

Guide to Virtual Mentoring

Build
relationships with
connection +
intentionality.



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Over the past weeks, the world has changed, as the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps the globe and upends our lives, sending many of us home to work, or out of work, separating us from family and friends, and making us question those things that we previously held sacred, including safety and stability, not to mention our health. And even as I type those words, I do so recognizing the tremendous amount of privilege that I hold, as there are so many millions of people across the world who did not have those things, in the first place, who struggled to survive on a daily basis, even without a pandemic. We who can complain about our work from home situations, our frustration in our weekly grocery trips, our annoyance with daily virtual meetings, are lucky, indeed.

And, while we must acknowledge that privilege, we also can recognize that the ways in which we live our lives and do work and maintain relationships have gotten infinitely more difficult during this time. Each of us must seek out new tools and processes for staying connected, seeking out guidance and feedback, and honoring the commitments that we have made to one another. And that is the reason for this guide, to provide some tools and guidance for doing the work of relationship-building which is so critical to our personal and professional success when it must be done from a distance. Because while it might seem like the height of personal privilege to think about mentoring relationships right now, while people are dying and losing their businesses and livelihoods, I truly believe that how we take care of one another, and connect with one another, in this time of social distancing, is critical to how we survive this moment in time, and to how we emerge from it, on the other side.

Mentoring is all about relationships. Deep, intentional, relationships of care. And if there is anything we all need right now, it is more connection and less (virtual) distance, to feel that we are supported by a community of care. Research consistently demonstrates the importance of social connection for long-term wellbeing, including behavioral, psychosocial, and physiological outcomes: “Captors use social isolation to torture prisoners of war – to drastic effect. Social isolation of otherwise healthy, well-functioning individuals eventually results in psychological and physical disintegration, and even death.”¹ How many of us feel like prisoners in our own homes right at this moment?

Mentoring is not, of course, the cure or magic fix for long-term wellbeing. And, research by Gallup and others have demonstrated the impacts of mentoring relationships on long-term wellbeing outcomes.² To put it another way, mentoring is not the only thing that matters, but it does matter, and it is something that we as individuals and program leaders can seek out and support, even in the middle of a global pandemic. So this guide offers up some tips and strategies, to those of you currently engaged in mentoring relationships, to those of you seeking the support of mentoring relationships, and to those of you leading formal mentoring programs. And you can find additional resources and guidance via @WFUmentoring on Twitter or on our website at mentoring.opcd.wfu.edu.

¹ Umberson, D., & Montez, J. K. (2010). Social relationships and health: a flashpoint for health policy. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 51 Suppl(Suppl), S54–S66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146510383501>

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/168848/life-college-matters-life-college.aspx>

One caveat, first: this is not a guide for using an online mentoring platform. You will find a bit more about technology at the end, and I believe you can use these strategies within any mentoring platform, effectively. But there is always value in remembering: technology is just a tool. How you use it, and to what purpose, is up to you. Our goal here is simply to think about what it means to mentor from a distance, no matter the method, and how can it be done effectively.

Virtual Mentoring: Ongoing Relationships

Whether in a formal mentoring program or an informal mentoring relationship, many people entered into this moment in established, ongoing mentoring relationships. And in some ways, this is a great position to be in, because the work of building the relationship has been done, already, ideally in a face-to-face format. It would seem, then, that maintaining that relationship would not be so difficult. Certainly, if you're in this situation, it means that you have a built-in support system that you can lean on during this time of uncertainty.

But, if you're like me, during the first week of our stay-at-home order I actually canceled a couple of my regular mentoring meetings, with the excuse, "this is ridiculous, let's regroup when things get back to normal." Well, we're not there yet. Which means that by the time of our next scheduled meetings, several weeks had passed, and a bit of momentum had been lost. There was much ground to recover, not to mention losing a great opportunity to talk about what was happening and to provide a sounding board for those feelings.

