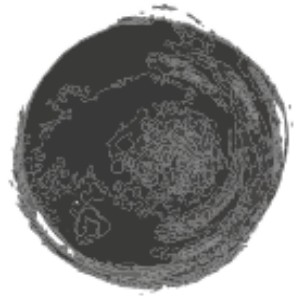

The Librarian's Guide to HOMELESSNESS

An EMPATHY-DRIVEN APPROACH *to* SOLVING PROBLEMS, PREVENTING CONFLICT, *and* SERVING EVERYONE

RYAN DOWD

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction: Who Am I? Who Are You? xi

Part I: Homelessness and Empathy

Chapter 1: Top Ten Homeless Myths 3
Chapter 2: Homeless People Are (Not) Just Like You 17
Chapter 3: Empathy: The Psychological, Neurological, and Social Bases for It 43

Part II: Empathy-Driven Enforcement

Chapter 4: Empathy vs. Punishment 65
Chapter 5: Step 1: Your Head Tools 79
Chapter 6: Step 2: Your Body Tools 95
Chapter 7: Step 3: Your Word Tools 113
Chapter 8: Advanced Tools 141

Part III: Special Situations

Chapter 9: Everyday Predicaments 151
Chapter 10: Mental Illness 159
Chapter 11: Substance Abuse 171
Chapter 12: Hygiene 179
Chapter 13: Sleeping 189
Chapter 14: Possessions 195
Chapter 15: Children 201

Part IV: Beyond Problem-Solving

Chapter 16: Advice for Managers and Leaders 211
Chapter 17: How Best to Help Homeless Patrons 227

Conclusion: The End of Homelessness 237
Appendix: Key Phrases 241
Index 245

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Introduction

Who Am I? Who Are You?

All Librarians are Secret Masters of Severe Magic. [It] goes with the territory.

—Catherynne M. Valente[1]

It was a cold December night in Illinois. Snow flurries swirled around the parking lot outside the homeless shelter (a large brick building that used to be a municipal incinerator) in mini-cyclones.

Inside, the shelter was relatively quiet. At 10:30 p.m., most of the residents had gone to bed in order to get a restless night of sleep before getting up early for work.

I was twenty-one years old. I had been working in the shelter for a week and this was my first shift "flying solo." My training had consisted of "Here are your keys. There is the bathroom. Try to do what the other staff do." The brevity of training was spectacularly effective at weeding out people who didn't belong (and some who did).

The night had been a little crazy (I still didn't know what I was doing), but everyone had survived. By 10:30, things had finally calmed down enough that I could get dinner. I went back to the industrial kitchen and got a tray of food—pulled pork sandwich, peas, and a Styrofoam cup of cherry Kool-Aid. I ate standing up so I could watch the room.

A short gentleman with a scraggly mustache approached me agitated, and a bit defiant. I squared my body off at him and straightened my shoulders to show him I was not intimidated. He got loud, but I was able to match his volume every time he got louder. He was rude with me, but I was rude back, lest he think he could get his way through bullying. I was determined not to be perceived as weak and to "teach him a thing or two."

Just as a pot of water eventually boils over when enough heat is applied, the small man with the scraggly mustache exploded. He lunged at me. His open palm came up, making contact with my tray of food. Like a sprinter coming out of the

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blocks, the tray exploded upwards. The cherry Kool-Aid splattered to my right in big red droplets and the peas went left as if ejected from a shotgun. The pulled pork sandwich went straight up.

The pulled pork separated from its bun and then came back down, landing on the top of my head with a noise that was somewhere between a "splat" and a "shpwack." Satisfied with the outcome, the small man with the scraggly mustache stormed past me and out the door.

I was stunned by what had happened, standing dumb and mute. A 400-pound African American man called "Big Ride" strolled over casually and started to pick pulled pork out of my hair. I asked him what had happened. Big Ride broke into a big friendly grin and said, "Welcome to Hesed House."

• • •

Who I Am and What I Believe

This book comes out my life's work of caring for homeless families and individuals. I started volunteering at my local homeless shelter—Hesed House—when I was thirteen years old. It just felt right to be there. I continued volunteering in junior high, high school, and then in college. In my senior year of college—when I was twenty-one years old—I got a part-time job in that shelter. I worked there through graduate school and law school. After I took the bar exam (and passed!), I became executive director of Hesed House.

In the last two decades, I have met tens of thousands of homeless individuals. I have talked to individuals on the day they became homeless and the day they moved into their own apartments. I have sat with women who had just returned to the shelter after being raped. I have laughed with some homeless individuals and cried with others. I have broken up more fights than I can count and had a knife pulled on me (only once, thankfully).

This book comes out of that experience, but it is also philosophically rooted in what I believe in the deepest—most intimate—parts of my soul. Consequently, it is worth quickly sharing those beliefs:

1. I believe that *every* human being is worthy of basic human dignity (without exception).
2. I believe that people are basically good, and—when treated with respect and care—*most* people *most* of the time will respond in kind.
3. I believe that compassion and empathy are not weakness. In fact, compassion and empathy are the most powerful tools for creating a more just world.

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4. I believe that compassion and empathy are not enough. We also need skills and practice to make compassion as effective as it can be. We need "practical compassion" in order to change the world.

While this book is about all four of these beliefs, it really focuses on belief number 4. I have spent the entirety of my career learning—and teaching—the art of "practical compassion." It really is the key to changing the world. If we have compassion for the most vulnerable, but we are too afraid of them to have a conversation with them, our compassion isn't worth much. The revolution is in the relationship. Sometimes, though, the relationship requires a little effort and understanding, and a few practical skills. The essence of this book is a specific practical skill: "empathy-driven enforcement."

