

CRN LEAD STORY: THE ART OF MENTORING AND HOW TO TEACH OTHERS WHAT TO FIND *Katy Wilkens, MS, RD*



Dialysis patient Stan Iwada on the trail of wild mushrooms.

The healthcare profession is built around mentoring. As a healthcare provider, someone in your discipline took an active interest in helping you be successful. Learning to practice medicine, whether you are a dietitian, technician, social worker, nurse, advanced practitioner, or physician, is not something you can simply learn from a book. Like hunting for mushrooms, you need someone to act as a guide to show you where, how, and what to pick.

Now it is your turn to help mentor someone else. Most of us can identify people who have been great mentors in our lives, but when it is your turn to stand forward and help someone navigate their way through the woods, you might feel lost. Most of us have never had training in how to be a mentor.

Mentoring can bring incredible sense of beauty back into the love and passion for your profession. Just like an unexpected walk in the woods, you may not see the trees, just the forest, until you walk along that path. At its best, mentoring is truly an altruistic relationship. There may be no prestige, pay, or power to gain from being the mentor, rather only the satisfaction of helping others on their way to being better at something you both love. This may indeed be the basis of every good human occupation. Whether you love teaching someone else how to knit, make pottery, play video games, mend broken bones, bake a pie, or give an injection, the mentor is in a unique place to pass on

skills and knowledge that are not found in books, can't be fully described verbally, and are not tangible enough to take a photo of or draw.

Many people may be mentors in their private lives. Some examples are helping with youth in the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, the YMCA, or some other type of youth group. Maybe you've been asked to teach someone what you know about playing an instrument, or how to change sparkplugs?

The role of mentoring in healthcare and your professional life is rarely discussed, and yet is so critical. That is why most healthcare professions rely on internships. Someone is able to understand the Krebs cycle from a book, but how to palpate a patient's organs, how to take a blood pressure, when to talk about end of life issues, where to place a fistula; these are all things that someone has to show you how to do.

Similar to hunting for mushrooms, you only know how to look for the things your guide has shown you. If you have never felt the silky heaviness of a Matsutake mushroom, you will never be able to distinguish one in the wild from the sea of a million other mushrooms. All the photos in the world don't replace someone showing you, letting you see, rotate, touch, smell, heft, and finally find, your own mushroom in a place you have never been before or even predicting where you will find it! Healthcare is the same. You have to smell the uremic odor of an underdialyzed patient, see the uremic frost on their skin, listen to the description of their avoidance of meat, and touch their vibrating fistula to gain insight about the patient.

Why Be a Mentor?

The amazing return gained from being a mentor more than repays the investment of time and effort. Mentoring enables your expertise to grow. It may also help mentors see their own work in a very different light. Mentoring enables you to analyze your own performance from a different perspective. By explaining or demonstrating something to someone else, an insight may be gained about why one is more effective with some patients than others. Or, in the case of dialysis patients, how it feels when needles are successfully placed and inserted or which phosphate binder works better for homeless patients. In order to teach, a much fuller understanding of the subject is needed beyond simply being able to perform the task. Learning to teach something to another person allows one to learn nuances that may have not been noticed before.

Another reason to be a mentor is the opportunity to share your expertise with someone else. For example, you may be a really good caregiver and clinician. If so, perhaps you might be able to successfully care for 150 patients? However, consider if you mentor a strong staff of ten like-minded people and each of them works with patients—the learned skills are extended to 1,500 patients! Think about it... if each of the people you mentor then goes on to mentor another ten people, your expertise has been shared exponentially.

What Is a Mentor?

Rules for the Mentor

- Listen, listen, listen
- Help develop goals
- Be reliable and consistent
- Ask how or what questions, not why
- Always be positive
- Be courteous
- Learn to ask the right questions
- Support and challenge
- Encourage independence
- Help develop a new perspective, maybe for both of you.
- Be a 'safe' person to bounce ideas off.
- Be ready to learn something new that is important to you

The mentor is not a mom, a therapist, a boss, or a role model. The mentor is a guide. A guide that helps you see farther in the forest, pointing out varieties of mushrooms and ideas you may have overlooked. Mentoring differs from teaching in many ways. With teaching, the teacher talks and the student listens. In the mentoring scenario, the mentor is much more likely to do a lot of listening, and less talking. It is a two-way, reciprocal relationship. The mentor gains as much as the person being mentored. Thus, the mentor can learn as much from their protégé or mentee as the mentee learns from the mentor. Sometimes it's just not as obvious. Your mentee might be more technologically savvy than you, showing you how to use a new computer program or app. They may ask a less sophisticated question, which leads you to think in a different way about what we think we know, helping to direct our efforts into a different area of research not considered previously. They may choose to practice in a different area, so now you have a resource and contact in the bariatric or diabetes community when an unanswered question arises. People want to be mentored and seek out dynamic, passionate, flexible and fun individuals. Who wouldn't want to work with this type of professional? These people can help bring enjoyment back into your professional career, long after complacency has taken root.