So this brings me to my first tip for those ongoing relationships:

This is the time to double-down and be even more intentional about those relationships. Don't let your scheduled conversations slide, just because you can't meet in person. Use technology – Skype, Zoom, WebEx, Google Hangouts – or even the now seemingly low-tech option of the phone if needed. Remember: the two most important elements of effective mentoring relationships are *consistency and continuity*. More than ever, this is the time to show up for one another and maintain the relationship, and to bring it to appropriate closure when it's time for that. Don't just let the relationship fade away because you no longer can see each other over a table in a coffee shop or in your office. Keep your commitments to those meetings that are already scheduled, and for mentors do even more reach out than usual to check in on your mentees. Ask for a quick 15-minute check-in or update conversation. For mentees, ask for the support that you need, even if it's just a 15-minute feedback conversation. The more frequent intentional touchpoints, the better.

If there is anything that I dislike about this current situation, it's the inability to sit across the table from my mentees, to read their facial expressions, and really feel that in-person connection. It's wonderful that we now have so much technology at our disposal to use in these relationships, and, it's important to deploy that technology in the right ways, and to prepare for the inevitable glitches and mishaps that will occur.

This brings me to my second tip for ongoing relationships:

Remember that even the best tool creates distance. Even for the most well-established relationships, there will now be a barrier of either a screen or a telephone line. Pay greater attention than usual to those verbal and non-verbal cues. Pay attention to where and how you are showing up on the screen – are you looking at the other person, or somewhere off in the corner? Do you need to adjust the height of your camera? Be even more mindful of a tendency to talk over the other person; while never a good idea, this doesn't work well in online formats. And, be prepared for the technology to break down, for internet connections to fizzle, for all sorts of things to happen. It will happen. The question is, how will you plan for it and how will you respond to it?

One thing I've learned is that when I conduct virtual meetings through my computer, the connection is far better if I'm in the room where my internet connection is located. This may seem obvious, but my house isn't that big, and I don't need to sit in that room to check email or to conduct other business. But when using videoconferencing software, the connection will often fizzle out or freeze up, typically right in the middle of a critically important conversation point, if I don't move myself and my computer to that room. This is a small, but important detail, when it comes to forming and upholding connection online.

Finally, it can be tempting to simply move your in-person conversations into an online format, without recognizing the challenges and the situation that led to this moment. Whether it's a global pandemic or some other reason, moving from in-person to online isn't simply a change in venue. It's a change to the entire structure of your relationship. That must be acknowledged and discussed, just as you discussed the parameters for your relationship in the first place.

Which brings me to my third tip for ongoing relationships:

Allow the conversation to go in some new directions. You may have been talking through work goals, or academic achievements, or other topics relevant to day-to-day life, previously. These topics are still important, but so is honoring the fear, uncertainty, and distractions which are caught up in this moment. It's completely OK to take a conversation or two (or more) to talk through those feelings and how you each are navigating through this moment. Brainstorm some strategies together. Make some new commitments to each other, and how you will show up for each other. This might be the time to make a new mentoring agreement. And, mentors, remember, your job is not to be a trained counselor. Be a connector, and recommend the support of professional resources when the situation warrants it. Mentees, remember, it's always OK to seek out that professional help when you need it. Talk to your mentor if you're comfortable doing so, about why you think you need that help. Ask for recommendations or guidance on how to seek it out. The effective mentor knows how and when to draw and keep boundaries.

Virtual Mentoring: Seeking or Starting a New Relationship

This may not seem like the best time to seek out or to start a new mentoring relationship. When you're stuck at home, surrounded only by your close family, and your only access to other people is through a computer screen or a phone, creating a new relationship can seem daunting, at best. Indeed, I hope that one of the lessons that comes out of this situation is that we never again take for granted the joy and meaning that can come from serendipitous meetings in a coffee shop, classroom, retail shop, or even just out in a park. I hope that we won't lose sight of how easy it is in fact to make friends when we are surrounded by people, now that we are experiencing the opposite.

And yes, seeking out and creating new relationships when you are distanced from others is challenging. But certainly not impossible. For starters, you can seek out formal mentoring programs to join, which will have built-in structures for connecting you with other people. But even these aren't fool-proof or distance-proof. Because mentoring relationships are always about the people not the process, and they will only ever be as successful as the people involved choose to make them. The good news, here, is that means you have the ability to build your network. In fact, even when doing so in person, the responsibility for that work rests entirely on your shoulders. And what a great time this is, to do that work.