Empathy-driven enforcement is a system for getting people to follow your rules without having to threaten them with punishment. It is in contrast to the typical "punishment-driven enforcement" approach that is the dominant model in most places. In fact, punishment-driven enforcement is so prevalent that we often mistakenly believe that our only other option is to not enforce the rules. Many staff—thinking they have no other choice—feel like they have to choose between compassion and enforcing the rules. They don't. There is another way!

Empathy-driven enforcement leverages research in psychology, neuroscience, and social science to obtain voluntary compliance with the rules. It is substantially more effective than punishment-driven enforcement. Libraries that have switched to using empathy-driven enforcement report that

- Problems with homeless patrons are reduced by 80 percent
- Staff are happier and more confident
- Non-homeless patrons feel safer
- Homeless patrons feel more welcome and dignified

Empathy-driven enforcement is not a panacea for all of your woes. It won't help you pass that referendum for additional tax revenue (though it will help people feel safer in your libraries, which can't hurt your ballot initiative). It is a very effective system, though, for reducing problems with homeless patrons while still fulfilling your library's mission of serving the whole community.

What Problems Do You Face?

I have spoken to library groups all around the country. I begin every training by asking the attendees what problems they face with homeless patrons. I always get different versions of the same answers:

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1. Sleeping/snoring in the library
2. Strong odor
3. Bringing in multiple bags
4. Drunk or high
5. Monopolizing space
6. Arguing with staff
7. Arguing with each other
8. Bathing in the bathroom
9. Panhandling
10. Taking shoes off
11. Bringing in pets
12. Sitting, but not reading
13. Talking to self
14. Pacing

A Quick Note about Language

Throughout this book, I will refer to "homeless individuals" and "homeless people." This violates the principles of people-first language, which say that instead we should say "people experiencing homelessness."

I am sympathetic to the idea that language shapes our perception of others. In fact, I was trained to never say "the homeless" (which removes "people" entirely).

I have chosen not to use the term "people experiencing homelessness" for three reasons:

1. It is a very cumbersome phrase. Given the number of times I need to refer to "people experiencing homelessness" in this book, it would be nearly unreadable if I used the preferable language.
2. I have been doing this as my full-time profession for a long time and I simply have been unable to retrain my brain away from phrases I have said hundreds of thousands of times. Please forgive this old dog who is unable to learn a new trick.
3. Homeless people don't care how they are referred to (at least not the tens of thousands I have talked to). If it isn't their crusade, I'm not going to make it mine. Language does matter, but we cannot allow "right words" to be a substitute for "right actions." Instead of focusing on how we describe homeless people, I'm going to save my energy for what truly does matter to them: being treated with basic human dignity.

If you disagree with my choice, I still totally respect you. I would ask the same.

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Does this list sound familiar? You're not alone. Libraries all around the country (around the world, actually) are trying to come to terms with what it means to be "public" in an era of widespread homelessness. In this book, we will go over how to handle these predicaments you face.

Is This Book for You?

Are you the type of person who wants to serve every member of your community, even those who have been cast aside?

This book might be for you.

Do you sometimes get frustrated when homeless patrons break the rules and cause trouble?

This book might be for you.

Do you wish your library had a system for creating a calm, safe library that did not require you to kick people out?

This book is definitely for you.

What You Will Learn in This Book

It took me two decades to learn the art and science of empathy-driven enforcement. This book is the distillation of what I have learned, of making a lot of mistakes along the way and doing a lot of research.

- In part I, you will learn some deep (and non-obvious) lessons about homelessness, as well as the science behind empathy.
- In part II, you will learn specific tools of empathy-driven enforcement.
- In part III, you will learn how to handle particular predicaments, like sleeping patrons or how to deal with individuals struggling with mental illness.
- In part IV, you will learn how to lead your team in empathy-driven enforcement and how your library can best assist your homeless patrons.

Grab a cup of coffee. Kick up your feet. Clean your glasses. It is time to learn some cool stuff that just happens to be dang practical!

Note

1. Catherynne M. Valente, *The Girl Who Soared over Fairyland and Cut the Moon in Two* (New York: Feiwel & Friends, 2013).

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Homelessness and Empathy

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Top Ten Homeless Myths

I could no longer pull wands, potions, and light sabers out of books, but when it came to research, give me a well-stocked library and I was a goddamned Merlin.

—Jim C. Hines[1]

Everyone sat around the donated conference room table—oblong and scratched—waiting for me to speak first. There were six of "them" and me.

There was the older white woman—with long, stringy grey hair—her body too thin for her bone structure. The wire-frame cart she pulled was tidier than most, but the contents—plastic bags and yellowed tabloid magazines mostly—retained the appearance of a stereotypical *bag lady*. Since college, she had always drank a little too much, but in the way that makes middle-class women likable at dinner parties. But then her son died. He was two. He would have been in his mid-thirties now. For three decades she had filled a toddler-sized hole in her soul with vodka, mostly from 50-milliliter plastic single-serving bottles like the airlines serve ("nips" some people call them, or "miniatures").

There was the large black man who laughed most of the day—every day—with a booming laugh that made everyone smile upon hearing its impact. The shelter volunteers loved him because gratitude is an art and he was a master artist, able to paint over the awkwardness one feels while serving another who cannot repay the kindness. He called me "Ryan's Hope," after some defunct soap opera that I've never seen. He had been shot once—in the shoulder, he showed me the wound—walking home from work at the factory (apparently the teenage boy a few yards behind him was wearing the wrong colors for that part of town). For work, he had done just about everything: landscaping, retail, McDonald's, shoveling snow—but his real passion was fixing cars ("My pappy taught me to take an engine apart and put it back together again").

