

The Campos Family

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Alejandro Campos is a twenty-one-year-old man who has been attending social work services for about six months. He originally presented with symptoms of depression, including a strong tendency to isolate himself socially, and he implied that a bad breakup was a contributing factor. He also presented with some substance use issues—primarily alcohol, which he began drinking more heavily after the breakup, which was what led him to seek services in the first place. He works a part-time job as a dishwasher and prep cook at a local restaurant and has recently begun spending more time with friends outside of work. He still lives with his parents and two younger siblings, aged eleven and thirteen, as his income is not sufficient to live on his own currently. While Alejandro has cut back on his drinking, and is showing signs of improved social connections, he is still presenting with depressive episodes. His parents have not been supportive of his efforts to seek social work services, at times actively discouraging him from doing so, but he has reported that they also display a lack of understanding of mental health concerns in general. He has described his parents, who immigrated from Mexico about a year before Alejandro was born, as devout Catholics who “never skip Mass” and pressure him to go, and to speak with the priest about the concerns he is having. Alejandro has expressed, both to his parents and to the social worker, that talking to the priest has not been helpful, and that he would prefer not to go, but often attends Mass with them anyway to prevent conflict. His mother is especially devout, and seems to drive the family’s connection to the Church; while his father is faithful, he seems the less reticent of the two to admit that the priest may not have all the answers Alejandro needs. He has expressed that he wishes his parents better understood what he is dealing with, and that they would give him more space to do it his own way.

Assessment and Service Delivery

Engaging with this family may present some difficulties. While I am bilingual and have taken the time to be versed in Mexican American immigrant culture, which has helped me to connect with Alejandro, his family is reticent toward social work, and more broadly toward mental health services in general. He has expressed that his father has been more open to his seeking services than his mother, so I would see about arranging a meeting with him, first. If need be, I would work on finding a “neutral” space, neither at the family’s home nor at the agency office, to establish contact in a way that doesn’t make anyone in the family feel threatened. If possible, and with Alejandro’s consent, I might even see if I could connect with the priest at the family’s church, due to the close relationship between he and Alejandro’s parents, though only with Alejandro’s expressed, written consent, if he felt it would help me to connect with his parents in a way that would gain their trust.

Once in contact with the family, I would begin by inviting them to share their feelings and concerns about social work services, and work to address any concerns they have. For instance, I might ask them how they felt these services would compare with eliciting the aid of the family’s priest, and address discrepancies between their concerns and how services are actually delivered. I would emphasize their strength of wanting their son to be happy, and encouraging him to seek help, and communicate his strength in recognizing that the help they have recommended is not serving his needs. I would also help the family to explore concerns about how seeking help from a social worker might be perceived among their church community, and see if there are ways I could alleviate some of that stress, including addressing our principles of confidentiality. Beginning from this place of finding our common ground, I would begin my assessment with some basic questions about what the family’s home life is like, asking about

who has what responsibilities around the home, or in the family structure, noting how roles and interactions are described in the conversation. I would continue by using circular questions to gain insight into the perspectives of each family member on what is happening in their home, and how it affects Alejandro's emotional state.

In a traditional Mexican Catholic household, the father is the head of the family and thus holds the executive power, making decisions about significant things, such as how money is spent, or time. Marcos, Alejandro's father, is generally agreed to be the head of the household. However, questioning throughout the interview would reveal that while everyone in the family says Marcos is in charge, Yaneth—Alejandro's mother—seems to be the person facilitating the decision-making process for the household. There is some flexibility in this, but often Yaneth acts as the family's "information gatherer," narrowing the choices in a way that gives everyone, possibly including Yaneth herself, the perception that Marcos is making a choice.

One of the sources of conflict that emerges during the assessment process is that while Alejandro's younger siblings are still in a complementary relationship with their parents, Alejandro seems to be frustrated with still being treated as a child in the home, despite his age, and his parents seem to be frustrated with the lack of respect he is displaying in the home. Based on my prior work with Alejandro, it is very likely that he has major depressive disorder, and some of his moodiness or broodiness is being interpreted by his parents as rebelliousness. Additionally, there is an expectation of a level of enmeshment in the family that appears to exceed what is culturally expected, something else that Alejandro is bucking at because of his age, and other cultural expectations about self-sufficiency. Even when he is not feeling depressed, he would like to feel more independent than he currently perceives his parents allowing. This has caused a number of disagreements between family members, with arguments

sometimes happening in front of Alejandro's younger siblings. He and his parents are both concerned that this might have the additional effect of modeling maladaptive strategies for communicating conflicting perspectives. All three adult family members would like to find ways to approach differences of opinion differently.

When asked the "miracle question," each family member says something slightly different. Yaneth wants the whole family to continue to live together and attend church together without having arguments about it. Marcos agrees that he would like fewer arguments, and that he and Alejandro would get to spend more time together doing activities. Alejandro wants more space, doesn't want to be required to go to church every Sunday, would eventually like to move out on his own, and also wants to have fewer disagreements with his parents. As it seems that many of the arguments they are having stem from one of the other mentioned desires, we will engage in some contingency contracting. Yaneth will not pressure Alejandro to join the family for church—she can ask him if he would like to come with them, but if he says he is not feeling up to it, she will drop the topic. Marcos will be more proactive about asking Alejandro to join him in extracurricular activities, again not pressuring him to do things if he is not feeling up to it. Alejandro agrees to be more communicative about how he is feeling, and to let his parents know when he is feeling unwell or does not have the energy to join them. Alejandro also agrees to go to church or spend other quality time with the family at least once a week if he is feeling up to it. All three adults in the family agree that when they are feeling escalated, they will communicate that and remove themselves from the situation, rather than having an argument.

I would meet with the family each week and discuss how many disagreements or arguments they had since the last session. We would review their progress toward stepping away when they felt escalated, and continue to re-assess if the original stated agreements were not

working. If they were amenable to it, I would also meet with Alejandro's parents, together or individually, to work with them on their coping skills to deal with Alejandro's change in role, as well as to help them build skills for when their younger children are approaching adulthood. I would also continue to reassess Alejandro's depressive symptoms and note whether there were any significant changes to the pattern of depressive episodes once conflict in the family had successfully decreased.