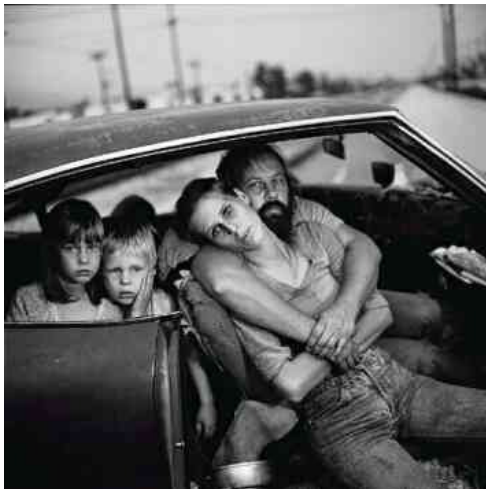


Street Level

A Manual for Church Workers with the Homeless



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Your Life Will Change From This Moment

If you are reading this manual, I must assume that you are thinking about engaging in a ministry for the homeless and or the mentally ill. What a glorious adventure you are about to experience! It is an amazing challenge that you will never forget; it could possibly change you forever!

To connect with the homeless and mentally ill is a cross-cultural experience that few missionaries have ever encountered. The street folk culture, often unnoticed because it is usually wrongly grouped with the prevailing majority culture in which they live, is different from any other; it's even fun in its own way.

Of course, any cross-cultural work is hard. It will challenge your ideals, your morality and your personal space. But it is well worth whatever cost we might pay to be the conduit of God's hope, healing, redemption and peace to those who, perhaps, are most keenly aware that they need it. Indeed, as you see people's lives transformed right before your eyes, you recognize that it is also one of the most Spirit-filled ministries the world has to offer.

True Confessions

My wife, Diane, and I have been pastoring the homeless and mentally ill since 1995. It started by asking one homeless person to dinner. Soon, we were welcoming street folks to our evening meal six out of seven days a week, providing food, listening to their stories and lives.

As time went on, we saw that street folks weren't comfortable coming to middle class churches, so we began one of our own: worshipping, reading the Word, teaching and praying, all in a context that the street folks and mentally ill individuals could appreciate. Around a hundred men and women from the Portland, Oregon area currently participate in our services. All of them serve, pray for, and teach the truth of God to one another.

I have loved this ministry. Diane and I couldn't do anything else, really. At the same time, it has had a cost. We live as lower-class folks ourselves, having little income. We squeeze what little personal time we can into our lives. We have separated from dear friends again and again. We have learned, over and over again, the dire necessity for the discipline of daily prayer, trust and contentment. I wish I could say that these disciplines are second nature to us now, but we are still learning these lessons daily. Despite the trials and our own failings, God has blessed us. We have shared in the joy of baptisms, transformed lives, seeing our children live as a part of a transforming, multi-class community. We have seen the Lord provide for us again and again.

Why Bother?

In this book, I want to introduce to you some basic concepts of what it means to minister to the most downcast and outcast of our society, with the hope that you will join us in this ministry to the marginalized. Because many of those whom we have worked with depended on our openness, even so there are many looking for help from the followers of Jesus:

- those who struggle with their own mental illnesses, as well as the mental illnesses of their spouses and children.
- those who desperately want to seek the Lord for a way out of their addictions because they don't have the self-will to do it on their own.
- those who love the Lord, but have difficulty remaining faithful because of the voices in their heads.
- those who are committed to seeking God but are trapped in their rooms due to depression and paranoia.
- those who truly want to give up selling and using drugs, but can't seem to remain out of the lifestyle.
- those whose minds are stuck in childhood, who struggles with evil thoughts, but are innocently and persistently seeking God.
- those who have received visions of Jesus, follow Him in jail, but can't seem to be faithful out in the real world.
- those who have a million good ideas for getting out of their addictions, but can't seem to stick to one.
- those who work hard to succeed in every step of escaping homelessness and then wonder why the Lord hasn't allowed them to get off the street.
- Those who follow Jesus with all their heart, but get thrown out of church after church.

Many street people love the Lord. They just need some support. That support must come from the church. More than that, the church needs them. The church needs to get out of the self-deception that the blessed have lives that fulfill the American dream, when actually it is the poor, the sorrowing, the meek, the outcast, the persecuted whom the Bible calls blessed (Luke 6:20-26; Psalm 37:11). God works powerfully among these people. So I hope you make the first step and join those of us who love the outcast and welcome them into our hearts.

You've Got A Friend: What Is Ministry To the Homeless?

What exactly is involved in being a friend to the homeless? Am I being asked to surrender all my possessions? Will I have to give up my privacy and security? No, not at all (at least, not much). Being a friend to the homeless isn't all that different from having any other friend who might have more needs than most. Perhaps you won't gain a lot of support from your friend. At the same time, however, you might be surprised at how insightful your friend is!

Christian ministry to the homeless:

- **is about building trust.** We want to develop a positive, trusting relationship with our street friend, despite all the obstacles which hinder that trust.
- **involves learning.** Our street friends have a different way of life and a different way of thinking about life. We need to be in a position to learn their thinking rather than criticize it. If we learn the way our street friend thinks, we will be in a better position to help them.
- **requires listening.** The most important thing we can do is help our street friend know that they are important -- enough for us to hear their trials, difficulties and emotions.
- **is supportive.** When our friends on the street are down, we want to encourage them. When they are in crisis, we want to give suggestions for solutions; many times they don't know what to do.
- **makes connections.** We want to let our friends on the street know about those who might help them. Some of them will give them survival support, while others will supply counsel or wisdom. We also need to keep in regular contact with our street friends, and go out to do things with them, such as eating together, doing something helpful together or just having fun.
- **provides opportunities.** We need to provide opportunities for change or help so that our street friends know what the possibilities are and how they can take advantage of them.
- **offers mediation.** We can offer to communicate between our street friend and others who might be trying to understand them, but with difficulty. If we have listened well, we might understand our street friend better than the social workers or doctors who have been assigned to them. Sometimes we have to explain what our street friend means, in a language the workers can understand.
- **is empowering.** Our support and listening, in fact, all that we do, is geared toward helping our street friend do what they need to do themselves. We don't want to be doing things for them, as if they were a child, but give them the opportunity to help themselves be who God wants them to be.
- **involves prayer.** We must pray for our street friend regularly, allowing God to hear the needs and cries of one for whom no one else is praying.