There was the eighteen-year-old white girl with pink hair and fresh tattoos, barely old enough to live in a shelter without a parent. Had she arrived a few months earlier we would have had to call the Department of Children and Family

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Services to come get her. But a few months ago—when she was still legally a child—she was living in a crack house—the only place that would take her. She left after the second time she was raped, wishing she had left after the first time. A few months before that, her parents had given her two hours to pack her stuff. Women aren't supposed to love women, not in *that way,* and her parents were not about to allow an abomination in their house. She was very pretty—which is a significant handicap when you are trying not to be noticed by certain types of men.

There was the middle-aged man with the middle-sized midsection. His grey goatee was always neatly trimmed and he ironed everything before he wore it. He seemed like a straight-shooter—as the expression goes—but one day he told me that he had been a Secret Service agent assigned to the presidential detail in the 1990s. He didn't seem to be a liar or mentally ill. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out an old photograph. In the center of the picture was Bill Clinton looking vibrant and strong and confident (before Monica, *obviously*). Standing slightly to one side and back a few feet was a younger version of the man in front of me. He was wearing a black suit, a starched white shirt, and a dark, unspectacular tie. His face was completely blank and his gaze was wide and over the crowd, with an earpiece just like in the movies. I never did find out for sure what precipitated his remarkable tumble from presidential escort to homeless shelter resident, but based on a few cryptic comments he made over the months, I suspected it had something to do with a woman.

There was the heavy woman with one large breast. The surgeon had tricked her and cut off the other for absolutely no medical reason, though the medical exam board dismissed her complaint quickly ("the whole medical profession is corrupt"). She never did find out why he had taken half her womanhood, but she was pretty sure that J. K. Rowling was behind it. Ever since that bitch had stolen her manuscripts about the young wizard, she had been persecuted by strangers who had no other obvious reason to hurt her. She liked me, though, because I hadn't taken it personally when she wrote the Board of Directors a letter, warning them that I was using the shelter to embezzle drug money that I kept buried on an island in the river. I—apparently—was more forgiving than her family, who had long ago tired of her delusions.

There was the "sometimes single" father, who looked a little like a young Michael Jackson, but much smaller and not as handsome. His smile was slight, but genuine, and the crow's feet around his eyes were honestly earned. His wife would appear occasionally and then disappear for weeks at a time. He had the particularly tragic curse of loving a woman who was indifferent to both his affection and the weight of the burden he carried trying to be a good father to two young boys in a large homeless shelter. I liked him.

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This motley crew was a focus group I was leading in our homeless shelter. We needed to pick a new legislative advocacy goal for the volunteers and we wanted the opinion of the residents.

I had prepared a list of issues for them to pick from:

1. Mental health services
2. Police harassment
3. Affordable housing
4. Sexual assault
5. Health care

I quickly lost control of the conversation, though. There was one injustice that they kept coming back to, no matter how often I tried to talk about my list of topics.

They wanted library cards.

I didn't really understand. *Were they not allowed in the library?* No, they were allowed in the library. *Were they not able to use the computers for job searches?* No, they were able to use the computers. *Why were library cards so important, then?*

The woman with one breast and a grudge against J. K. Rowling looked at me like I was crazy. "Because," she said slowly, as if she was talking to a toddler, "without a library card you cannot check out books."

"It's like this, Ryan," the single father who looked like Michael Jackson said. "I was born in this town. I have lived here my whole life, but I can't get a library card. Some guy who just moved to town yesterday can get a card, but I can't. I mean, did I stop being a member of this community when I got evicted?"

The room was silent as everyone nodded along.

And for the first time in my life, I fully understood libraries. Libraries are at the center of community in a way that no other modern institution is. Libraries are indifferent to race, creed, color, religion, political affiliation, or socioeconomic status. A library card is one of the few attributes that fully defines who is a member of the community. Every single inhabitant in your community can use the library.

Except sometimes homeless people.

Note: I am happy to report that the local library did change its policies, allowing homeless individuals to get cards and check out books.

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Ten (Plus One) Homeless Myths

There are a lot of myths out there about homeless people. I'm not going to try to dispel all of them. But I do want to address some of the ones that affect how your library works with homeless patrons:

- Myth 1: People are homeless for a long time.
- Myth 2: Most homeless people are mentally ill.
- Myth 3: Most homeless people are addicts.
- Myth 4: Most homeless people are unemployed.
- Myth 5: Most homeless people are old men with long beards.
- Myth 6: Most homeless people are stupid and/or uneducated.
- Myth 7: Homelessness can happen to anyone.
- Myth 8: Homeless people know they are homeless.
- Myth 9: Homeless people like libraries because libraries are warm and dry.
- Myth 10: Homeless people are nothing like you and me.
- Bonus Myth: Homeless people are just like you and me.

Myth 1: People Are Homeless for a Long Time

There are multiple "types" of homelessness. Experts disagree on exactly how many types there are—and exactly what to call them—so I will simplify it. For our purposes, there are three types:

- *Short-Term.* Individuals experiencing short-term homelessness aren't homeless for very long. At Hesed House, 50 percent of the people who come to our shelter are out again within two weeks. They typically have no major issues. Some sort of financial crisis bumped them out of housing and they scramble quickly to get back in.

- *Medium-Term.* Individuals experiencing medium-term homelessness are homeless for up to one year. This subgroup typically has one—but only one—major issue (e.g., mental illness, substance abuse, health problems, legal problems, etc.). It takes about a year to work through a major life challenge. This subgroup accounts for 42 percent of the residents at Hesed House.

- *Chronic.* Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness are homeless for more than one year (and often much more). This subgroup has multiple major issues (e.g., mental illness *and* substance abuse *and* health problems *and* legal problems, etc.). It can take years (or forever) to work through multiple serious life challenges. This

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subgroup comprises 8 percent of the residents at Hesed House in any given year. The federal government estimates that the chronically homeless account for 10 percent of all homeless people nationally.