Mentoring is not for a day, or a week, or even a year. It takes time for both of you to work on the lifelong relationships that are being built. It is all about empowering people. It's not up to the mentor to figure out how to mentor, but rather the mentee to figure out what they need. The mentor, as a guide, can point the mentee in the right direction and present options.

Things to Avoid with Mentoring

Poison Mushrooms to Avoid



Amanita muscaria, a poison mushroom growing outside a dialysis unit in Seattle.

- You can't fix problems
- You can't fix relationships
- You are not a therapist
- Respect privacy
- Respect boundaries
- Be honest, but not critical
- Experiment with different communication styles
- Let mentees set their own goals, but encourage them to reach further
- If you are working harder than the mentee, there is a problem

Think of these as "poison mushrooms." They are things you want to stay away from, and teach your mentee to stay away from too. The mentor role is not to fix problems for the mentee. The mentor role is to help the mentee identify them, and come up with multiple strategies to resolve the problem. Whether they choose one path or the other is up to the mentee, whereas the job of the mentor is to point out there are several successful paths, each with positive and negative considerations.

Relationships can't be fixed by the mentor, but the mentor might help the mentee try and figure out why someone is acting a certain way and what might be good alternative actions for the mentee. The mentor is not a therapist and, ultimately, the mentee needs to find her own solutions to relationship issues. Having someone to talk to will go a long way toward helping the mentee talk through positive solutions. During this process, it is important to always respect the mentee's privacy. If the mentorship is focused on professional issues, respect those boundaries. If the mentorship is focused on life outside of work issues, respect those boundaries too. Bringing private life into public, or vice versa, is not the role of this relationship.

Rules for Mentees



Eagle Scout Stefan Rachel learning to hunt.

- Try to connect with your mentor at least 4 times a year
- In-person contact is best because nothing replaces the human moment
- Have a list of questions before each meeting
- Ask open-ended questions
- Listen actively, look for central ideas, big themes
- Take initiative, follow up on suggestions
- Bring something to the relationship, this is shared experience
- Build trust, don't take advantage
- Be respectful of mentor's time
- Be grateful, explain the impact of their relationship
- Take time after meeting to reflect, making notes on big ideas, and ideas you want to explore fully

Be honest, but not critical. Mentees will be their own best critics; they don't need a mentor for that. They do need a mentor to tell them when they might be overstepping a role, not participating enough, to suggest different paths they might take to the same or different ends. Different mentees will require different communication styles from the mentor, which can serve as an intellectual growing point for the mentor. How do you get the thoughtful, careful, mentee to think outside the box and take risks? How do you get the outgoing, boisterous mentee to slow down and listen to others? Do you match your style to your protégé, or do you try to use an opposite style that compliments the mentee?

Take time to evaluate your relationship honestly. If you are working harder than the mentee it may be time to discuss this with the mentee. If the relationship is not bringing you joy and a feeling of success, talk about it. The role of the mentor is to guide, the mentee has to do the hard work of finding the mushrooms; you are just showing them what to look for in the forest. If you are doing lots of work that is not bringing new knowledge or happiness, take a step back and reevaluate the relationship.

What Can be Gained From Being a Mentor?

Mentoring will teach you inestimable wisdom and, in the process, you will learn a lot about people. You will learn a lot about reciprocal relationships, which will help in both your personal and professional life. You will learn the joy of someone else's success, and new ways to look at failure as one of the best tools for learning. There is a lot of joy in watching others learn to hunt. You will develop the singularly important skill of listening, which is so useful and critical in the healthcare field.



A mentee's first solo chanterelle hunt is successful!

If you are really a good mentor, there will come a time when your mentee becomes your mentor. When you have passed on what you know to your protégé, there may be a magic moment when you find yourself calling the mentee to ask a question, or watch the mentee teach someone else something you didn't know. When the mentor becomes the mentee, and the mentee becomes the mentor—that is true joy.

Mentoring will help you become a more patient person, and you will develop a better sense of humor. If you mentor those younger than yourself, you will have a conduit to a younger generation and learn how to relate to them better. If you mentor those older than yourself, you will learn wisdom you didn't realize existed. Being a mentor teaches you to look at others, and the forest, in a whole new way. Until you find your own mushrooms, you haven't learned. Until you can teach someone else how to do what you do, you don't really know. Mentoring can fill you with boundless gratitude, making both your private and professional life richer.

Gratitude is also important to happiness. Thank someone who mentored you. Take a few minutes to write a note, make a call, text, or tell someone else about a mentor that was important to you. Be specific, saying something to the effect of, "Joan, I wanted to thank you for all the hours you spent helping me understand biochemistry; it made me a better dietitian." If you have lost touch, try and find the mentor. I recently sent my son's art website to his preschool teacher, who identified him as an artist at a very young age. She was overjoyed, and I felt so pleased to have finally thanked her.

Try Walking Off the Beaten Path... Become a Mentor!

You will get way more out of mentoring that you put into it. It can light your way through the forest as well as the path for others. Sometimes you find something beautiful, and unexpected, along the way! The best mushrooms are not found on the trail but rather off the beaten path.

All photographs courtesy Katy Wilkens unless otherwise noted.

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