

The Mentoring Partnership

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Although long recognized, the importance of a mentor appears to be receiving renewed attention. The *New England Journal of Medicine* recently published an article on attending physicians as role models.¹ The authors of the article identified several characteristics of excellent teachers. Some of these features included an emphasis on the patient-physician relationship and a psychosocial perspective in clinical care, and others have emphasized enjoyment of teaching, greater time devoted to educating, teaching in clinical settings, providing feedback to learners, and actively building relationships with students. An editorial in *Medical Education* highlighted the importance of mentoring throughout one's career, especially during professional transitions.² In the same volume, another editorial called for an examination of the effect of role models on students and junior staff and went on to describe the concept of learning through caring.³

It is estimated that fewer than half of physician-teachers exhibit professional characteristics residents want to emulate.⁴ However, those who do exhibit such worthy characteristics can have a profound effect on the professional lives of their students. In this article, we review mentoring as a partnership that depends on the fit between teacher and student. We expand the discussion to include the concept of loss in the life cycles of these professional relationships.

Background

The word *mentor* is derived from the fictional character Mentor, tutor of Telemachus, in the *Odyssey* of Homer.⁵ Mentor was a wise and faithful friend of Odysseus, King of Ithaca. When Odysseus departed for the siege of Troy, he entrusted his infant son, Telemachus, to Mentor. Mentor was largely responsible for the child's education, shaping his character and instilling values. In Mentor's presence, Telemachus matured to make decisions independently. Thus, Mentor was viewed as the transitional figure in Telemachus's life during his journey from youth to manhood. Although the concept of mentor is ancient, it continues to be useful in many areas, including the development of

residents and faculty. As in the experience of Telemachus, a special relationship with a respected teacher can be useful in guiding a journey of learning that results in an independent thinker.

Other definitions of the mentor highlight the importance of trust, experience, and a long-term relationship. It is agreed that the relationship is serious but nonsexual.⁶ The mentor can be additionally characterized as role model, adviser, encourager, resource person, counselor, sponsor, and friend.^{7,8} In addition, the mentor may be very helpful to a junior colleague by passing along insights about sensing the political climate.⁹

The term *mentor* connotes a position that differs from those of other types of teachers, such as preceptor, supervisor, role model, and tutor. The preceptor, although more clinically active and serving more like a role model, is focused on teaching and learning, whereas a mentor seeks a closer and more personal relationship.¹⁰ A mentor is different from a role model in the following ways. The mentor is engaged in an interactive, continuing process, whereas exposures to role models are often brief. Role modeling is not necessarily interactive; indeed, a role model may not be aware that he or she is being observed. Role models may affect many persons, but mentors ordinarily have relationships with only a few.⁵

Preceptorship has been described as more formal, shorter, and more structured than mentorship.¹¹ The term *supervisor* is at times used interchangeably with *mentor* and *teacher*. However, supervision implies critical watching and directing without the warmth implied by the term *mentoring*.¹² The terms *mentoring* and *tutoring* differ because *tutoring* has a more restrictive meaning. Tutoring may be one of the duties a mentor performs. Adding to the confusion in terms is the fact that any of these activities may coexist. The same person can act in more than one capacity, which may reinforce the view that these terms are interchangeable.¹³

The Mentoring Relationship

Characteristics of a Good Mentor.—Several characteristics and skills of a good mentor are summarized in Table 1. Three basic tasks of the mentor have been described: to inspire, to support, and to invest.¹⁴ An inspirer recognizes the student's potential and encourages the student to realize his or her dream. A supporter can reduce stress, assist with

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Table 1. Commonly Recognized Characteristics and Skills of a Good Mentor

Characteristics	Skills
Self-confident	Tolerates being a learner
Inspirational	Motivates
Supportive	Empathizes
Generous with time and energy	Is accessible
Competent	Asks thought-provoking questions
Friendly	Builds relationships
Respectful of student's goals	Promotes professional growth
Honest	Gives constructive feedback

orientation, and provide a sense of belonging. Support may be emotional or practical, as in assisting the student to develop technical competence. As an investor, the mentor pushes the student, draws out his or her capabilities, and demonstrates trust by putting the student in charge.

Another important duty of the mentor is to pass along information. This requires the mentor to have a respectable base of knowledge and the necessary interpersonal skills to impart that knowledge. Ideally, the mentor is confident enough to admit ignorance and to work with a student to find answers to questions. Effective mentors are skilled in asking questions that provoke critical thinking, analysis, and reasoning.¹³

Some of the security that a mentor provides comes in the form of making the mentored person a part of the system. There is a welcoming aboard. This may occur through the mentor's accessibility, which sends the message that the student is valued. The mentor may initiate social interactions that promote trust and a sense of warmth. An effort to get to know the junior colleague as an individual with unique needs and attributes can further tighten the bond. When mentors share feelings and experiences about their professional lives, they give a valuable gift of professional inclusion. At a transitional point in the relationship, such as the end of a rotation or an upcoming move, activities such as "end-of-attachment" dinners are useful in reinforcing the mentoring bond.³

Characteristics of a Good Partnership.—The success of a mentoring relationship depends on the qualities of the student as well as those of the mentor. Students with ambition, ability, and mentor-attracting skills seem most likely to acquire a mentor of high quality. Persons who engage in active behaviors that initiate mentoring receive more mentoring.¹⁴ Examples of actions the student in search of a mentor can take to find one include searching for someone with similar interests and a compatible personality, expressing career goals, discussing specific areas in which help is needed, and demonstrating seriousness about one's career. The mentoring partners need not always agree; however, trust and respect are inherent in an effective partnership.

