

# Great East Japan Earthquake

March 11, 2011

## Why were you there?

I was living in Fukushima City, Fukushima Prefecture, about 35 miles from the nuclear power plant which was damaged in the earthquake. I was teaching English and had just returned to school from my lunch break when the earthquake hit.

## What was it like during, for you, others?

I was in awe during the earthquake. I'd been in a lot of earthquakes before, including a few just a couple of days prior, but this one was different. It started pretty strong and kept getting stronger. Within a few seconds, my coworkers and I were all outside in the parking lot, which was a safer spot than inside our aging building. A typical earthquake will only be felt for about 10-30 seconds, with 30 seconds being a long one. But this one just kept going, and kept getting stronger as it went on. By the time it hit about the two-minute mark, with no sign of slowing, was when I think people started getting really scared. The cars around us were rocking violently back and forth, and it was difficult to stand. The dormitory building next to the parking lot was swaying, and we all crowded over to the far side of the lot, afraid it was going to collapse right onto us. I was transfixed by a traffic pole swinging violently from side to side. About three minutes in, the shaking seemed to level out. After a minute or so of this, it gradually eased back down, until everything was still. The strong shaking alone lasted more than five minutes. It's amazing, the power of the Earth.

## Afterwards?

My neighborhood was a bit of a wreck. Almost everything in my apartment had fallen down or been tossed around. There were cracks in all the walls. The rear half of the house next door to mine collapsed and was leaning on my building, against my bedroom wall. Pieces of it kept falling farther down from the aftershocks during the following days and weeks. The streets in my neighborhood were littered with pieces of fallen walls, curbs, windows. My neighborhood fared pretty poorly.

Long-term, life was completely interrupted. People dedicated themselves to cleaning up their homes and workplaces, keeping stocked up on food and water. People more or less returned to work the following Monday, but nothing was really up and running. They were just carrying on. Immediately after the quake, all communications in my school were down except for the internet. Landlines began working again within a couple of hours, but it was two or three days before cellphone communication was up and relatively reliable again.

What utilities were down varied from one area to the next, but the entire town lost water and gas. The power was restored after four days or so. Water returned after nine. Nine days is a very long time to go without water. There were no supplies coming in to town during this time; a lot of transportation was down, roads damaged, and of course the disaster relief at this point was all going to the tsunami-hit coast. It was eight days before transportation out of the city began to become available again, more than a month before all of it was up and running as usual. The city had trucks of water stationed at a few spots throughout the city which we had to wait in long lines for. With most supermarkets badly damaged, food was an issue.

## How would you have prepared?

If I had known the earthquake was going to come, I would have gathered a small stockpile of food and water. Not a 24-hour kit, which wouldn't have gone far. I'd want enough food and water to last a week. I would have made sure I had a larger supply of clean socks and underwear. I also learned to include dry shampoo in my emergency kit; not being able to wash your hair grows exponentially more unpleasant as the days pass. I would have learned first aid ahead of time because minor cuts and injuries were pretty common. I also would have become more informed about radiation; I was completely unprepared for a nearby nuclear power plant to meltdown.



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