



Why Kindness makes ALL the difference | Tammy Banks | TEDxHolgateWomen

(Applause)

In June of this year, I was in Parliament, working as part of the Committee of Standards. I am one of seven independent members who assess, adjudicate, and sanction MPs who break the code of conduct. There are seven members and seven parliamentarians on the committee. This had been a particularly difficult meeting – it was challenging, intellectually and emotionally draining.

I completely disagreed with the perspective of one of the MPs. I used reason and rationale and pulled from every bit of evidence I could hold onto. It was one of those moments when I knew I had done my absolute best. You know those moments – it might be when you bake an amazing cake and stand back proudly, or when you achieve a great score in exams or excel in a sports match. When you know you have given it your all, this was one of those moments for me.

So, I was walking through King's Cross station – to be fair, I was gliding! I had a huge smile on my face, dressed smartly, makeup perfect, pulling along an eye-wateringly expensive laptop case. I felt proud of myself – the epitome of a professional. Then I saw her. She had greasy blonde hair, was dirty, dishevelled, and clearly intoxicated. She was struggling with a huge suitcase.

I couldn't move. I felt sick. I followed her into a shop, not believing my eyes. When she came back out, I stood there and quietly said, "Abby." She turned and looked at me, a flicker of recognition in her eyes. She took in my appearance and said to me, "You've done well for yourself."

Suddenly, I was 16 again. Twenty-two years previously, Abby and I had lived in the same homeless hostel. I remember the day I met her. It was my 16th birthday, the day I moved into the hostel. I walked in with my shoulders back, my head held high, and a big smile on my face. But inside, I felt sick; I was petrified. I can tell you now that I didn't want to live anymore. I had been sleeping on the streets, and the night before, I had been assaulted. Yet, I still had my mask on – pretending I was okay. Abby was standing there, hair similar to mine and a smile that disarmed me. She just said, "Hi, I'm Abby. Welcome."

You might wonder what this story has to do with you today. I want to use this extreme example to explain the small, incremental steps I took to make huge changes in my life and how you have the power to help others make that change.

I'm really lucky to be standing here today. I have my wonderful children in the audience, an amazing husband, friends, and I run my own training company. Things are going well for me. But Abby and I are in very different positions right now. She is sleeping rough at King's Cross station. She's addicted to heroin, and her three children are being cared for by others. Yet, 22 years ago, we were in the exact same situation.

So, what changed? Connection, environment, and opportunity. When these elements work together, they are absolute game-changers. And there was one person who started the domino effect that changed my life.

When you're 16, vulnerable, young, and hopeless, you do everything you can to survive. I won't go into the details, especially with children in the room, but Abby and I did what we needed to do to get by. After a particularly tough night, I found myself storming into a local college. Education had been my safe place during my younger years, amidst an abusive childhood. So, after that night, I stormed into the college and insisted they enrol me. You can imagine a 16-year-old swearing, shouting, "Enrol me! I want to join this college!" No surprise, I was marched out by security.

But luckily, a woman named Jane followed me out. She quietly asked if I knew what an appeal was. She told me her name was Jane and that she would help me appeal on one condition: that I engaged positively in her lessons. Then she walked away.

I was furious. Up until that point in my life, adults always wanted something or were abusive and exploitative. And here was this woman offering me a chance for nothing. Over the next couple of weeks, Jane gave me hope. I eventually went back to the college, though I didn't have the confidence to find her, so I just hung around, hoping she'd find me. And she did. That was the beginning of my new life.

Jane started a positive connection for me. She gave me the opportunity to change my environment. During the day, I attended college – sometimes engaging, sometimes not. Jane would let me sleep at the back of the class because she could see the bags under my eyes and the bones through my skin. At night, I was still doing what I needed to survive. But when others in the hostel slept off the previous night's activities, I was at college, learning.

Now, you might be thinking, "Lucky her, she must have been grateful for the opportunity." I can tell you now, I wasn't. I was angry, ungrateful, and difficult. I was not an easy 16-year-old. But Jane's unwavering kindness, arranging therapy sessions, speaking to my other teachers before I had a lesson with them, and asking them to look out for that spark in me – that part of Tammy that wanted to grow and achieve – was transformative.

She helped me build positive connections, changed my environment, and provided opportunities. Those elements – connection, environment, and opportunity – are absolute game-changers when they work together.

We're human beings; we're social. As John Smith from Good Therapy says, "All we want is to belong, to be loved." I have seen in my personal and professional life that when people don't have that connection, they can be exploited, drawn into radicalised groups, or take paths they'd never have considered.

I didn't belong at college. I felt out of place. But my invisible suitcase – filled with stereotypes, biases, experiences, and values – was slowly being changed. A positive environment is so important. And opportunity is key. For some, opportunities are massively unavailable. One of the hardest parts of being homeless was feeling invisible, like nobody noticed or cared.

The welfare system should be set up to help, but instead, it labels and demoralises. Jane started the domino effect. Abby didn't have that. My sliding doors moment came when Jane asked if I'd ever thought about going to university. I laughed in her face. University seemed unattainable. I didn't know anyone who had ever been to university. But 22 years later, I have a degree in psychology and multiple postgraduate qualifications.

If Jane had made me choose between college and the homeless community, I'd have chosen the homeless community – it was where I felt connected and seen. But through my hybrid life, step by step, I realised I could belong to something else. Jane was a superhero in my story, but she had a hundred sidekicks: other college tutors who smiled, police officers who looked the other way because they knew a criminal record wouldn't help me, shopkeepers who reduced items so I could afford them, and those who left food out for me.

There were thousands of sidekicks. Their kindness and belief made the difference. What does this have to do with you? I'm using an extreme example to show you how people's kindness, seeing beyond stereotypes and judgement, changed my life.

We all feel powerless in the current political climate, but you absolutely have the power to make change. Whether you care about individuals struggling or the impact of poverty on society, you can be the one to make a difference.

There are 302,000 people sleeping on the streets right now, 84,000 people in prison, and drug-related deaths are at their highest level ever. If you can feed yourself, keep warm, and support your family, you live a comparatively privileged life. I implore you to recognise that and see the people who struggle.

You could be a superhero like Jane if you share connection, opportunity, and environment. But if you can't, don't worry – she needed sidekicks too, and that's every one of us, every day.

I know life is overwhelming right now, and my example is extreme, but let's look out for each other. It isn't a competition; it's about us all living our best lives. I want two things from my life: for my girls to never doubt my unconditional love for them and to stop the cycle of abuse for as many people as I can.

I'm asking you to recognise that with every smile, kind word, and act of inclusion, you have the power to make a difference every day.

Thank you

(Applause)