

POST-POLIO HEALTH

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A Wonderful Encounter of "Same Here"

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"I finally became strong when I accepted who I am. I feel healed every time I experience the feeling of 'same here'."

I was born in 1955. When I was 18 months old, I contracted polio and its after-effects disabled the use of my lower left limb. Since my physical disability was relatively mild, I was able to receive an ordinary education from elementary through senior high school and graduated from university. In the meanwhile, I met no one like me.

I became a teacher because I thought I could work, even with my impaired leg. However, when I was asked to marry, I quit the profession. When I had my first child, I thought, "Finally, I will be accepted by everyone as a woman."

But prejudice and discrimination undeniably exist in our society. When I realized it, I became annoyed and the emptiness and the regrets I had in my adolescence changed into anger. The first "eruption" occurred ten years ago, as a member of the Women's Net Kobe (a group for women's issues). At a meeting focused on the fear of divorce, nondisabled female participants talked about their own experiences and they discussed whether or not they should divorce. I burst into cries. "What are you talking about? You might have various problems, but you can make a decision of your own. I wasn't even regarded as an object of marriage, just because I am lame in my leg." To my surprise, it was something I could not hold in.

Since my childhood, I wished I hadn't been disabled or that I had at least been a boy with a disability. Males with financial ability might be treated as members of society even if they have a physical disability. On the other hand, with women, beauty takes priority over everything. When people talk about "beautiful legs," we are left out. For many years, I was made to believe that females with disabilities should not be treated as independent members of society.

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Kimiko Negayama (▼), Tae Shibata (▼▼) and members of the Japan Network of Polio Survivors (JNPS) at Amity Maishima, Osaka City Maishima Sports Center for Persons with Disabilities.

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Members of the Tokyo Polio Association,
led by Mariko Koyama (▼).



At the age of 39, I realized that this feeling was "silly" and became aware that there must be many women with disabilities who had the same kind of worries as I had. I thought if we could gather together to talk, we might gain the power to liberate ourselves from being dually discriminated against — for being a woman and having a disability.

Nine years ago, I joined a tennis school for the disabled at the Shiawase-No-Mura of Kobe. It was the first time in my life I met a person with aftereffects of polio. Mrs. Azuma and I immediately got along. When I confessed my desire for a mini-skirt and high heels, she expressed her sympathy saying "same here" with a smile on her face.

"Same here." "Same here." Her words were repeated in my mind and gradually grew into delight. This was quite a new feeling. My eyes filled with tears.

In the early stages of our support group, tears were often seen in the regular meetings. Many who attended sobbed out on account of their life as a polio survivor, which brought tears to the other members. Once they spit out what they had in mind for many years, they became happier. They felt reassured by knowing that the rest of the members had the same problems as well.

Our group does aquatic exercise. Swimming is good for us since we do not have to care how much we weigh. When we swim in a swimming pool, we have to expose our legs, so we feel uneasy. But we care less about it when we are together. I'll never forget how comforted I felt when I first saw similar kinds of legs in a row.

While Mrs. Azuma and I engaged in activities to support polio survivors, we learned of the existence of the late effects and post-polio syndrome. Today, we want to help polio survivors, who are over 40 and living in fear of gradually declining physical strength, to accept their new condition and realize that it commonly happens to polio survivors. Moreover, we believe that it is highly possible to avoid having some new symptoms if one is aware of the risks of overdoing in advance.

The Tokyo Polio Association, part of Japan Network for Polio Survivors (JNPS), focuses on medical and scientific information and has distributed their book, *For Understanding Polio and Post-Polio* to major public health centers and hospitals.

JNPS has a representative working with the Japanese with Disabilities National Network, a group dedicated to passing a law to assure people with disabilities have the same rights as other people.

Visit JNPS' website: www.normanet.ne.jp/~polio

I also have changed a lot since I organized this association. I used to lead a difficult life of switching myself from a person with a disability to a nondisabled person since I have mild aftereffects. I finally became strong when I accepted who I am. I feel healed every time I experience the feeling of "same here." ●