College Case Study Report
Self-Harm: Vanessa

D·PREP SAFETY DIVISION

TRAINING OUTPOST

Case Details

Vanessa is a member of the women's basketball team. Vanessa told her athletic advisor that a teammate she played with in high school recently died by suicide and she would be missing class to attend her funeral.

The advisor reached out to Vanessa while she was away to see how she was doing. Vanessa shared how good it was to see her old teammates, but how tough it was at the same time. She said her parents were very worried about her because they knew she had been experiencing a great deal of stress already with classes and basketball, and now this happened. They wanted her to consider taking some time off. She really did not want to stay at home.

Vanessa's academic records show that she is a psychology major in her second year, taking a tough statistics and research methods course along with other courses. Last semester, she was referred to Title IX about some concerning interactions with a women's basketball volunteer assistant.

Vanessa lives on campus. Vanessa shared with her advisor that she is exhausted with everything and finds it more difficult to get to class or be motivated during practice sessions. She talks briefly about depression, and when asked about suicide, Vanessa shrugs and says, "It's just a lot; I don't really know what I would do."

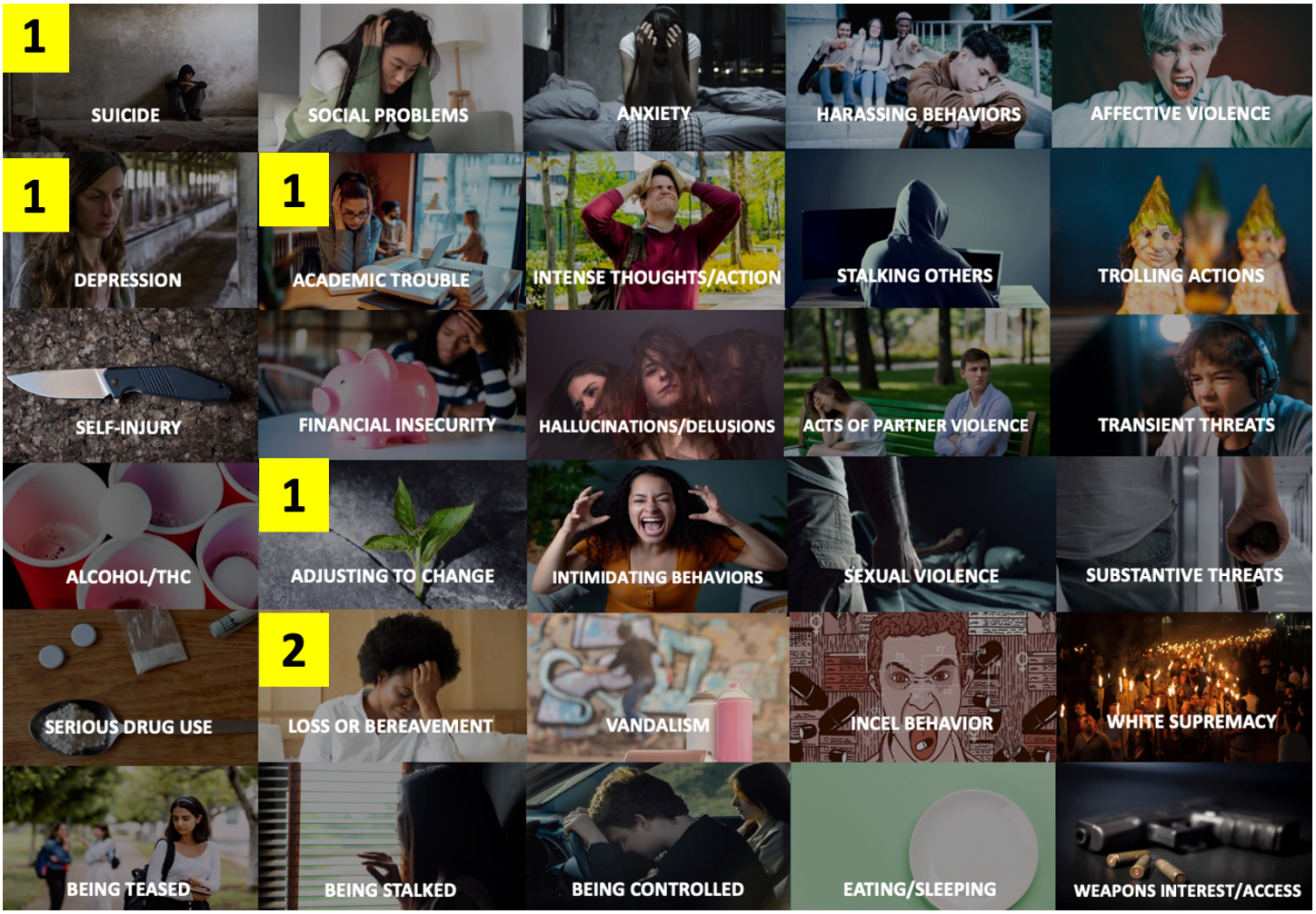
This case is different in there is no threat to others that appears to be present. What are some of the general concerns you see in the case?

