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ABSTRACT

Before making determinations about counseling people who have been harmed by technology, counselors need to identify the problems and symptoms. The paper states that this approach is similar to what occurs with other family counseling issues. The only difference noted is that this counseling is more focused on what happens inside families from a family therapeutic point of view, not only paying attention to those clients who are harmed but also to the family systems in which the problems or symptoms occur. The paper stresses the importance of attending to those who feel they are not catching up with the constant and rapid change in technology. Listening with simple acceptance is an effective technique for those who have a fear of micro-electronic systems. For those tired of technology, a trip to a natural setting is helpful. The stress management model used for teacher burnout is useful for clients who have stress and depression. The model contains a recognition stage, contact stage, and insight stage that helps clients identify the degree of stress, aids in discovering the meaning of their struggle, and helps them gather insight into their experience. The paper particularly focuses on counseling Japanese high school students. (Author/JDM)

HOW TECHNOLOGY IS INFLUENCING FAMILIES IN JAPAN

Yoshiya Kurato(Osaka City University)

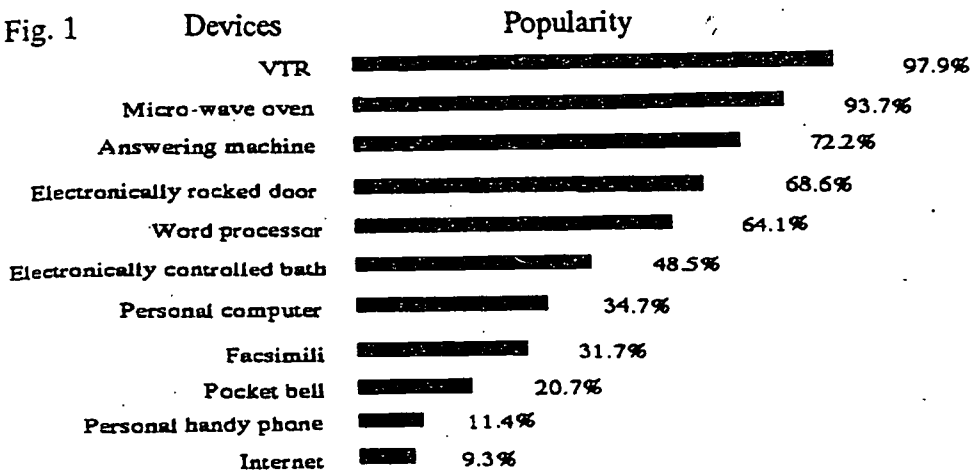
Introduction

Japan is one of the nations where technology has been highly developed. Especially, when it comes to micro-electronic devices for family use such as personal computers, micro-wave ovens, answering machines on the phones, or personal handy phones, such devices enjoy a high rate of their popularity. According to the Bureau of General Affairs in the central government (1996), the VTR was the most popular device in Japan. Its rate of the popularity was as high as 93.3% in 1996, and 78.8% in 1991, five years earlier. The VTR was followed by the answering machine at 58.4%(19.4%) Figures in parentheses are 1991. The word processor's rate was 42.8%(31.1%) . The personal handy phone's rate was 28.1%(2.6). The pocket bell's rate was 26.1%(9.1%). The personal computer's rate was 23.9%(15.5). And the facsimile came in at 14.9%(5.1%).

I Survey

A survey, conducted by the author in 1997 with 334 subjects, both male and female, is shown in Figure 1.

Fig. 1



Subjects are shown in Figures 2 and 3. As seen in the Figures 2 and 3, there are deviations in the samples in that males are smaller in number. Also, most females surveyed were college students. Therefore, these deviations might have affected the data. This has to be elaborated in further studies.

Fig. 2

Sex	Subjects
females	299
males	35
Total	334

Fig. 3

Age	Subjects
~29	221
30~59	105
60~79	8

II Some positive impacts of technology upon families in Japan

The recent development of technology has had many positive influences upon families. For instance, micro-electric ovens have not only been a great convenience but also a joy for cooking. Just a couple of minutes, or 5 minutes at most, is enough to cook almost all dishes. Electrically controlled baths are also superb. It is a Japanese bath that electronically controls how much hot water there is: how hot it, or when it is ready, all by setting keys. Furthermore,it can be set by remote-control by a telephone call when one is away from home. Japanese love it since we are fond of baths. Another device is the electric vacuum cleaner which has a popularity rated almost 100% and makes house cleaning enjoyable. Shopping and banking on the internet is getting popular in the age of electronics. All in all, technology saves time and labor. Japanese housewives used to spend almost all their day cooking and house keeping, but now as technology develops they only spend two to four hours a day depending on their family size. What a great change!

