

1 - The Little Things

The Little Things

When you are left with nothing, even a smile or a kind word can brighten up your day. This being said compassion can be a tremendous help to those in need. Having empathy and treating individuals with dignity and respect is an integral part of showing compassion. It is also important to take the time to acknowledge an individual's presence and treat them with respect. Lastly, compassion can take on various forms, and different types of compassion can help during different parts of people's lives. Compassion can be defined by describing the parts that make an act compassionate.

Compassion can be defined by Alyssa Tate's study titled, "Even a Smile Helps." Tate interviewed forty homeless people to understand how passersby treat them. They reported being ignored and having violent interactions; however, they also reported receiving help and kindness from people (par. 3). The passersby have the option to either react negatively or ignore these homeless people asking for help, but instead, some choose to recognize that homeless individuals are human beings too. These compassionate acts are a result of the passersby practicing empathy. Empathy is the ability to imagine yourself in others' shoes and understand their feelings and emotions. Compassion cannot be achieved without empathy as shown in Tate's study.

However, many people find themselves uncomfortable around homeless people. This uncomfortable feeling leads people to ignore homeless people in their time of need. In Daria Peoples' children's book "Hello, Mister Blue," she raises awareness of this issue by telling the story of a little girl who chose to acknowledge a homeless man, and how it changed his life. Mister Blue is a homeless musician who is known throughout the community for his music that

he plays in the park. Many people stop to listen to his music, dance, and continue about their day. The little girl finds out that Mister Blue served in the military with her grandfather and asks important questions: "Is he safe? Is he lonely? Is he hungry?" (par. 1). These questions cause her grandfather to invite Mister Blue inside, and they play their music together.

This heartwarming story raises awareness of the importance of acknowledging homeless people. For example, I was driving in Grand Rapids with my friends and we came across this homeless individual on the side of the street with a cardboard sign reading: *Homeless, anything helps*. I became uncomfortable and scared since my parents previously drilled it in my mind to be on the lookout for kidnapping traps, so I ignored the individual in need. However, it wasn't until my friend, Nadia, reached into her wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill that I realized the importance of compassion. I felt ashamed and even guilty that I would ignore them and not even make eye contact. Witnessing my friend not even hesitate to help caused me to change my entire outlook on helping homeless people. Whenever I see a homeless person, I try to be selfless and give a kind word, smile, or any help I can. Recognizing when someone needs help is an important step in providing compassion.

However, all compassionate acts don't look the same. In the article "The Role of Compassion and 'Tough Love' in Caring for and Supporting the Homeless" by Jon Limebury and Sue Shea, the authors help to expand on the definition of compassion; "compassion may be explicit in attending to, and offering services in relation to basic needs, but more implicit in terms of encouraging independence and choices" (par. 12). They state that compassion could also be shown through 'Tough Love' and compare the behavior to a "fair, kind, but disciplined parent" (par. 13). This 'Tough Love' compassion is more suitable for long term growth and rehabilitation back into society. Rules and structure from a loved one or a volunteer can help a homeless person go from an unstructured society on the streets to the more structured real world. In the article "Researchers gave thousands of dollars to homeless people. The results defied stereotypes" by Francesca Giuliani-Hoffman, she states that, "those who received cash were

able to find stable housing faster, on average,” (par. 4). Whether you take an explicit approach, (donating money, food, or a smile) or an implicit approach, (‘Tough Love,’ rules, and choices) both types of compassion provide help to people in need. All compassionate acts don't look the same.

Recognizing when a person needs help, using empathy, and realizing that compassion can take different forms are all important steps needed to act with compassion. Kindness and compassion go hand in hand. It is integral to first choose to recognize homeless people in need of kindness. Ignoring homeless people will only cause more distress and harm than good. The second step is to use empathy to connect with a homeless person. Empathy allows you to imagine yourself in another person's shoes and understand their feelings and emotions. When my friend chose to take the initiative to notice the homeless individual who needed help, she was using empathy to understand the individual's feelings. However, giving to homeless people is not about making yourself feel better but about reminding that individual that good people exist; you can provide them hope which might be the motivation that they need. After that, you need to choose to give kindness. Selflessness and serving others is another aspect of compassion.

Choosing to serve others in need is the final step in showing compassion. Even if you recognize and empathize with a homeless person, it is not compassion since no act was performed. If you cannot provide any physical help--money, food, or shelter--you can still show compassion with a smile or a conversation. It costs nothing to be kind. Compassion can also look like ‘Tough Love’ in a long-term situation. ‘Tough Love’ can help rehabilitate a homeless person back into society with rules and structure. There are many varieties of compassion. Compassion can be defined by recognizing, empathizing, and acting. These compassionate acts, when performed regularly can help change another person's life for the better.

Works Cited

Giuliani-Hoffman, Francesca. "Researchers gave thousands of dollars to homeless people. The results defied stereotypes." CNN. October 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/09/americas/direct-giving-homeless-people-vancouver-trnd/index.html>

Limebury, J., Shea, S. "The role of compassion and 'Tough Love' in caring for and supporting the homeless: experiences from 'Catching Lives' Canterbury, UK". *J of Compassionate Health Care* 2, 7 (2015).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40639-015-0016-1>

Peoples, Daria. "Hello, Mister Blue." Booklist, vol. 119, no. 18, May 2023, p.

52. EBSCOhost,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=163574876&site=ehost-live.

Tate, Alyssa, et al. "'Even a Smile Helps': Exploring the Interactions between People Experiencing Homelessness and Passersby in Public Spaces." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, vol. 68, no. 3, May 2022, pp. 525–32. EBSCOhost,

<https://ezproxy.muskegoncc.edu:2080/10.1177/0020764021989385>.