

How to Interact with Someone Experiencing Homelessness

People are often uncomfortable when approaching a person experiencing homelessness because they are unsure how to interact in this situation. People who live in urban areas often encounter this circumstance, so learning to speak with individuals experiencing homelessness in a positive and fruitful way can make the interaction less awkward for everyone. Ignoring homeless individuals reinforces [social exclusion](#), which can prove psychologically damaging. Some people may offer money but avoid eye contact and real conversation, which is not much different than simply ignoring homeless individuals.

Some tips to keep in mind about interaction with people experiencing homelessness include the following:

Remember these individuals are people.

While individuals may understand intellectually that people experiencing homelessness are human, their actions may not reflect this. For example, just as they would with other people, individuals should make eye contact. A person experiencing homelessness is struggling, but a normal conversation may completely change their frame of mind and remind them that they are worthwhile. Conversations can be as simple as asking someone where they are from. These exchanges do not have to be long. Even a few seconds can radically brighten a person's mood.

Don't be afraid to offer cash when individuals ask.

People often hesitate to offer cash to individuals experiencing homelessness because they worry the money will go toward drugs, alcohol or other bad habits. However, keep in mind that individuals may be asking for cash for a variety of reasons. Many individuals assume hunger is the motivating force, but people often need money for a hotel room or even for basic necessities, such as a bar of deodorant or a razor. When individuals do not feel comfortable handing out money, they should ask what else they could do to help. Sometimes, people experiencing homelessness will request food or bottles of water. Purchasing requested products can relieve their anxiety.

Listen to your personal instincts.

While interacting with people experiencing homelessness and offering some conversation or material assistance is helpful, individuals should always put their safety first. If individuals feel uncomfortable in a particular situation, they should not feel guilty for choosing not to engage. People should avoid offering to give strangers a ride. If it is at night, make sure there is sufficient lighting. Furthermore, it is not appropriate to offer anyone a shower or a place to sleep, since these resources usually already exist in the community. To help people experiencing homelessness, research information about local resources and direct people to these areas for help.

Take a moment for personal stories.

People experiencing homelessness may have little social contact. If individuals are willing, ask them to share some part about their lives. While this involves an investment of time, its impact is often great in terms of improving their mental health. When individuals start telling their stories, it is important not to ask too many personal questions. Interrupting the story constantly can make people feel frustrated or think their point is not getting across very well. Frequently, these people tell their story with a specific purpose in mind, such as sharing how easy it is to move from comfortable living into homelessness and how the cycle then tends to perpetuate itself. During breaks in the story, listeners should nod and repeat back what the person says to show they are listening and to offer a sense of understanding.

Carry along items to hand out to people.

If giving out money or asking what people need is not comfortable, there are other ways to help people. Many individuals make up snack packs of sandwiches, apples, bottles of water or similar items that will not go bad quickly. In colder climates, people may need fresh socks or disposable hand warmers, so carrying these items to hand out can positively impact someone's day. It's important to ask people if they want these items. If the answer is "no" the giver should respect this decision.

Avoid offering unsolicited advice.

People may offer individuals experiencing homelessness advice they think is helpful, such as pointers about who is hiring or how individuals could make themselves more attractive to employers. Many people experiencing homelessness who are on the street are likely dealing with a number of hurdles, such as finding safe and reliable shelter, before they can even think about employment. If, however, in the course of conversation, a person experiencing homelessness mentions looking for employment, then it would be appropriate to suggest local job-readiness organizations and other resources. Pointing these individuals toward long-term support goes a lot further than offering piecemeal advice, even when well-intentioned.