

CASE SUMMARY—“AGAINST MY VALUES”

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Practice Setting Description

Transitions is a group home run by a nonprofit social service agency that contracts with the county public children and family services agency to provide housing and social work services to female teenagers who are aging out of foster care. A wide range of counseling, life skill, case management, and educational services are offered to prepare the participants for independent living. Transitions serves eight teenagers aged 15 to 19 at any one time and the average stay for those who complete the program is about 2 years. All of the teenagers have been in foster care long-term and most have lived in a number of foster homes while growing up.

The group home has a BSW-level social worker who serves as the house parent and is in charge of the running the house. There are three case aids—one during the day and two during the evening hours. Social workers based at the parent agency are assigned to provide counseling services, and run life skills groups and educational programming for the participants. As a first-year MSW student, I am completing my generalist field placement at Transitions. My primary roles as an intern are to provide case management and mentoring services to three of teenagers residing in the group home. My field instructor is the social worker assigned to provide counseling services to the Transitions' residents.

Identifying Data

Mary is a 17-year-old African American female who has been in foster care since the age of 5. She was placed in care because of parental neglect. Her mother was addicted to heroin and would leave Mary and her younger sister unsupervised for hours at a time. There was also suspicion of abuse by one of her mother's numerous paramours. During Mary's 12 years in foster care, her mother's parental rights were terminated but she was never adopted. She lived in six different foster homes before she was placed in the Transitions group home when she was 15 years old. Mary struggled in school, and had frequent suspensions for behavior issues and truancy. Although she was at grade level for her age, academically she was performing well below her grade level. Mary dropped out of high school when she turned 16 years old.

Mary has not had contact with her mother since her termination of parental rights when Mary was 8 years old. She had occasional visits with her younger sister but has not had any contact with her for the past 5 years. Mary's relationships with five of her former foster parents are strained or nonexistent. She maintains phone contact and occasionally visits her first foster mother. Mary has few friends and has trouble getting along with her peers. She is not close to any of the other group home residents.

The Transitions house parent, the case aids, and some of the social workers view Mary as hostile and manipulative. They give her wide berth and tend to not confront her if she is angry or acts out. They make no real effort to engage with her, develop relationships, or encourage her participation in the life skills or educational groups. The social worker, my field instructor, who is assigned to Mary, meets with her occasionally, but he reports that she is essentially unwilling to engage in a counseling relationship. Mary is one of my three assigned internship clients. My field instructor has asked me to try to develop a relationship with Mary, and help her engage in the services offered by the program. He warned me that this will be a challenge, but he is hopeful that she can be reached.

Presenting Problem

Mary has been in the group home for 2 years and is scheduled to transition to independent living in 1 year. She is a high school dropout with poor academic skills. She has shown little to no progress in strengthening her basic life skills and has not made any progress in terms of obtaining the educational resources she needs to improve the skills she would need for most types of minimum-wage jobs.

In the group home, Mary is allowed to reside there and basically not participate in the services offered. Mary does not have a positive relationship with any of the staff or group home residents. Most of the time, Mary displays indifferent or negative attitudes and responds angrily or is dismissive to any efforts to engage with her. At the most fundamental level, the presenting problem is that Mary is not prepared for independent living and she is not participating in the life skills, educational services, or counseling services that are designed to strengthen her ability to successfully make the transition out of foster care. In addition, Mary's poor interpersonal and relationship skills will hinder her transition to independent living.

Assessment

It appears that the staff are willing to tolerate Mary's hostile behavior and isolation rather than engage in any type of confrontation with her. I believe that Mary is tolerated and allowed to stay in the group home because there are no other options for her. Her social worker and my field instructor, however, has not given up on Mary and he has hope that she can be reached and engaged in a helping relationship.

Mary had a difficult early childhood with a neglectful parent. In all probability, Mary did not form a secure attachment with her mother. Attachment issues were further compromised by having lived with six different foster parents during her childhood and adolescent years. It appears that Mary formed a trusting relationship with her first foster parent, but that trust was broken when she was removed from the home and placed in a second foster home. With each subsequent move, her willingness or capacity to form secure attachments, in all probability, diminished. It is hard for Mary to trust. She perceives relationships in terms of disappointment and abandonment. This has resulted in her being very guarded in the group home and unwilling to form relationships with the Transitions staff and her peers.

