

Case Study Analysis

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The case study analysis I picked from the book *Ethics in the Helping Professions* is on the case of Bettina.

“Bettina lives at boarding school and has made several suicide attempts. Because these attempts were judged to be primarily attention- getting gestures, her counselor feels manipulated and does not report them to Bettina’s parents. During the last of these attempts, however, Bettina seriously hurts herself and ends up in the hospital”(Corey, G., Corey, M., and Callanan).

Since Bettina is in boarding school she is still considered a minor which means parents or gradience should have been notified as soon as possible. When a client poses danger to self their confidentiality must be broken. Also, the school could be found negligent for failing to notify a parent of student’s suicide attempts. However, school counselors are also expected to be aware of the warning signs of suicidal behavior and need to have the skills necessary to assess a student’s risk for suicide. If the school counselors made an assessment that a student is at risk for suicide, it is imperative that the student’s parents or guardians be notified. In this case, the counselor was aware of Bettina’s attempts but failed to notify parents. As a future school counselor, I would have notified the parents right away so that Bettina would have been evaluated by mental health professionals. Afterwards, it is crucial that all stakeholders work together so Bettina has the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

The school counselor’s emotions interfered with assisting Bettina which led the counselor to not take Bettina suicide attempts seriously. I believe the school counselor needs to reevaluate his or her moral and values because the counselor had the responsibility to take Bettina’s suicide attempt seriously. The counselor for some reason did not validate nor created a support system

for Bettina which resulted in her ending up in the hospital. These attempts were judged to be primarily attention-getting gestures which can be seen as a malpractice issue because it is the school counselor's duty to protect suicidal clients. If a client dies by suicide, the risk of a malpractice action is greatly measured, which can be seen in this case because the counselor was well aware of Bettina's suicide attempts but did not do anything about it. School counselors have a duty to use reasonable means to attempt to prevent a suicide when they know about a student's suicidal intentions. Sadly, in the case of Bettina the counselor failed to provide their services. If I was Bettina's school counselor, I would create a safety plan to provide an environment for exploring healthy ways of coping with emotions my client may be experiencing .

In this case study, it seems that the counselor was not focused on the client. For example, background information was not provided about their client- counselor relationship. However, it seems that the counselor was unable to build rapport because I am not aware about why Bettina is feeling like she needs to end her life. There may be many reasons why Bettina may be depressed. For example, she may be experiencing loneliness and adjudication issues due to being enrolled in a boarding school. Maybe this is the first time she is away from her family and she does not know how to cope with her emotions. I believe the school counselor missed opportunities to develop a connection with Bettina. Also, if the counselor was having trouble because of limitations of scope of practice it should have been his or her responsibility to reach out to other resources to better consult Bettina. As a future school counselor, it is important to create an environment where students feel respected and safe in order to prevent harm from

happening. Also, knowing my limits of practice can create a great opportunity to reach to other communities or resources so that I can better assist clients.

The school counselor's actions in the case are both illegal and unethical. Bettina may use suicidal behaviors as a means of gaining attention, which complicates matters clinically, but this does not relieve the therapist from the obligation to treat the client from self-harm. Even one suicidal attempt demands a comprehensive assessment of the client's risk for suicide. For example, guidelines for assessing suicidal behavior the counselor should have considered taking direct verbal warning seriously, explore feelings to be able to determine the cause of wanting to end life, determine the history of psychiatric treatment, and be alert to client behaviors. This was not done, which resulted in the client's injury and hospitalization. The counselor and school personnel failed to notify parents about the student's suicide attempts. School staff have an obligation to contact parents if their child is at risk for suicide. It is crucial that all stakeholders work together so that the student has an opportunity to be successful, but in this case the school and the school counselor failed to inform parents. Every parent has the right to know if their child is in danger or a danger to others. The school acted in a negligent and improper manner by not providing services for Bettina. The counselor specifically needs to reevaluate his or her values because feeling manipulated by a client may cause malpractice and may be harmful to the client.

From the *American Counseling Association Code of Ethics* **A.4.a. Avoiding Harm**

"Counselors act to avoid harming their clients, trainees, and research participants and to minimize or to remedy unavoidable or unanticipated harm." In the case of Bettina, the school

counselor did not act to avoid harm from happening to the client. The counselor, however, ignored Bettina multiple suicide attempts until she ends up in the hospital. Information about the counselor reaching out to Bettina was not provided nor was there a plan to minimize harm from reoccurring. Since the school counselor did not prevent harm from happening he or she neglected and abandoned the client.

According to the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counseling* **A.9. Serious and Foreseeable Harm to Self and Others School Counselors:**

“Inform parents/guardians and/or appropriate authorities when a student poses a serious and foreseeable risk of harm to self or others. When feasible, this is to be done after careful deliberation and consultation with other appropriate professionals. School counselors inform students of the school counselor’s legal and ethical obligations to report the concern to the appropriate authorities unless it is appropriate to withhold this information to protect the student (e.g. student might run away if he/she knows parents are being called). The consequence of the risk of not giving parents/guardians a chance to intervene on behalf of their child is too great. Even if the danger appears relatively remote, parents should be notified.” In the case study, the school counselor and the school failed to notify parents or authorities during the first suicide attempt. It is important that all stakeholders are involved during a severe manner like this. Unfortunately, parents were not notified until Bettina was rushed to the hospital.

My personal values may have influenced my ethical decision- making process because of my own personal experience with suicide. I know friends who have lost their parents and siblings due to suicide. I too experience an event where my sister attempted suicide. It is a scary time for family members, which is why it is very important for them to be informed. Going through this

experience with my sister was traumatizing for me and my family. The fact that the school counselor nor the school did not notify family members of this event makes me furious because the family has a right to know what is happening so they are involved. It is easy for me to be empathetic towards Bettina and her family because of my personal experiences with suicide. When I become a school counselor I know I will validate my students feelings, respect them and try to understand where they are coming from because everyone deserves to have a support system in play.

My professional values of being able to collaborate and not being afraid of asking for help has helped me during my ethical decision making process. I believe the school counselor missed an opportunity to collaborate or even ask for help when dealing with this client. From the case study, the school counselor allowed his or her emotions to get in the way of providing a service. From the first attempt the school counselor should have contacted authorities and parents so that Bettina has all the resources she needs to recover. As a school counselor, one must understand the role we play which we advocate for students, but we must also know our limits and self care is important. You cannot help others if you cannot help yourself.

My multiculturalism values helped me during my ethical decision making process. I am hispanic and was raised in a kind of authoritative environment. So as a child my feelings were not validated which reminded me of Bettina because it did not seem like she had someone to talk to, which can create one to feel isolated. In my culture, we do not believe in mental health and do not take depression seriously, especially with young people. Because of my multiculturalism I was able to tell that the counselor allowed their values to get in the way of helping Bettina . The

counselor believed Bettina was just trying to seek attention and did not take her suicidal attempt seriously until she ended up in the hospital. Understanding my culturalism has made me aware of limitations people may have. That is why I strive to have an open mind and continue to learn in order to be a successful school counselor.

## References

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