TV programs that show us a different way of life in another part of the world give us joy and ideas on how to enjoy our daily lives. We feel expanded. We are experiencing a world that is becoming smaller and smaller. Communications and transactions through the computer internet are more than fun. We can communicate with anyone in the world who has a home page or an e-mail mail address on the internet. We can buy goods listed in the home pages whether it is a brand-name item in Paris or Rome. It has been fun and an eye opening experience for most of us. It contributes to helping us feel richer both physically and psychologically. This is a good side of the technology.

The survey showed that 36.9% of the subjects who have micro electronic systems at home appreciated their convenience, which was significantly more than those who had no systems ($p<0.05$). Those who have pocket bells, when compared with those who don't, tend to support the notion that technological development is good for families ($p<0.01$). Also, those who have a facsimile machine at home, when compared with those who don't, are inclined to support the notion that technological development is good for families ($p<0.01$). Likewise, those who use the internet affirmed the same notion ($p<0.01$).

III Some negative impacts upon families

While there are positive influences, there are some negative impacts as well that have occurred with advances in technology. For instance, in spite of the convenience that technology had brought to us,

we have begun to ask ourselves whether we have obtained a better quality of life, that is to say, are we happier? Has the technology brought us happiness? Does it help us to get our family ties more secure?

Our survey showed that 8.9% of the total subjects recognized the negative impact on families ($p<0.01$).

Three percent of the subjects will prefer, if possible, fresh air in the country to urban conveniences. Twelve point three percent of family members have become significantly less connected to each other and seldom communicate verbally ($p<0.01$). Children spend most of their time devoted to playing family computer games. Some, for instance, play games 3 to 4 hours a day. Those who don't go to school will spend a whole day playing games. Interestingly enough, family computer games are somewhat meaningful for those who refused to go to school since the games may give yong people something to do at home while not attending school and they may have some therapeutic value. By therapeutic value I mean that there are games which require them to interact with others, in order to win or finish the game. And there are games that help them to express anger while playing and hence, catharsis. Also, for some it is a device that enables to become aware of their feelings. These may be considered as positive aspects of the family computer games.

Adults are not an exception when it comes to the computer and internet. They spend hours of their time on it while they are at home. Other family members, such as wives and children complain about it. It is symbolic that a newly wed bride once told me that "He is married to his computer, not me. He spends almost the whole weekend with the computer and I am left alone home feeling lonely."

Expenses for using the internet are not cheap. Some will pay about US$400 to 500 a month for a telephone bill that is mainly the expense for the internet. This is compounded by the bill for a pocket bell system if they have a teenage girl. It usually amounts to about US$300 to $400 a month in addition to the internet bill. This creates the concerns the family and often escalates to a serious family battle.

Those who have personal computers at home, compared with those who don't, had significantly more stress ($p<0.05$). Moreover, 13.8% of those who have personal computers complained about eye fatigue, stiff shoulders, or physical fatigue ($p<0.05$).

Another problem reported in the survey was that there were some who compulsively think they have to respond to every message they receive on the internet. But it is sometimes too much to respond to and they become depressed as they don't know what to do. This problem's symptoms resemble those of burnout syndrome.

There were 26.6% of the subjects that reported they felt stressed when manipulating the micro electronic systems ($p<0.01$). Who gets to watch what TV channel creates conflict between mothers and children (3.9%), between fathers and children (1.8%), and between husbands and wives (3.0%). Long conversations on the phone causes stress for families (5.1%). This may result in polarization

of family members one against another.

A high school girl student responded in our survey that she is afraid of the sound of her pocket bell, but she is not able to switch off the bell because if she does she thinks she will be treated harshly by her friends. Bullying is a big social problem in Japan. On the other hand, she gets too nervous to respond becouse she might make a mistake when answering the bell. Also, among those who communicate with their parents via the pocket bell, there are some who feel they are watched and controlled by their parents. There were 8.7% of the subjects who felt stressed when the pocket bell rung ($p<0.05$). It was reported that the TV tended to reduce family conversation (11.4%), which was more than those who responded that TV facilitated more conversation(3.0%).

In general, there were 6.3% of the subjects who were afraid of the technological development which is too quick to catch up (6.3%) and felt uneasy to use those devices found in homes.

IV Some policy changes to address technological impact on people

Regarding computer communication on the internet, first of all, we must have computers at home and must have a good command of the English language if we are to interact with others on the internet. However, our housing is not spacious enough in most cases to accommodate a computer, so living room or dinning room is occupied with the machine and conflicts with children who tend to prefer to watch the TV which is also on in those rooms. This creates arguments as to what the living room or dining room is all about and hence, brings conceptual change. On the other hand, we are not accustomed to the languages that are used on the internet nor are we used to e-mail addresses if we communicate overseas, so we are limited language-wise.

