You’re an academic coach. Do you know which questions to ask?

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Every learner has a dream—something much bigger than a goal—yet many medical students and residents lack a trained and trusted person to help them navigate their personal obstacles to achieve those dreams. But being an academic coach requires much more than sympathy and good intentions.

The art of coaching lies in knowing which questions to ask—and when to ask them.

Following are highlights from “Coaching Models: Demonstration and Practice,” an interactive session at the recent AMA Academic Coaching Virtual Workshop, which provided core questions for academic coaches to ask their coachees to help them better understand the challenges they face and how to overcome them.

The workshop, held in August, also explored the first steps in establishing a coaching program, how to develop and curate materials for training coaches and how to apply coaching to well-being and burnout prevention.

Check out a starter’s guide to pursuing an academic coaching program.

The research behind coaching

Much of academic coaching is based on self-determination theory. Widely considered the most important contemporary theory of human motivation, it assumes three core human drives: autonomy, relationships and competence.
“At its simplest, coaching is about drawing out the other’s autonomy through a close relationship that is both safe and challenging, in order to help the other person build the skills [they need] to get where they want to go,” said the leader of the session, Margaret Moore, co-founder and chair of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School.

An outline for conversation

A handful of questions can help you get off on the right foot with coachees. Each is grounded in positive thinking:

What makes you thrive? This explores where, or who, the coachee is at the time of the conversation.

“Thriving is a biological term. Each organism has a recipe for thriving,” Moore said. “We know we’re thriving when we feel fully alive, when we feel really energized.”

What is your vision for your future self? This question explores who the coachee wants to be. But it should be more intuitive than contemplative, drawing on the images that are conjured when one’s mind wanders.

Why is this vision important to you? If intuition served up the coachee’s vision of her future self, this question reinforces it by bringing her full autonomous motivation to the forefront.

“When people are going to embark on difficult change, the hotter the motivation is burning, the further they will go,” Moore said. “Our emotions show us where our values are.”

What is your most important challenge? This is intended to build the coachee’s self-confidence. It should be a practical assessment of what would make the biggest difference in realizing the coachee’s vision.

What strengths will help you most? These should be distinguished from talents. Strengths are based in values—the idea being that the more you value something, the more motivated you are and the better you do at it. (A list of strengths to consider is available at the Values in Action website.) You might then suggest an exercise in which the coachee explores using a strength in a new way.

“Sometimes we lead, sometimes we facilitate,” Moore said, adding that the challenge is figuring out what the coachee is crying out for, not shoehorning in what you know how to do. “That’s a higher order of a relationship—when you really can tune in with what is it that they need right now.”
More help with academic coaching

Learn more with the AMA about coaching in medical education. *Coaching in Medical Education: A Faculty Handbook* provides a practical framework for medical educators who are creating medical student coaching programs. *It Takes Two: A Guide to Being a Good Coachee* is a handbook focused on what learners need to know.