So, to start, it's time to focus on you and your goals:

Just because you're now practicing isolation and distancing doesn't mean you need to be *isolated*. This virtual moment is a great time to think deeply about who you are, what you want, and where you are headed. Take a values assessment, like the Life Values Inventory, which you can find at lifevaluesinventory.org, or look up a list of values online and spend time in deep reflection on what really matters to you. Can you identify your top five values? How are you living those out, or what is preventing you from doing so? Think about where you want to be in six months or a year. Is it a new job? A new city? Do you want to learn a new skill or go deeper into one you're already pursuing? Revisit your goals or set some new ones. Take this gift of time and quiet to get hyper-focused on *you*. In every effective mentoring relationship, the mentee, the one being mentored, is the one who does the work. So take this moment to do that work, for yourself. Remember, the mentor is just gravy. It's a gift to have someone choose to walk beside you on your path. But you have to be willing to set some goals, and commit to pursuing them, first.

Chances are, you're already surrounded by people who could serve as mentor to you, or who are already providing you with advice and guidance. In fact, in my experience, when people complain about not having a mentor, it often means that they just haven't been paying attention to the people who have been trying to help them. And, it could be that for the specific goals you are trying to achieve, you really are missing some people in your network with the skills or knowledge who can help you.

So that brings us to the next step in this process:

It's time to **assess your network**. We all need broad, diverse networks of strong and weak ties who can provide feedback, guidance, and access to opportunities. One way to figure out who those people are, and who's missing, is to do a simple network mapping exercise. This starts with writing your name in the center of a blank page. From there, write down around you all of the spaces in which you find yourself on a regular basis, such as work, home, school, the gym, and so on. Then split those spaces into smaller groups. Work could be split into "my team" and "my department," or school might be "my department" and "volunteer activity." There's no right or wrong here, and you can have as many spaces and groups as you want. After that, start to identify some people in each of these groups. Who are the people you are closest to, or who you think are most important? And then, finally, can you identify skills or knowledge areas that any of these people possess that align with your goals? What do you find when you look at your network map? Are there spaces or groups that are missing for you? Are there gaps or strengths in your people connections? Take some time with this to really assess the strength of your network and your opportunity to build it.

Of course, mapping your network and building on those connections are two different things, entirely. We often think of network-building as networking, a purely transactional experience. And, there's a time and a place for that. But when we think of mentoring relationships, we're looking for something more transformational. And that requires work and time to build. These relationships don't develop overnight.

Which brings us to the third step:

Do the work and make the ask. Look at that network map and pick just one person to reach out to for a quick chat. Don't ask, "Will you be my mentor?" That's a conversation for down the road. For now, make it an ask with purpose. "I've been working on this goal and I know you have some experience in this area, I was wondering if you would have 15 minutes to chat so that I could ask you for some feedback." Or, "I'm very interested in the work that you do and was wondering if you had 15 minutes to share some lessons you've learned from your experience." Be specific about what you're asking for and be respectful about the amount of time you're requesting.

This is the time to have some extra patience with people. Everyone is dealing with a new normal right now, figuring out how to live and to work in different ways. It may take people longer to get back to you, or they may not have the time, right now. That's OK! Be gracious, be humble, and then move on to the next person on your list. The best person to have in your network is the one who wants to support and connect with you. And, these aren't one-time conversations. You won't build a deep-level relationship with everyone, but for that one or two that seems promising, ask if you can follow up in six weeks, to update them on your progress. Remember, network-building is relationship-building, and relationship-building takes time and work, and even more so in a virtual environment.

Virtual Mentoring: Leading a Formal Mentoring Program

If you are leading a formal mentoring program, moving from in-person connections to online can seem overwhelming, but it shouldn't! The work, for you, actually doesn't change, it's the work within the relationships that has shifted. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't pay attention and provide oversight, perhaps even more than you normally would. Just like those participating in the relationships need to be mindful and acknowledge what has shifted, so should you. Provide more support and resources than you normally would. Think about the processes and the systems and how they might need to change. Above all, remember that what you are providing to people in this moment is a gift: the gift of connection, of feedback, of space to reflect on this moment. Not everyone gets to have that. The work that you are doing is important and valuable.

