

The Big Issue

The other week after an evening at the theatre, I was standing on a street corner scoffing down a falafel pita when a minor scuffle broke out. A few characters shuffled out of the way as a guy selling The Big Issue had a shouted rant at a passer by. We all averted our eyes. He stormed around the corner, took a few deep breaths, then went back and apologised profusely to everyone in the vicinity.

As he calmed, he walked towards us shaking his head, looking disappointed. I have always been attractive to the oddballs and downhearted in the world so I steeled myself for the inevitably weird conversation that was likely to follow. 'I am so sorry about that,' the young guy said. 'How are you?' My companion took the lead, replying 'Probably better than you mate, by the sound of it.'

The guy grinned wryly and continued to apologise as we reassured him. It turns out the guy he'd had the run in with had been following around behind him for around half an hour hassling him, saying things like 'Why would you buy the big issue? It's rubbish.'

The Big Issue seller was clear in his reasoning. He just wants to make a better life for himself and his family. They've had hard times and he's doing his best to change their fortune. It's sad that someone could treat this as an unworthy cause.

The homeless, as if they don't have enough problems, are often abused, both verbally and physically and somehow homelessness is seen as a self induced problem. Many people consider homelessness to be a result of alcohol or drug abuse and therefore an issue not worthy of attention. In actual fact, the biggest root cause of homelessness is relationship breakdowns. Substance abuse is

often a result of homelessness, rather than a cause.

Most of us are only a few missed paychecks away from being homeless at any given point in time, yet we struggle to meet eyes with the street people we see. We are one of the detrimental factors that feature in a homeless person's struggle. Homeless people often report feeling invisible, as most of us choose to look away, rather than confront what we could so easily become.

So what can we do? There is a natural reluctance to give money in case it is not used to the right effect. Most charities support this idea. Instead, give food items, soap, water, or even just recognition and remember that any outreached hand can be the cause of a life change. If you want to contribute in a meaningful way, look into local charities that focus on homelessness, and do what you can, whether it is a financial, skill, or time contribution.

My company supports a charity that works with the homeless, which is why I have been confronted with this issue. It forced me to think about why it is such a difficult issue to support and my conclusions that we somehow lay blame on the homeless. We make assumptions without ever testing them and we forget that these people are just that - people. They may have fallen on hard times, but in their place, wouldn't you appreciate some support in whatever form it comes?

Buy The Big Issue. It's two pounds that is well spent