The Christian minister to the homeless is not:

- **a mentor.** To be a "mentor", many people believe, is to assume that we are running our own lives perfectly and, thus, we are helping "the helpless" get their lives straightened out. We need to be humble, recognizing our own failings and our own position as a peer, not a leader.
- **a parent.** We cannot be a replacement mother or father for our street friend. We are not there to command or to provide for them. We are there to support, not to be an authority.
- **a police officer.** It is not our task to punish or judge our street friend if they do something self destructive or illegal. We should certainly encourage them not to go on a path of self destruction, but we want to be the agent of God's grace, not judgment.
- **a housing supervisor.** We are not to tell our street friend how to live, how to keep their house or who they let stay with them. We can, however, make suggestions, give our own opinions, and then pray, allowing God's Spirit to speak to them.
- **a policy provider.** We are not there to make rules for our street friend. But we may encourage them to establish their own rules that make sense to them.
- **a judge.** If someone thinks differently than we do, it is not our job to determine what their relationship to God is. We allow God to speak to them and just encourage our friend to seek God.

- **an enabler.** We do not want to provide the means for our street friend to do something against God or against those they know. If we provide money thoughtlessly or help our friend destroy themselves, then we are not being a minister, but a destructive agent, even if it feels that we are “helping” them.
- **Jesus.** We cannot save our street friend, or determine the means by which they must be saved. Jesus is the only One who saves, and the Spirit is His representative to all people. We must allow the Spirit to do His work, while we provide support for what the Spirit is doing in our street friend’s life.

Interaction Tip: The Most Important Ingredient

The main characteristic of a successful worker with the needy is endurance. For the most part, helping the needy is a much longer, more complicated process than most people would ever think necessary in our fast-paced, direct society. There aren’t twelve steps to escape homelessness nor five easy lessons to learn how to help people on the street. So if our friend isn’t making the progress we thought they should, we could show this frustration and our friend could feel blamed by us that they aren’t where we think they should be. If it seems like the need never ends, just get comfortable and enjoy the ride.

One thing that might help is to remember that the goal of our friendship is not to make our friend middle class, but to help them follow Jesus with whatever resources is available to us. So we are not here to create change in people’s lives, but to be available for when God needs someone He can use. So let’s not measure our success in ministry by how many people got off the street or who came to the Lord. Rather, we need to measure it by how much we see God using us in other people’s lives. Our ministry is as much a transformation of ourselves as well as others.

Bridging The Gap: Building Trust

To connect with a person is to establish trust. When we have a cross-cultural, or cross-class, situation, building trust is even more important, and more difficult. When we are trying to build a relationship with people who distrust us, or might even have reason to be angry with us, this is most difficult. This is exactly the situation between the homeless and those who are well-off, or even middle class. Some homeless feel that they are entitled to something from the middle class, while others feel that they have nothing in common with those that have their lives “together”. And middle class folks may feel that they need to bring the homeless up to their level or to “straighten their lives out.” To treat each other as peers in this situation can be difficult. But in our relationship, we can do some things to help build bridges and to develop trust over time.

Trust builders include:

- **Being positively honest.** The most important issue in building trust is being sincere. Most homeless folks are pretty good at identifying people who are only pretending to be nice, but not really liking them. That means we need to share whatever enjoyment we have with them. At the same time, we don’t want to share, especially at first, any negative impressions we have of them. We shouldn’t even share at first how we think their lives can be improved, because it will be taken as a statement of judgment. If we keep positive, then we will be able to share a full perspective after they feel that we really like them.
- **Exhibiting true understanding.** To build trust, we also have to show that we really understand the other person. But such understanding can’t be assumed by either party; it must be stated. Because of this, we may want to occasionally restate what we hear our street friend saying, just to make sure we heard it right. And we should respond to what they say (again, as positively as possible!), so they know that they were heard and understood.
- **Giving without asking.** At times we should look at our friend’s needs and try to meet them, without them asking. If we give freely, there is no sense in which the person is being taken advantage of. Also, it shows that we really care about them if we take the initiative to see their need and meet it. Sometimes this can backfire if they have a felt need they consider really important but which we are not meeting (for example, tobacco), but to meet a need is almost always a relationship builder.
- **Stating agreement.** No matter how much we disagree with our street friends about politics or lifestyles, there are many things that we will agree on. When those things are shared, we should take advantage of them and state our agreement. Emphasize the agreements and downplay the disagreements.

Trust breakers include:

- **Being demanding.** If we insist upon our way, it will feel to our friend that we haven’t really listened to their concerns. If we have a disagreement about a significant issue, we should ignore it if we can. If we can’t ignore it, we should discuss it and come to a mutually agreed-upon compromise. But we should never put down rules or insist upon our own perspective above our friend’s. If we do that, we are taking the parent role and treating them as children. No adult can accept that.
- **Vacillating.** To constantly change our mind means that no one knows what our opinion or viewpoint really is. It means that we can’t be trusted, because we are going to be different with each person. We should stick to who we really are and what we said, even if it leads to a disagreement. Disagreements are easier to deal with than lack of trust.
- **Breaking promises.** Jesus said, “Let your yes be yes and your no, no.” We must keep our promises. The secret to this isn’t trying hard to keep all of our promises; rather, it is being careful when making promises in the first place. If we only make a promise we know we can keep, then even though our friend might be disappointed that we have to say no sometimes, at least he or she will know that we can be trusted when we do make a promise.
- **Hypocrisy.** We need to walk the talk. If we say we are a Christian, but act in a destructive, unloving or impure way, we show that we aren’t who we say we are. If we say we hate an action in some people and then do that action, we show hypocrisy, and people know we can’t be trusted.
- **Irrational boundaries.** Placing limits on ourselves on how much we can help is significant (see “Avoiding Burnout” below). But if our boundaries make no sense to our friends, then they will think that there is some other reason why we don’t help them, such as we don’t really like them. We should try to make our limits reasonable and fair.

