

Coming Back from a "Radiation Panic" = The experience of a housewife — Realizing my own discriminatory feelings was the moment of awakening

Yuka Shirai



[Editorial] Even for people living somewhere far away, the Fukushima nuclear accident caused hurt to individuals, and threw society into chaos. Notwithstanding the fact that currently, in Japan, the health risks from radiation are very small, some people have fallen into a panic. Though these people, who cause untold grief to both their families and children, are indeed victims, at the same time, they may also become aggressors who blacken the reputation and discriminate against the affected areas.

Though it is possible to bring up the idea of individual responsibility, when one thinks of the negative influence that is spreading, as a member of the Japanese community, isn't it necessary to do something to help the society as a whole? However, to confront this, it is necessary to understand people's emotions.

Ms. Yuka Shirai, a housewife Tokyo resident who runs a self-owned seminar planning business, both fell into, and climbed out of, a panic after the nuclear accident. She has spoken about this experience, under her real name, despite the possibility of receiving harsh criticism. Even a calm, self-analytical woman like Ms. Shirai fell into this sort of a panic. Maybe experiencing such a psychological problem is much closer to us all than we imagine.

Mental and Physical Changes and Family Discord

What was it like to fall into a "radiation panic"?

I began feeling strange just after the earthquake. I was at my worst from September to October of last year. I had a nervous breakdown; all I could think about was the situation at the nuclear power plant and radiation pollution, and I was always gathering information about it every waking hour. "I'm going to die from radiation. But before that, I might also die from an earthquake striking the Kanto area." I was always surrounded by these thoughts, I couldn't shake my anxiety. I felt dizzy, had headaches, weakness, and was constantly harried by heart palpitations. My physical condition was at its worst.

My daily life also changed in a strange way. For my food, I only used ingredients from places far from Tohoku, such as Western Japan, Hokkaido, or overseas. I stockpiled large quantities of rice that was harvested before the nuclear accident. I'm a single mother, and I not only forced my kids to wear masks to school, I also raised questions to the Board of Education regarding the safety of their pools and school lunches. My kids resisted, and I fought with them every day. But even then, I was certain that I was correct and ignored how my kids felt. Every day, I gathered inaccurate information and disseminated it myself.

So, you didn't gather correct information, like that originated by doctors or specialists?

My main method of information gathering was the internet. I mainly used Twitter, blogs, or Ustream. The information sources were all people who were becoming well-known by spreading dark and tragic information. There were a lot of different people, from anonymous sources to university professors and researchers. Looking back on it, I think I believed a lot of strange people, but at the time, I thought they were right. As for people labeled as "government scholars" who were disseminating accurate information, I was certain they were wrong, and I ignored them. Also, since I didn't have much knowledge at all regarding nuclear power or radiation before the accident, I couldn't really confirm whether any information was true or not.

I also joined a gathering of people who had all fallen into "radiation panic." They were all people who thought like me, and who believed biased information. Now, I'm a pretty outgoing person, but a lot of them seemed to be the kind of person that

always used the internet and weren't very good at communicating in real life. Though, in the corner of my mind, I did think that these people had fallen into a panic, I didn't make the mental leap to realize that I had also become the same as them.

Knowing the Pain of People in Fukushima and Realizing my own Panic

What did you do when your fear reached its peak?

I looked for a place to run; I thought about moving to the countryside in Hokkaido. Just as I had started my preparations to move, some friends in the real world that were all worried about my craziness thankfully advised me to stop. They pointed out to me that evacuating would cause problems with my job, and that I had been behaving erratically. However, I got a lot of calls telling me "congratulations on your decision to evacuate" from my those acquaintances that I knew only on the internet who had fallen into a "radiation panic."

Thinking of my life and work, I decided to stay in Tokyo. The place where I lived at the time, near Ikebukuro, had high rent and a bad living environment. It was a place from which you could hardly see the sun. I moved to Tama, where there is a lot of green and we can see the sky very well. Even though the rent is cheaper, the rooms are larger and neater. Thanks to that, I felt that I could take a breath. That being said, my nervous breakdown due to radiation didn't change. I continued being careful with regards to what I ate, and I continued checking for information on the internet every day without fail.

So, why were you able to change from there?

I changed gradually. I began re-thinking everything after I stopped my decision to evacuate, and then I read a few good books. My actions all changed little by little. And then, I heard that a young male friend of mine who was from Fukushima had experienced terrible discrimination simply because he had told others that he was from there. He cried in front of me. When I saw this, I realized that I had made a terrible mistake. I understood that had simply selfishly fixated on the idea of "radiation" without thinking at all of the victims.

