and April, I would go for a walk at a sports park. But since around late May or June, it got too warm to do that. So, I now take a late afternoon beach walk. I do walk, along the coast, reminding myself to stay healthy.

I don't have any plans to try anything new, but I'd like to stay connected with people in the community, the same as always.

Matsuko's story was shared with us by International Longevity Center (ILC) Japan – 国際長寿センター, member of the ILC Global Alliance, an international federation researching and advocating the vitality and the societal and economical position of older people. In the Netherlands, the ILC network is represented by Leyden Academy.