And Now A Word From Our Sponsor: What the Bible Says about the Homeless

Some words from the Word about being a friend to the homeless.

- The poor should be given regular assistance; if the poor were helped regularly, there would be no poor. However, because of our disobedience of God's commands, there will always be the poor among us. (Deuteronomy 15)
- The Bible blesses those who make plans to help the poor. (Psalm 41:1-4)
- Those who help the poor will be helped by the Lord. (Proverbs 19:17)
- Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, the outcast from the church. (Luke 19:10)
- It is one purpose of the church to seek out and to celebrate the return of the lost. (Luke 15)
- Jesus offers healing and peace to those who live sinful lifestyles. (Mark 2; John 5; John 8)
- The poor should be invited to our celebrations instead of our friends and family. (Luke 14:12-14)
- The poor are those who live their lives by faith alone, relying on nothing else, so they should be honored in our churches. (James 2:1-10)
- We should hire the poor and pay them a fair wage in a timely manner. (James 5:1-5)
- We should make sure that the poor receive justice; God will destroy those who harm the poor. (Exodus 22:22-24, Psalm 82).
- Jesus will judge the world based on whether they help the believer in need or not. (Matthew 25:31-46)

No Place To Rest His Head: What Does It Mean to Be Homeless?

While the experience of each homeless individual varies, here are some examples of what homelessness means to many of them:

Homelessness means:

- walking miles to every meal.
- having little or no privacy.
- regularly being asked by the police for your identification and being questioned about your activities, at least once a week.
- needing to hide your living space.
- moving every couple of months so you don't get harassed by the police or others who invade your camp.
- hanging out with people who don't care about you, and who do dangerous things or just act crazy.
- dealing daily with people who are addicted and/or mentally ill.
- being separated from your children
- receiving rejection and hostility from most people.
- trying to get off the street, but you haven't been able to.
- having your possessions stolen or ruined on a regular basis.
- constantly wanting money for your needs, but when you get money, you use it poorly.
- spending more time giving up than hoping.

A Rose By Any Other Name

Types of Homelessness

Being homeless means being part of an alternative society. There are many aspects of homelessness in our society, including:

- **Homeless families.** There are families on the street, sometimes with just a mom, sometimes just a dad, sometimes with both parents. Usually these are families who have fallen on hard times, having lost a job or their housing. Families don't usually stay on the street very long and can get off of the street with some help from a church or the government.
- **Homeless youth.** This is a growing population. Many homeless youth have left their families or foster care homes because living conditions there were unacceptable to them, perhaps from abuse or perhaps because they wanted to live an alternative lifestyle that was unacceptable to their guardians. Usually these kids can get assistance if they want to get off the street, but many are content to live their chosen lifestyle.
- **Couch surfers.** This category could be adults or youth, families or singles. These are people who have enough of a support network that they can at least get off the street, but they are people who cannot find a place to live, are usually having a hard time obtaining permanent employment and can receive almost no services or help from churches or the government.
- **Chronically Homeless.** This is who we think of as "classically" homeless. They usually have addiction or mental health issues, live in camps around urban areas. These folks have been homeless from a year to forty years, having become hardened by the constant rejection and pity they receive.

Interaction Tip: Be Real

No matter what kind of homeless person we are dealing with, no matter what issues they are dealing with, they need our understanding, not our pity and not our simple solutions. Let's try to see the complexity of their situation and to appreciate them as a person, not as a stereotype or as a problem.

Why Have You Forsaken Me?

What causes homelessness?

Often people blame homelessness on “The Big Two”: addiction and mental illness. While these two issues are certainly factors in most homelessness, it is difficult to determine whether they are primarily the *cause* or the *result* of homelessness. Below are some issues related to homelessness that are often overlooked:

Extreme personal crisis. Most folks on the street can pinpoint a certain event or experience that triggered their homelessness. It could be the death of a loved one, abuse from a guardian or spouse, exposure to drugs at an early age, loss of a job, or some other critical experience.

Lack of a support network. If most people experience a personal crisis, we have a support network to assist us. There are family, friends or a church to assist us when we are in need. But people on the street do not have that network, and that means that they cannot readily receive the help that most of us take for granted.

Employment difficulties. Most people on the street are desperately looking for work, but find it difficult to find or keep work. Sometimes it is because of their own lack of personal care or social limitations, but often it is because of an inability to work on a regular schedule, to keep appointments or to work for 40 hours a week.

Social limitations. Many people on the street, even if they have not been diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder, have social habits or difficulties that make it hard for them to obtain or remain in work, to live with others or even to maintain relationships.

Desire for freedom. Many people on the street have a hatred for being told what to do. They don’t want to be controlled by social workers, foster parents, mental health workers or others who are trying to “help” them. They want to maintain their independence, even at the cost of their economic well-being.

Inability to live with others. Some of the homeless are so mentally ill or socially dysfunctional, that they cannot live with or around other people. Some folks are just too stressed to be around people on an ongoing basis, while others have their mental issues triggered by others. At a time when all low income housing is crowded, these folks cannot live in any housing.

Interaction Tip: Be Careful What You Ask

In most cases, until trust is built, it is not recommended that you ask your homeless friend why they are homeless. They may or may not know the answer, but they probably won’t want to give you a true answer until they can be sure you are to be trusted. The cause of one’s homelessness is usually a difficult and painful story, and it is not to be shared lightly.

Culture Shock: Why the Homeless Don't Come to Church

Approximately 30 to 50 percent of the homeless are committed, baptized Christians. Yet most of us don't see them, or even the working class, in our churches. This is not because the homeless or the lower social class don't go to church. Rather, they have their own churches. Here in Portland, there are churches that specifically target the homeless, and many churches that specifically welcome the working class. There are missions, bible studies, individual worship services and many other venues for the homeless to worship and serve God.

