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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The ABC's of Mentorship in Medical Education: Awareness, Benefits, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT:

Mentorship, bridging experience and aspiration, is vital in higher education and sectors like medicine. Although recognized as a "dynamic, mutually beneficial relationship," there's a gap between its acknowledged significance and real-world implementation. This article delves into mentorship's Awareness, Benefits, and Challenges from both the mentor's and mentee's perspectives.

Effective mentorship hinges on mutual respect, shared values, and understanding. Mentors, navigating roles from teachers to sponsors, must possess skills like honesty, commitment, and the capability to manage diversity and power dynamics. They are tasked with blending career advice with psychosocial backing. Conversely, mentees should exhibit proactivity, clarity in objectives, and value comprehension. The mentor-mentee bond thrives on shared principles, but it's the amalgamation of these values with diverse insights that propels growth, underpinned by genuine involvement and trust.

Both mentors and mentees reap immense benefits from their alliance. Mentors experience personal evolution, heightened motivation, and the euphoria of seeing their mentees thrive, enhancing their professional networks. Mentees gain early career support from someone earnestly rooting for their success. This relationship is synergistic: mentees bring fresh perspectives, while mentors contribute their vast experience, jointly amplifying productivity and cultivating a relationship rooted in shared growth.

Despite its merits, mentorship has its hurdles. Mentors often juggle time pressures, battle self-doubt, and weigh the repercussions of their mentee's achievements or setbacks. They must harness vulnerability, acknowledging they can't resolve every dilemma but should steer growth. For mentees, the mentor selection process can be overwhelming, and initiating the relationship might be intimidating. Open dialogue and clear boundaries are paramount. Occasionally, mentorship ties need termination due to misalignments or changing roles, necessitating careful handling. In sum, while mentorship offers profound rewards in medical education, it demands dedication, adaptability, and confronting challenges to genuinely shape participants' futures.

Introduction:

Mentorship, a timeless practice, serves as a vital bridge between experience and aspiration, bestowing invaluable rewards upon both mentors and mentees. Mentorship's transformative power is widely acknowledged. Individuals who have been mentored excel in their respective fields and propelling their careers forward.^{1,2} We define mentorship as "a dynamic, context-dependent, goal-sensitive, and mutually beneficial relationship between an experienced clinician and a junior clinician focused on advancing the mentee's development."³ This definition underscores the evolving nature of the mentor-mentee relationship, which flexes to changing contexts and goals. Furthermore, mentorship is aptly described as a "professional working alliance."⁴ Successful mentorship hinges on mutual respect, clear expectations with accountability, a personal connection, a sense of care and commitment, and shared values.⁵

Within the realm of higher education, there often is an implicit expectation that mentorship is in abundant supply.² Given the well-established advantages mentorship offers to all parties involved, one might wonder why aspiring academics, junior faculty, and seasoned experts aren't consistently reaping these benefits. Surprisingly, a 2020 Harvard Business Review article found that less than half of individuals surveyed could pinpoint a mentor, despite a

whopping 76% of them acknowledging the significance of mentorship in personal growth.¹ In medical education, where mentorship is expected for trainees, systematic meta-analysis data indicates that fewer than half of medical students, and in some fields, less than 20% of faculty, have a mentor.⁶ This gap between the expectation of mentorship and its actual practice reflects the inherent challenges associated with mentoring. This begs the question, where is the disconnect? Why does mentorship often prove to be one of the most significant challenges in our professional lives when, on the surface, it appears straightforward? Perhaps it's because the deliberate and purposeful practice of mentoring is not as effortless or intuitive as it might initially seem.⁷

In this perspective, we aim to heighten readers' understanding of mentorship, illustrating the profound impact and rewards that enduring, successful mentoring relationships can offer. Additionally, we endeavor to normalize the idea that mentorship is far from a straightforward process; instead, it presents substantial obstacles that mentors and mentees must navigate to fully realize its benefits. Despite these challenges, those who have participated in mentoring relationships successfully can sustain these advantages throughout their careers, and perhaps even throughout their lives. We will approach this by examining the ABC's 'Awareness, Benefits, and Challenges' from both the mentor and mentee perspective. (see table 1)

