

## Getting the support you need: Mentoring

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Here, Lyn Jenkins, West Midlands Open Up Co-ordinator, talks you through how to get the support you need through finding a mentor.

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### In this factsheet...

1. Working out what type of support you need
2. Finding the right person
3. Entry and contracting with your mentor
4. Maintaining your relationship

A mentor is someone who acts as a trusted coach or teacher using their knowledge to help you identify and reach your goals. Finding a mentor is one way to ensure that you and your project are well supported BUT only if you choose the right mentor. Here is a step-by-step guide to finding a mentor.

### Step 1: Working out what type of support you need

Begin by dedicating some time to think about yourself: your strengths and weaknesses, as well as how you like to do things. For example,

- Do you need someone to put a bit of pressure on you to get things done or do you get things done easily and resent interference?
- Do you need specific answers on professional questions (e.g. finance, law, etc) or do you need a general sounding board on any issues about your project?
- How regularly do you need to meet your mentor?
- Is there anything else that you would like your mentor to have (e.g. qualities, experience) or anything about yourself that you need to bear in mind when looking for a mentor (e.g. can't meet in the evenings, etc)?

Once you've completed your list of needs, review the contents. Is it realistic? Should you be looking for more than one mentor?

Make a note of the type of mentor/s that you are looking for. For example:

"I need two mentors:

- Someone to help me with planning and problem solving on a monthly basis.
- Someone who can help me with [a particular subject...] every other month, or as and when needed."

## **Step 2: Finding the right person**

Now that you know what type of mentor you are looking for and what you need from them, you can begin your search.

First, look at the people you are closest to. Will any of them be able to help directly? If they cannot help you themselves, talk to them about what you are looking for. Do they know anyone who may be able to help?

Remember to ask local, regional and national mental health organisations for support. Dedicated mental health support workers, charity workers, development workers, other campaigners and close friends may be more willing to help and able to give more time.

## **Step 3: Entry and contracting with your mentor**

The entry and contracting phase of your relationship with your mentor is critical. The actions you take in this phase will have a huge effect on how successful your mentoring relationship is. It is during this phase that you explore how your relationship will work – will there be opportunity to walk away without bad feeling if either of you decide it is not right for you?

During this phase, which may take days or weeks, begin with general discussions. This stage can, at times, be frustrating as you both build an understanding of each other. Potential general discussions include:

- What you both think 'mentoring' means. Make sure you resolve any differences in your opinions.

- What each of you hopes to give and receive in the relationship. Again, resolving differences before moving on is the key to an open and successful relationship.
- Listen to your own feelings too. Is there anything that doesn't feel right? Are there any issues where you feel you and your potential mentor are conflicting? Discussing these now will save you both time and potential bad feeling.

Once you have completed these initial discussions without any commitment, take some time to reflect on whether this relationship will fulfil your identified needs. Don't forget to check with them that they are happy to move onto a round of more specific discussions.

Potential specific discussions include:

- The aims of your project in detail.
- How you will record your progress, decisions, etc, as you work together.
- Meeting dates and other practicalities.

#### **Step 4: Maintaining your relationship**

Step 3 ensured that you and your mentor entered the mentoring relationship with realistic expectations and clear lines of communication. However, these can quickly be lost if attention is not paid to them regularly.

Try to prevent this by

- Arranging meeting dates for the lifetime of the project or twelve months (if your project will last longer than a year). This helps to prevent you and your mentor drifting apart if you have one difficult meeting.
- Allocating some time during each meeting to reflect on the mentoring process: How does each of you think it is going? Is there anything that needs to be changed (e.g. record keeping, space between meetings, content of meetings)? Don't worry if either of you know that a change needs to be made but neither of you are sure exactly what that change should be. Just put potential ideas together and delay the decision until your next meeting.

We hope these basic tips help you find and build a strong, positive relationship with a mentor who is an asset to your project.



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