Making Eye Contact with Homeless People Is Important

It’s free, and it makes a big difference for everyone

It’s something you take for granted every day. Connecting with people during a conversation, meeting their eyes, and feeling seen.

For you, it probably happens dozens of times a day, but for people living on the street, it’s a rare occurrence.

More often, people shuffle by quickly, looking absolutely anywhere but at the invisible person they’ve chosen to ignore.

It’s a common behavior, but what’s strange is the number of people who don’t fully realize what they’re doing. Stranger still is the people who think the other person won’t notice they’re being ignored.

The whole, “oh my, I’ve just received a very important text that requires my full attention for the next 30 seconds” routine isn’t as convincing as you think it is. Especially when it’s been done by the last 20 people who walked by.

Making eye contact with homeless people instead of ignoring them is safe, easy, and costs absolutely nothing. Once you get good, you can even throw in a smile, nod, or friendly wave.

It’s amazing how far a simple acknowledgment of another person’s presence can go toward helping that person feel seen rather than invisible and preventing dehumanization.

If you only ever do one thing to improve your interactions with the homeless people you meet, let this be it.

The Harm of Withholding Eye Contact

By now you might be thinking, “what’s the big deal?”

It’s hard to imagine that not engaging with one person on the street is causing any real harm. After all, you pass plenty of non-homeless people every day that you don’t acknowledge or make eye contact with.

You’re right that there’s little to no harm in one single person ignoring a homeless person trying to interact with them. It may be rude, but it’s not going to make or break anyone’s day.

But the thing is, it’s never just one person.

You can’t really appreciate the scale of the problem unless you experience it yourself. But most people behave exactly the same way, and the effect is cumulative.

Imagine a day where none of your coworkers would look at you, your family all ignored you when you tried to speak to them, and even strangers on the street went out of their way to avoid you.

How would that feel?

Now imagine it happening **every day**.

After a while, homeless people who are subjected to this treatment begin to feel as if they were ghosts watching the world but not able to fully participate in it. If they try to strike up conversations, their words fall on deaf ears. They’re ignored, dehumanized, and invisible.

Feeling Seen and Being Seen

What are we afraid of when we try to avoid looking a homeless person in the eyes?

As far as I know, there’s no super-virus that’s transmitted via eye contact, so it can’t be that.

Maybe it’s something less physical. Maybe we prevent ourselves from looking because we really don’t want to see.

When you engage with someone, even in the most basic way like making eye contact, you acknowledge your shared humanity. This is what makes the lack of eye contact so dehumanizing. But giving it also requires something of the giver.

It forces you to confront the fact that the person you’re seeing is a fellow human in a painful situation, which can trigger your own painful feelings. You also must acknowledge the broader societal problems that have put this person in their current situation.

Seeing a homeless person as a person can be confronting. You may feel empathy for their situation that was previously held at bay by reductive stereotypes. You may feel anger at the injustice of inequality and be moved to execute change. Processing all these things in the moment can be overwhelming.

It’s much easier to just shut your eyes, close your ears, wall off your heart, and keep on walking by. But as much as homeless people need to be seen, the rest of us need to see them even more.

While homelessness is a complex issue and each person’s experience with it is unique, the first spark of understanding comes during that initial experience. Before friendship, before conversation, before anything else, the very first step on the road to understanding is eye contact.

Allowing the other person to be seen and allowing yourself to truly see them is where it all starts.

So, the next time you see a homeless person, resist the urge to ignore them. Make eye contact. It’s quite literally the least you can do.