Perhaps you are a new nurse or an experienced nurse assuming a new position, or perhaps you are a new mentor. What all of these situations have in common is a need to learn the ropes of a new position. One effective avenue is mentoring.

Jill James is a new RN who had been seeking an RN position in her home state. With today’s limping economy, she was unable to find a suitable position, so she ventured into new territory and accepted an RN position in her chosen specialty, medical-surgical nursing. She felt fortunate to have found a position at St. Rita’s Medical Center, about 200 miles from her family.

Jill is encountering many new things at once: new home, new city, new hospital, and new job. Sounds overwhelming, doesn’t it?

One of the reasons Jill selected the medical-surgical unit at St. Rita’s is because her interview with the nurse manager and the unit’s staff went so well. She found them to be welcoming, caring, friendly, professional, and patient-centered. Also high on her list of positives about the job was the unit’s mentoring program. Jill had the opportunity to interview with a mentor and mentee in the program and it was this interview that sealed the deal for her decision to accept the position.

So What Exactly is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a reciprocal and collaborative learning relationship between two individuals with mutual goals and shared accountability for the success of the relationship. The mentor is the guide, expert, and role model who helps develop a new or less experienced mentee.

In many instances, mentoring is a spontaneous relationship that develops between two people. However, mentoring can also be successful when the mentor and mentee are paired or matched by others. This is often the case in health care facilities when a mentee transitions into a new role. The mentee is paired with an experienced nurse, or mentor, to learn a new position and develop in the role.

Mentoring is more than orientation or preceptorship that may last a few weeks or through a 3-month probationary period. The duration isn’t cast in stone, but it is an ongoing relationship that will last as long as the mentor and mentee find meaning and value in it.

A mentoring relationship can occur at any phase of an individual’s career. We may be a new graduate, an experienced nurse assuming a nurse manager or clinical nurse specialist position, or an experienced clinician taking on a leadership position as the chairperson of a shared governance council. We may also become a mentor one day, using our knowledge, wisdom, and experience to provide meaningful learning experiences for a mentee.

Mentoring is a partnership between the mentor as a teacher and the mentee as a learner. As adult learners, mentees are responsible for their own learning and behaviors. As teachers, mentors act as guides or facilitators of learning.

Each of us has numerous opportunities throughout our lives to be new at something. Being new isn’t always a pleasant experience. There is fear of the unknown, uncertain confidence, fear of making a mistake, and just the uncomfortable feeling of not being in control. We’ve all been there, and will be there again at some point. In the role of a mentor, it is very helpful to remember what it was like being new to a position or task. It helps to get in the frame of reference of the mentee.

Novice to Expert Continuum

We’ve learned from one of nursing’s icons, Patricia Benner, PhD, RN, in her book, From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice, that learning new skills requires a progression through stages or levels. These levels are:

- Novice
- Advanced Beginner
- Competent
- Proficient
- Expert

When nurses take on new and unfamiliar roles, they often begin at the novice stage. Novices use rules and facts to guide their actions. They adhere to these rules without consideration for the context of the situation. It is difficult for a novice to put all of the parts together and see the whole picture. They are concerned with the tasks at hand and often cannot do more than one thing at a time.

Most novices want to feel and be seen as competent immediately upon taking on a new role. It is uncomfortable knowing one does not have a firm grasp of a new role. Mentors and mentees must remember that learning new skills is a process that takes time. Both individuals must be patient during this formative time and realize that what is occurring is normal.

With time and experience, novice nurses continue to experience the real world and progress to the advanced beginner and higher levels of the continuum. Mentors can continue to play a significant role in the mentees’ progression.
**Mentors**

Mentors will more quickly become successful in their roles when they listen actively to what is going on and are willing to soak up as much learning as possible. Mentors are a rich source of knowledge – they’ve been there, done that, and learned the critical pieces to perform successfully. Thus, mentees can gain a tremendous amount from an effective mentoring relationship.

Successful mentoring relationships are built upon trust, openness to self-disclosure, affirmation, and willingness and skill in giving and receiving feedback. Mentoring involves a significant expenditure of time and energy on the part of the mentor and especially the mentee. Living up to promises and commitments to each other over time is extremely important to the relationship.

Mentees learn to achieve a balance between their own independence and reliance on the mentor. Over time, the independence will most likely dominate, and the relationship will change. After experiencing an effective mentoring relationship, mentees often feel refueled and inspired to make a difference in their practice. Other benefits of mentoring for the mentee include:

- Increased self-confidence
- Enhanced leadership skills
- Accelerated acclimation to the culture of the unit/facility
- Advancement opportunities
- Enhanced communication skills, especially with the interdisciplinary team
- Reduced stress
- Improved networking ability
- Political savvy
- Legal and ethical insight

**Mentees**

Mentors provide their mentees with insights that would otherwise have been gained only through trial and error. They ask a lot of questions – especially “Why?” – which encourages mentees to stop and reflect on situations and potential alternatives. Mentors are good at linking different bits and pieces of their mentees’ lives, such as work and home, thoughts and feelings, successes and failures. They try to look at the bigger picture and the future. Mentors help their mentees grow in their critical thinking skills and progress along the novice to expert continuum.

**Potential Problems with Mentoring**

Not every relationship is successful. This can be true of a mentoring relationship as well. Sometimes the interpersonal dynamics or the match between mentor and mentee just doesn’t work. One partner might grow faster than the other or in a different direction, and a strain on the relationship may occur.

One common problem is the lack of follow-up and commitment to sustain the relationship. Mentors might overburden the mentee with work and responsibilities and vice versa. Mentees and mentees will most likely dominate, and the relationship will change. After experiencing an effective mentoring relationship, mentees often feel refueled and inspired to make a difference in their practice. Other benefits of mentoring for the mentee include:

- Increased self-confidence
- Enhanced leadership skills
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**Tips for Mentors**

- