Get coaching help to set these 7 key medical student goals

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For all of its structure, medical school is still a highly individual experience. Making the most of it requires a level of personal insight and mental fortitude that medical students might want additional help to develop. Coaches can fill that role.

The following are highlights from “How can my coach help me?”, Chapter 4 of It Takes Two: A Guide to Being a Good Coachee. This is a learner handbook focusing on what learners need to know to get the most out of a coaching relationship. It was produced by the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

What’s special about coaches

“A coach is not a mentor who you necessarily aspire to emulate or an adviser who tells you the specific tasks you need to complete to reach a career milestone,” wrote the authors, Amy Garcia, MD, a pediatric gastroenterologist at Essentia Health, in Minnesota, and Karishma Patel and Roree Phillips, third-year medical students at Oregon Health & Science University School of Medicine.

Instead, a coach listens to you and asks tough questions you may be avoiding.

“A coach can help you formulate goals and offer an intervallic chance for self-reflection on your progress throughout undergraduate medical education,” they added. “It is up to you and your coach to determine where your efforts and limited time will be best spent.”

Learn more about how medical students can benefit from coaching in medicine.

Seven kinds of goals

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Part of what coaches contribute is the opportunity to individualize one’s medical education by setting personal goals, the authors noted. Medical student-driven goal setting is the foundation of this relationship. The coach is there to ensure the learner's goals are realistic and will tend to organize those goals in these seven key areas.

**Academic.** On the front end, a coach can assess your study habits to help you identify the pros and cons of your current regimen. But he or she can also help you manage academic setbacks.

“For many students, medical school is the first time they will be pushed beyond what they may feel capable of achieving (e.g. the first time a student may fail an exam),” the authors wrote. “Medicine is not a failure-free field and learning to cope with adversity is something your coach has likely faced during their career.”

**Clinical.** This includes identifying weaknesses in clinical skills, navigating clinical relationships and choosing a specialty.

**Professional.** A coach can help you form a positive understanding of yourself and cultivate your professional identity. But more to the point, a coach can help you figure out what kind of a doctor you want to become.

“A coach may ask you to examine the physicians you work with throughout school, keep notes on what qualities or traits you admire or do not appreciate in them, and then set goals based on these examples,” the authors wrote.

**Well-being and balance.** This includes exercise, diet, sleep habits, hobbies and interests. A coach can help you set goals to meet a tight schedule and avoid neglecting your physical and mental health.

**Personal.** Maintaining meaningful relationships during medical school is crucial. So is navigating difficult personal and family situations.

“Remember that your coach is a non-biased medical professional who likely has a wealth of experience in conflict resolution,” the authors wrote. “Keep them in mind when you feel like you could benefit from someone who can help you critically reflect on a dispute you are experiencing and create a plan to resolve it.”

**Accountability.** Goals are only meaningful if you’re actively pursuing them. A coach can help with time management and organization.

**Reflections and check-ins.** The idea is that, by having an external individual hold you accountable to your goals, you can feel supported and remain motivated, the authors noted.
“It can be helpful to ask yourself: How am I doing? What has been going well, and where can I improve? Am I actually achieving my goals? Do I want to adjust my goals? How far have I come? What are my strengths?”

Read more about how to get the most out of your medical school coaching sessions.

A corresponding text, Coaching in Medical Education: A Faculty Handbook, provides an academic coaching framework for educators, as well as tools to provide professional development and assistance to learners in medical education.