Table 1: Summary of the ABCs of Mentorship

Awareness	Benefits		Challenges	
	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee
Misconceptions: mentoring is easy and doesn't require training	Fulfillment	Psychosocial and emotional support	Time constraints	Finding a mentor
Skills required: building rapport, fostering open communication, empowering mentees	Motivation	Illuminating hidden curriculum	Imposter syndrome	Asking for mentorship
Roles: teacher, tutor, role model, coach, supervisor, or sponsor	Rejuvenation	Navigating hierarchy of academia	Mentee failure	Lack of direction
Requirements: shared values, common understanding, diverse perspectives, growth mindset	Growth	Professional development	Vulnerability	Ensuring needs are met

Awareness	Benefits		Challenges	
	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee
	Successful resolution of stages of development	Role modeling	Embracing limitations	Feeling like a burden
	Academic Productivity	Successful resolution of stages of development	Overcommitting	Disorientation in academia
	Enduring relationships	Academic productivity	Mismatch	Psychological size
		Enduring relationships	Termination	Mismatch
				Termination

A: AWARENESS OF MENTORSHIP

Mentors:

To optimize the benefits of mentorship, mentors must possess a comprehensive set of skills and understand the various roles they may need to assume.⁷ Some of these skills are inherent to mentors, such as availability, commitment, honesty, the ability to deliver constructive feedback, and a compassionate approach. Others are skills that mentors need to actively cultivate, including building rapport, fostering open communication, empowering mentees to take initiative, and addressing issues related to diversity.⁷ Maintaining equity within the mentoring relationship should always be a key focus, as many of these skills and attributes aid mentors in navigating power imbalances and mitigating the impact of stereotype threats on mentees.⁸

Depending on the specific situation and the needs of the mentee, mentors may find themselves stepping into diverse roles, including that of a teacher, tutor, role model, coach, supervisor, or sponsor.⁴ Furthermore, mentors often provide essential psychosocial and emotional support, but it's essential to emphasize that mentors should not attempt to act as psychotherapists.

Contrary to a common misconception, individuals do not inherently possess the ability to provide effective mentorship when they assume a leadership role.⁹ The skills required for mentoring must be intentionally developed.⁷ Mentors play a dual role, offering both career guidance and psychosocial support to their mentees. The mentoring literature highlights the significance of mentors' proficiency in balancing these two aspects when supporting their mentees. In essence, mentors

must excel at attending to both the personal, psychosocial dimensions and the professional, career-related aspects of the mentorship.^{9,10}

Mentee:

For mentorship to thrive, mentees also play a vital role. They should understand their own values, take proactive steps, set clear goals, articulate their needs, ask insightful questions, actively listen, seek feedback, and remain accountable.¹¹ Responsiveness and flexibility are key attributes in this dynamic relationship.⁴ Recall the individuals who were the most influential to you throughout your career. What were they like? What was it that made them so influential on your younger self? Within the literature there has been discussion of what the true role of the mentor is; teacher, tutor, role model, coach, supervisor, when in reality a great mentor is a bit of each of these.¹²

For the mentee, the mentoring relationship serves as a compass in navigating the complexities of advancing in one's career.¹¹ The mentor-mentee relationship has long been known to be a critical component to personal and professional growth with the mentor providing valuable insights, guidance, and support to the mentee to help them harness their potential and overcome challenges.^{6,13} Increasing awareness of the importance of mentorship and the aspects of mentorship that make it most successful can help mentees fully reap the benefits of the relationship.

Mentors and Mentees together:

For mentorship to thrive, it is essential for individuals involved in mentoring relationships to share a common understanding of what mentorship entails. This includes the roles it encompasses, those it

excludes, and the key skills and attributes that contribute to mentoring success.

