

Breaking a Frame of Reference

Category: Making Assumptions

written by Ahmad Shakeri | January 11, 2020

When you see one on the subway, get off. When one is coming your way on the sidewalk, cross the street. Despite being a progressive-minded student studying drug policy, this was my frame of mind about drug users outside the research lab. This frame changed after my time at Street Health.

Street Health is a Toronto harm reduction clinic—a nonjudgmental place for drug users to seek public health services. Some days I handed out needles to drug users outdoors, and others I did administrative work. One time, while doing rounds on a cold day at the park, I saw an unconscious man sweating, unusual given the weather. It hit me that I was witnessing an opioid overdose and I had to think fast. I rushed over and gave him a shot of naloxone. He made it.

Yet that first time delivering naloxone was not my most meaningful moment at Street Health. Most of my job involved interviewing patrons for data and learning of any requests they have for us. This was my first time speaking to drug users, and unlike on a subway or sidewalk, I couldn't avoid it. Listening to them, I learned about the many dimensions to their predicaments. For example, many told me about the difficulty of finding healthy food to eat, an issue that never crossed my mind until then. My most profound conversation was with one of the clinic staff, Jane. I wanted to emulate her empathy and professionalism. When I asked her how she was able to connect with drug users so well, she said, "Because I'm one of them." It was that moment when my mental frame fully shattered.

Through my work at the harm reduction clinic, I learned about the art of conversation and the urgency of overdoses. More importantly, I saw the necessity of abandoning assumptions and dispassionately listening to somebody's needs and stories. Not only is this the humanistic thing to do, it's also scientific. Only when we abandon our preconceptions do we become better problems-solvers and caregivers. For those in health care like me, the toils of those we study become data points to analyze in our ID-controlled offices. But many times there's a gap between our professional and personal views of those we help. And for me, it was my time in a harm reduction clinic that bridged it.

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