

Homelessness Bias-Busters

It seems like there are lots of shelters, why would someone choose to be on the street?

Those who seek shelter are often dealing with their own personal trauma which can easily be aggravated by others who are also dealing with personal challenges. Being together in a close space can be disruptive, overwhelming, and feel unsafe depending on one's circumstances. Negative experiences in shelters lead many homeless individuals to feel safer on the street.

If homeless individuals can get a job, why are they homeless?

About 25% of individuals experiencing homelessness have one or more jobs. Unfortunately, due to rising housing costs and overall lack of affordable housing, minimum wage isn't always enough to afford a home. It's also important to note that not having a job shouldn't render someone homeless. Homelessness is most often a product of a lack of support that, for many of us, kicks in when life gets challenging.

Why is working while unhoused hard to do?

Working while unhoused comes with several challenges. A person who is unhoused likely doesn't have a safe and consistent place to sleep making it hard to focus and work safely. They may not have anywhere to store their belongings and it may not be possible to take them to their place of work. They may have a pet that serves as their companion and makes them feel safe but have no place to keep the pet while they work. They may not have a current ID or bank account that would allow them to receive a paycheck. They may be experiencing unidentified or unhealed trauma that prevents them from being able to offer consistent commitment that ensures employment. As much as a job can help in several ways, there are many factors that should first be addressed before expecting an individual to successfully maintain employment.

I offered my leftover food to a homeless individual, who didn't want it. Shouldn't they take anything?

Maintaining a sense of self and dignity is important for survival and getting back on one's feet. Despite being in a difficult situation, folks experiencing homelessness are still humans with likes and dislikes, preferences, and standards. Honoring the dignity of choice is powerful

It seems like many people experiencing homelessness have a problem with drugs or alcohol.

Why is that?

A challenging or unhealthy relationship with alcohol can affect absolutely anyone. Drugs and alcohol are used by many individuals as a coping mechanism from unhealed complex trauma. Unhoused individuals may be using substances to numb the reality of their current situation, to cope with pain, or to help get some sleep. Addiction to substances can happen all too easily to anyone. When a substance is associated with comfort and few other comforts are available, it may quickly become a survival solution. To address substance use, an individual should also be provided with additional support services as needed.

If I encounter someone who is asking for money, should I give it to them?

If you feel comfortable empowering the person who you're giving it to to use it in a way they deem most helpful, then feel free to give. If you don't wish to offer money, but do wish to offer support, you might ask them directly if there is something you can purchase for them that would be helpful.

Why does it sometimes feel so hard to really offer someone help?

Simply put, it's complicated. Offering help to someone experiencing homelessness is an important thing to do. Rarely is this experience the result of one acute issue that can be solved.

Homelessness happens most when one loses their support network and the challenges, they face become too overwhelming to handle. To survive without a home takes strength and courage. One is forced to look out for oneself which often means becoming distrustful of others. This is especially true if one has had a lived experience where they were hurt or traumatized by someone close to them. The longer a person experiences homelessness, the harder it can be to help them to trust someone enough to accept support. Through consistent interactions and relationship building, the opportunity to help - even in small ways - may be possible and certainly impactful.

Is homelessness an issue that money can solve?

Money is helpful for many things, but not enough on its own. A home is surely needed, but also not enough on its own. As humans, we rely on several supports to help us survive and thrive each day. If all supports were taken away but one, those losses would make it very challenging to function. Similarly, offering someone one solution when the others aren't in place, can make it very challenging to help a person achieve stability. Understanding each individual's needs and connecting them to services that meet each of those needs is the best way to help someone get the support they need.

If homeless individuals have nice clothing or a phone, do they really need my help?

Nice clothing often comes from donation closets, stocked by folks giving away bags of clothes they no longer wear. Many assistance programs provide smartphones knowing how important they are for managing one's health and employment. Being able to wear clean clothes and having a phone offers a sense of dignity for someone who may otherwise be having a hard time.

What's the right way to try to help someone experiencing homelessness?

Start by realistically assessing what you feel you're able to contribute. It may be a kind hello, a few dollars, a cup of coffee each morning, or time. Connect with organizations like Hope Beyond Bridges who have a proven record of effectively ministering to and addressing the needs of the homeless. All are important and it's especially important to know what you're willing and able to give. A universal truth: they don't care what you know, until they know you care.