Picture a disheveled woman in her 30s or 40s on her knees, begging for money or food.

Picture a put-together woman in her 30s or 40s, flat on her back, having just fallen on the sidewalk.

Both need help. Only one gets it. Guess which one.

I witnessed both situations in the past several weeks on my walk to and from work at the Tribune Tower on Michigan Avenue.

One evening in early fall, as I approached Ogilvie Transportation Center, I saw a woman in jeans and a T-shirt on her knees, pleading "Please! I'm so hungry. Please! Please!" Dozens of rush-hour commuters blew right past her. I was among them.

A couple of weeks later, on my walk to work, I waited to cross Randolph Street. I saw eyes dart and heads snap to the attention of something behind me. I turned around and saw, about 10 feet away, a woman dressed like the rest of us, for work, lying on the sidewalk. She'd fallen. Several people rushed over to her. I was among them.

The woman lay in pain, saying her arm hurt. We stayed with her, asking what we could do.

After a couple of minutes, we helped the woman up, and she was fine. She thanked us, and we went on our way.

"The city that cares," quipped a man in our group.

I wondered about that. As I walked, I wondered why I and others had been so quick to help the woman on her back but not the woman on her knees. Had I been too focused on catching my train? Had I ignored her because I didn't want to feel her kind of pain?

I consider myself a friend of the homeless, giving time, money, food and clothing, perhaps because I spent much of my childhood poor. A grandparent or family friend often was the only thing that kept our family of four from sleeping in our pickup truck.

So why did I help the woman who fell but not the woman who begged?

Maybe, in the case of the woman who fell, I simply reacted in the moment to something I rarely see — an adult lying on the sidewalk.

Or maybe I better relate now to a middle-class person — and more specifically, a middle-class person in pain. A couple of years ago I slipped on the ice, landed directly on my back and lay alone on a suburban sidewalk for a minute or so, a slight taste of blood in my mouth.
I can’t explain the action and inaction of the others. But researchers think they can.

"If somebody slips and falls on their back, it’s easy for people to envision that happening to themselves," said J.D. Trout, a professor of philosophy and psychology at Loyola University Chicago. "The way that people take the perspective of others will in good part determine how they react to a situation like that."

Researchers say it’s about empathy — the ability to take the perspective of others and to vicariously experience the feelings of others — and about the judgments we make. We often base those judgments on our ideas about personal responsibility.

"If you think the person needs help due to some fault of their own, it really ticks people off," said Linda Skitka, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Whereas, if they make an attribution that there’s some external factor outside their personal control, people feel very sympathetic and rush in and help."

Skitka pointed to a late-1960s study involving two New York subway scenarios — a man with a cane who appeared ill and a man who appeared drunk. Both men would fall to the floor of the subway car. Bystanders more often and far more quickly helped the man with the cane.

Some would say that my two scenarios differ too much to compare. A noted ethicist told me so in an e-mail.

"The woman who falls is clearly a different case," said Peter Singer, an author of numerous books and a professor of bioethics at the Princeton University Center for Human Values. "It is clear we can help and hard to see what bad consequences could follow from doing so."

I asked him whether we needed to work to establish empathy.

"Empathy with others is the starting point of an ethical approach, but it does not tell us the best way to act," he replied. "We should have empathy for the homeless woman, regardless of why she is homeless or what she will do with any money we give her."

But, he said, "it should not lead to an automatic assumption that we should do what she asks us to do, that is, give her money. That may not be the best way to help her, or solve the larger problem that has given rise to her situation."

Singer instead strongly advocates giving money to charitable organizations.

But I still struggle with looking a desperate human being in the eyes and saying no. Every time I say no, I hurt.

Loyola’s Trout said that in his book "Why Empathy Matters: The Science and Psychology of Better Judgment," he cites a brain study showing that pictures of most people activate areas of the brain responsible for social engagement. He said images of homeless people produce no such activation, "as though we see them as a cup or table," he said.

I still see that woman begging for food, and I see her as a human being who needed my help. Next time, I’ll stop.