



Mentoring During the Pandemic

In these uncertain and scary times, mentoring might not be “top of mind,” but it should be. I’m not talking about the aspects of mentoring we usually discuss. There are so many things to worry about that are more critical right now than meeting development goals or achieving career objectives. At some point in the future, those things will become important again, but right now, there is a more fundamental aspect of mentoring that is vital to emphasize: mentoring is a *personal relationship* based on caring, support and trust. Keeping that relationship active can help mentors and mentees better manage stress, anxiety, frustration and loneliness during a period of isolation.

People need each other now more than ever. If you are in a mentoring relationship, whether formally through a program or informally on your own, mentor and mentee need to let each other know that you care, you are interested in how the other is doing, and you will be supportive, especially in this difficult time. Here are few suggestions for how to do that:

1. *Check in with each other regularly, via video call if at all possible.* Email is fine for just checking in and saying hello. Phone calls are much better because hearing your voice is more immediate and personal. But video is the most powerful and engaging method of communicating across distances. It’s incredibly easy today to set up a video call on zoom, facetime, skype or some other app, and there’s no reason not to do it from time to time. Video ensures that you pay attention to each other, promotes more meaningful conversations, reinforces trust, and creates a stronger feeling of connection. Seeing and paying attention to each other’s gestures and facial expressions, and being able to focus on and react to the same thing instantaneously as we interact in a video chat, can preserve some of the in-person contact that we crave.
2. *Help each other adapt and cope.* Discuss how you’re both managing while you’re stuck at home. Whether you are a professional with 25 years of experience or a very junior associate, we are all new at this. Everyone is learning how to adapt and cope, and some people are doing better at it than others, no matter their age, position or intellectual brilliance. People who rarely or never worked from home before may be having a tough time; even people who are accustomed to working from home may be struggling with isolation or with the added burden of spouses sharing workspace and childcare responsibilities. Discuss your mutual fears, concerns and challenges. Edify and learn from each other. If you are adept at the technical issues of remote work and your mentor isn’t,

offer some helpful tips. If you are an older mentor who has survived other ordeals in the past, provide reassurance to a young mentee that “we will get through this.”

3. *Get to know each other better.* With everyone working from home, we are growing accustomed to seeing kids on laps and pets wandering in and out during zoom meetings. We are getting a better sense of how others live and the kinds of pressures they face. Use this time to learn more about each other, and to practice empathy and compassion. This greater understanding can deepen your relationship.
4. *Remind each other that you have much to be grateful for.* Amid all the dislocation and anxiety, it is essential to acknowledge how fortunate you are. No matter how hard things get, tell each other about something you are grateful for that day, whether it is the ability to keep working while at home, the opportunity to have more time with your family, the beauty of the view from your window, your own good health, or the people who are bravely continuing to serve your community by delivering your groceries, teaching your children online, or providing health care under dire conditions.

These simple steps will benefit both mentor and mentee, and will help your mentoring relationship survive and thrive during this challenging period. It will also strengthen the interpersonal skills that will serve you well in relationships with clients, colleagues and others when the virus danger is gone and “normal” life resumes.

Ida O. Abbott, JD, author most recently of [Retirement by Design](#) (Ulysses Press 2020), and [The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring, 2d Ed.](#) (NALP 2018), is an international leader in the field of talent management, especially mentoring, sponsorship and retirement. She has enjoyed a four-decade career as a lawyer and consultant, and now applies her talents to help firms improve retirement processes and to serve senior professionals as a retirement mentor and coach. She is the author of numerous seminal books and publications, and is a popular speaker. Learn more at www.IdaAbbott.com.