If you don't see the homeless in your church, it likely due to a cultural difference. Every church is not just a spiritual experience, but a cultural one. We have certain customs and kinds of worship that are specifically for our cultural group which, on the other hand, push away those of different cultural or social experience. For instance, if we speak English in our congregation, we do not offer a welcoming atmosphere to those who only speak Spanish. This is not a bad thing, but we shouldn't wonder why no Spanish-speaking people come to our services.

Similarly, if everyone in our church is clothed in suits or dresses, smells good and has a small group of like-dressed friends with whom they associate exclusively, it should be no wonder that homeless people, even if they wandered into the church, wouldn't feel welcome. If the church has a number of unspoken rules, such as not speaking during the sermon or Bible readings, not making statements in the middle of the service, not pacing or making wild movements in the middle of an aisle, then it is no wonder that the mentally ill wouldn't feel welcome in our church. And most churches aren't open to having people drunk or high in their service.

The homeless do not refrain from coming to these churches because they are not really Christian. Nor do they avoid them because they are greater sinners than other church-going Christians. It is because they feel uncomfortable, out of place and that everyone is judging them.

Interaction Tip: Street Greeters

If you would like to have the homeless feel welcome at your church, then have a special greeter for them. This greeter is to specifically "dress down", looking comfortable in the sanctuary in jeans and a t-shirt. The street greeter should be on the look out for the homeless and the mentally ill to specifically welcome them and to explain to them about the service. The street greeter could also keep an eye on the guests to make sure that they are alright and to give them a gentle reminder to respect others around them if needed. If a guest is causing too much of a fuss, then the street greeter could gently lead them outside, and recommend that their street guest could perhaps come again when they are more ready to be in that group of people. Most of all, however, the street greeter is to make them feel at home, as if they were coming to the family to which they had never belonged before.

What I Would, That Do I Not

What does it mean to be mentally ill?

We all have mental weaknesses. All of us have areas in our lives in which we are, admittedly, irrational and difficult to deal with. We all, at times, do things that others are uncomfortable with, or possibly even something we know to be dangerous, just because it makes sense to us. Even though it makes sense to no one else.

To be mentally ill by definition, however, is to be given a diagnosis of a common debilitating mental weakness by a professional mental health worker. In the United States, a full 40% of the population have received a diagnosis of mental illness sometime in their lives.

Being mentally ill means:

- thinking outside of “normal” rational concepts, causing you not to participate in a normal life.
- for a portion of one’s life, it is the inability to make one’s own choices based on what makes the most sense to them.
- possibly thinking self-destructive thoughts or do things that are self-destructive.
- sometimes having an inability to understand what people are saying to you and are not able to control your own behavior.
- having others be exasperated with you or treating you like a child.
- often not understanding the motivation for one’s own deeds or speech.
- constantly regretting one’s actions, but not knowing what to do about it.
- blaming others and your environment for your own feelings and difficulties because you don’t know who else to blame.
- assuming what others are thinking, and often misunderstanding other’s motives.

Being mentally ill does not mean:

- that a person is irrational, but that their thinking involves a different kind of rationality.
- that a person is violent, except in rare cases.
- that a person has a lesser intelligence.
- that a person cannot function normally in life, although they may need some special assistance or allowances.

Interaction Tip: Talk Like A Grown-up

When communicating to an adult with a mental illness, the temptation is to talk to them or to treat them as a child. However, this only causes a greater frustration and distance between you and your friend. Assume that your friend can make his own decisions and can understand normal adult speech unless you see otherwise. But no matter what the case, be friendly as a peer, not as one who has superior intelligence or wisdom. Sometimes it helps us to remember—and to communicate to our friends—that we are mentally weak in some areas, too. We don’t have our lives perfect, but struggle with our minds, just as they do.

If It's Not One Thing, It's Another

Types of Mental Illness

Below are some of the more frequent kinds of mental illness found on the street. (The definitions provided are general ones; to find the official definitions, please look at the DSM IV, the basic psychiatric reference.)

- **Schizophrenia.** This is a disorder in which one sees or hears things that are not there. Often a schizophrenic will hear voices that will compel them to do strange or even self-destructive actions, or they will compel the person to *not* do that which would help them.
- **Depression.** This is a persistent lack of energy to lead a normal life, due to stresses or being emotionally overwhelmed.
- **Anxiety disorder.** This is a sense of nervousness or fear based on relatively insignificant issues in one's life.
- **Bipolar.** This is a disorder in which one has wildly changing moods, usually between feeling terribly depressed and being hyperactively motivated. Usually the person has a difficulty focusing on anything productive, no matter what mood they are in.
- **ADD/ADHD.** Attention deficit disorder is an inability to focus on most things for longer than a few minutes. These folks are constantly bored. ADD is characterized by a lack of motivation, while ADHD is characterized by constant movement, always moving on to the next item before the last one is finished.
- **PTSD.** This is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and it is famously attributed to veterans, many of whom are now on the street. But many others also have this stress disorder. A person with PTSD has had some traumatic event in the past (even if it did not seem as traumatic to others around them), and everyday occurrences might trigger an overreaction to stress.
- **OCD.** Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a compulsion to do some kind of activity, usually innocuous, until a feeling of compulsion passes. The actions are unnecessary in a practical sense, but experienced as an essential need emotionally. Usually, after the action is completed, there is a sense of guilt over having given into the compulsion, so the person might hide the activity from others.
- **Borderline Personality Disorder.** People with this disorder frequently exhibit anti-social speech and actions. They are constantly breaking relationships. The cause and treatment of this disorder is unknown for most victims of it. The use of this term is controversial.

Interaction Tip: We Aren't The Doctor

Unless you are a trained psychiatrist, it is best not to determine a diagnosis yourself. If we share our diagnosis, our friend may take our word above their doctor's if they prefer our amateur diagnosis. Once you get to know your friend well, perhaps you can ask them what they were diagnosed with. Allow them to also share whether they feel that the label that was put on them is accurate or not.

Transforming the Mind

What helps the mentally ill?

The first answer that most people usually come up with to mental illness is “medication”. Medication can help the mentally ill in many cases, even completely cure them. For others, however, medication helps only in a limited way, while inducing a number of side effects.