Secondly, we are inclined to depend on technology that is so convenient to use, so much that we may have the same dependent attitude as alcoholics. For instance, we depend on the computer to look up Japanese KANJI words instead of consulting a dictionary. At the same time convenience tends to produce low tolerance. For instance, we soon switch on air conditioner when it is only a little hot or cold.

Thirdly, technology has been encouraging us to change our value systems. For instance, TV programs that show another way of life in a different part of the world inevitably affects our thinking and behavior. World wide communication and transactions through the internet on personal computers is also changing our value systems. Anyway you look at it, the computer age has come with an accelerated speed and computers will dominate human beings if we don't know what they are: what they are for; and how we use them.

Once in a department store in Japan I thought I saw tropical fish in a huge aquarium, which was about the size of dinning table. The fish were colorful and different shapes, and were swimming in the tropical surroundings. Everything was so beautiful that I kept watching it for a while before I realized that it was a video tape and the aquarium was not real but a fine flat TV set that was so

shaped. This is virtual reality. On the way back home I bought a small version of the aquarium. Just a picture frame-size. I enjoy it at home. Nevertheless, once in a while I feel I am no where because what I am surrounded by is not real after all. Of course they are fine. And machines such as TVs, VTRs, answering machines, bath facilities, cooking facilities, or computers, are all magnificent, but they are made with solid materials. Even tropical fishes! I question whether I am one of them and whether I am alive in this world, could I be virtual reality also. Furthemore there is no clear distinction between day time and night time. It goes on 24 hours day after day. This may lead to a feeling of boundarilessness, which is common to people of today.

IV Counseling families

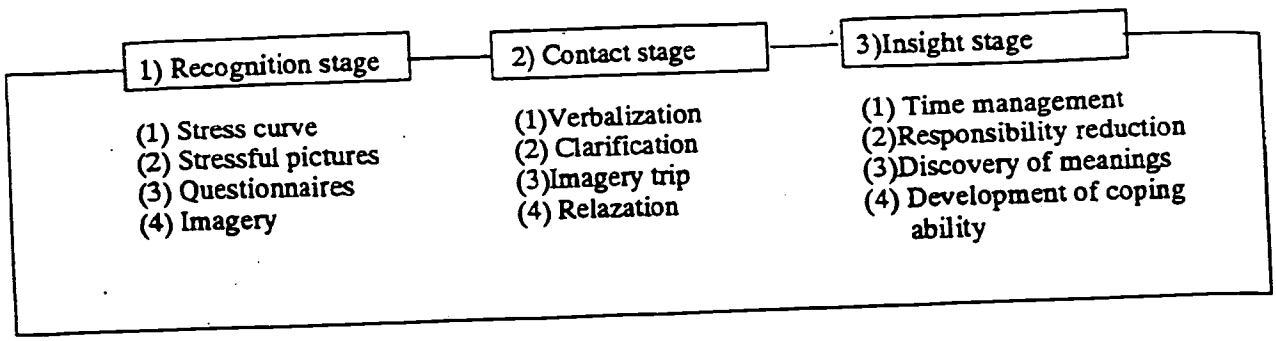
Before we can say something about counseling those who are harmed by technology, we ought to identify what their problems are or what symptoms they have when harmed. According to my experience, irritation, stress, fear to touch anything that are controlled by micro-electronic systems, depression, or withdrawal attitudes have been observed among those who are harmed.

Therefore, my counseling has been aimed at dealing with those things stated above, which is nothing special but the usual counseling that I do for my daily practice. The only difference is that I would be more focused on what has been happening inside families from a family therapeutic point of view, not paying attention only to those who are harmed but also the family systems in which the problems or symptoms occur.

Attending where they are at is what I try to do in the first place since they feel left out from the families or they are not catching up with the constant and rapid change in technology. Listening and responding is another technique. Especially, I have found that listening with simple acceptance is very helpful for those who have a fear of micro-electronic systems. For those who are tired of technology, a fantasy trip to places they want to visit is useful. One went back, in a fantasy trip, to a "home town" which was in the countryside with a lot of nature. She realized how much she missed her life as a child in the country. After the counseling session, she smiled and said, "I'll take my children with me to my home town during the next vacation."

For those who have stress and depression, the stress management model that has been developed and used for teacher burnout by the author, but hasn't been applied for those harmed by technology in home, may be encouraging. It is as follows;

A Hypothetical Model for Stress Management(Kurato, 1988)



This hypothetical model has been applied to both group counseling and stress management workshops conducted by the author. Its results have been clinically working well (Kurato, 1989). The model consists of three stages: *Recognition stage, Contact stage, and Insight stage*. The three stages sometimes take two consecutive days to process in a workshop situation. What is good about the model is that it helps to identify the degree of stress and helps people to discover meanings of their struggle or to get insight what they are experiencing.

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