When most people—including librarians—talk about homeless individuals, they are actually talking about chronically homeless individuals. Most homeless individuals simply don't fit our stereotypes: long beards, dirty clothing, talking to themselves, panhandling. In fact, I guarantee you that you see homeless individuals all the time and have absolutely no idea that they are homeless. They simply don't "look homeless." We had a guy at our shelter who ironed his clothing every night so he could go to work the next day as a paralegal at one of the biggest law firms in Chicago. I'm sure that no one outside of the shelter ever realized he was homeless.

The chronically homeless (8–10 percent of the total homeless population) are much more likely to fit the stereotypes we have about homelessness. They often struggle with mental illness and addiction, which can really take a toll on a person's physical appearance over time.

When library staff express concern over their homeless patrons, what they usually really mean is that they are having problems with their chronically homeless patrons. Consequently, this book is intended primarily to help you have more confidence in working with your chronically homeless patrons.

Myth 2: Most Homeless People Are Mentally Ill

National estimates are that about 20–25 percent of homeless individuals struggle with mental illness. Yes, that is much higher than the general population (6 percent), but it is hardly "most."[2]

What is worth noting, though, is that—in my opinion—mental illness, and particularly severe mental illness—is increasing. As governments continue to cut funding from the public mental health system, more and more individuals with mental health needs are left to fend for themselves. This has had a profound impact on shelters around the country (and libraries, too). The hardest part for shelters and libraries is not so much the breadth of mental illness, but the depth. A patron with paranoid schizophrenia can be a very difficult challenge for unequipped staff.

For a slightly deeper dive into mental illness, turn to chapter 10.

Myth 3: Most Homeless People Are Addicts

National estimates are that 38 percent of homeless individuals struggle with alcohol abuse and 26 percent struggle with other drugs.[3] *Note:* Many people struggle with both, so you can't add them up to get the "total" addiction rate. Yes, that

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is higher than the general population (6.6 percent for alcohol and 9 percent for drugs).[4] No, that is hardly "most" homeless people being addicted.

As Forrest Gump would say, "And that is all I have to say about that." Actually, that's not true. I'll say a lot more in chapter 11.

Myth 4: Most Homeless People Are Unemployed

This myth becomes less true every year. I have worked in homelessness since 1999, and every year a larger and larger percentage of our residents are employed. While a few decades ago the majority of homeless individuals were unemployed, an increasingly large percentage are now "underemployed."

At Hesed House, about 50 percent of our residents head off to a job in the morning. The reason is simple: wages have remained relatively stagnant for the last several decades while housing prices have increased dramatically. Since 1960, wages have increased (adjusting for inflation) by only about 20 percent, whereas rental prices have increased by 60 percent during the same time period (adjusted for inflation).[5]

You might be thinking that the Great Recession helped by pushing down housing prices. You would be wrong, though. While the Great Recession decimated home values, it actually increased rental prices in most communities. After people's homes were foreclosed on, they joined the rental market, thereby increasing demand (and raising prices).

Myth 5: Most Homeless People Are Old Men with Long Beards

We all have an image in our mind of what a homeless person looks like. He is male. He is middle-aged or older. He has a long, untrimmed beard. Yes, some homeless people do fit this stereotype, but not most.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires communities to do periodic "point in time" counts. We count everyone in the shelter, and then we run around in the dark at night trying to find people living under bridges and in abandoned buildings. It is a heck of a lot of fun! (No, seriously, it actually is.) Anyhow, in 2016 (the most recent year with available data) on a single night there were 549,928 homeless individuals in the United States.[6] This includes some startling statistics:

- 22 percent were children
- 40 percent were women
- 35 percent were part of a family

Every year, women and children become a larger percentage of the homeless population. The first time Hesed House had a child in the shelter for a single night, it was on the front page of the newspaper. Now we average 40 children per night

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(and have had as many as 80). Similarly, we used to have a small room for women and children. We have steadily increased room for women and children. Soon we will be creating a second shelter for families, just to handle their numbers.

Myth 6: Most Homeless People Are Stupid and/or Uneducated

Many people mistakenly believe that homeless individuals are stupid or uneducated. It just isn't true. A few years ago, I was eating at the shelter—meat loaf, if you were wondering—when the guy across the table started telling me all about the Brazilian economy during the 1980s. When he was done, I asked him how he knew so much about such an obscure topic. "I did my master's thesis on it," he replied. Apparently, he had a master's degree from Georgetown University. That was before the voices started to tell him to focus his efforts elsewhere.

I once did an informal poll of residents at Hesed House about their educational level. While some had not graduated high school, many had college degrees, a few had master's degrees (one guy had two), and one woman had a medical degree (I looked her up . . . she had—in fact—been a doctor).

When you talk to homeless patrons as if they are stupid and uneducated, they feel like you are being disrespectful. Do you know why? Because you *are* being disrespectful. People who feel disrespected are unpredictable (which is bad for you).

Myth 7: Homelessness Can Happen to Anyone

Homelessness can happen to anyone. *Wrong.*

We're all just one paycheck away from homelessness. *Not true.*

Both of these statements (incorrectly) assume that homelessness is just extreme poverty. Yes, homelessness is an extreme form of poverty, but it is not *just* the most extreme version of poverty. Homelessness is a very unique (and, fortunately, relatively rare) form of poverty.

