

IF I CAN DO IT, ANYONE CAN

A message of hope for new ALTs



By Paris Forsythe-Fields

To all of Kagoshima's new ALTs, welcome to Japan! I hope you're finding your feet here and enjoying yourself. For those of you who may be struggling with adjusting to your new life here, especially as re-contracting is coming soon, I'd like to share the story of when I arrived to give you some hope that things will be okay.

I was a new ALT in 2021. The circumstances of my arrival were more difficult than most, as my cohort came to Japan smack bang in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis. The usual summer departure was delayed to late November, and when I arrived in Japan I was immediately shoved into a hotel room in Tokyo for two weeks to quarantine. Once the strange liminal period between my old life and my new one was over, I flew down to Kagoshima city and began my work as an ALT.

My life in Japan had a rather rocky start. I have suffered from anxiety and depression since I was a teenager, and although it's usually well-managed, the huge change in my life suddenly made it all rise to the surface.

I was thrown straight into school just two days after arrival rather than having the summer vacation to prepare. I had terrible culture shock from the unfamiliar environment, and I dearly missed my family and friends.

These factors combined quickly made life difficult to bear. I had panic attacks daily, I cried all the time, and I was struggling to go to work.

I was so disappointed in myself because JET had been my dream job for so long and I had finally arrived after so much work, but I was already considering going home.

Because I arrived in December, I got my re-contracting papers after only two weeks. With just two weeks of experience, and with my mental health at its lowest, I had to decide whether to stay for another year, unsure of whether I would ever feel better, or just go back home into my comfort zone.

Eventually, I decided to stay, and every single day I thank my past self for doing so.

It was a risk for sure, but the deciding factor for me was when I reached out for help and got so much support.

I talked to my Japanese supervisor, my block leader, and the few friends I had made in my short time about my feelings of anxiety and culture shock. I was so surprised at how warm both my Japanese colleagues and my fellow ALTs were, and I got so much help and support from them.

Whether it was helping with furniture building, providing a home-cooked meal, or making appointments with a psychiatrist and arranging time off work, everyone was so accommodating.

Eventually, I came out the other side of my mental health crisis, but I couldn't have done it without the support of these people who truly wanted the best for me.

This is my best advice for you, and I know it may sound corny, but please reach out if you're struggling. Even if you think you don't have anyone to talk to, you absolutely do.

There are the PAs, your supervisors, your fellow ALTs, group chats, forums, and even KAJET themselves.

I know this job may seem lonely at times, but there is always somebody to help you if you just ask.

I'm now a fourth-year ALT and I have never regretted re-contracting. For months after I arrived, I felt like a puzzle piece that didn't fit into the jigsaw of this complex society, but now, although I have my quibbles with Japan, it truly feels like a second home.

I've had so many amazing experiences, made so many friends, and even found love here. You can have all of this too, but you have to give yourself time.

This is not an easy transition to make and you will not adjust overnight, so be patient, go with the flow, and most importantly, **know that you are never alone.**

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