Lifelong learning is a defining feature of contemporary medical practice, and master adaptive learning enables medical students, resident physicians and other learners to take control of the process. But adopting this framework and its four phases—planning, learning, assessing and adjusting—can be a daunting task if you don’t have someone to provide guidance and encouragement. Coaches can do just that, helping you focus your energy, develop your goals and identify strategies to meet those goals.

Following are highlights from “How can my coach help me develop as a master adaptive learner?”, Chapter 6 of It Takes Two: A Guide to Being a Good Coachee. This is a 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.

Where to start

“The basis for any active learning endeavor is the act of performing an informed self-assessment,” wrote the authors. They are: Molly Fausone, MD, an internal medicine resident at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nicholas Raja, MD, an ob-gyn resident at University of Michigan, and Meg Wolff, MD, MHPE, associate professor of emergency medicine and pediatric emergency medicine at University of Michigan Medical School.

“In short, you need to know where you are in order to begin thinking about where you want to be,” they added.

Many things go into an informed self-assessment—including compassionate self-reflection, soliciting feedback and aggregating feedback from multiple sources—and a coach can help you through the process.

A good coach can help you see the forest for the trees in informed self-assessment. One way is by
making sense of conflicting information from feedback sources. A coach can also help you appreciate having an accountability plan and then implement one.

“Opportunities for learning exist when there is a gap between where you are and where you ought to be (or want to be),” the authors wrote. “Reflection and feedback can help you identify these gaps, but choosing which learning opportunity to tackle first and making an action plan to do it can be challenging. These are areas where your coach can help you with this process.”

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

Beyond immediate needs

Similarly, many learners need help prioritizing learning opportunities and setting goals. A coach can help you sort out the many goal-setting tools, including the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant, Time-base) framework, Wish-Outcome-Obstacle-Plan (WOOP) and goal blueprinting. The latter builds on WOOP by asking:

- Where am I now?
- Where do I want to be?
- How can other help me get there?
- What do I need to change?
- What are signs that I’m on the right track?

But coaches shouldn’t be sold short on their scope, the authors noted. They can also help with nonacademic goals.

“Is there an important aspect of your identity or advocacy work you engage in that you want to tie more intentionally to your medical career?” the authors asked. “How do you plan to balance responsibilities to work and family? Is there a hobby or activity you would like to pursue in your free time?”

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

Ask this question often


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Beyond self-assessment, learners also need to identify appropriate learning resources and effective learning strategies. Neither is easy without help, and here again coaches can play a vital role.

“Make a habit of asking your coach what types of resources might be useful,” the authors noted.

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.