

WELL, I WANT LIFE TO GET BACK TO NORMAL

Masaomi (91) from Tokyo, retired seaman, lives alone in an apartment complex

TRANSFERRED ALL OVER JAPAN

I'm from Hokkaido and found a job at a merchant shipping company. I worked on a domestic cargo ship there and traveled around, like the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean. Since the company later stopped its shipping business, I joined a seamen's union.

Since then, I was transferred all over Japan, including Hokkaido, Miyagi and Fukushima. Then, I was transferred to the headquarters in Tokyo around 45 to 46 years ago and stayed there until the retirement.

CAREGIVING ROLE

Since my wife was gradually becoming frail, my daughter asked us to move closer to her family. I couldn't keep saying no to her, and reluctantly moved to where I live now in 2012, a year after the Great East Japan Earthquake. It's been 8 whole years, and I think it's turned out good. My wife passed away in 2018, so I no longer have a caregiving role. Looking back, I think I did a pretty good job. I was quite selfish when I was young, doing whatever I wanted to, so I think I was able to return the favor to my wife. It's a natural thing to do.

KIND OF DULL

So, my daughter found all kinds of events at a senior center and kept telling me to go there. That's how I started going. Anyway, I went to the senior center at least 4 times a week, joining programs like light exercise and yoga. I've also joined an healthy exercise group because my daughter invited me. Anyway, I've lost all the places to enjoy activities. I don't go out that much. You shouldn't go out to prevent COVID infection, right? So, I was gradually feeling down. It's kind of dull, I felt.

STOCKING UP

I do all the housework by myself. I take care of myself. My daughter would stop by in the evening, open the door, say "How're you doing?" and leave. So, I can take care of pretty much everything in everyday life, like eating. I do my best to be a good father. I do all the shopping myself too. Of course, I do it less often since the COVID outbreak. Before then, I would go almost every day, buying a little bit of this and that. But now, I do it about once

a week, stocking up on items. But when I buy a lot of stuff, it gets really heavy. Since I'm an old man, I now use a shopping cart for seniors.

SOME EXERCISE

Of course, I still ride a bicycle. I need it when I go a little further because it's easier than walking. When I was young, I played baseball. Shortly before the retirement, I also started golfing. In terms of sports, that's pretty much it. When you golf, you walk. So I guess it was good in a sense that I did some exercise. Right before the COVID outbreak, I hurt my lower back a little, a slipped disc. Then, after going to a massage therapist for around 2 months for that, I would start exercising with a machine. So, I go to rehab now twice a week. I get to do some exercise there. About a hospital, I used the bus to go there first. But I gradually felt better, so I've started using my bike, even now. It only takes around 15 minutes. I can feel that I'm losing physical strength since the COVID outbreak, naturally. So, when I ride a bike, I get tired easily now unless I go slowly. So, thanks to the rehab, I get to go out a little, and I think I should be thankful for that.

MY CHILDREN CONTACT ME OFTEN

Besides the oldest daughter who stops by every evening, I have a son and another daughter. My son lives in another ward in Tokyo, and the younger daughter lives in a neighboring prefecture. They contact me often, giving phone calls to encourage me.

DISTANCE

Anyway, COVID-19 is such a strange creature, so it's really stressful just to think about it. I try my best to protect myself, but you need to care for other people too. That means we should definitely avoid close contact. So, we no longer speak to each other. Even when I see neighbors, we would just say hello and leave right after that. I feel the distance, and that's really sad.

AT THE DOOR

I get a visit once a month by someone from the social welfare council to check on me. But now, they don't come inside. Actually, they can't. It's been like that for a while, and I hate it. Before the COVID crisis, they would come inside, and I would serve them a cup of tea. Now, nothing like that at all. They would open the door, and that's it. Their job is done once they find out I am fine. I think they come to my place because I have become a member of the council.

CYBERFRIEND

Well, I want life to get back to normal. I'd like to go to the yoga and light exercise programs at the senior center, as long as my body allows me. I had the greatest time when I went to the healthy exercise group. I'm looking forward to seeing the members

again, the sooner the better. I also have a cyberfriend. During the COVID crisis, he often sends me emails. I tend to forget, but he doesn't. So I send him replies.

*Masaomi'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.*