Medication can also be an admission of one’s own mental illness and the shame they feel for taking it is often unacceptable to the mentally ill person. A person diagnosed with mental illness might be forced to take medication for a period of time, but shame will often cause the person to stop the medication, and starting and stopping mental health meds is sometimes more dangerous than not taking them at all.

While medication is usually a part of a solution for the mentally ill, it is never the whole answer.

Some other things that help the mentally ill include:

- **a safe living arrangement.** Every mentally ill person needs a place to live where stress is reduced to a minimum and they do not live in fear.
- **a regular counselor.** Every mentally ill person needs someone they can trust to listen to them and to give positive, applicable counsel. This person is usually a professional counselor, but not necessarily.
- **someone who can serve as a sounding board for the person.** An opportunity to discuss their thoughts and decisions and to be gently corrected if their thinking doesn’t match reality is often a big help. This is especially helpful if the person listening can pray for the mentally ill without judging them.
- **community.** Having a sense of belonging in a group that openly welcomes them and has a specific social place for them.
- **an organized plan for daily living.** A mentally ill person almost always benefits from having a regular daily schedule to live by. This living plan needs to be determined by them and should not be imposed upon them by others.
- **feeling functional.** Every person needs to feel that they are productive and that they have a purpose.
- **having clear boundaries.** Every mentally ill person needs to have understanding of what they can and cannot do or say with other people in different contexts, and what is unacceptable speech or behavior.

Magic Carpet Ride

What does it mean to be addicted?

- It means feeling uncomfortable in your own skin.
- It means having an action or a substance that makes you feel “normal”.
- It means finding it impossible to live without that action or substance.
- It means hurting others and always excusing yourself for it.
- It means lying to yourself about what you need and who you are.
- It often means having little or no social boundaries.
- It means doing what you know is wrong but desperately needing to do it anyway.
- It means assuming that everyone who is not an addict is judging you.
- It means doing anything, sacrificing anything, for the next opportunity to participate in your addiction.
- It means wanting to change, but not knowing how.
- When not using, it means a constant sense that something is wrong and constantly coming up with the wrong reasons for that feeling.
- It means having a desire build up in you slowly until it consumes all your thoughts. Sooner or later, you give in.

Interaction Tip: Enabling or Disabling

It is difficult for many to interact fairly with a person in the midst of their addiction or the desire for their addiction (a “jones”). A person under the control of their addiction is very needy and often acts like a manipulative child. Some people react with anger at the manipulation, while others react with empathy at the suffering that is openly expressed. At times, the people who react the worst toward addicts are ex-addicts who see themselves in the addict before them. We need to remember that this is a human being who is being controlled by their addiction and they may not know what they are doing or saying, and will probably regret it later. Giving into our anger will only isolate them more and break down trust. If we help them, we need to remember to help in a way that will not assist them to be self-destructive. We also need to set firm boundaries that we do not change no matter what story they tell us.

Hope For the Hopeless: What really helps addicts

When a person is in the throes of their addiction, they have the sense of being stuck in a pattern that they cannot escape. Even if they do stop for a while, the addiction is often looming in the back of their minds, and they know that it will only be so long until they give in again. However, many addicts have obtained complete freedom and are able to live hopeful lives.

Most addicts receive quite a bit of help from treatment, a 12-step program, or a church. But almost every addict that stays clean for a long time have some combination of these helps:

- **Deep desire.** An addict needs something outside their addiction that meets their emotional needs and fulfills a significant desire. Many people find their fulfillment in faith in God or in a personal relationship, but it must be something that is antithetical to their addiction.
- **Healing from God.** God does heal addicts today, although not all of them. But many people receive a complete and life-long release from their compulsions.
- **A safe detox.** Most addicts need a period of time to be released from the physical dependency to their substance of choice, and possibly medical supervision to bring them safely off of the drugs.
- **An accountability partner.** Every addict needs someone who will listen to them at any time, day or night, and encourage them not to listen to the lies their bodies tell them. This person needs to be someone who is not currently in the addiction cycle and who doesn't judge them when they relapse.
- **Separation from addiction triggers.** Every addict has triggers that puts their brain on the route to falling into the addiction. They need a period of time apart from these triggers, so they don't even think about using.
- **A new life and lifestyle.** An addict needs an opportunity to get out of the social group and setting that they have been living in. Once they leave that context, then they find themselves able to escape the social cycle that brings them back to their addiction as their only solution.
- **Activity.** All addicts need something to keep them occupied, so they do not focus on their needs or get tripped up by boredom.
- **Tenacity and determination.** An addict who remains clean is determined to not have anything to do with their addiction, even when struggling with crisis or depression.
- **Prayer.** Almost all addicts regularly seek God's help for release and find that this is an avenue for deliverance.

Interaction Tip: Giving Freedom for Freedom

Freedom from addiction is a personal decision. Someone cannot be forced, manipulated, cajoled or bribed into it. The addict has to know that freedom is what they want and they must be willing to do the hard work necessary to obtain it. Thus, all we can do is pray for the addict and give them opportunities for freedom. But only they will know when they are ready to go down the path to freedom.

A Hand Up Workers with the Homeless

Here is a general list of those who are concerned with the plight of the homeless, and who have ideas of what best to do with your street friend.

- **The homeless.** The main people who assist the homeless are the homeless. It is the chronic homeless who teach others how to survive on the street, how to protect oneself, and where to get assistance. Often the best resources for help are those who need to get the help themselves. Keep in mind that some of the homeless also try to take advantage of other homeless people to meet their own felt needs.
- **Social workers.** These are people assigned by various agencies to assist the homeless and the disabled. Their main task is to discover and provide resources to those for whom the resources have been designated. They usually work particular hours and cannot be contacted outside those hours or their place of business.
- **Mental health workers.** This is a specialized kind of social worker who is interested in the stability of those diagnosed with mental health issues.
- **P.O.** In other words, a “parole officer” or “probation officer”. This is a specialized kind of police officer, assigned to check on those coming out of jail or prison to assure the court that the former inmates are obeying the court’s orders. Homeless folks (with no alarm clocks or phones) can have difficulty contacting their p.o. on schedule; which often leads to the p.o. putting out a warrant on them.
- **Local police.** The police sometimes have a negative idea of the homeless, seeing them as criminals instead of citizens. Since the homeless are usually breaking local camping ordinances, they are technically breaking the law (although not usually by their own choice). There is often a lot of animosity and fear between the homeless and the police, but this can usually be set aside if the police speak kindly and with understanding to the homeless.
- **Pastor/church worker.** There are many churches that have ministries with the homeless, besides the Salvation Army. There are meal sites and shelters run by churches— the workers there are very interested in the welfare of those whom they serve. However, these workers also tend to be overworked and have a hard time taking anything else on their plate.
- **Judicial representatives.** Some folks, especially if they are committed by the court due to a mental illness, are temporarily assigned a representative of the court to mark their progress.
- **Service workers.** There are many who work for the homeless in various capacities, both for pay or as a volunteer. They often take a casual interest in the homeless, though some care more than others.

