

Post-riot depression

By **Sophia Kyung Kim**
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Mr. Lee (not his real name) slumped into depression after his liquor store in South Central Los Angeles was destroyed during the riots. He refused to get out of bed, eat or take a shower.

After Mrs. Kim (not her real name) had her clothing store looted and burned to the ground, she lost her appetite. Suffering from insomnia, she had recurring nightmares about storms and cried incessantly.

Mr. Lee and Mrs. Kim are among the growing number of riot victims who are seeking professional help from Korean-speaking psychiatrists and counselors now on call at a handful of social service agencies in Koreatown.

"We are getting about five riot victims a day," said Jun Shin, a mental health nurse therapist at the Asian Pacific Treatment Counseling Center. "We usually have a one-month waiting list, but when riot victims call, we treat them right away."

Sook Hee Roh, a marriage and family counselor at Western Region Asian Pacific Agency (WRAAP), said she has about 20 to 30 riot victims on a waiting list. "I am only able to see limited numbers," she said.

According to mental health professionals who were interviewed, many riot victims are suffering from symptoms related to post-traumatic stress syndrome: headaches, anger, insomnia, heart palpitation, depression, dizziness, anxiety, chest pain and a sense of helplessness.

Dr. Kwang S. Park, a psychiatrist at Hollywood Mental Health Service, is volunteering his services at the AP counseling center three times a week for a total of six hours.

He sees about 20 clients a week—those whose lives have been directly impacted by the riots. He anticipates many more to walk into his office in the future.

"I expect more because post-traumatic stress can be delayed," Park said. "Some will come after six months. Right now, victims are concentrating on applying for loans, filling out papers. The disaster they've suffered is so great that they will come in."



Marriage and family counselor **Sook Hee Roh** advises a patient.



Alleviating her clients' emotional distress is the main focus of her sessions, said Roh, the only Korean-speaking counselor at WRAAP. "It's getting them to talk about their problems. I become like their trash container. Whatever their complaints, I listen and take in."

Shin said she tries to provide emotional support for her patients. That includes getting people to express their feelings, letting them cry and "giving them a sense of hope, self-empowerment, so they can rebuild their lives."

If clients lack energy and are unable to eat and sleep well on their own, a doctor is available to prescribe medication, said the mental health specialists.

Emotional problems, if not taken care of—can fester in different ways, according to Tong Ho Kim, a counselor at the Korean Family Counseling Center. For example, parents could project their anger on to their children and in relationships with other people, she said.

"If you keep your feelings inside, it can lead you to talk about suicide," added Park. "If people are unable to get over the problem by themselves, they have to get professional help."

Kim said it is important for clients to understand that their feelings of frustration, depression and emptiness

are normal.

Emotional recovery, according to Kim, is almost as difficult as financial recovery, particularly since immigrant KAs have difficulty "opening up, and learning how to deal" with emotional problems.

"When people go through counseling, these symptoms will not last," she said. "Their emotional problems will be resolved. They can move on with their lives."

The majority of the clients who come in don't have difficulty expressing their feelings because by that time, they are desperate, according to those interviewed.

Since her clients are in crisis, "They have so much to talk about," said Roh, who counsels out of Young Nak Church. "My therapy time is about 45, 50 minutes, but my Korean clients are using up two full hours."

"They are quite open to psychiatrists because they come in to get help," said Park. But he noticed that women seem better equipped to handle the emotional and financial crisis that the clients find themselves in.

"I think it is because men are head of the household and feel they have more responsibility. They are more overwhelmed," he continued.

But still, it is hard for some people to admit that they are mentally suffering, according to Shin. She recalled how one husband—who merely accompanied his wife to a session—kept assuring his distressed wife that "we can make it."

Upon talking to the husband, Shin discovered that he displayed several post-traumatic stress symptoms.

"But he denied it, saying he was OK. We can see lots of these kinds of men," she said.

Mental health professionals encourage riot victims who are reluctant to seek counseling to share their feelings with family members or form support groups.

"Don't swallow your feelings or it will hurt you physically," said Kim. "The more healthy way is to talk about it."

Shin also encouraged people to sleep well, eat a well-balanced diet and try to engage in something pleasurable to take their mind off their problems.



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