

If Your Home Makes You Sick, And You Have to Leave With Nowhere To Go

by J. Camphill

Many people with severe chemical or electrical sensitivity have to leave their homes, with no good place to go to. Various degrees of homelessness are common among the environmentally ill, as it is very difficult to find housing.

Sometimes temporary housing is needed while modifying an existing home, or building a new one.

There is also the problem of what to do with all our worldly belongings, while we are trying to find a permanent place to live.

People

When catastrophe strikes, we often have to rely on other people to help us — friends, family and strangers. Many of us get very surprised by how people react in this situation. People we think are reliable, who will be there for us when we are down, are often the ones who step away. And sometimes people we hardly know step forward. Be prepared for rude surprises and do not rely on just one person — it is not fair to that person and people do get tired of helping after weeks or months.

People who have never experienced a personal catastrophe — and most have not — may have a hard time relating to what is happening. This is especially so if they cannot see the problem with their own eyes. It is very easy to close the eyes, shrug that there really isn't much that can be done, and get on with something else.

What to do with your stuff

Think deeply about what to do with your belongings before taking off. It often takes years to arrive at a stable situation where we can have a place to keep our things.

I have met people who simply had to send their key to a realtor, asking them to sell the house and everything in it. In my own case, I expected to be back from treatments in Texas after two to three months, but I never came back. After three months, I got friends in the Midwest to empty my apartment and store my things in their basement. I gave them all my nice furniture, the expensive stereo, TV etc. It took years before I was in a stable situation again, and asked to get my stuff

shipped out. If I had rented a commercial storage space, there was the risk of contamination from the frequent pesticide spraying most such places do. Also, I could not afford paying rent for years — at that time I only had a couple months left before I no longer had any income.

Other EIs have used commercial storage units and had good luck eventually finding ones that are not sprayed. The ones that open directly to the outside are usually preferable.

Before you take off, I would suggest you throw away a lot of stuff. Then pack the rest in plastic crates (available from Target, K-Mart and Wal-Mart) or steel trash cans (from hardware stores, make sure to wash them in hot, soapy water first) so they are easy to move around and can be stacked. Do not use cardboard boxes, they can more easily break or get wet, and those who store your things may not be as concerned as you would be. Pesticides and other fumes can also get through cardboard more easily.

When you are able to take the things back, you may not be able to go get them yourself. If the things can simply be put on a pallet, a trucking company can pick it up, which is much cheaper than a moving company.

Use crates that are NOT transparent. If the people who handle or store your things cannot easily see what is inside, it is less tempting to borrow it. And once people start to borrow your things, they may become contaminated, lost or simply be absorbed by the household.

Try to limit the time someone has to store your things. People might start getting irritated after a year or so.

If you store in someone's basement, make sure they understand that it could be years before you can come back or send for it. Of course, it is a hard thing to admit that possibility ourselves. Perhaps divide the things between a couple of people.

Packing is not a fun thing to do when one is too sick to even live there any more. Think about whether it is worth the exposures. A complete loss of one's possessions is not as bad as it sounds, a lot can be replaced and they really are just things. This illness makes many of us unmaterialistic anyway, and we often end up throwing most of the things out once we do get them back, especially books and clothing. Focus on the things that are really important, like family pictures and grandmother's heirloom needlepoint.

Where to go

There are a number of places in Florida and around Dallas, Texas, that rent rooms to EIs on a weekly or monthly basis, but their rents are very high. None of the places seem very suitable for the severely electrically sensitive. These expensive places can drain you dry of money, and once you are out of money your options are much more limited. So don't stay too long in those places in the hope that you'll be better in another couple of months. It rarely happens.

When looking for a more permanent place to settle, it is best to try a variety of settings to see what works best. Some EIs do best in the mountains, others on a lake or by the ocean, or in the dry desert. Some people who are extremely sensitive to vegetation do better in cities with less vegetation, though some cities have extremely high pollen counts in the spring, due to non-native plants people have imported. Tucson is one example.

It is best to try out places at different times of the year. Maybe the winter is too cold or the summer too hot, or the spring has too much pollen.

If you have great support where you are, consider staying there, but be realistic whether this support can be depended on next year, too.

Mobile homelessness

The mobile homeless usually live in their car, van or truck. It is a hard way to live and should be avoided whenever possible. Don't expect to recover while living in a car.