Interaction Tip: Contacting Workers

Most people on the street have a love/anger relationship with these workers, even if the worker is openly trying to be on their side. If you want to maintain a friendship with your street friend, ask before you contact one of their workers, even if you’re doing so on their behalf. This will help build trust and will help you to interact openly with the worker. Also, all social and medical workers are not allowed to share any information with you unless they have a signed release from your friend.

Riding A Roller-Coaster That Doesn't Stop

Avoiding Burnout

Working with people who are perpetually in crisis is some of the most difficult work possible. It is emotional, it pushes your boundaries and you are often questioning whether you did or said the right thing. This leads to long term stress, even stress that prevents one from continuing the ministry. This stress is called “burnout” and it is a serious issue for those who give themselves to work with the homeless. Even if you are only planning on working with the homeless part time, it is still important to give yourself safeguards so you don't overextend yourself.

One of the major reasons it is so important to focus on burnout is because of our emotional weakness. When we work with the homeless, we not only take on the concerns of folks who are in perpetual crisis, but we must still handle issues that crop up in our own lives, too. In ministry to the homeless and mentally ill, we often take on their emotions, their pain, their issues, as if we were dealing with them ourselves. We want to be empathetic, but we also need to know how to take care of ourselves so we don't have mental health issues.

Here are some tips:

- **Prioritize.** We need to look at our lives and determine where God wants us to focus, and give those things top priority. This will help us to spend more time on these things, while not neglecting the smaller, but also significant, aspects of our lives.
- **Set firm boundaries.** We need to know what our limitations are and stay within them. When we establish boundaries, we must be wise, looking to our own needs as well as those of the people to whom we minister. We should change these boundaries only after thought, prayer, and counsel, not at the spur of the moment. Keep to them, unless you have a good reason to do otherwise.
- **Recognize your own mental weaknesses.** We all have mental weaknesses, things with which we struggle but with which others don't. Personally, I have a social weakness—I have to have times without people. My wife freezes when there is visual chaos. These are small issues, not mental illness, but they are issues. We need to examine ourselves, find our mental weaknesses and then evaluate how to keep these weaknesses from ruining our effectiveness. Most of all, we have to own these weaknesses, not blame others for our feelings, and find ways to keep our weaknesses from hurting others.
- **Evaluate before ministry.** Before answering the phone, I find that I have to ask myself if I am ready to answer the phone. I want to make sure that, if it is a stressful call, I will respond appropriately. This is what we must do heading into any ministry situation if we can. In ministry, it is our responsibility to be like Jesus to those to whom we minister, so we should pray and evaluate ourselves to make sure we are able at that moment to truly be like Jesus and not act according to our flesh.
- **Enlist the help of a counselor.** It is important to have someone who understands the ministry we are doing and the overall life we are living, giving us recommendations. This person or persons (they need not be a professional counselor but should preferably be someone seasoned in the Lord and in ministry) can help us determine if we are overextending ourselves, how to prioritize our lives and set boundaries.
- **Establish a group of people with whom you can pray.** When dealing with constant crises, we need to have a small group of people we can call if we, or our street friend, need immediate prayer. This way, we can have God involved in our crises at a moment's notice.
- **Get enough sleep.** Yes, most of us can function on six hours of sleep. But we can't function well in a stressful situation. Since working with the homeless involves constantly being on call for any potential crisis, we need to regularly get enough sleep.
- **Eat well.** Our body becomes stressed if we don't eat enough or if we eat the wrong things. We should keep an eye on the nutrition we give ourselves, and not allow sugar or fats to rule our eating habits.
- **Take your vitamins.** When I first began working with the homeless, I was asked by one of my street friends, “Are you taking B vitamins? Everyone I know who is working on the street takes a multi-B vitamin.” The first few years, I didn't do this, but I later found that these vitamins are essential for the ministry! They help us deal with stress and give us energy. All of us involved in stressful ministry or work should all be taking a multi-vitamin daily, especially high in B's.

- **Make time for joy.** Besides sleep, we all need a break, especially to have some fun. To have times of joy isn't an option for humans; it is a necessity. If you find yourself getting too stressed, do something you really enjoy. Take a break.

Interaction Tip: Be Open About Limitations

Be open about your weaknesses and about some of the things you need to take care of yourself, especially if you just need some time. And if you are especially stressed or nervous and you feel that it might come out in your interaction with your street friend, just let them know. Make sure they know that it isn't their fault, and that you'll be fine next time.

Odds and Ends

Q and A

What if a homeless or mentally ill person is irrationally angry with me?

At some point, everyone is angry or gets irrational. Sometimes we are more afraid if a person who is mentally ill gets angry because we don't know what to do about it. But everyone who is angry wants the same thing: to be listened to and understood. If your friend is angry and you want to calm them down, try to understand what they are saying and tell them what you think you hear them saying in your own words. You could also try agreeing with some aspect of what they are speaking about, especially if you can't understand all of what they are saying. If the anger can't be abated, and it is severely disturbing your time together, then you might want to break off the discussion and get together another time.

What if they threaten me?

This happens very rarely, even with people who deal with the mentally ill every day. But it can happen. First of all, don't be afraid. Most people, when they threaten, just feel that their issues aren't being understood and that they need to do something extreme to get control of the situation again. Just as we do when someone is angry, we want to assure our friend that we do understand them and are on their side.

