



Connecting People

Communication  
Across Barriers

## Breaking The Iron Cage of Poverty

### Tips for working with people who live in the crisis of poverty



Thank you for choosing a profession where you have opportunities to change lives for people living in the crisis of poverty. Your role in assisting people to discover talents, interests, resources and opportunities for moving out and staying out of poverty is critical. This handout provides tools and strategies to support your great work.

The first step to breaking poverty barriers is to examine our attitudes and beliefs about poverty and those who live in it. Your attitudes and beliefs will shape your tone of voice, your body posture, your facial expressions, and your actions. The Poverty Training by Dr. Donna M. Beegle, will provide you with education and tools for assisting people in moving out and staying out of poverty. This handout serves as a take away for you to take your learning deeper and to assist you in implementing proven strategies.

### Self-Reflection - Ask yourself...

1. What do you believe causes poverty?
2. Do you understand that your experiences and exposure to opportunities may be different than others?
3. Are you armed with facts about poverty to help you suspend judgement and understand people are making the best decisions possible from their perspective?
4. Are you willing to assist people who may believe and respond differently than you?

Understanding your own attitudes, beliefs and values related to poverty and the people who live in it, can assist you in building life-changing relationships. Seek to know the "why" behind a behavior you may not understand rather than judging. People respond to life in ways that make sense from their perspective. Once you understand, you are empowered to offer other solutions or opportunities. However, if you are judging, you can not connect. If you can not connect, you can not communicate. If you can not communicate, you can not eradicate poverty barriers.

# Four Tools Needed To Break Poverty Barriers

1. A deeper understanding of poverty and its impacts on people.
2. A Strengths Perspective Approach: Stand in awe of People fighting that evil villain poverty.
3. Operate like NASA: Failure Is Not An Option. If you can not connect people or resolve a poverty issue, who in your network or community might be able to? Use an “If not me, then who?” approach.
4. Build stronger partnerships within your organization and with community members. Breaking poverty barriers requires a comprehensive approach. What is in your hands to assist those you serve in moving forward? What obstacles are you not able to address? Rely on your full resource backpack (an inventory of who in your community may be able to assist people in moving out of poverty).

## The Meaning of Poverty

### What We Learn is Based on Life Experiences

The word “poverty” is used to describe many different life situations. Some people may be from generational poverty, others may be experiencing working-class poverty. You may meet someone who faces immigrant poverty issues or, our current economic crisis, situational poverty. Each of these life experiences shape people and present them with a view of what the world is like. If we take the time to listen to those we serve and understand how they see their situation or their “world-view,” we are in a better position for understanding and developing solutions that work to break poverty barriers. Below are some characteristics of different life experiences labeled “Poverty.”

### Generational Poverty

- Family has never owned land
- Never knew anyone who benefited from education
- Never knew anyone who moved up or was respected in a job
- Highly mobile
- High family Illiteracy
- Focus is on making it through the day

### Working-Class Poverty

- Working, but rarely have money for any extras
- Most do not own property
- Live pay check to pay check
- Few have health care
- Focus on making it two weeks or through the month
- Poverty seen as personal deficiency

## Immigrant Poverty

- Have little or no resources
- Face language and culture barriers
- Seem to do have a stronger sense of self and often do better than those born into poverty in America
- Poverty is viewed as a system problem

## Situational Poverty

- Surrounded by people who are educated or able to earn a living wage
- Attends school regularly and has health care
- Has crisis (health, divorce, etc.) and income drops
- Generally is able to make it back to middle-class
- Has not internalized the poverty as personal problem
- Does not recognize advantages of growing up middle-class
- Can be harsh judge of those in generational and working class poverty

# What Does Poverty Teach?

Many people living in the crisis of poverty are sent messages through their interactions that impact their perspectives of what is possible. Here are some of the messages taught to people living in generational, working-class poverty, and immigrant poverty:

- No one cares
- Everyone seems smarter
- People who are making it must be better than me
- We don't belong anywhere
- People like us do not get educated
- We don't have what we need to break out of poverty
- There is no one to help

# What are we taught about poverty?

Many approaches for breaking poverty barriers are based on stereotypes and as a result, they fail. We graduate people from college to become teachers, counselors, lawyers, judges, researchers, politicians and other professionals without Poverty 101. The number one teacher about poverty in America is the media! The media tend to present extremes, sensationalize and dramatize stories. Few Americans have had the course, "The History of Poverty in the United States of America." We don't know our history. We don't know models we have used to address poverty or even how we have come to our current understanding of poverty. Facts about poverty realities are rarely presented and therefore most people remain unaware of poverty realities in their own communities. This ignorance promotes stereotypes and leaves people with little or no real understanding of poverty or its impacts on people.

In spite of our lack of education about poverty, there are theories that provide strategies for breaking the iron cage of poverty. Below, I outline five theories and provide suggestions for how you, as a helping professional, can use them to break barriers.

1. **Take a Strengths Perspective approach:** Focus on and build on strengths.
2. **Use Resiliency Theory:** Treat people special. Show people what is unique about them.
3. **Asset Theory:** Become aware of what assets are in a person's life. Work to connect people to missing assets.
4. **Break the isolation of poverty using Social Capital Theory:** Help people build their address books and grow their networks.
5. **Beware of Faulty Attribution Theory:** When we attribute motive to someone's behavior, we set ourselves up for judgment and relationship breakdown. Believe people are making decisions and behaving in ways that make sense from their perspective. Seek to understand the "Why" behind behavior from the individual's point of view. Once you understand their perspective, you can share other ideas for responding to situations.

## Build Relationships That Matter: Mentor

It is the single most important action you can take. Below are four characteristics needed for mentoring people on their journey to move out and stay out of poverty.

1. Believe those you serve can get out of poverty with the right resources and opportunities. If you don't, they probably won't.
2. Tap into the knowledge and skills that people have and build on that. Everyone has strengths and talents. Discover what is right with people and what they do know.
3. Introduce those you serve to a network of people who have benefited from education or who have moved up in a job. Assist people in understanding that people who are making it are not "better" than they are, they are just people who have had different experiences and opportunities.
4. Give information, examples, and supports to build internal (self-confidence, hope) and external capacity (knowledge, gas, transportation, etc.) for moving out and staying out of poverty.



### Dan with Austin

We live in a world of "It's who you know." No one gets educated or moves forward without help—For some—

**You are the HELP!**