

Hotline Case Study 2024: Addressing Mental Health Disclosure

During the third week of camp, a camper disclosed to her counselor that she was struggling with depression and anxiety. The camper shared that she had previously tried to talk to her parents about her mental health, but they dismissed her concerns, attributing her feelings to “teenage moodiness.” The camper described feeling minimized and invalidated by her parents, which made her fearful of discussing the issue further. She also revealed that she had not been receiving any mental health care at home, despite feeling that she needed it.

The camper expressed that she was anxious about returning home after camp because her parents continued to deny the seriousness of her condition. She asked if she could call her aunt, who had always been supportive of her, but her aunt was not listed as an emergency contact on her camp forms. Camp administrators were unsure if this situation fell under mandatory reporting laws, as it involved emotional well-being rather than physical harm. They needed to determine the best course of action while considering the camper’s mental health, safety, and their legal responsibilities.

Challenges

- **Uncertainty Around Mandatory Reporting:** The camp administration faced a dilemma about whether the camper’s situation — her parents’ failure to acknowledge or support her mental health needs — fell under mandatory reporting. While the camper was not in immediate physical danger, the neglect of her mental health could be seen as emotional neglect, raising questions about the camp’s legal obligations.
- **Handling Family Dynamics and Emergency Contact Restrictions:** The camper wanted to contact her aunt, who she believed would support her mental health needs, but the aunt was not listed as an emergency contact. The camp’s policies only allowed communication with emergency contacts in cases of crisis, leaving the administration unsure if they should break protocol to allow the camper to reach out to her aunt.
- **Supporting the Camper’s Mental Health:** The camp needed to prioritize the camper’s emotional well-being while ensuring that any actions they took were in line with their legal and ethical responsibilities. The staff also wanted to support the camper in a way that empowered her to manage her mental health while providing the appropriate resources and care.

What Can We Learn From This Case?

- Understand the complexity of addressing mental health issues in campers, especially when the camper’s family is not supportive.
- Recognize that neglect can extend to emotional and mental health, and know when to escalate such concerns under mandatory reporting laws.
- Explore strategies for supporting a camper’s mental health while navigating family dynamics and policies around communication with non-listed contacts.
- Learn how to consult with external experts to make informed decisions about camper well-being and mandatory reporting.

Policies and Risk Management Questions to Consider

- Does your camp have policies in place for responding to campers' mental health disclosures?
- How does your camp's mandatory reporting policy address emotional neglect — particularly when it involves mental health concerns?
- Are there established protocols for handling requests to contact individuals who are not listed as emergency contacts, especially in situations related to mental or emotional well-being?
- What are the legal and ethical implications of deciding whether to file a report in cases of emotional neglect or lack of mental health care?
- How can the camp protect itself from liability when taking steps that involve breaking or bending policies to support a camper's emotional health?
- What processes are in place for documenting mental health-related concerns, interactions, and decisions regarding campers?

Staff Training Questions to Consider

- Are staff trained to recognize signs of emotional neglect or mental health issues in campers, even when these concerns may not involve immediate physical harm?
- How does your camp prepare staff to navigate difficult conversations with campers regarding their emotional well-being, especially when family dynamics are involved?
- What resources are available for staff to consult if they are unsure about whether a mental health situation should be reported?

Key Takeaways

- **Mental Health as a Priority:** Emotional and mental health neglect can be as serious as physical neglect, especially when a camper is not receiving proper care for a diagnosed condition like depression or anxiety. Camps should be prepared to handle such disclosures with appropriate sensitivity and care.
- **Legal Considerations for Emotional Neglect:** While emotional neglect may not always fall under mandatory reporting laws, camps must carefully assess the situation, consult with legal counsel, and document their observations to ensure they are acting in the camper's best interests.
- **Supporting the Camper:** Camps can support campers by creating a safe, caring, and nonjudgmental environment where campers feel heard and supported. While camp staff may not be licensed counselors, they can offer active listening, empathy, and reassurance, ensuring the camper knows they are not alone.
- **Flexibility in Policies:** Although policies such as restrictions on contacting non-emergency individuals are important, are there cases where exceptions should be considered?

- **Consulting Experts:** Seeking guidance from mental health professionals and legal experts is essential when navigating complex situations involving mental health disclosures and emotional neglect. External expertise can help camps make informed decisions while protecting the camper and the camp's legal standing.

Resources

- [Mental Health Resources — Tips for Camps](#)
- [CDC Mental Health: Resources for Help and Support](#)

Articles

- [Camping Magazine — Considerations for Implementing Mental Health and Behavioral Supports at Camp](#)
- [Camping Magazine — Reframing Mental Health at Camp](#)