

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Mentoring During a Crisis

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Shortly after September 11, 2001, I (David) stood in the cafeteria line at work, anxieties still swirling in my mind. I happened to see one of my mentors, a senior member of our department; after we exchanged hellos, our conversation quickly turned to current events. I remember he said two simple – yet powerful – words: “It’s scary.” Almost instantly, my fears began to settle, replaced by a sense of connection. Knowing I wasn’t alone made a difference.

From our combined ~50 years of experience mentoring healthcare professionals before the Covid crisis, and now during it, we’ve learned just how important mentors can be—especially for those on the front lines. For months, doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, postal carriers, and [many others](#) have been navigating physical danger, complexity, and uncertainty, with no end in sight. Now more than ever they need emotional support. But they can’t always turn to their managers, who may be

consumed with solving problems and overwhelmed with keeping their organizations running. Workers may also fear that managers, who hold the key to future advancement, may view a request for help as a weakness. Thus you as a mentor can play a critical role, providing them with a stabilizing force, someone who can help talk them down when they're triggered, scared, burned out, or confused—all off the record.

If you consider yourself a mentor to someone on the front lines, the first step is to take care of yourself. You can't offer emotional support if you don't have your own emotional fortifications in place. Then you can turn to helping your mentees by offering them emotional support and concrete tactics.

Fortify Yourself First

First, take stock of your capacity. Do you have the necessary time, focus, and energy for your mentees? If you're on the front lines yourself, you're probably stretched thin, and if you don't have capacity, accepting this reality is an important act of kindness to yourself and a service to your mentees. If you don't have time but still want to help, one solution is to help your mentees develop a [“team of mentors.”](#)

If you do determine that you have the bandwidth to play a mentorship role, ask yourself: what can I do to fortify myself? Mentors are often accustomed to putting themselves last—or not even on the list—of those whose needs get addressed. But you cannot provide care to others with an empty tank.

We've seen well-intentioned colleagues push themselves harder and harder—without regard for self-care—to the point where they had to step away to recover.

Adequate sleep, nutrition, exercise, and activities that provide rejuvenation and meaning—such as meditation, prayer, nature walks, listening or playing music—are not luxuries; they are essential. [Micro-practices](#) such as keeping a gratitude journal, deep breathing, and [moments of mindfulness](#) such as when using hand sanitizer can build moments of wellness into your day. They take only seconds to minutes to implement. Even a ~15 second practice of [“taking in the good,”](#) done consistently, can boost your well-being and put you in a better mindset for helping others. And just as your mentee benefits from having you and other mentors to support them, you need your own support network as well. Highly effective leaders lean on [support teams](#) of colleagues near or far and good mentors do the same, scheduling regular check-in calls with friends, family, mentors, coaches, spiritual advisors, or mental health professionals. Mentoring can feel like a solitary job, especially in a crisis: know you are not alone.

In the same vein, keep in mind that your relationship with your mentee isn't one-way. Being open to learning from your mentees can be a source of positive energy for both of you. [Reverse mentoring](#) can pay big dividends, both emotionally and practically, especially in the ever-changing virtual world in which digital natives have a lot to teach the rest of us. For example, one of us (Vineet) learned about using virtual whiteboards from a mentee, increasing our ability to teach and engage audiences

effectively. Voicing your appreciation for these moments of exchange can also build your relationship and provide its own form of emotional support to your mentee.

This kind of self-compassion and self-care can feel hard for mentors to justify, but it will help you be a better mentor—and modeling these behaviors is a great gift you can give your mentees.

Attend to Your Mentee’s Emotional Well-Being

In your work with your mentee, it may be tempting to focus on teaching them new skills or on giving them advice about how to solve specific technical problems. But for front-line workers, you’re one of the few places they can turn for emotional support, so it’s critical that you make their well-being a focus for any mentoring discussion. Encourage your mentee to share what they’re feeling, reassure them, offer wellness strategies, and affirm their strengths.

Begin with listening. Ask your mentees, “How are you *really* doing?”—more than once. Expect to hear about [grief](#), anxiety, and fear. Encourage them to talk about these feelings: [naming emotions](#) helps us feel them, and allows them to flow through us, bringing a helpful shift in [brain activity](#) and perspective. Expect too that your mentoring meetings may involve more emotion than usual, including tears. Help your mentee know they’re not alone—“I’ve cried too,” or “I’ve been there myself.” This can assuage their grief, calm the fight-flight-freeze response of their nervous system, and strengthen your [relationship](#).

If you’re worried about what exact words to use with your mentees, know that [reflective listening](#) is in itself highly supportive. This just involves taking the essence of what the mentee said and offering it back as a connecting confirmation that they have been heard and understood. For example, if your mentee is describing how stressful work is, you could say, “I hear it’s really stressful—and it’s hard to know what to do with the unexpected.” If you want to dig deeper, you can ask, “What is your biggest challenge right now? What is helping? What’s going well—or still OK—in your world?” In times of stress, clarifying what is most important to your mentees can be the biggest gift of all. In so doing you help them appreciate and focus on the things that bring meaning and purpose to their life.

Second, offer reassurance and opportunities for connection. Discuss [lowering expectations](#) in these uncertain times—explaining that they shouldn’t feel they have to push themselves beyond their limits. At the same time, express your appreciation for their [strengths](#). Simply naming them can be surprisingly helpful: “One of the things I most appreciate is your curiosity and drive for learning.” Or: “Coronavirus is one for the history books. You’re helping to pull us through. Thank you.”

Finally, share tactics for supporting their emotional well-being. Encourage your mentees to have their own support team and to limit their media exposure. Offer a detail or two about your support team, and how you use it; ask about their own loved ones. Even just talking about mental health resources helps to normalize them. Each of us has used a coach, psychologist, therapist, or spiritual counselor and at various times has shared this fact with our mentees, as appropriate.

For both mentors and mentees, this may also be an especially meaningful time to renew [dormant connections](#). Even if it's been years since you've been in touch, a "check-in" call or e-mail can help. And while virtual mentoring may not be as satisfying as the in-person kind, there is evidence supporting its [efficacy](#). In ways large and small, [one person](#) can make a lasting difference. Even a few words, mentioned in passing, can last a lifetime.

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