

Empathy Exercise: Homelessness



A Day Without a Home: What Would You Do If You Lost Everything Tomorrow?

Imagine you lost your job, have no savings, and your landlord is evicting you at the end of the week. You have no family nearby, and your car just broke down. You're about to experience homelessness for the first time.

Choose Your Path: Make a choice *at each step* and reflect on the consequences.

Step 1: Eviction is Imminent- Where will you go?

- A) Ask friends to stay with them (they can host you for only 3 days).
- B) Try a local shelter (it's currently full).
- C) Sleep in your car (but it's unreliable and barely runs).

Step 2: Basic Needs- You haven't eaten since yesterday. What do you do?

- A) Visit a soup kitchen (but it's on the other side of town).
- B) Panhandle for money (risk being fined or harassed).
- C) Dumpster dive behind a grocery store (unsanitary, but immediate).

Step 3: Hygiene and Dignity- Where can you wash up?

- A) Use a public bathroom at a library (closes early) or beach.
- B) Try a day center or non-profit like "Showers of Blessing" (but you have no transportation).
- C) Go without (risk job interviews, illness, or stigma).

Step 4: Long-Term Options- You've been unhoused for a week. What's your plan?

- A) Apply for housing assistance (waitlist: 6 months).
- B) Find work (but you need a permanent address).
- C) Stay in a tent community (not allowed by local ordinance).

Reflection Prompts:

What surprised you about the choices you had to make?
What would be most difficult for you—safety, hygiene, isolation?
Did this change your assumptions about homelessness?

Optional Challenge:

The "No Couch, No Privacy" Challenge

For one evening, avoid using your couch, bed, or bedroom. Spend your time in a shared or uncomfortable space—like the floor, a kitchen chair, or your car (if safe).

Reflect: What did you miss most—comfort, security, or solitude? How might this affect someone's physical and mental health?

Quick Facts:

Over 40% of people experiencing homelessness are employed.
1 in 5 are children.

The primary cause: lack of affordable housing—not addiction or mental illness.

- For more information see: <https://bfi.uchicago.edu/insight/research-summary/learning-about-homelessness-using-linked-survey-and-administrative-data/>