

Pills, Perception, and Perspective: A Host Family Pushes Back on a Student's Medical Plan

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Tags

Crisis Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Primary and Secondary Education

Setting

This case takes place within a short-term, faculty-led education abroad program for secondary school students in a Western European country. The program brings U.S. students to a European capital for six weeks in the summer. The program is designed to promote language acquisition, cultural immersion, and global awareness through homestays with local host families. Each student lives with a host parent who provides meals, cultural guidance, and daily support. A global education organization with on-site staff is accountable for student welfare, communication, and coordination between host families; and faculty oversee the teaching and curriculum.

Case

One of the participants, referred to here as Ava, was an American student with a documented anxiety disorder. Prior to the program, her parents informed the organization that Ava took prescribed medication daily to manage her condition. Her physician had approved travel and confirmed that her medication routine was stable. During the pre-departure orientation, staff reviewed the importance of communication, mental health awareness, and flexibility when adapting to a new environment.

Ava's host parent, Elena, had been hosting international students for nearly a decade. Known for her warmth and enthusiasm for cross-cultural learning, she had developed an approach to student support centered on CSIE cases are offered as professional development for readers and are not meant to focus on specific individuals or organizations. Names and other identifying details within the cases have been changed. In some instances, cases may have been amalgamated.

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structure, shared meals, and limited technology use. Elena spoke conversational English, and her primary languages were Spanish and German. The language gap between Elena and Ava occasionally led to miscommunication about expectations and routines, though both remained patient and respectful.

Within the first week, Ava began experiencing increased anxiety symptoms such as tension headaches, difficulty sleeping, and moments of overwhelm. She told the on-site staff that she was adjusting more slowly than expected and missed her family. The staff provided reassurance and encouraged her to continue practicing grounding strategies while communicating openly with her host parent.

However, tension emerged when Elena expressed concern over Ava's medication use. In her cultural context, medication for anxiety—particularly among adolescents—was viewed with skepticism. Elena believed that anxiety could be managed through routine, diet, and discipline rather than medical intervention. During a group meal, she gently suggested that Ava try “disconnecting from the pills” for a few days to see if she felt better naturally. Ava felt uncomfortable and confused, unsure how to respond without offending her host. She later contacted her father in the United States for advice and emotional support.

As days passed, Elena became increasingly frustrated with what she perceived as Ava's dependence on her phone and frequent family contact. She interpreted the calls home as avoidance of immersion, while Ava viewed them as necessary for managing her anxiety. Misunderstandings grew when Elena restricted phone use during the evenings, believing it would help Ava engage more with daily life. Ava, however, experienced heightened distress, describing feelings of isolation and panic during her check-in with the program staff.

The on-site program coordinator, Lucia, met separately with both Ava and Elena to better understand the situation. Elena reiterated her concern that the student's reliance on medication and phone calls was “not healthy.” Ava explained that her doctor had prescribed the medication and that taking it consistently was essential for her well-being. Lucia tried to mediate the cultural differences by acknowledging Elena's intentions to support student growth while emphasizing the importance of respecting medical needs.

Despite the discussion, the relationship between host and student remained strained. Ava began spending more time alone in her room, while Elena reported feeling uncertain about how to help. After consulting with the program's leadership team and Ava's family, the organization decided to relocate Ava to on-site housing for the remainder of the program. This move was presented as a neutral adjustment rather than a disciplinary measure. Ava expressed relief but also sadness that the homestay experience had not gone as planned.

Following the incident, the program team held an internal debrief to reflect on lessons learned. Questions emerged about how best to prepare host families for students with mental health needs, what level of disclosure was appropriate before placements, and how to balance cultural sensitivity with non-negotiable health requirements. Staff also discussed the growing need for mental health training among international education professionals, particularly as more students who have diagnoses and treatment plans study abroad.

This case illustrates the challenges that can arise when cultural beliefs about mental health intersect with the duty of care and student support. While both the student and host parent acted with genuine intentions, their

differing perceptions of wellness, independence, and care created a situation that required mediation, cultural humility, and swift decision-making.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In this case, there were differing beliefs about medication use. What other cultural beliefs could become a point of conflict in a homestay situation?
- Considering both this case and question 1, where should the line be drawn between a host parent's right to set house rules and a student's expectations?
- How should programs select host families that will support high school students? What criteria should they screen for? What ongoing monitoring is appropriate? How should programs review the host family's contributions before renewing their positions?
- How can programs prepare host families to understand the generational and social climate of the students they are hosting, rather than assuming shared norms?
- When should on-site staff intervene in cultural misunderstandings, and when might intervention unintentionally reinforce one cultural worldview over another?
- What mental health training would help support international education professionals?