Imagine that your landlord or mortgage company showed up at your door today with the sheriff demanding that you leave your house immediately. Would you go to a homeless shelter? Would you sleep in your car? Would you sleep outside or in an abandoned building? Probably not. You would most likely go stay with a relative or friend. In fact, take a second and make a quick mental list of people who would let you stay in a spare bedroom or on a couch. I can think of over twenty people that I know—for certain—would let me stay with them. I suspect that with a little begging, there are probably fifty different people who would let my family stay with them temporarily.

Money is not the only resource that matters. Relationships are a resource too. You don't need money if you have friends or family willing to help. Conversely, you don't need friends or family if you have money (at least not for survival).

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When I was still in college, my girlfriend became pregnant. I was able to finish college and go to law school because my parents allowed me, my girlfriend, and our son to live in their finished basement for five years. Had I not had parents with the resources (and willingness) to help us, the trajectory of my life would have been *very* different. Spoiler alert: that college girlfriend is now my wife!

As I said, homelessness is a very particular type of poverty. It is a poverty of both money *and* relationships. Most people who are poor will never be homeless because they have friends or family who will prevent that. In 2015, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 43.1 million Americans were living below the poverty line.[7] During the "point in time count" for 2015, HUD reported there were 564,708 homeless individuals.[8] In other words, only 1.31 percent of individuals who were poor were also homeless. Homelessness is relatively rare—even among individuals below the poverty line—because most people have sufficient relationships to give them shelter.

The only people who live outside or in a shelter are those who don't have sufficient relationship resources. There can be many reasons for this. Some people simply don't have family (e.g., foster kids). Some people have family, but that family is living on the edge already (e.g., in public housing, and they will be evicted if they take more people in). Others have family, but they have burned those bridges because of addiction or mental illness.

Unfortunately, as society changes to be more individualistic, families feel less and less responsibility for one another. The result is homelessness.

Myth 8: Homeless People Know They Are Homeless

I guess, "technically," most homeless people know they are homeless. They just don't think of themselves in that way.

Think about it this way: What are the labels you use to define yourself? What aspects of you make up your self-identity? If you are like most people, you probably define yourself around four dimensions:

- *Profession*—Librarian, security guard, and so on.
- *Relationships*—Mother, sister, brother, husband, and so on.
- *Hobbies*—Reader, fisherman, and so on.
- *Physical traits*—Tall, Asian, athletic, and so on.

Where does your housing status fit into your identity? If you meet someone at a party, do you say, "Hi, I'm Ryan. I live in a duplex with two bedrooms and two baths?" Of course not. That would be absurd. People don't use their housing as a key element of their identity. Guess what? Homeless individuals don't either. They don't introduce themselves as, "Hi, I'm Gary. I'm homeless." They don't

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even think about themselves as "homeless." It simply isn't an element of their self-identity. It is only non-homeless people who think in these terms.

Remember this when you are interacting with homeless individuals. If you see someone as a one-dimensional "homeless guy" and he sees himself as an "out-of-work mechanic with two children and a passion for old Ford Mustangs," you two will have a hard time truly communicating.

I once went to the funeral of a thirty-year-old man who had lived in our shelter. I had only known him in the context of his homelessness. In fact, I had never even spoken to him anywhere but at the shelter. At his funeral, the family had lots of pictures of him around the room on cork boards. It turned out that this "homeless guy" was a Chicago Cubs fan who loved to water ski. He looked as awkward in his high school prom photos as I did in my own. He liked to play Monopoly with his nephews and nieces. He had been a professional welder, though he had delivered pizza in high school. He had a mother and a father and siblings and friends who loved him. Homelessness did not define his life. In fact, homelessness wasn't even a footnote at his funeral (my presence was the only thing to give it away).

Myth 9: Homeless People Like Libraries Because Libraries Are Warm and Dry

Yes, homeless people do like the fact that libraries are warm and dry. There are also a lot of other reasons why homeless people enjoy being in libraries so much. Basically, if you were to make a list of all of the negative aspects of homelessness, a library is the antithesis of most of them.

Homelessness	Libraries
Crowded—Homeless shelters are inherently crowded places where people are forced to sit and sleep right next to each other.	**Spacious**—Even a very busy library has ample space for everyone to carve out a little space of his or her own.
Loud—Homeless shelters are loud.	**Quiet**—Even the children's section on a Saturday is quieter than a homeless shelter on its quietest day.
Chaotic—Homeless shelters have a lot of people, and many are struggling with substance abuse and mental illness. This makes for a pretty crazy environment.	**Calm**—Again, even on its craziest day, the library is going to be far calmer than a shelter on its best day.
Boring—Homelessness is very boring, without a lot of stimulation. Imagine sitting around for hours every day with nothing to do…	**Stimulating**—Libraries have a nearly infinite supply of free entertainment (books, magazines, computers, etc.).

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Homelessness	Libraries
Depressing—Being homeless is really bad for one's self-esteem.	**Escapism**—What better way to escape a rough life than to spend some time looking at the world through the eyes of Jay Gatsby or Clarice Starling or Jon Snow or Lucy Pevensie?[9]
Police-"Saturated"—Most anywhere homeless people go (e.g., public parks, walking around, etc.), they are hassled by police to move along.	**Police-"Free"**—Police tend to not go looking for homeless people in libraries, so it is a great place to go to "just be."
Excluded—Most everywhere that homeless people go, they are separated out from the rest of the community in a form of economic apartheid. They are forced out of the public eye.	**Inclusive**—Libraries are the heart of the community in many places, allowing homeless people a rare opportunity to be a part of the wider community.

The public library may, in fact, be the last truly democratic institution. Homeless individuals know—and appreciate—that.

Myth 10: Homeless People Are Nothing like You and Me

I once took an ignorant politician through our shelter at 10:00 p.m. It was a really crowded night and we had forty or fifty people sleeping in our dining room. His eyes were huge, never having really seen poverty up close. After we left the shelter, he was flabbergasted by what he had seen. He just kept saying, "Those people don't look homeless!"