But the other issue we need to deal with is our own fear and instant reaction to being threatened. If we respond with anger and an attempt to control, we will escalate the situation, not defuse it. So it is good to think about these kinds of difficult situations ahead of time to consider what we would, could or should do. In this way we can respond—not in an unthinking manner, which may harm all involved—but in a way to defuse the situation. If, after the situation is over, you still feel fear, speak to your counselor or prayer group, ask for prayer and take the opportunity to express your emotion.

What if they physically attack me?

This is the fear of many who think about ministry to the homeless or the mentally ill, and it prevents some from truly entering into a relational ministry with the most needy. First of all, it must be said that the chances of being physically attacked is very slim. Statistics show that a homeless person or even a mentally ill person is LESS likely to cause a personal injury to another than a housed person. Nevertheless, even if you do everything you can to prevent misunderstanding, there is a possibility, however slight, that you might be attacked.

Like most everything else in any ministry, we know how we should react if we think about it and make a personal plan. The most important thing, whenever you are attacked by whoever, is to try to leave the situation behind. It does not help to attack back, nor to make the situation worse by insulting. Also, consider whether calling the police is helpful or not for the person who is your friend. As an alternative, you might want to keep handy the mental health crisis line in your area.

But most of all, do not be anxious that this situation might occur. People attack when they are in immediate fear of another. If you cause no fear, then you will not be attacked.

What if I can't support an important decision they make?

We need to remember, as strongly as we want to see people do the right thing for themselves, they are adults and they are in charge of their own decisions. If we see someone make a choice that we think will damage them, then we must tell them the damage we think they are doing to themselves. The important consideration in this, however, is how strongly we want to make our perspective known. If we state our perspective too strongly, then they will feel that we are demanding or sounding like a parent. So we want to communicate what we think, but not so strongly that it breaks our friend's trust in us.

What if they go back to their addiction?

As was stated above, our street friend must make their own decisions, and we can't stop them from doing that. But given this, we must remember a few things:

First of all, almost everyone who commits themselves to quit their addiction relapses. Sometimes the relapse can be for a long time, sometimes only for a short taste. This is not the end of the recovery process, but simply a part of it.

Secondly, if we cut communication and connection, they will see our relationship as a burned bridge, which makes it unable for them to return to you and get healing. Of course, we can't support them in their addiction, but we need to be ready to really help them and support them, especially as they continue the process of recovery, to which they will almost certainly return.

What if they decide to act in opposition to their social worker?

You may find yourself in difficulty if you are in contact with a social worker or court worker, and your friend does something in opposition to the requirements the worker gives them. The first thing we must remember is that we are connected to these other folks as our *street friend's FRIEND*. We are on their side, and will support them, even if they make decisions we don't find helpful to them. If we feel we must tell the social or court worker something, we should only tell them those things which we have told our street friend we will let them know. We should do nothing behind our street friend's back. This maintains the trust we have been given and makes sure we are not acting in deceit.

What if they talk about suicide or do something self-destructive?

We must always take self-destructive talk or action seriously. First, we must pray for God's wisdom. Then, we must discover how serious they are about self-destruction. Many of our friends with mental health issues talk about suicide, but have never made an attempt. This does not mean we ignore their plea, but we must remember that it could just be a plea. And if we call 911 for a simple plea for help, then they will never contact us with their crises again. Sometimes it is good to get them to talk and keep them talking until the depression eases somewhat (or until they get so tired that they just want to go to sleep). Sometimes referring to a suicide hotline is good, but that can't be the first thing we do, because they called us, not a stranger. But the most important thing to remember is that they are our friend, and we want our friend to live and not to die at their own hands. So we might have to take them to the hospital, or, if it is serious enough, we will need to call 911. Perhaps they will forgive us, perhaps they won't, but we will have saved our friend's life. And that is what ministry is about.

Horse-Skinning Time!

Other Ways To Help The Homeless

In this manual, I have emphasized people having a personal relationship with the homeless as the primary way of ministering to them because that is the most effective, most respectful, most loving way of service to the poor. However, there are many people who find this path of ministry impractical for them, even though they really want to help the homeless. Perhaps they are too busy with other tasks, perhaps they don't have the social skills or perhaps they are in an area where there are no homeless (or they haven't seen any, anyway!). Below are some other ways to assist the homeless:

Support someone who is in personal ministry with the poor. Devoting one's time to the poor and meeting their crises head on is a difficult ministry, and requires support. You could regularly check in on them and pray for them. You can be available for them to call if they need emotional support. You can find out if their friend has some needs that they cannot meet, but want to and see if you can help.

Regularly volunteer at a homeless shelter or kitchen. In any urban area there are many ministries for the homeless, and even then the needs are not met. You could volunteer at one of these ministries, doing some practical work that really helps them out.

Provide a ministry to the homeless with supplies. Ministries are always in need of supplies, such as coffee or clothes. Also, they could sometimes use other items that they don't usually hand out, such as hand warmers or breakfast bars. Be creative in your generosity!

Pray for the homeless. In your prayer times personally and in your community pray for the homeless. They need God's help more than anyone's, so please do not forget them before God.

Teach others the truth about homeless people. Part of the reason homeless folks are in such a predicament is because of what people assume they are doing or out of just fear of the unknown. Check out some of the resources on our resource page, learn what the homeless are really like and then tell others.

Buy street papers. If you live in an urban area, you have probably seen street folks selling papers. Please buy one from them! The papers are inexpensive and you are supporting a street person in their available occupation.

Give the homeless some work. As mentioned before, one of the greatest problems for street folks is obtaining paid labor. If you see someone with a sign and you want to help them, give them work to do and pay them for it. It could be cleaning up your yard, cleaning your car, even teaching you what it means to be homeless. Give them something to do to earn the money you give them.

Give to Beggars. Okay, this topic is complicated, so let's go on to a new section:

Bread On The Waters

Giving to Beggars

It can be a struggle to know what to do for folks who approach us for money, or who are holding a sign asking for support. We want to help, but we often don't know how. If we give them money, will they use it for drugs or alcohol? By giving them something, are we perpetuating their cycle of poverty? Is it better to give to an organization?

