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Social Psychology
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You Matter

My work on the Day of Compassion assignment started out a little bit different. It began with an idea I had prior to this course, and it was something that took more than 24 hours to complete. Three months earlier, in the chilly month of December, I had been dealing with some difficult emotional issues. I had been feeling overwhelmed by many things in life, and it seemed like hate, fear, and anger had been in the driver's seat in society and at the forefront of many people's mind. I got the idea to help myself and others get out of this rut by spreading some compassion and love instead. To pay it forward. The saying "hurt people hurt people" came to mind at the time, and I didn't want to contribute to that dynamic. I wanted to be a part of the solution, not the problem.

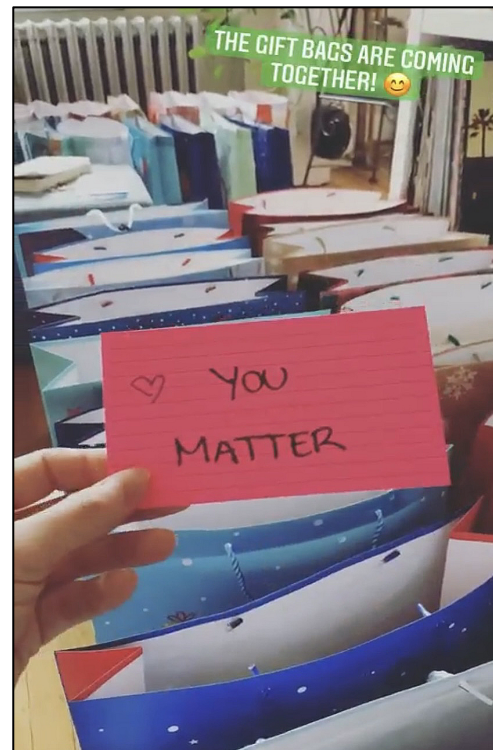
I decided to start a donation bin at my work and began collecting items myself to create gift bags for homeless people. Living in downtown Vancouver, Canada, it's easy to see that homelessness and mental health have become growing issues. With the state of the world today, and with COVID-19 intensifying these problems, this plan felt like the right thing to do.

Ultimately, I ended up creating 40 gift bags—20 for males and 20 for females—although I later learned that there are many more men on the street than women. I also learned that it took far more work than I anticipated to create this many bags with all the necessary items. Inside the bags, I put essentials such as toiletries, soap, socks, gloves, winter hats, snack packs with crackers, dried fruit, an orange, bottled water, chocolate, and so on.

I also put a note inside each bag that said "You matter."

Originally, these gift bags were supposed to be a Christmas season project. I had even set up the gift bags as large Christmas-themed bags. Unfortunately, I got COVID-19 in late December, which delayed some of my plans.

Things ended up working out perfectly, though, because I came across this online Social Psychology course in the midst of organizing the gift bags, and I saw there was an assignment called "The Day of Compassion." I thought, *how fitting is that?* I had wanted to make a difference in other people's lives as well as my own, and this course turned out to be a guiding light to do exactly that.



Fast forward to mid-January, when my dad drove to my downtown apartment to help me deliver the gift bags. This was my true Day of Compassion—a full day spent delivering 40 holiday gift bags to homeless people in Vancouver.

My father and I began by organizing all the bags and making sure each one had the necessary items inside. The bags with the most red on them were for women, and the bags with the most blue on them were for men. Then we loaded all the bags into my father's vehicle and drove to the area of Vancouver where I knew we would find many people in need.



As we drove down one of the main streets, I saw a young man who looked like he was around my age but appeared to be in pretty bad shape. I walked over to him with a gift bag in hand and asked, "Would you like a very belated Christmas present?"

At first, he looked shocked when I offered him the bag, but his expression quickly turned into a grateful smile as he said, "Yes, please. This is the only Christmas present I got this year."

That interaction alone made all of the work I put into this project feel worth it. As I walked away, I nearly had tears in my eyes and felt a real kinship with this man. With only a few words exchanged, we connected on a deep level, which I didn't expect to happen so quickly or easily.

As the day continued, we were able to deliver the rest of the bags. It was sometimes difficult to find people who needed them because it was so cold outside that there weren't many people on the street. We did, however, find a couple of camps that were good spots to distribute the bags. At one of these camps, I explained to a man that these gifts contained only basic necessities, but he responded by saying, "Every little bit helps—thank you so much!"

His words gave me a great sense of relief. I don't know why, but while creating the bags, I kept feeling as though I wasn't giving enough. As my father and I walked away from the camps, the whole group shouted its thanks to us—even those who were inside tents.

One of the last stops we made was in a run-down part of town. It had been hard to find women for the last few bags, but we came across a group of people who were huddled in one area of the street. I walked over, bags in hand, and asked, "Would you like a belated Christmas gift?"

Once again, a sense of surprise spread across their faces as I handed over the bags. One woman said to me, "Did you do this all yourself?" I replied, "Yes, and this is my dad who is helping me deliver them!" She smiled at me and said, "That's a wonderful thing you are doing. It's things like this that remind me that there are still good people out there. Thank you!"

Wow—what an incredible feeling that comment left me with! I hadn't expected the gift recipients to be as grateful as they were. Somehow, I figured that they had soup kitchens, shelters, and other resources to provide for them all year round. What difference would I make? In hindsight, it's obvious that I couldn't have been more wrong.

At this point it started to get dark out, so we dropped off a few last bags at a nearby women's shelter. When I returned to the car and sat down in the driver's seat, I felt as though I were high. The feeling inside me was almost like a drug. I kept replaying these beautiful moments from my Day of Compassion, thinking about the lives that we had touched.

Social Analysis

It's heartbreaking that the social norm is to see people living on the street and to ignore them as we go about our daily lives, often walking right past these people as though they're ghosts. Homeless people are grossly mistreated by the public and sometimes even the police. I see it all too often in my line of work as a police dispatcher.

Homeless people are also stereotyped and judged by the way they look and live. I know there are many factors that come into play when it comes to homelessness, but I believe that we could be doing much more to help than we do. At the very least, we should make a greater effort to avoid jumping to conclusions about their character.

Deindividuation could be avoided if we treated these people as fellow humans. This is why I included a note inside each bag to let people know that they're valued and being seen as an individual—as someone who matters, not an invisible person living in the shadows.

This experience was a reminder to me that we are all connected. We get so caught up in daily life and our own problems that we fail to see how much more is happening outside ourselves. In keeping with research on the bystander effect, we make excuses by saying that "someone else will take care of this," when in reality, each of us can intervene.

This experience has ignited a passion inside of me. I have even discussed with my family the idea of starting a tradition every Christmas to do the gift delivery together as a family, creating even more bags next year with a few more items that are much needed. Currently, our plan for next Christmas is that my mother will help me put the bags together, and my father and three siblings will help me deliver the bags.

A Few Closing Reflections

One thing this assignment made clear was that it doesn't take much to change someone's day. A simple gesture, a smile, or an acknowledgment is enough to put a spring in their step. These positive interactions are what each of us need in order to feel connected.

If we're deprived of human connection for long enough, we risk sliding into an all-consuming darkness. We don't need to be living on the street to be living in darkness. Something small that you take for granted may be all it takes to save someone's life.

In my case, helping strangers ended up being what I needed to get out of my own dark place. I thought that giving a gift to others might make me feel a bit better, but I didn't realize how much a single Day of Compassion could transform my outlook on life. For that, I am truly grateful.