Emphasizing the importance of shared values is paramount. This doesn't imply that individuals should exclusively seek out mentors or mentees who mirror their own characteristics, in fact quite the opposite. Diverse perspectives often lead to more significant personal and professional growth.¹⁴ However, if a mentor values work-life balance while the mentee prioritizes home life (or vice versa), it can lead to conflicts and relationship breakdowns, affecting the expectations they set for each other. While some degree of personal connection and shared values is essential, diversity can indeed foster growth, built on trust, the sharing of strengths and limitations, and authentic engagement with one another.^{4,5,14}

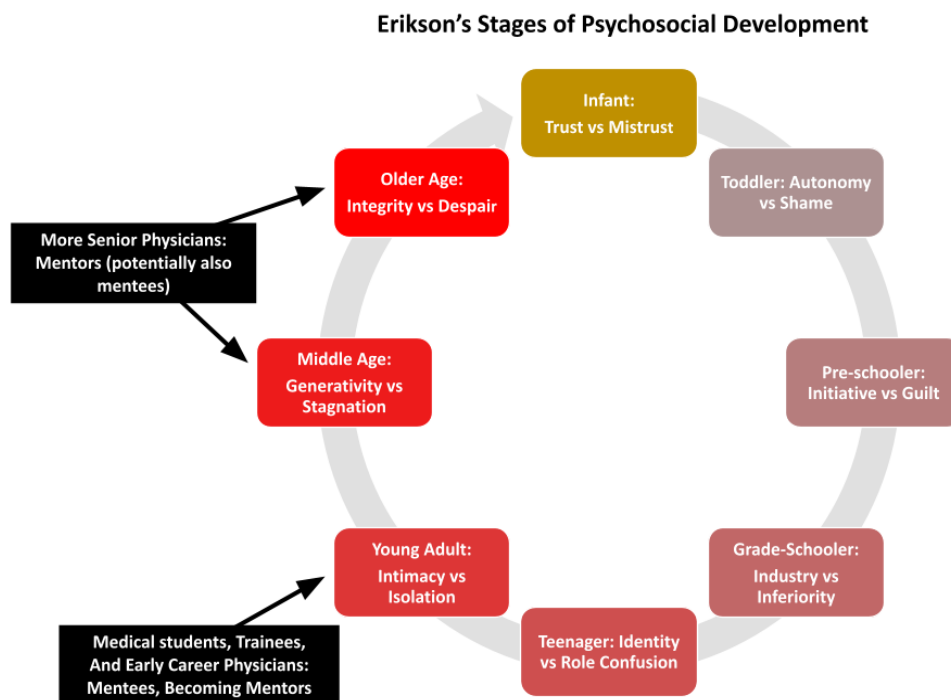
B: BENEFITS: WHY MENTORING?

Mentors:

The benefits of mentorship are well known from the perspective of the mentee, but there are many benefits for mentors as well, not the least of which include motivation, rejuvenation, and personal and professional growth.¹⁵ In his book *Drive*,¹⁶ Daniel Pink addresses motivation in terms of autonomy, purpose, and mastery. Mentorship offers mentors opportunities to experience each of these elements in different ways.

One of the greatest feelings for a mentor is the emotional high of watching a mentee succeed. This allows mentors to experience both a sense of purpose and a sense of mastery in their mentoring skills while witnessing their mentee develop a sense of autonomy.¹¹ Mentees continue to benefit from the connection but are increasingly able to perform and succeed on their own. Mentorship also inspires mentors to commit and recommit to lifelong learning, further adding to their sense of mastery. Mentors also benefit in the context of their own professional and personal development. When a mentor is successful, they become known as an academic leader and talent manager.¹⁰ When a mentee succeeds, it reflects well on a mentor and opens more opportunities for mentorship and growth for the mentor. This allows mentors to continue to build their professional network, connections, and notoriety.¹¹ It allows them to progress through Erickson's stages^{17,18} of psychosocial development, successfully navigating the stages of generativity versus stagnation and integrity versus despair (see Figure 1). These stages play out in one's personal and professional life¹⁷ and mentoring allows mentors to stay young at heart while giving back to the next generation. Through teaching and the encouragement of mentees to learn and master the art of self-reflection, mentors are able to continue to build this art in themselves.

