

“I Have the Worst Life Abroad”: Mental Health Crisis

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Management and Operations; Student Services

Setting

Keiran is a 19-year-old premedical major from a large southern university in the U.S. He is selected by his honors college to study abroad during the spring semester of his sophomore year. He and a small cohort of fourteen other honors students apply and are selected to study abroad in Australia, living in the same site and studying in the same classes, including a writing class that the entire cohort takes together.

Keiran is a very sporty student, with excellent grades. He has a romantic partner and lots of friends. He has always excelled in science classes and has been successful in all areas of his life. Keiran expects things to be the same during his time abroad. Keiran has never had any mental health issues or counseling and there are no flags to the home campus that Keiran might struggle while abroad.

Prior to departure, Keiran attends an orientation session on his home campus. After arrival in England, Keiran attends a three-day on-site orientation where physical health, mental health, and culture shock are all discussed. During the first week, Keiran does not get involved in activities or do more than is required of him, missing out on the time that most students make friends and start to plan for the term. While Keiran is not isolated, he is not integrating with the group and seems to be an outsider.

Case

During the first weekend excursion with the group, Keiran tells his friends that he is having thoughts of self-harm, reporting that he has “the worst life as anyone in the world”. His friends report this immediately to the student life

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office. Keiran admits to these thoughts and wants to withdraw from the program. The following day, Keiran decides he would rather stay in the program and the team arranges a psychiatric evaluation. The physician reports that Keiran has been cleared to stay on the program as Keiran stated that there were no issues at all and he is healthy and happy. The team cannot intervene as Keiran has asked the physician specifically not to talk with them.

Each week during the first seven weeks of term, this event repeats itself. Keiran appears in a state of crisis, crying and texting friends about thoughts of self-harm. The team meets with Keiran, sends him for evaluation, and Keiran is cleared medically to stay on the program. Each week the team becomes more disheartened as they worry that Keiran will self-harm. The team reported the incident to the home institution during the first incident, and each week after, but the home institution says the study abroad program has the duty of care and cannot intervene to withdraw the student. They offer no additional resources or help.

The team is pleased when Keiran's father comes to visit unexpectedly, but Keiran states he does not give permission for the student life team to speak to his father about any medical or mental health issues. Keiran's father is aware of the issues as a family friend has tipped him off in the U.S. Keiran's father simply replies that Keiran must "toughen up." He recounts how difficult military school was for him, but it made him a better person.

Keiran's friends are upset, his classes are disrupted, the community is on edge, and the staff are demoralized and sleep deprived. All resources available have been mobilized with self-harm contracts in place, check-ins with the nursing staff, weekly counseling, weekly clergy support, and all members of staff reporting when Keiran has been seen to ensure his safety. The provider team, the faculty, and the students are very unstable, and many blame the study abroad provider for not involuntarily withdrawing Keiran. The provider is not able to involuntarily withdraw a student unless they have a physician recommending the withdrawal or a home campus recommending a withdrawal, and neither has happened.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What laws in the U.S. are guiding the home institution to decide if they can intervene in the case? What policies of the home institution or study abroad provider should be considered in this case?
- Who has the duty of care for the student? What does duty of care entail?
- What resources might be helpful to the student?
- How might beliefs around mental health and counseling apply to this case?
- What steps might be taken to help the other students on the program cope with the situation?
- How could the pre-departure and on-site orientation be improved to cover more mental health information?
- How might the program take steps in the future to ensure this situation would be better dealt with?
- How can the program provider prepare and train onsite staff for similar situations?
- What support could be provided for the onsite staff and faculty?

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