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# Around 1 million Japanese lock themselves in bedrooms and will not come out

THEY are known as Japan's "invisible youth", a lost generation of young people locking themselves away in their bedrooms and dying, disconnected from the real world.

NICK WHIGHAM

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The name relates to the condition from which the members of this group appear to suffer.

The trend of young Japanese, predominantly males, locking themselves away is causing very worrying social and health problems for the country and is mystifying mental health experts.

Yuto Onishi, now 18, spent nearly three years as a shut-in as he excommunicated himself from friends and family. Living in his bedroom, he would sleep during the day, surf online and read comics at night — occasionally slinking out to get some food.

“Once you experience it, you lose reality,” Mr Onishi [told the ABC's 7.30](#) this week.

“I knew it was abnormal but I didn't want to change ... It felt safe,” he said.

Mr Onishi became a hikikomori after he failed as a team leader at school and felt like an embarrassment, a feeling exacerbated by pressure placed on him by his family.

His reasoning for permanently retreating to his bedroom is common among hikikomori. The intense pressure to perform at school or achieve in society leads some to deal with rejection or humiliation by shutting themselves away.

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Some stay in their rooms for years on end. Source: YouTube

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, hikikomori has been a household word in Japan since the 1990s, with many experts calling it one of the biggest social and health problems plaguing the country.

Yet the phenomenon is puzzling mental health workers, who are trying to treat those who suffer from the condition. The Japanese government has poured huge amounts of funding into greater understanding hikikomori, however the rate of successful treatments remains low.

Over four years ago, a support centre opened up in the city of Fukuoka, nearly 900km southwest of Tokyo.

In the local dialect, the name of the centre translates to “It’s OK, don’t worry about it” and the small centre mainly fields phone calls from those who’ve become reclusive, as well as many worried parents.

Takahiro Kato, a professor in the neuropsychiatry department at Kyushu University has worked with the centre in an effort to study hikikomori.

In addition to a strong emotional dependence on their parents, he believes the increasingly digital nature of life is contributing to the problem.

“In Western societies, if one stays indoors, they’re told to go outside,” Dr Kato told the ABC. “In Japan they’re not.”

Many hikikomori still live with their parents who financially enable the lifestyle and in some reported cases bring food to their door.

Dr Kato works with groups of hikikomori and tries to counsel them in order to get them to re-enter society.

“We’re working on the social and biological aspects as well (as psychological) and want to be the first to provide a multidimensional diagnosis,” he said.

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Many rely on their parents for financial support to live as hikikomori. *Source:YouTube*

While the research is beginning to develop, hikikomori is understood to be a cultural problem perhaps as much as a psychological problem.

The prevalence of the phenomenon is largely unique to Japan. So much so that French psychologist Nicolas Tajan remarked to *The Japan Times* last year: “If you ask people in Japan about hikikomori, almost everyone will say, ‘I know somebody like that’ but there is no such word in France.”

However other cases of the condition have been studied in countries including the US, Spain and Hong Kong.

Interest and curiosity in the phenomenon has also piqued over recent years in the international community and led to a number of books and films outside of Japan, documenting hikikomori.

Those trying to tackle the issue hope the greater awareness will somehow help in the process of getting many young Japanese teens and adults to emerge from the safety of their bedrooms.



There are more than 600 thousand Japanese youths who stay hidden away in their bedroom, sometimes cut off from all social interaction for several years. This documentary meets...



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