Vanessa has missed class due to the recent loss by suicide of a friend from high school and had a challenging time at the funeral. She has two difficult classes this semester and was involved in a Title IX case last semester. Vanessa is feeling overwhelmed with all her obligations at college.
Feeling overwhelmed and balancing multiple stressors are sources of difficulty for Vanessa. She appears to have expressed some concerns and has a previous experience with depressive symptoms. When asked directly about suicide, she responds in a vague manner that would require a more detailed assessment. Given this is her second year on campus, exploring her local supports and her ability to visit her family or siblings would also be useful.

What are some of the risk factors for suicide?

Feeling isolated and overwhelmed with obligations (such as challenging academics and basketball. There is a potential contagion effect that could impact her thoughts of suicide, given the death of her teammate. Adjusting to new aspects of campus life could also be escalating her hopelessness, desperation, and potential despair. Access to lethal means, expressing a plan, and a lack of protective and stabilizing factors (e.g., friends, supportive family, financial security, and access to mental health care) are areas of concern for suicide risk. The use of substances like alcohol or THC could further exacerbate feelings of depression or isolation.

Score the case on Pathways. If indicated, follow the link and score the case on the Suicide WayFinder as well.



Pathways Interventions

Counseling/Case Management
Suicide

- Discuss a voluntary referral to counseling services
- Explore stressors and identify escalation triggers
- Connect the individual to peer and social supports and inspire hope

Depression

- Discuss a voluntary referral to counseling services
- Explore stressors and identify any source of their depression
- Encourage healthy eating, exercise, and social connections

Loss or Bereavement

- Encourage counseling referral and walk them to the clinic
- Discuss any interruption of academics, relationships, and life skills
- If there was a breakup, identify boundary and conduct risks

Academic Trouble

- Offer support, normalization, and advice/guidance
- Consider a referral to academic support
- Consider a referral to counseling
- Explore goals and strategies for improvement

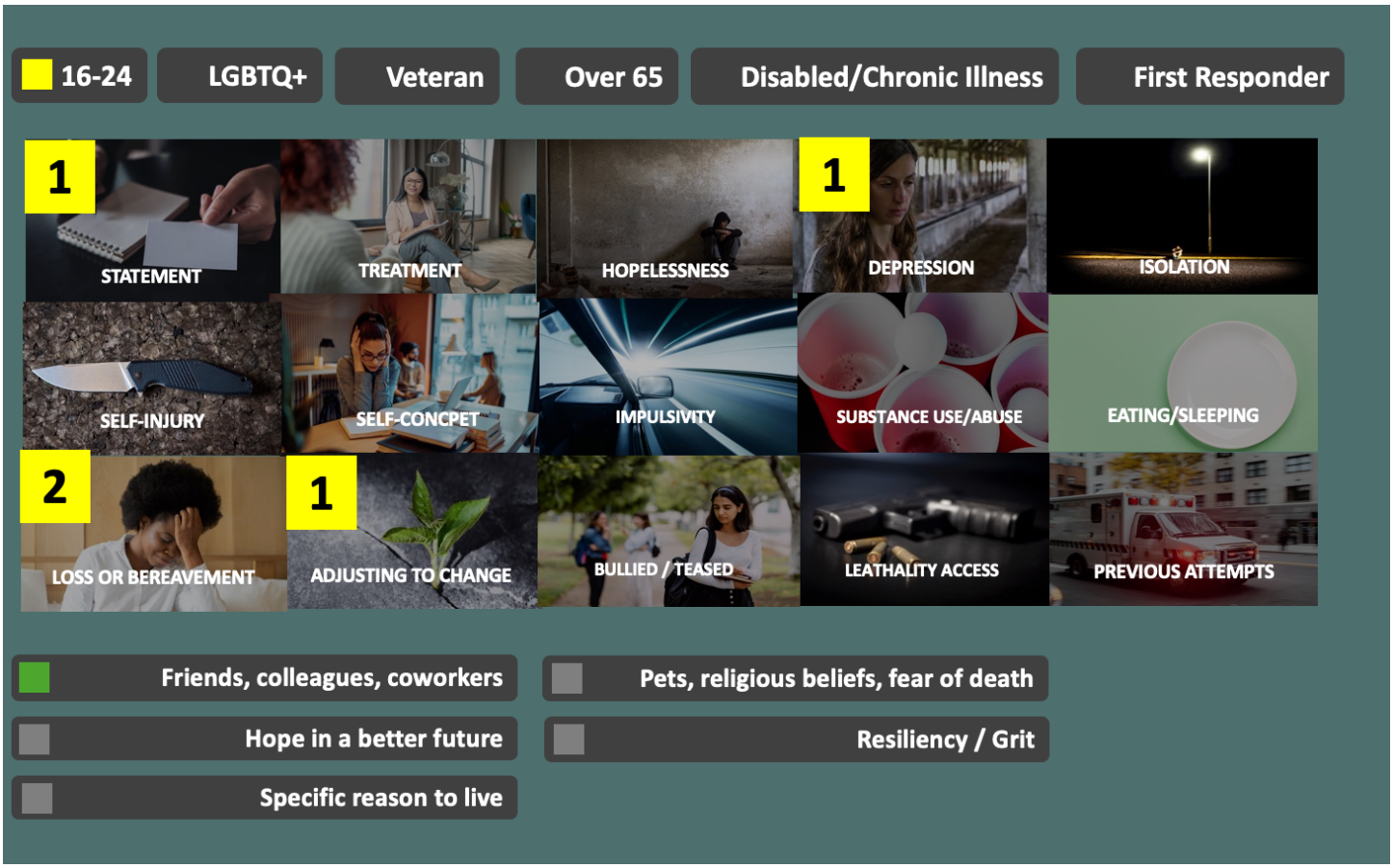
Residential Life/Conduct
Adjusting to Change

