Get the most out of your medical school coaching sessions

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Having a coach can be valuable at any stage in one’s medical career. But why should you prioritize coaching while you’re in medical school? When and how should you meet? And what exactly should you talk about? A handbook from the AMA provides useful answers.

Following are highlights from “How can I get the most out of my coaching sessions?” Chapter 5 of It Takes Two: A Guide to Being a Good Coachee, a learner handbook focusing on what learners need to know to get the most out of a coaching relationship, produced by the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

“An academic coach may sound very similar to an adviser or mentor, but there are distinct differences,” wrote Christine Thatcher, EdD, associate professor of family medicine and associate dean for medical education and assessment at University of Connecticut Health, and Antea DeMarsilis, a medical student at University of Connecticut School of Medicine.

“Ideally, conversations with a coach are safe, meaning that as a learner, you can explore ideas, dreams and goals with your coach to become the better you,” they added. “Regardless of stage in your career, from early learner to professional, a coach is someone who will ‘guide from the side,’ facilitate change and help celebrate when goals are met.”

When, where and how to meet

“Ideally, the first few meetings will be face-to-face,” the authors wrote. “It is essential to establish a relationship and to build trust. Take time to get to know each other. By sharing a CV and/or a personal bio, you may find similar interests, and it will help you engage in deeper conversations.”

Once you establish a relationship with a coach, set regular meetings. These could be by phone, video or email if the question or update is brief or urgent. But no matter the format, communicate regularly
and try not to cancel, the authors emphasized.

You might also set intermittent meetings to accommodate issues and achievements as they arise.

"Your coach may see a red flag appear in evaluations, you may receive difficult feedback or a board score may come in that changes your outlook," the AMA handbook says.

Likewise, you can set transition meetings for when your needs and goals shift, such as after you reach a major milestone.

“Reflect on your goals,” the authors advised. “Have you met them within the timeframe you intended at the outset? Has this relationship helped you to make changes and move forward? Is this the time to close this relationship and look for a new coach? Or will you continue together? This is the time for tough conversations that will ultimately shape future goals.”

What you should ask for

“From the beginning, you should discuss what the relationship will look like,” the authors wrote. “You should drive this discussion and decide how the coach can be helpful—what are the areas you want to improve? You may consider clinical performance, communication skills, wellness or academic difficulties such as time management as just a few examples.”

You can structure coaching sessions in many ways too, but there are several core agenda items to consider including in each meeting. These include:

- **The check-in:** Spend a few minutes talking generally.
- **Goals review:** Look at your progress and figure out if your goals need to be revised.
- **New goals:** What could make you feel more successful?
- **Wellness:** Discuss your personal interest and how to maintain work-life balance during transitions.
- **Meeting frequency:** Should it be revised to better meet your needs?
- **Follow-up:** Take time to record pertinent thoughts and plan your next meeting.

More help with coaching

The chapter includes a checklist of potential coaching session topics, descriptions of how coaching might change throughout training and ways to make your coaching sessions “high yield,” such as practicing self-reflection prior to meetings.
A corresponding text, *Coaching in Medical Education: A Faculty Handbook*, provides a coaching framework for educators, as well as tools to provide professional development and assistance to learners in medical education.