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Social Psychology
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The Day of Compassion

The origins of my Day of Compassion began many years before September 6, 2013.

My definition of compassion is when people open their heart to someone suffering and try to understand and help the sufferer feel better any way they can. For my Day of Compassion, I made plans to volunteer at a local drug rehabilitation center for women with children. I am normally a compassionate person, open to people from all walks of life... except this one. Being a child of a woman who was drug-addicted, I have long held certain preconceived ideas and reservations about putting myself into a situation like this one.



I have tried very hard to avoid the way of life I was exposed to as a child, and I've done a great job of keeping my children away from such environments. I have never tried drugs or felt their effects, except for the drugs I experienced in the womb, and I pride myself on that. But on the other hand, I have shut off a very important part of my life as well. I thought that by volunteering to help women who suffer as my mother did, I could develop more compassion and let go of some hate.

I waited in the waiting room of the drug rehab building with women who looked worn down and sorry. Some wept. Some looked angry. I sat with my hands in my lap and tried to not make eye contact; this was going to be harder than I thought.

I was eventually called to meet with a counselor and the volunteer specialist. They were both very nice and intrigued as to why I would choose such an emotionally challenging topic for my paper. As I explained my history and desire to use my background to help, not only that day but in the future if I could, they both softened and became more willing to let me volunteer. I went from being in the outgroup (where I wanted to be previously) to the ingroup, which gave me both scared feelings and confident feelings as well.

After completing some privacy forms, they showed me the room where women get signed in, and the detox room. They described their normal routine when a woman comes in and what happens after that. They asked me if I wanted to sit in on an interview, and of course, I was interested.

I sat in a cold metal chair as politely as I could. After being introduced as a college volunteer, I asked the woman if it was alright for me to listen. Once she granted permission, the interview began. I couldn't stop looking at the infant the woman was holding; he was fidgety, fussy, and overall just cranky. The mom was, too. As the interview proceeded, the woman had to sign some papers and asked if I would hold her son, who was outright crying by now.

As I took him in my arms, my heart broke. I was angry that he was addicted to the same drugs as the mother (through her breast milk) and that she continued to use drugs, but I was thankful that the mother was at least trying to get some help for her and her baby.

As I tried to comfort the baby—I am a mother of six—I began crying for the baby and his mother. I was this baby. She was my mom. All I could do was thank the mother for seeking help for the sake of her baby. Without tearing up, she asked for her baby back. I was in no emotional state to continue, and I left the room.

A little embarrassed, I returned to the lobby and tried to compose myself. A few minutes later, the counselor came out and sat next to me. She asked if I was okay and whether I wanted to continue or come back later. I wanted to continue; I felt so bad, but so good at the same time. I sat in on three more interviews and felt so much emotion that it was hard to sort it out.

I began to realize that addiction was more than a result of chemicals entering women's bodies; it was the result of a messed up line of thinking. It was a cover up. There were women from all walks of life who had made mistakes and needed help fixing them.

But don't we all? I started to warm to the women and even held the hand of one who needed support through the interview process. I handed out tissues and wiped tears. I went from trying to hide a scowl to giving a reassuring smile. By the time I finished, I was emotionally exhausted and was sent home with an invitation to join the volunteer counselors program they offered. I think I will.[§]

On my drive home, I noticed ordinary people who had lost their way and were sleeping under overpasses and in parks. I thought differently about them, realizing that I had been discriminating against those I didn't understand and giving them a label without even noticing it. Instead of avoiding and ignoring them, I felt compelled to understand their plight, listen to their stories, and point them in a direction to possibly get some help. I felt a little like the "Grinch Who Stole Christmas" and felt my heart grow three sizes that day.

I like the "me" after the Day of Compassion much better than the "me" before. I feel like I am on the right track to helping people and being more compassionate every day.

* Vanna Booker is a pseudonym used to protect the privacy of this student, who prefers not to be publicly identified.

[§] Epilogue: Approximately one month after the Day of Compassion, I began work as a regular volunteer at the drug rehabilitation center and am now on my way to becoming an addiction counselor. My life has changed dramatically since completing this assignment.