- Normalize their feelings and offer support and care
- Identify triggers and any comforts or reducers
- Consider a referral to counseling
- Consider a referral to academic support
- Look for social supports

Pathways Summary

Assess Vanessa more directly related to potential suicidal thoughts or actions. Offering support to Vanessa to be successful at college should be a primary focus of the interventions. These may include academic counseling, a referral to mental health counseling, supportive conversations with her coach or others in the athletic department, and fostering connection with her parents and other family members and friends.

Suicide Wayfinder



PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- They have friends and/or other supportive people in their life. Encourage them to reach out to these people and talk to them about what they are feeling.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

At-Risk Demographic (over age 65)

- Connect them to peer and social supports and inspire hope
- Discuss a voluntary referral to counseling services/EAP
- Normalize their feelings and offer support and care

Statement

- Discuss a voluntary referral to counseling services/EAP
- Explore stressors and identify escalation triggers
- Connect them to peer and social supports and inspire hope

Depression

- Discuss a voluntary referral to counseling services/EAP
- Explore stressors and identify escalation triggers
- Encourage healthy eating, exercise, and social activities

Loss or Bereavement

- Encourage a counseling/EAP referral
- Discuss any interruption of academic, social, and life skills
- In a break-up, identify boundaries and conduct risks

Adjusting to Change

- Normalize their feelings and offer support and care
- Identity any triggers and any comforts and reducers
- Offer referrals to counseling, HR, academic support, and social support

Suicide Wayfinder Summary

The overall risk in this case is moderate, with the main recommendation being a further assessment of Vanessa's potential suicide risk by a mental health clinician. Stressors related to increasing feelings of depression or suicide should be explored, along with identifying social and family supports. Assessing her access to lethal means and determining if she has a specific plan would also be important. Gathering information about previous mental health treatment, medications, counseling, and in-patient care would also be areas to explore with Vanessa. A referral to ongoing counseling would likely be part of her support while remaining at college or returning home. Assisting her with a medical leave or incompletes in class (if she chooses this path) would be additional supportive measures.

What other questions would you ask related to this case?

Specific questions related to any suicidal thoughts, ideally asked by a licensed mental health clinician, would be indicated. This would include questions about previous treatment, in-patient hospitalizations, or suicide attempts. Assessing any substance use/abuse and current access to therapy would also be important questions to consider. Assessing her current supports like social connections, friends, family relationships, financial security and plans for her future career/job would also be useful.

It may be helpful to determine how the Title IX case was resolved and if it involved other team members, possibly impacting current relationships. Moving forward, assessing access to support for academics with her difficult classwork would also be a consideration. Academic accommodations such as tutoring support and helping with study habits may also be useful.

What are some of the pros and cons of involving her parents involved in a risk mitigation plan?

Parental involvement helps reduce the college's liability in the event something happens with Vanessa, and the parents hadn't been notified. Under FERPA, the college has some freedom to share concerns with the parents. However, this is typically better approached directly through a BIT/CARE conversation with Vanessa. Her parents may be able to share potentially useful information about Vanessa's time in high school, her mental health history, and how the family (both primary, siblings, and extended) could be helpful.

On the negative side, involving her parents without collaboration could worsen matters. Her parents may put pressure on her rather than offering support while she is away at college. A reasonable middle option would be trying to learn more about her family and involve them with her permission.

List 4-5 action steps you would take in this case.

- Further assessing Vanessa's suicidal statements would be an area of central importance. Ideally, this should occur with a licensed mental health clinician.
- Identifying supports for Vanessa, including therapy, ADA/504 or academic counseling, and/or connections through athletics and her friends and family.
- Explore any unresolved issues related to the Title IX case that may be impacting team dynamics.
- Discussing options related to an incomplete or medical leave if these are helpful as short-term solutions.