As such, here is the first tip for you as a mentoring program leader:

This is the moment to check in with your mentoring pairs, more so than you normally would. Remind them to keep their commitments and to keep meeting. Encourage the use of technology and make recommendations if you can; if you have access to IT support for that technology that you can provide, even better. And, give your participants permission to meet in other ways. Normally a phone meeting is less ideal to face-to-face, but within an established relationship, it can still work. Remind people of best practices: remove distractions, focus on the other person, practice active listening, ask questions for clarification and to move the conversation forward. Refer to the advice above for those participating in ongoing mentoring relationships. This is not the time to flake out or to let these relationships fizzle out. This is the time for *more intentional* engagement, by both mentoring partners.

As the mentoring program leader, you set the tone and the expectations for effective relationships within your program. If you aren't going to show up for your participants, then why should they show up for each other? If you aren't going to uphold the program expectations and timelines, then why should they? Your behavior and the messages that you communicate send important signals about the value and importance of this program and these relationships.

Which brings us to the second tip for you as a mentoring program leader:

Remind your participants of your commitment to them, as well. This is the time to over-communicate, to send an encouraging note, a relevant article or TedTalk, and to offer up your support to help facilitate connections and conversations. This is the time to express gratitude to your participants for all the work that they have done and what they will be doing, moving forward, for each other and for the program. Remind them why these relationships matter, not only to the organization but to the participants, themselves. Ultimately, this is the moment to project a sense of calm, to provide a consistent, trusted space in the midst of all this chaos, and to give them a place where people know what is expected of them.

And, while upholding those commitments and expectations, remember that it's OK to be flexible. Moving from in-person to online isn't just a shift in venue or format. Some of the

relationships may end prematurely when they otherwise would not have. This is OK. Some people will have frustration with the technology or finding time with their mentoring partner, and feel like the relationship isn't proceeding as it "should." Also OK. Mentoring relationships are always about the mentoring partners involved: their goals, their relationship. It is possible to remind your participants of their commitments while also giving them room to find a "new normal" for their relationships.

Which brings us to the final tip for mentoring program leaders:

Keep to your plans, but be flexible. If your program was scheduled to end with the end of the semester, do that, and think about how you might facilitate that, virtually. If mentoring partners were expected to meet twice a month, uphold those commitments. *Structure in the midst of chaos is a good thing.* And, prepare to be flexible with those plans. That in-person closure ceremony may need to be moved online, or to a later date. You may have a participant drop out for real health reasons, or work overload, or various other concerns. This is all OK. After all, nothing about a mentoring relationship should be forced upon people. These are relationships and communities of care. Now is the time for each of us to be role models of that behavior, as much as we possibly can.

Final Thoughts

No matter whether you are moving an ongoing mentoring relationship online, starting a new one, leading a formal program, serving as mentor or mentee, there are some overarching tips and strategies we all can use in a virtual space.

First, and foremost, remember that technology is only a tool. It's not magic. It won't run your program for you or have your conversation for you. There are some good mentoring platforms out there, that will do the work of matching people together, but the people still have to do the work to show up and participate in those relationships. Tech tools like Zoom, WebEx, Google Hangouts, and others are great for video meetings and for simulating the in-person experience. And still, it's not an in-person conversation. There will be glitches. Technology breaks down. Interruptions happen. Be prepared for these things to happen, and be ready to react to them when they do. With any tech tool, including the low-tech phone option, provide more time and space for the conversation than you normally would.

Whether virtually or in-person, there is always value in taking time to prepare for your conversations. Think about:

- What do I know about this person that would be useful for this conversation?
- What do I hope to learn from this person or conversation?
- What are some good questions that I can be prepared to ask?
- What guidance do I want to seek out during our time together?
- What steps can I take to build a more authentic relationship with this person?

Then, once the conversation is complete, spend some time in reflection:

- What did we discuss that was particularly meaningful to me?
- What did I learn about myself that I can use moving forward?
- What do I need to follow-up on before we meet again?
- How can I continue to support and uplift this relationship?

Mentoring relationships are deep-level, interpersonal connections between people. And when we build those connections virtually it can feel chaotic, and unsettling, and disconnected. Taking the time to be more intentional with these relationships, in this moment, will help to mitigate and to navigate those feelings more effectively. The truth is, you can, in fact, build and develop relationships, even when separated by distance. Because relationship-building is always based on mutual trust, and respect, and accountability, in whatever form it takes. That is the work of mentoring, whether online or in-person.