Mary has been in the foster care system since she was 5 years old. During this time, she has had only one positive parental figure—her first foster mother. Other than her, Mary most likely received very little parental guidance throughout her journey in foster care. She has been provided shelter but not the parental guidance and role modeling that would prepare her for adulthood. As she nears her transition out of foster care and so-called independent living, she is probably feeling very scared and anxious. Her hostile behavior is her defense from her fears. It is scary to imagine being on one's own at the age of 18 without any family or support system. Mary adopts her hostile and indifferent "I don't care about anything" attitude as a way of protecting herself from her internal fears. Mary's trust issues make it hard for her to share her feelings and be vulnerable with the staff or her peers. She instead lashes out at others and turns inward. She is isolated, alone, and, more likely than not, very anxious about being on her own and making her way in life as an independent young adult.

Case Process Summary

Prior to my first meeting with Mary, I discussed her background, her behavior in the group home and program, as well as my field instructor's assessment of what might be influencing Mary's behavior and nonparticipation. Cognitively, I felt that I had a pretty good handle on what to expect in my first meeting

with Mary. The case aids also advised me to give her plenty of space and not to try and force a conversation. They agreed that doing so would only cause a hostile and angry reaction from Mary. During my first week of placement, I had observed Mary being very disrespectful to the staff, argumentative with her peers, and not held accountable for her actions. I did not have any direct interactions with Mary. When Mary was assigned to me in week 2, I was tasked with introducing myself and discussing my role and how we will work together. Needless to say, I was a bit nervous and apprehensive about my ability to engage with my assigned client.

My plan was to initiate a causal conversation with Mary where I would introduce myself, discuss my role, and offer my help in any way possible. I wanted to keep it casual and informal and hopefully set up a time to meet. I approached Mary in the living room where she was listening to music with her headphones. No one else was in the room. Once I got her attention, I asked if I could talk with her for a few minutes. She replied with an angry “Who the f*** are you?” I introduced myself and said I was a social work intern. Mary replied, “I am in a bad mood and I hate social workers. Get the f*** out of my face and leave me alone.”

Emotionally I was not prepared for the way Mary treated me. I tried to behave professionally and not respond negatively but inside I was offended, angry, and judgmental. I tried not to show it, but I am pretty confident my nonverbals revealed how I felt and the effect her behavior had on me. I grew up in a religious home where my parent emphasized respecting others and appropriate behavior when interacting with adults. As a parent myself, my husband and I have tried to instill these values in our children. I found Mary’s behavior extremely offensive. I also felt that it was wrong that Mary was allowed to behave this way in the group home with no consequences or accountability. I was also very discouraged that the initial meeting had been a complete failure.

I processed the interaction and my self-reflections in supervision with my field instructor. We discussed how my personal values were influencing my feelings about Mary and our working together. We discussed human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and attachment theory to better understand Mary’s behavior. We also discussed ways I might manage my personal feelings and how to become more empathic about Mary’s challenges and reasons behind her hostile and defensive behavior. We used qualitative assessment of the interaction to identify ways to improve my practice effectiveness with Mary.

Be Ready to discuss the following in our class meeting:

1. Describe how the above-stated case example relates to Competency 9: Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities. Identify all the potential Competency 9 issues and discuss how each is relevant to the case.
2. Describe how the case example relates to a second professional competency. Identify the components of that competency and discuss how it is relevant to the case.
3. Based on the preceding case summary, describe how you would manage the conflict between Janet’s personal values and Mary’s behavior. Discuss how you would cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally manage your feelings of being disrespected and of being personally offended by Mary’s behavior.

4. In the case summary, identify two mezzo-level organizational issues that Janet could possibly address during her field placement.
5. In the case summary, identify two macro-level issues that have impacted Mary's life and her current situation as an unprepared teenager aging out of foster care.