As the debate rages on, and we give neither to the beggar nor an organization that helps them, the one flying the sign is there on the street, in need. The rumors are not true—beggars do not make an excellent salary. A really good day might gain them thirty dollars. But normally, they might get ten or less.

As for alcohol and drugs, yes, some will spend the money they receive to get drunk. Others are hoping to get a place to sleep for the night. Others are just wanting to get a decent meal.

One thing we need to keep in mind, however, that a person begging is desperate for something. No one stands with a sign or approaches people for money unless they are desperate. It isn't exactly the best employment opportunity—one only takes it if other options are lacking. To beg is to face being ignored, disrespected and openly insulted. No one would take this as their job unless they are at the bottom of their options.

So what do we do? The choice that I have made is to carry around with me items that would assist the beggars, but would not be used to destroy themselves. Below, I have listed a few items that would be used to help a beggar, without any detriment. Some of these items we might have in our cupboards or closets. I just carry these items near my driver's seat, so I am ready to pass them out to anyone holding a sign as I'm passing by.

In this way, I am able to show Christ's mercy and love without any harm.

By the way, if you would like to hand out tracts to folks, or a list of meals in the area, they are only appreciated if a practical gift accompanies the paper. If you just give paper, that's a good way to encourage littering. But if you display Christ's love, they might assume that your offer of the gospel is sincere and not just someone else disrespecting them.

- Socks
- A friendly chat about the weather
- Breakfast bars or energy bars
- A hamburger
- A coffee
- A gift card to a local coffee shop
- A gift card to a grocery store (some stores have gifts cards in which you cannot buy alcohol with them)
- A sandwich (Food prepared at home might be refused by some, because they are concerned that someone might harm them)
- A bagged lunch
- Individual chips
- An individual juice
- Foot or hand warmers (you can buy a pack of six for pretty cheap, and they keep you warm for six hours)
- A small blanket (not too hard to carry with them)
- A kind word (Very rare in their business, and VERY welcome)

Besides this, the other thing I attempt to do is to talk to the person to find out who they are and what their specific needs are. Some folks are taken aback by this, but others really appreciate being treated as a human being and not just a post holding a sign (or a monster).

Conclusion

Bennies and Perks

Remember, God in Christ WANTS us to help the needy, especially the believers who cry out for our help. He will reward us if we do:

Whoever is generous to the poor is giving a loan to God, and God will repay his generosity with generosity!
Proverbs 19:17

*How fortunate is the one who acts on plans for the needy—
When trouble comes in his life, the Lord will deliver them.
The generous in heart God will carefully watch and preserve
This one will be declared to be God's blessed in this age
And she will not be overcome by those who cause him difficulties
The Lord will take care of him in illness
And You will restore her to health.*
Psalm 41:1-3

Live your life helping the needy, and God will be there for you in your needs!

Resources for Information about Homelessness

1. Information about homelessness

- Statistics from the National Coalition on Homelessness, updated regularly:
<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts.html>
- Myths and facts about homelessness:
<http://www.nhchc.org/Curriculum/module1/module1D/H3MythsandFactsaboutHomelessness.pdf>
- Homelessness in the United States: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness in the United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness_in_the_United_States)
- *Down on Their Luck* by David A Snow and Leon Anderson. A sociological analysis of street people.

2. Information about mental illness

- DSM IV: The basic clinical manual which defines various mental illnesses
www.psychiatryonline.com
- NAMI: National Alliance On Mental Illness. An organization which provides information and advocates for the mentally ill.
http://www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Inform_Yourself/About_Mental_Illness/About_Mental_Illness.htm
- New York Times: A collection of articles about mental illness
<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/health/diseasesconditionsandhealthtopics/mentalhealthanddisorders/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier>
- SAMHSA: The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration. A video about how a friend can support someone with mental illness. Also links with more info about mental illness.
<http://www.whatadifference.samhsa.gov/>
- *Helping Someone With Mental Illness*, Rosalynn Carter

3. Information about addiction

- Statistics about Drug addiction: <http://www.nida.nih.gov/Infofacts/Infofaxindex.html>
- Addiction Recovery Basics: Informative blog and articles about addiction
<http://addictionrecoverybasics.com/>
- Addiction and Recovery Blog: <http://www.addiction-recovery.blogspot.com/>
- *Addiction*: An HBO documentary series and book

4. Information about ministry to the poor

- Stories and tips on ministry to the homeless: www.pastoralblog.blogspot.com
- A theology of the disciple of Jesus being the poor www.anawimseekinggod.blogspot.com
- The Micah Declaration on incarnational ministry
- “Helping the Homeless” <http://www.allaboutgod.com/helping-the-homeless.htm>
- Manual for helping the homeless in New York. Some good “myth-busters”
http://wnyhomeless.org/sitepages/publications/education/Bufalo_Faith_Outreach_Handbook.pdf
- Blog for Church of the Woods, a homeless ministry in North Carolina. A variety of ideas that a church can do to help the homeless— <http://least-of-these.blogspot.com/>
- *54 Ways to Help the Homeless*, Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff. A very practical manual for helping the homeless, it is available online at: <http://home.golden.net/~msavage/ooc/54ways/overview.html>
- 50 Ways to Help the Homeless in Seattle. This list is specifically for King County, Washington, but it offers some practical suggestions: <http://www.radicalcongruency.com/20040103-50-ways-to-help-the-homeless>
- *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians*, Rev. Tex Sample

5. Where to search for practical helps in your community

Call a local group that you can find listed below. Ask them for a resource list for the homeless in your area. While many of the homeless folks you meet may already have the list memorized, many of them won't. Be aware, and so help the uninformed.

- Government resources for the homeless listed by state <http://www.hud.gov/homeless/hmlsagen.cfm>
- Catholic Worker Houses-- <http://www.catholicworker.org/communities/commstates.cfm>
- Homeless shelters Directory-- <http://www.artistshelpingchildren.org/shelters.html>
- Association of Gospel Rescue Missions directory-- <http://www.agrm.org/missions.html>