Figure 1: Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development as it relates to mentorship



Mentees:

For those of us who have ever experienced the role of mentee, we can attest to the myriad of benefits of being mentored. At the onset of one's career, having an identifiable figure within the higher education framework who knows, looks out for, and cares about your success is truly invaluable.

Mentoring exhibits a positive correlation with initial job placement, as evidenced by research.^{19,20} Trainees who are mentored have been found to demonstrate higher career self-efficacy,^{21,22} higher career and institutional satisfaction,^{19,21} and improved productivity and academic performance.^{19,23} Another of the key advantages to being mentored is the accelerated learning curve that comes with direct guidance from an experienced mentor. Mentors are able to provide their mentees with an inside knowledge of the "hidden curriculum" within academia and the medical profession,^{19,24} enabling trainees navigate past common pitfalls and obstacles early in their career. This inside knowledge also helps the trainee in gaining a deeper understanding of their field more rapidly, enhancing their skill set, and instilling a sense of confidence as they navigate their career path with a trusted mentor by their side.²⁴

Having a mentor is an enduring personal relationship that continues to yield benefits long after career advancement.¹¹ Mentors play a crucial role in assisting mentees with successful completion of the intimacy versus isolation stage of psychosocial development proposed by Erikson^{17,18} (Figure 1). This support extends to professional socialization, academic opportunities, and consistent feedback, shaping a mentees' career journey.

Mentors and mentees together:

A preponderance of evidence suggests that the mentor-mentee relationship brings opportunities and benefits to both parties.^{6,23,25} The enduring nature of this mentoring relationship creates a fulfilling connection between two individuals who share values and interests, and extend beyond the training period and achievement of a career.

Mentorship not only cultivates a conducive environment for increased academic productivity for both the mentor and the mentee but also creates a symbiotic partnership. Mentees bring fresh perspectives, time, and motivation to the collaborations, complemented by mentors who contribute to on-going projects and the invaluable asset of experience. The mentor's role extends beyond explicit knowledge transfer, encompassing the illumination of the "hidden curriculum" within the medical profession, including insights into the art of

medicine, values, ethics, and professionalism.^{19,24} These findings align with the natural progression of psychosocial development proposed by Erik Erikson^{17,18} and particularly relevant for mentees as they navigate the challenges of intimacy versus isolation and mentors as they face the challenges of generativity versus stagnation and integrity versus despair.

Mentors, for mentees, serve not only as coaches and advisors but also as sponsors and guides to the complex social hierarchy of academia.¹¹ They embody role models for a successful career, with multiple studies demonstrating the positive impact of mentorship on personal development, career choices, organizational retention, and research development and productivity.^{2,9,11,24} In this mutually beneficial partnership, the mentor-mentee relationship enhances overall productivity and enriched the learning experience for all involved.

C: CHALLENGES ARISE**Mentors:**

Mentorship, while crucial, presents mentors with a significant challenge, which is well known to almost all seasoned mentors. This challenge is time constraints. Juggling demanding clinical schedules, escalating academic requirements, and the pressing demands of research often finding time to mentor trainees can feel like an insurmountable task.¹³ If mentorship is valued by our institutions and programs, they should consider how to protect time for mentors to perform this important task.

In our experience delivering mentorship workshops for faculty development, early on mentors often grapple with imposter syndrome—a formidable obstacle. Junior faculty members may question whether they possess the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful mentors. In truth, mentorship success hinges on the mentor's willingness to learn, seek guidance from their own mentors, and invest emotional energy into relationships. However, this process is far from straightforward. To foster effective mentorship, normalizing the challenges within mentoring relationships and promoting a growth mindset is imperative.

One key aspect of mentorship is the symbiotic relationship between mentor and mentee. A mentee's success reflects positively on the mentor, offering potential rewards. Conversely, a mentee's failure can cast a shadow on the mentor. This underscores the importance of mentors effectively modeling failure while helping mentees develop their resilience in the face of setbacks.¹³ In reality, if neither mentors nor mentees experience occasional failures, it suggests they are not reaching beyond their comfort zones.