Most EIs drive older vehicles, as time makes the interior more tolerable. But it rarely becomes really good, especially in hot summers. But over time we get used to the smell and do not notice it, even though it is not so good for us. Older cars also tend to have worse exhaust and leak oil. Combined with the traffic fumes, daily exposures do take their toll.

A car is not a good place to sleep, as only short people can stretch out. That makes for a less restful sleep, which is essential for getting better. People sleeping in awkward positions for longer periods of time also tend to get back problems.

A van or a truck can be much more comfortable, and also may have more room to store belongings and food. A pickup truck can be outfitted with a shell to cover the bed, which can then hold a mattress. Such shells are usually made of fiberglass and can often be bought used so they are off-gassed, but may have been pesticided. A used shell can sometimes benefit from being washed. A few places

will custom build a shell from welded aluminum, which should need minimal off-gassing, unless sensitive to aluminum.

A cargo van has less upholstery and already has a big open space to sleep in the back, so it may be a good type to look for.

Old vehicles have breakdowns, sometimes requiring being in the shop for days, and then where to sleep in the meantime is a real problem.

Obtaining a usable tent is very difficult. New ones are very toxic and take years to off gas. Old ones tend to be moldy. Canvas tents are available, but they tend to be bulky, smelly and get moldy fast, even in the desert. Some people have bought untreated nylon and sewn their own tent.

Camping trailers are also very difficult. It takes at least a decade to off-gas the formaldehyde and other chemicals in a new one, and by then they are usually leaky, moldy and generally falling apart. The Airstream and Avion vintage trailers hold up well, but they are invariably moldy.

It is an enormous job to clean up a moldy Airstream. It includes removing the inner walls, which is a very labor-intensive process, taking months of work. Some people have had reasonable good luck by totally stripping a trailer, including the inner walls, and only use the hollow shell as a movable room, without any plumbing.

Homeless in the city

Being a mobile homeless is a very stressful living situation, as one often will have to hide from security guards and the police, and may be awakened several times at night by activities outside. It is also difficult to maintain a good diet.

Some are able to arrange with a friend or a family member that they can come in during the day to take a shower, eat and do laundry. For those who are not so lucky, it is a huge problem to get clean clothes and a decent shower. One usually has to use restrooms in fast food restaurants, hospitals and shopping malls. As fragrances and other airborne pollution from the stores and restrooms cling to the clothes, there are a lot of chronic exposures in this way of living.

The mobile homeless are constantly having to move around, unable to stay permanently in one place. Especially so in a city, where the police will often be called to chase one away. It is important to be inconspicuous while sleeping in the vehicle. In a city, people have better luck staying in parking ramps, large

shopping malls, hospitals and by all-night restaurants. One EI has spent a lot of time watching TV in hospital waiting areas.

Cops can be friendly and helpful. Ask if they know of a suitable place to park for the night. You may get surprised. Some charities help the homeless and may offer a place to sleep in the car.

One EI slept in front of a K-Mart in Chicago for two years before being thrown out. He then put an ad in the newspaper looking for a driveway to rent at night — it's perfectly legal to sleep in a car in a private driveway. He did find one, but it only worked until they started doing aerial spraying for mosquitoes.

Downtown areas may have less spraying and lawn chemicals than in the suburbs, simply because there is less vegetation. The air pollution is often much less in evenings and on weekends.

Homeless in the country

Others prefer to stay in the country, where the air is cleaner and the EMF exposures are much lower. But it can be extremely lonely and boring being out there all alone.

Options for country homelessness include staying in campgrounds, at truck stops, around rural highway exits and on public lands. It is generally permitted to camp anywhere in national forests, as long as it is largely out of sight. Camping in national parks, national monuments and state parks is by permit only, and usually only in campgrounds.

Campgrounds can be expensive and the restrooms may not be usable. The activities of the other campers can often be a problem, such as their use of bug spray, fragrances, barbecues and campfires. Don't expect any willingness to accommodate your needs, but expect to have to go for walks sometimes, until the air clears. Choose a campsite carefully, and best late in the day, when most people have arrived.

Parks may also use pesticides to control mosquitoes, invasive plants and lawn care, and the staff is rarely able to answer questions about their recent and future use of these chemicals.

Some campgrounds can have high levels of ground currents from poorly installed and maintained electrical pedestals at their campsites, or even their sewage plant. In non-electric campgrounds, RV-campers may use generators, which are noisy and perhaps stinky.

Some campgrounds will not allow people to just sleep in their car, to discourage homeless people from staying there. This could be circumvented by using a “decoy tent”, i.e. a tiny tent put up just for show.