The reason why my nervous breakdown worsened was because I had problems in my own mind, and in my own daily life. I realized this after I finally calmed down. My life had taken a turn for the worst because of the Great East Japan Earthquake. I'm self-employed, but in the restrained mood after the disaster, my work dwindled. And after the disaster, I was always watching news stories about the earthquake or the nuclear accident on the TV, so I slowly became unable to do anything.

With that, I lost the motivation to do anything. I was certain that, no matter what I did, the Tohoku and Kanto areas would be destroyed by radiation, and that we had no future. I was filled with despair. But at the same time, if I speak honestly, at that time I also felt glad. I also had this conflicting feeling that with the earthquake and the radiation, all my pain would be released.

What do you mean by "my pain would be released?"

I'm 44 years old. A few years ago, I began to hit a few difficulties, and I really felt bewildered. With my age, my figure and appearance began to deteriorate. I began to be treated as an "old person" by society, and I also started to think of myself in that way, but I couldn't really accept this reality.

I also had work-related problems. I wanted to do something big to surprise the world. I had this dream for many years. But I haven't been able to do anything. I also had a lot of other distress with child-rearing and interpersonal relations, but I couldn't really find a way to solve any of them. I slowly lost confidence. I had a sort of "hole in my heart," or in any case, a sense of despair.

At that point, when the radiation problem happened, I got the idea that everything would be reset, and I might be able to start my life all over again. I was looking for help, amidst all this destruction. The reason I think I became so lost in looking for information related to the disaster was because it stimulated me, and allowed me to forget all other troubles in my life.

So, in other words, this massive anxiety put a lid on this "hole in your heart," and even maybe gave you a meaning for life.

Yes, that's right. The stronger my anxiety was, the more I was able to turn my attention away from my real problems. I was terrified to the core that my children might die from radiation. But at the same time, I felt a sense of mission, as a mother, to help them. I think that my position as a mother spurred my panic even further.

I thought I had received a role. I put the responsibility that I wasn't able to lead the life I wanted on the social system, and the nuclear problem was my chance to strike back at society. There was no "evil" easier to understand than nuclear radiation. By screaming my opposition to nuclear power, I felt a special sense of duty, a sense of being among the chosen, and I was filled with self-love. I think now that there was a certain sense of "maintaining my self-esteem" as a background to my panic.

Slowly Escaping the Panic with the Help and Understanding of One's Support Circle

What happened after you awoke from your panic?

The process of becoming aware of how wrong I had been also led me to become aware of my bad aspects, and I fell into self-loathing. I also had feelings of guilt for having contributed to spreading inaccurate information, and having added to the discrimination against Fukushima and the other affected areas. I am also still worried where my feelings will go from here. I am not very well balanced mentally; I tend to go from extreme to extreme. Before I was in a mental breakdown because of the radiation, but now I'm afraid I might be at the other extreme, where I don't worry about it at all. I'm afraid I'm just thinking that "it's fine like this" and not looking directly at the risk of radiation, or the risks to our daily lives. Mentally, it was very painful to get out of this panic.

How should people who have fallen into a "radiation panic" be helped?

I feel that "radiation panic" has a similar system of reliance to that of cults. In the world of those who have fallen into a panic, there are friends who will accept them among all their unfulfillment and anxiety. People of a similar disposition can help lick each other's wounds. Moreover, there is a lot of exchange of information on the internet, away from the annoyances of reality. Even more, it's possible to give up thinking with your own head. There are "gurus" or, in this case, "sources of frightening information" to show you the way, so it's not very taxing. I felt a complete sense of safety in this nice space that doesn't exist in the real world.

However, such a space doesn't resolve any problem whatsoever. What's more, it's built on fabrications, even though the people who live in it both don't, nor want to realize it. I think there are as many ways to get out of it as there are people, but maybe the only way to change is to slowly take heed of the information which others point out. I think the help of one's circle of friends is necessary.

I think that the fact that I have this "heaviness" in my heart is a large cause of why I fell into this "radiation panic." However, I don't think everybody is like me. I think there must also be people who aren't very good at finding information, who can't think clearly because they worry too much about their children, who aren't very outgoing and so have trouble getting information, or who cannot see problems from other perspectives. I think that these kinds of people would be easier to bring out of their panic than myself.

I answered the questions in this interview with the idea that I would like to help these kinds of people, if I can. We should not criticize or attack people who have fallen into a panic. We should instead benevolently help them.

Interview and Texts: Takaaki Ishii, Agora Research Institute Fellow

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