I think he partially subscribed to *Myth 5: Most Homeless People Are Old Men with Long Beards,* but that wasn't all. He also had come to believe that homeless people are almost a different race of human beings. I think he would have been less surprised to find someone with two heads or purple horns.

I don't think ignorant politicians are the only ones who fall into this trap. It is easy to think of homeless individuals as "wholly other" than us. This is one of the reasons why I am a huge advocate of getting children to volunteer in homeless shelters as young as possible. Adults have preconceived notions and stereotypes firmly cemented in their brains. When kids start volunteering young enough—while they still just see "people" instead of "homeless people"—they often never develop the stereotypes.

Try this: next time you see some ragged soul with a cardboard sign panhandling on the side of the road, remember:

- He has (or had) parents that loved him, just like you.
- He played with toys when he was a child, just like you.

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- He has had crushes on people and (hopefully) been in love, just like you.
- He has pains and hopes and dreams and disappointments, just like you.
- If you prick him with a pin, he will bleed. If you tickle him, he will laugh. If you poison him, he will die. Just like you (and William Shakespeare).

Thinking that homeless people are totally different than you is wrong and dangerous.

Bonus Myth: Homeless People Are Just Like You and Me

Thinking that homeless people are exactly like you is also wrong and dangerous. A homeless person's life and experience are very different from yours.

Have you ever

- Been evicted or foreclosed on?
- Eaten out of a dumpster?
- Gone longer than forty-eight hours without eating?
- Been forced to panhandle to survive?
- Slept outside in the winter without a tent or sleeping bag?
- Been mugged?
- Been arrested?
- Been sexually assaulted?
- Gone more than a week without access to a shower?
- Had to go to the bathroom (no. 2) outside in a city?
- Worn the same clothes for more than two weeks straight?
- Grown up poor?
- Been ticketed for jaywalking?
- Had something thrown at you out of a moving car?
- Slept in a bed with bedbugs?
- Lost all hope?

Many of you will be able to answer "yes" to some of these (I have experienced three of them). Unless you have been homeless, though, you probably have not experienced most of these things.

Someone with these very different experiences looks at the world differently than you do.

It is helpful to understand and appreciate the very real ways that a homeless person is different from you. In fact, understanding those differences is at the root of empathy.

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Q & A

Question: How is rural homelessness different from urban or suburban homelessness?

Answer: Rural homelessness is much more complicated than urban or suburban homelessness for two reasons:

1. There are far fewer services. Cities tend to have far more nonprofit organizations than the country.
2. There are fewer forms of public transportation. Someone without a car is at a significant disadvantage.

In a rural area, the public library may be one of the few public institutions available for homeless individuals. It is especially important for your library to network with any other organizations (private or governmental) that do exist in your community.

Conclusion

There is a lot of misunderstanding around homelessness. So, next time you hear someone spouting off one of these myths about homelessness that have just been debunked, you can correct them.

Notes

1. Jim C. Hines, *Unbound* (New York: DAW, 2016).
2. National Coalition for the Homeless, "Mental Illness and Homelessness," www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/Mental_Illness.pdf.
3. National Coalition for the Homeless, "Substance Abuse and Homelessness," www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/addiction.html.
4. National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Nationwide Trends," https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/nationwide-trends.
5. Andrew Woo, *How Have Rents Changed Since 1960?* https://www.apartmentlist.com/rentonomics/rent-growth-since-1960/.
6. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress," https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf.
7. United States Census Bureau, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015," https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.html.

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8. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "The 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress," https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2015-AHAR-Part-1.pdf.
9. One of our residents was once in a coma for a week. When he woke up, he told me: "Ryan, when I was in a coma I thought I was a pilot for American Airlines. It was so real. I had a great job and a family and a home. People respected me. And then I woke up, and I was just a drunk."

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Index

A
abandonment, 32, 39
abstract thinking, 46
academics, 204
acronyms, 120
active commitment, 53
active listening, 117–118, 242
addiction, 7–8, 172, 175. *See also* substance abuse
adult voice, 120–121
advanced tools, 141–148
advocacy, 233
After Action Review tool, 92, 215–217
aggression, 56
alcohol, 171–174, 175–176. *See also* substance abuse
Alleyn, George, 91
aloofness, 60
Alternative Fact tool, 130–131
Amigo tool, 184
Andy Taylor tool, 220
animals, 221–223
Anti-Judge Judy tool, 87
Anti-Metaphor tool, 218
Anti-Procrastinator tool, 174–175
Anti-Witch Hunt tool, 214–215
appearance, 34–35
Appointment to Argue tool, 132–133
appreciation, 124–125
arguing style, 24–27
arguments, 132–133, 152–154, 174, 176. *See also* fights
arms crossed, 100
Armstrong, Richard, 221
Armstrong v. District of Columbia Public Library, 221
awareness, 233

B
Baby Steps tool, 128
backing away, 97
backup, 144–146
Bad Cop tool, 128–129, 241–242
bad news, bearers of, 50
bags, 197–199. *See also* possessions
Barack Obama tool, 108
basic orientation, 80–87
bathing in bathrooms, 187–188
bathrooms, 182–183, 187–188
"because," 118–119
behavior
  inconsistent, 165–167
  levels of, 73
Behavioral Interview Question tool, 219–220
bias, 88–89
Big Bird tool, 90
Bill Clinton tool, 108
Billy Bias tool, 88–89
Black Lives Matter, 59–60
body angle, 98–100
body language
  attention to, 24, 96
  echoing, 111–112
  eye contact, 102–104
  facial expressions, 104–105
  handshakes, 105–110
  how to stand, 97–101
  where to stand, 101
body tools, 77, 95–112
boredom, 191–192
breathing, 116
Bridges Out of Poverty, 19