Vulnerability is a prerequisite for effective mentorship. Mentors must acknowledge their limitations, recognizing that some problems—such as health issues or academic failures—are beyond their control.²⁶ In these situations, mentors should reflect on their own knowledge and skills, seeking support from peers and mentors to ensure the mentees' needs are met. They must remember that their role is to support, not to solve all problems. Mentorship should be viewed as an opportunity for growth. Mentors can choose to enhance their skills, seek additional mentors, or connect mentees with other mentors who can address their specific needs. Embracing weaknesses and vulnerabilities can be a catalyst for personal and professional growth, benefiting both mentor and mentee. The importance of a mentor realizing their limitations also becomes relevant when their mentorship services are requested far more than they can successfully manage. Saying no to a mentee who wants to work with you is a difficult decision to make, but overtaxing oneself may risk other mentoring relationships and personal wellness.

Mentees:

The prospective mentee grapples with a unique set of challenges as they dive into the world of academia. The daunting task of finding someone who has both the desirable qualities of character and personal achievements while still having the time and bandwidth to be an effective mentor can be formidable.^{13,19}

How do we overcome this challenge? A 2020 Harvard Business Review article¹ suggested changing the focus from trying to find a mentor in anyone available to a purposeful search for and acquisition of a mentor by the mentee. Writers suggest that a prospective mentee should consider carefully the personal and professional qualities they are looking for in a mentor and seek out that person.¹

Often, mentees struggle with a sense of disorientation within the complex landscape of academia. This feeling of being lost or even pulled in many directions can make it difficult to identify suitable mentors and to navigate the mentor-mentee relationship once a mentor has been found. Mentees may also contend with feelings of insecurity, particularly when their mentor holds a position of perceived significance or has limited availability.¹³ This hierarchical uncertainty within academia can result in difficulty on the part of the mentee in effectively communicating their needs and lead to a sense of burden.

For even the most extraverted, the prospect of approaching someone to request mentorship can be

intimidating.¹⁹ Authors suggest to “ask someone for a first conversation... if there is an alignment, then make the bigger ask for mentorship.”¹ By being upfront and intentional, the prospective mentor is able to conscientiously choose to accept or decline committing to further mentorship. This tactic also allows the opportunity for a collaborative discussion of the mentee's goals and needs based on the mentor's abilities and expertise.

Developing a relationship with a mentor requires hard work, persistence, and organization on the part of the mentee.^{1,2} By creating designated time for purposeful conversation with a mentor, a prospective mentee can demonstrate to the mentor that the relationship is a priority and acknowledge the value of the mentor's time and resources. Through careful cultivation of this mutual respect, the mentor-mentee relationship has grounds for growth and prosperity.

Mentor and mentees together:

Finally, the termination of a mentorship relationship presents another challenge. This may occur early if either party realizes a mismatch in personality, values, expectations, or schedules. In such cases, early, no-fault terminations should be normalized to ensure the relationship remains productive. Later in the relationship, changing roles, priorities, or geographical constraints may necessitate ending the mentorship.¹³ For example, if a faculty member assumes the role of a program director, temporarily terminating a mentorship to avoid favoritism for their mentee becomes crucial. Neglecting this step can have adverse consequences for entire programs.

Conclusion

Mentoring relationships powerfully impact those in medical education, offering numerous benefits to both mentors and mentees. These relationships connect the mentor's experience with the mentee's ambitions, driving both towards their highest potential. However, there's a noticeable gap between the acknowledged importance of mentorship and the actual formation of effective mentoring bonds.

We have explored the ABC's of mentoring, highlighting the benefits for both mentors and mentees and addressing their challenges. Mentorship isn't a one-size-fits-all journey; it demands effort, intention, and mutual understanding from both parties. With this collective insight, dedication, and the resolve to overcome hurdles, mentorship remains a pivotal influence in shaping the careers of its participants.

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