

First Hand About Homelessness – Irregular Class Discussions

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An efficient field for processing life experiences

If common life experience is a point of connection, then people having experienced homelessness always have an opportunity to carry out peers support work in an either informal or formal way.

But where do we find the community of homeless people? As lack and discontinuity of social connections is exactly one of the most characteristic concomitant phenomena of homelessness. Besides tangible help, emotional support is also very important in combating homelessness. This battle cannot be supported by the institutional framework of homeless services primarily because of the impersonality seen in mass services. Connections made between each-other in this environment while focusing on satisfying basic needs cannot be built on a really positive basis. Relations are not based on being touched by the personality of the other, but their maintenance is dominated by more pragmatic cooperation.

It is a difficult task to create a community of adult people who arrived to homelessness from various directions and experienced it on different levels; especially that belonging to the community is always based on voluntarism and personal motivation. What can be the basis, moreover a positive basis of a community of homeless people? Our program 'First Hand About Homelessness' shows that experiences gained during homelessness can be utilized as competencies in order to build a community of acceptance.

The inventor and leader of the program is a homeless person himself, see the Peer Guide p. x.

What is the program about in a nutshell?

We contact secondary school students whose value system is still being formed in order to sensitize them through meeting homeless experts by experience in person. We aim to reduce negative stereotypes. The 90-minute-long presentation is moderated by a homeless person; two peers share their own life stories with the audience. After this students can get an insight to the everyday struggle of homeless by playing a homeless person in a situational game.

Aims and structure of the program

The program has dual aims: first to sensitize host society, secondly to build a community of homeless people and improve their quality of living. Quality of living, subjective well-being greatly depend on the quality of human relations and the feeling of belonging, this fact has been proved by every psychological research. The drive and professional leader of the school program up today is Bill Bob, a homeless person who invented the program. We can firmly state that his community-focused advocacy and sensitization activity means his life. It is his

personality, his personal faith in the fight for a common goal and equal chances that makes this participative program authentic. This encourages other presenters who have also experienced homelessness to share their life stories with the host society openly and with dignity. The basic concept behind the program reflects his own approach that homeless people themselves should initiate social dialogue. Support workers, tools and connections of the organization are only used as a support to reach this aim. He takes part in selecting presenters, implementing trainings and presentations; the cooperating support worker can assist in the previously mentioned activities, focus on organizing and fund-raising tasks.

Acceptance plays a key role in developing one's quality of life. Our experience shows that acceptance becomes easy to practice by actors of the host society once homelessness becomes personalized and they have the chance to meet personal life stories. We have been receiving written feedback on very positive changes regarding the opinion on homeless people. During presentations presenters directly experience this accepting attitude, therefore they compete to get in to one of the upcoming invitations.

It is very important to focus on strengths when developing self-confidence. People who have experienced homelessness are real experts on the field; the knowledge is inside them. They only need some kind of communication and situation training in order to transfer this knowledge. A process enabling self-development takes place within presenters: by telling their life stories again and again, roofless presenters take part in a process developing their own personalities, keep working on themselves, reflect on their own situations and the road leading there. They are able to acquire their own story verbally and emotionally, too. They gain a greater and clearer reflection on their history and can control their past emotionally. In order to perform in the classes, they form the narrative well, make time limits, develop the text grammatically and give advice to each-other.

Audience of the presenters takes place in groups. Peers never judge the narrative; reflection on the story is only driven by the common goal, sensitization of the society. Thus concealment is never an aim even when some elements of the life story are in line with negative stereotypes (e.g. past or present alcohol abuse, making wrong decisions, etc.). The aim is that genuine homeless people facing themselves become initiators of a dialogue with the majority of society. By getting to know each-others' stories, they strengthen within their own peer community and are able to stand up in front of the mainstream society as well.

Through improved quality of life, feeling competent and experiencing acceptance homeless experts by experience will be more confident in the world, more open and active; this way take their lives into their own hands to a greater extent. By now none of the presenters live on the street, they regularly support each-other with donations. There have been cases when some of them stopped quit homelessness by moving to a rental together with their peer.

Skills and competencies developed during the program, see the [Infobox x., Peer Guide p. .](#)