C
calmness, 89–90, 116, 154–155, 176, 215
Canary tool, 218
Carnegie, Dale, 122
casual register, 22–23
Central Library (Dallas), 213
Chapman, Gary, 84
chemosignaling, 48
child voice, 120–121
children, 201–208
choices, 127
chronic homelessness, 6–7
Clinton, Bill, 118
close talkers, 100, 242
cold, 231
commitment, 53–54
common crises, 49
community oriented policing (C.O.P.) officer, 220
complaints, 223–224, 243
compliance, long-term, 68
compliments, 47, 49, 124
concessions, 133–134
confidentiality, 224
conflict
  de-escalation techniques and, 46
  ending, 174
  psychology of, 46
  tools for, 126–139
consistency, 54–55, 58–59, 137
contempt, 48
co-occurring disorders, 172
cortisol, 56
Counteroffer tool, 134
crisis mode, 28
criticism, 48
Cuddy, Amy, 90
Cup of Pennies tool, 83–84, 122

D
Dalai Lama tool, 124–125
danger, 33–34
debating, 135–136
deeds, 47
deep breathing, 90
de-escalation techniques, 46
defensiveness, 48
delusional patrons, 163–165
detoxing, 172–173
dictating, 136
dignity, 229–230
distance, 98
"Do Ask, Don't Tell" tool, 126–127
dopamine, 56
doubled-up children, 202
drunk patron, 175–176
dual diagnosis, 172

E
Echo tool, 110
education, 9, 204, 205–207
education rights, 205
effortful commitment, 53–54
Ejector Seat tool, 146–148
electricity, 231
e-mail, 231–232

alastore.ala.org

emotional contagion, 45–46
emotional support animals, 222
empathy
  abstract thinking and, 46
  definition of, 45
  description of, 44
  generalizations and, 20
  introduction to, 43–44
  neurochemistry of, 56
  punishment versus, 65–78
empathy-driven enforcement
  about, xiii
  description of, 71–78
  elements of, 72
  parts of, 77–78
employment, help with, 231–232
escalated revenge, 51–52
essential elements, five, 231
everyday predicaments, 151–157
"everyday sadism," 129–130, 219
eviction, 32
exhaustion, 190–191
Explainerator tool, 135–137
explanations, 118–119, 242–243
eye contact, 102–104

F
facial expressions, 104–105
fairness, 40, 58–60
Favor tool, 134
FEND, 221
Fight and Flight tool, 97
fights, 152–154. *See also* arguments
fire tools, 76, 84, 102
Five Love Languages, The (Chapman), 84
5:1 ratio, 47, 83–84
Floor of Disrespect tool, 102
focus group, 3–5
Foot in the Door tool, 126
formal register, 22–23
"Four Horsemen," 48
Frago, Walt, 91
freely chosen commitment, 54

G
gender, 85–86
Girard, Joe, 49
glaring, 102
Goldilocks tool, 103
Good, Sarah, 214
Gore, Roger, 91
Gottman, John, 47, 48
graduated reciprocation in tension reduction, 133

H
"habituated to punishment," 35–36
hands
  in fists, 100
  on hips, 100
  placement of, 100–101
handshakes, 47–48, 56, 105–110
Harvard Implicit Bias Test, 89
head tools, 77, 79–93
heat, 231
Helen Plum Memorial Library (Lombard, Illinois), 213
home, concept of, 31–32
Homeless Golden Rule tool, 86–87
homeless patrons. *See also individual scenarios*
  how best to help, 227–236
  how to approach, 97
  how to think about, 87–89
homelessness. *See also individual challenges*
  myths about, 6–14
  relationships and, 9–10
  rural versus urban, 14
  types of, 6–7
homework, 205–206
Hot Stove tool, 108–110
How to Win Friends and Influence People (Carnegie), 122
HUD (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), 8
humanity, 229–230
humor, 32, 60, 125–126
hygiene, 179–188
Hypnotist tool, 116

I
identification, forms of, 229
"If" (Kipling), 224
implicit bias, 88–89
information sharing, 55
intoxicated patrons, 175–176
IQs, 35

J
Jackson, Jesse, 89
Jane's Addiction tool, 175
jargon, 119–120
Jerry Seinfeld tool, 100, 242
John McCain tool, 133
joint behavior agreements, 184
joint staffing, 184
joint training, 184
jokes, 125–126
judgment, 87

K
key phrases, 241–243
kicking someone out, 146–148
Kipling, Rudyard, 224
Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 88
Kness, Gary, 91
Knight and the Lady tool, 123
Kreimer, Richard, 221
Kreimer v. Morristown, 221

L
La Bibliotecaria tool, 85–86
Langer, Ellen, 119
language, xiv, 22–23
Laser Beam tool, 102
laundry facilities, 182
lawsuits, 221
Lawyer Repellent Spray tool, 221
leading, 74–75
legitimacy, 57–60
Less Public Library tool, 101
LGBT homeless youth, 206
libraries, reasons for liking, 11–12
library cards, 5
life expectancy, 33
likability, 48–50
Limbo tool, 115–116
listening to people, 57–58, 116–118, 147, 230–231, 242
local resources, 233
long-term compliance, 68