Most campgrounds will only allow campers to stay for two weeks at a time, but may not enforce it if the place is not running full. One EI woman was able to stay at the same campground for 1¹/₂ years with her little trailer.

Make sure to camp so people cannot run into you with their cars during the darkness. Place your car between you and any access.

Primitive camping is generally safe, especially when staying where nobody can find you. One EI woman was murdered in New Mexico in 1998, while camping on empty land next to a development. Neighbors heard the gunshots, but it didn't save her. A pepper spray is a good non-lethal weapon to keep with you. If you decide to pack a gun, learn how to use one, or it will be no help at all, possibly even being used against you.

Truck stops may be usable, if parking upwind from the many idling diesel engines. Be aware that the wind often changes around sunset.

In agricultural areas, look out for sprayings of the fields, both from tractors and airplanes.

Primitive camping also means no access to a restroom nearby. It is often possible to find a usable one at a rest stop or fast food outlet, and drive there once a day to wash up in a sink. Some truck stops have showers, which often have private rooms with their own ventilation duct, so other people's fragrant shampoos are not such a problem. Of course, it is a lot of driving to get to a bathroom — learning to squat is a very valuable skill.

Mobile homeless EIs tend to migrate south to warmer climates. Such places as low elevations in southern Arizona and around Big Bend in Texas are good choices. Others have stayed around lake Mead near Las Vegas and in the towns along the lower Colorado River. BLM has many primitive RV sites available for winter use around Blythe and Quartzsite. Some EIs head south into Mexico.

These places are great most of the year, but they are very hot during four months of the year. Heat stroke is a very real possibility, especially when living outside in these areas where shade is hard to find. Migrating north may be a good idea for the summer, either to the mountains in northern Arizona and New Mexico, or further north.

It may be possible to maintain a decent diet by using a “5-day” cooler and a small propane camp stove, if camping outside a city. Using a camp stove could attract attention in a city parking lot. A “five-day” cooler really only works well for two or three days in the summer, so it is necessary to find a place nearby to get fresh ice and food. Dried fruits and nuts are good camping foods and delicious meals can be made in a single pot by first cooking a batch of grain and then adding a can of beans or chili, for example. Our individual food needs vary, but with some thought and creativity, a lot can be done.

Laundry is also a big problem in the country. See if you can make an arrangement with a friend or a fellow EI. Some EIs wash their clothes while taking a shower, simply by stomping on them. Clothes can also be washed in a bucket.

A clothesline can be strung between two trees, or your car and a picnic table. A clothes dryer is really unnecessary for most of the year, and those at a laundromat are bound to be contaminated by dryer sheets.

Temporary housing

If you can find a permanent place to hang out, things can get a lot more comfortable. This can be outside the house you can no longer live in, an empty lot you lease or purchase, or the yard of a good friend.

Be careful jumping at the “good friend” solution right away. Even the best friendships can tear after a year in the same place. It is impossible to know in advance how an old relationship will handle a totally new situation. There are often surprises.

If staying on somebody else’s property, be aware that ANY fixed improvements you pay for belong to the property owner.

A common method is to simply live on the porch of a house, and only go inside to use the bathroom and for various chores. Perhaps also when the weather is really bad. This may not work with other people living in the house, especially if you are electrically sensitive (EMF is not stopped by walls).

A porch can be improved in various ways. If it is an open porch, it can be enclosed to better protect against rain and storms, while maintaining good ventilation. But do not make it so tight that it really inhibits ventilation. A fancy method to do this is to mount big windows, using metal framing that does not need to be painted.

Cheaper and more temporary setups can be done with cotton windbreaks on simple wooden poles (unless it's a windy climate), or purchase about a hundred concrete blocks and stack them up as a wall. If stacking concrete blocks, be aware that they are very heavy, this will probably only work on a concrete slab, not a wooden porch. It is also very important to make sure the stacked wall is stable and will not tip over, possibly injuring someone. This is done by not making it higher than about five feet and also not having any straight runs longer than five feet. The wall must have at least two ninety-degree turns for stability. There must be one at each end to make it stable. You may also have to smooth them a bit. Test the setup by pushing on it, before trusting it.