Part of this respect is recognition that the mentor is investing his or her time and energy.

According to Kram,¹⁵ the interactions that occur in a mentoring relationship can be divided into the broad categories of career functions and psychologic functions. Career functions help in understanding the job, preparing to do the job, and stimulating advancement. Included in this category are supportive activities such as helping the person gain exposure in an organization, coaching in specific strategies, protecting the student from negative contacts, and assigning challenging and constructive work. Psychosocial functions facilitate a sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in the professional role.

Spontaneous or accidental mentoring almost always works. A teacher and student pair off because of mutual interests and enough liking for each other to initiate and sustain a relationship. Planned mentoring is an attempt to create a fertile environment for spontaneous mentoring to occur. Although the utility of planned mentoring has been questioned, one study showed that a planned formal mentoring program had moderate to high effect on the development of professional academic skills by students; in other words, it was effective.¹⁶ Sameness of sex, race, and ethnicity may help the relationship along; however, these attributes are not thought to be essential for the relationship to work. Research has not established whether mentors of the same sex or race are more effective. As with any relationship, a "settling-in" period is needed. As time progresses, the relationship becomes increasingly open and relaxed. Typically, a closer relationship develops, fostered by signs of success.

The more the mentor and student interact, the more likely a meaningful relationship will develop. A good mentor does not need the student to become like him or her, but the two must be similar enough to work together.¹⁴ Outside activities can help foster relationships. Shared meals, sports, and interests in professional societies may solidify the bond. Always, the goals of this relationship are professional achievement and personal growth. Sexual advances continue to occur in the medical workplace.^{17,18} A relationship that deviates into sexual territory is no longer a mentoring partnership because the primary goal becomes personal rather than professional. The opportunity for the student's professional growth is diluted or negated. The mentor is expected to have the maturity to recognize the conflict of interest and potential damage of such a situation. If there is doubt about whether boundaries have been crossed, the concern needs to be brought to the attention of a colleague or supervisor.

There is probably no best mentoring personality or best way to mentor; it is more likely the fit between the partners that is important. This is a 2-way relationship that works best when both persons contribute and recognize each other's strengths and weaknesses. In addition to the satis-

faction of passing on the benefits of experience, the mentor may receive technical and psychologic support from the student and recognition from others for encouraging a talented protégé. The partnership can lead to the professional development of both persons, and they may change roles at times so that it is not always apparent who is teaching whom.

Loss of a Mentor

Two broad types of separation occur in the mentoring relationship: planned separation and sudden loss. In a planned separation, the mentor may leave the institution or retire, or the student graduates or transfers in order to progress in his or her career. Feelings about a planned separation are often a mixture of excitement and happiness with sadness and perhaps fear about a transition. In an anticipated move, there are opportunities to share hope and celebration, continue advice about the transition, and reminiscences.

A sudden, unexpected separation occurs when the mentor becomes seriously ill or dies. As with other close relationships, the loss of a mentor may be associated with intense reactions. Common reactions to a sudden death are numbness, feelings of abandonment, anger, depression, and disbelief. The effect of a planned separation is very different. Planned separation may be sad, but there is time to mourn the separation before it occurs. Sudden loss is associated with grief followed by mourning, without the valued input of the mentor.

This unexpected loss can have a significant personal and professional effect. For the student, the mentor may be like a surrogate parent guiding one's passage through a training period, analogous to the parent who guides the adolescent to adulthood. The student has had a special relationship that is disrupted. If the disruption is sudden, there may be an empty and lost feeling. Because the relationship is primarily in the professional arena, the practical impact is most likely to be professional. Beyond sadness are the realities of a lost resource. There may have been hope that the mentor could ease one's way professionally for several years to come. For the student or resident, a practical matter is that a key professional reference is no longer available.

There are several ways to cope with one's grief: interact with others who share the loss; confide in peers, other supervisors, and one's own family; attend the funeral to join the mentor's family, friends, and other colleagues; and find another person able to offer professional support and partially fill the gap that is left. For the resident, this person may be the program director. If the mentor was also an evaluating supervisor, the program director can build a letter of reference based on the record the mentor left behind. For a junior faculty member, other colleagues who grieve the loss may be particularly helpful. These strategies may ease the pain of coping with an unanticipated end to the partnership.

Conclusions

This article was written to highlight the qualities of a good mentor, to reiterate the importance of mentors, to characterize this relationship as a partnership, and to introduce the concept that this professional relationship often changes or ends. If one understands mentoring as a partnership, it is easy to see that a natural course may be one in which the person mentored develops confidence and independence, so that the role of the mentor-teacher evolves from authority to guide to, finally, colleague and companion.² It is also appropriate to acknowledge that the mentoring relationship may end, sometimes unexpectedly. Grieving its loss then is a necessary component of the professional partnership.

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