M
managers and leaders, advice for, 211–225
Marijuana Plant tool, 89–90
marriages, 47, 84
mass hysteria, 214–215
Matthew 20:16 tool, 184
medium-term homelessness, 6
mental illness, 7, 33–34, 159–170, 172
Mental Illness Disrupter tool, 162
Michael Jordan tool, 81–82
mindset, 80–87
Minimalist tool, 212–213
Minow, Mary, 221
mirror neurons, 45
Mirror tool, 117–118, 242
MISA (mental illness substance abuse), 172
mistakes, admitting to, 118
modeling behavior, 74
momentum of compliance, 52
Monica Lewinsky tool, 118
monopolizing space, 199–200

alastore.ala.org

moving forward, 97
Mr. Bobby tool, 144
Multiple Choice Test tool, 127–128
myths about homelessness, 6–14

N
Name Game tool, 122–123
names, 122–123, 241
Nashville Minute tool, 90–91
National Coalition for the Homeless, 37
Negative tool, 134–135
Newhall Massacre, 91–92
No Child Left Behind Act, 205
non-homeless people, complaints from, 223–224
nonverbal cues, 23–24
Nuclear Option tool, 142–143

O
Odor Eviction and Odor Suggestion, 186–187
O'Meara, Aisling, 219
Oprah tool, 116–117
over-sharing, 82–83
oxytocin, 56, 103, 106, 117

P
pacing, 167–168
panhandling, 156–157
Parent Trap tool, 120–121
parent voice, 120–121
Parris, Betty, 214
pauses, 116
Payne, Ruby, 19, 120
peacocking fights, 152–153
Peel, Robert "Bobby," 144
Pence, James, 91
personal space, 100
personality disorders, 160–161
pets, 221–223
physical abuse, 32
physical violence, 32
Pirate tool, 103–104
plumbing, 231
Plutarch, 50
pointing, 100
police involvement, 142–143
police liaison, 220
Pool Shot tool, 98–100, 217
possessions, 30, 195–200
post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 33, 193, 222
postural echoing, 110
posture, 90
poverty
  culture of, 27–28
  worldview and, 19–22
Praying Ninja tool, 100–101
predictability, 58
problems
  preparing for, 91–93
  preventing future, 122–126
problem-solving, 46
programming, specialized, 232–233
programs for children, 207–208
proxemics, 98
psychological discomfort, 70–71
psychological inertia, 52–55
psychology of conflict, 46
public commitment, 53
punishment
  definition of, 67
  description of, 70–71
  empathy versus, 65–78
  habituation to, 35–36
punishment-driven enforcement
  alternative to, xiii
  description of, 66–71
  elements of, 72

questions, 47

R
Race IAT, 89
real fights, 152, 153–154
reciprocity, 50–52, 83, 133–134
Red and the Blue tool, 213–214
referrals, 233
reflective listening, 117–118
relationships, 9–10, 29–30, 46–48, 83
resentment, 70
respect, 27, 90, 123, 229–230
Reverse Golden Rule, 50
reverse tolerance, 173–174
ritual, 56
Robin Williams tool, 125–126
role-playing, 217
rules, 212–214
rural homelessness, 14

S
Sad Librarian tool, 129–130, 242
Sadat, Anwar, 54–55, 137
sadism, 129–130, 219
Salem Witch Trials, 214
saving face, 101, 131
Scholarship Hunter tool, 206–207
Scrimmage Game tool, 217
Secret Handshake tool, 105–108
seizures, 176–178
Selfie tool, 84–85
self-image, 54
self-worth, 36–37, 230
September 11, 229
seriousness, 60
serotonin, 56
service animals, 222
sexual abuse, 32, 181
sexual comments, 155–156
"Short Sadistic Impulse Scale" (SSIS), 219
short-term homelessness, 6
Shot Across the Bow tool, 131–132
showers, 179–181
Sidekick tool, 144–146, 217
similarity, 48
Six Unforgivable Curses tool, 121–122
sleeping, 185, 189–194, 242
Slone, Jennifer, 227–228
small talk, 124
smells, 183, 185–187
smiles, 104–105
snoring patron, 192–194
social proof, 55
social space, 98
social standing, 56
social workers, 184, 234–236
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, 18
space, 30–32, 197, 199–200
speaking slowly, 116
staff, 211–213
staff splitting, 161
standard phrases, 92–93
staring, 168–169
Stick and Stone tool, 82–83
stonewalling, 48
storage space, 196–197
"street cards," 233
stress, 56
string metaphor, 74
substance abuse, 160, 171–178

T
talking to oneself, 162–163
tension reduction, 133
thinking in the moment, 89–91
Thompson, Elaine, 59

alastore.ala.org

time, 27–29
time horizon, shortened, 28–29
Time Machine tool, 88
Titchener, Edward, 44
"tit-for-tat," 51
tolerance, 173–174
tools. *See also individual tools*
advanced, 141–148
body, 77, 95–112
description of, 75–78
head, 77, 79–93
word, 77, 113–139
touch, 47–48
toughness, 60
Tractor Beam tool, 137
Training Wheels tool, 91–93
trash, patron going through, 154–155
trauma, 32–33, 203–204
traumatic brain injury, 32
treatment
perceived, 51
poor, 36–39
Trick Question tool, 219
trust, 39–40, 56
28 Days, 173
22-Pound Chocolate Smile tool, 104–105

U

unemployment, 8
urban homelessness, 14
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 8

V

violence, 32–33, 38
vocabulary, 23
vocal inflection, 24
Vogon tool, 119–120
voices, 120–121
volume, 24–26, 115–116, 241
volume-to-anger ratio, 24–26

W

Walking Man tool, 97
Walmart tool, 123–124
water tools, 76, 103–104
Weather-Person tool, 124
Weirdo tool, 137–139
Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome, 174
wet brain, 174
Wi-Fi, 231
Williams, Abigail, 214
withdrawal, 172–173
Wizard of Oz tool, 118–119
word tools, 77, 113–139

Y

Yerkes National Primate Research Center, 50–51
"Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are" (Cuddy), 90
Your Momma tool, 87–88

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