Another option is to purchase a steel garden shed and put it up to sleep in, or to spend time in during the day. These sheds seem fine with most EIs after a week or two out of the box, though it can take months for extremely sensitive people. It may help to wash them inside and outside with hot, soapy water. They are available as kits from many building supply stores and hardware stores and can be erected in two to three days by a good handyman. It is best to put them on a concrete slab, but it is possible to do a simpler setup with a foundation made from a ring of concrete blocks filled with cement. The floor could then be bricks, concrete blocks on their sides or similar. Expect to pay about \$1,000 for such a project.

These kits are somewhat flimsy. It is absolutely imperative to anchor them well to a foundation, and also to brace the walls with a horizontal piece of lumber (a 2x4 works well). Several people have seen their shed take off like a tumbleweed or have the walls severely damaged by high winds. These all-important measures should be done as part of the erection of the shed.

A garden shed can be somewhat insulated with Reflectix or Astro Foil, which is "bubble wrap" encapsulated in aluminum foil (mylar), that most EIs do well with. Available from many building supply places. Don't expect it to be a cozy place in hot summers and cold winters.

A car port can be purchased as a kit and erected in a day or two. They tend to be larger than the garden sheds, but do not give much protection against wind and driving rain, even though some can be bought with optional steel sides. Some models are also available with a shed in the end. Car ports are very hot in the summer, with the sun baking down on the steel roof, and they are very difficult to insulate as the wind would tear down the insulation. Steel car ports are available from many building supply places, as well as Wal-Mart. The stores often offer to send a crew out to erect the kit in a single day.

For a more elaborate setup, one can combine the porch, shed and car port with sleeping in a van, truck, car or trailer.

If one does not have the luck of having a house available as a service building, there are other options.

An old not-too-moldy trailer could be purchased, somewhat inexpensively, and only be used as a bathroom. Most of us can tolerate a moldy place for a few minutes at a time.

Do not use such a moldy trailer for storage of clothes or other things that can get moldy. Some EIs have brought moldy clothes into a new home or a safe vehicle, and then contaminated the space with mold spores.

It is also not realistic to remove the mold, or any fragrances. Also, be aware that many trailers have been pesticided. It can help some to cover contaminated areas with aluminum foil or Tu-Tuff plastic, held in place by aluminum tape, but it'll very rarely be good enough to live in.

It would be necessary to have a septic system, or other approved sewage system. These are expensive to install, and take time, including inspection. If there is a septic system close by, a special sewage tank on wheels can be purchased from many RV stores. One then has to empty the camping trailer's holding tank into the sewage trailer, roll it to the septic tank and dump the contents into it. This is fairly simple and does not involve pumps or anything fancy. It is used by many RV'ers who like to stay at the same campground for many days, and do not want to have to move their whole rig when their sewage tank gets full.

In many cases, it is possible to drain the water from the shower directly to the outside, so there is longer time between having to empty the sewage tank. This is called a gray-water system.

A septic system costs around \$4,000 or so, while an old-but-working trailer may be possible to find for a couple thousand (look for "hunter's specials").

There are water-less composting toilets available, which do not require electricity. I have never used one of the household models, but I'm told that they do not like cold weather, they need to be in heated space. I would not want one to be in my living space. But they would probably work well for a separate shed, which had a heater inside. The electric models have a heating element inside the commode, which can be turned off before entering. A composting toilet is cheaper than a septic tank, but still costs around a thousand dollars.

Then there is the basic outhouse, which is still used around the country, and is actually legal in some western counties of the United States. A simpler and more temporary version is the sawdust toilet, which is a bucket one covers with sawdust, wood chips or sand after each use, and then empties onto a compost pile when full. An excellent book about this method is *The Humanure Handbook* by Joseph Jenkins. Some stores sell a portable camping commode (sometimes called a “hassock toilet”) for around \$25, which is very suitable.

We all hope such a primitive setup is temporary and short, but some of us are not so lucky and it stretches out into years. It is hard to make a decision on whether to shell out real money for a more comfortable setup. Some of these things could be combined with a building project, or whatever makes sense in the situation. I’ve seen various ways people have gotten by until things can improve.

There are healthy people who live that way to get away from it all, and not needing a steady job. There are several books about such a lifestyle. One very entertaining one is *Rancho Costa Nada* by Phil Garlington.

Resources

Astro Foil (“bubble wrap”/aluminum insulation):

Heartland (316) 265-6712

Many building supply stores

Tu-Tuff (very tolerable plastic in rolls)

Sto-Cote (262) 279-6000

Untreated nylon:

Seattle Fabrics (206) 525-0670

The author wishes to thank the five people who commented on the draft of this article, drawing on their experience of being homeless for an extended period of time.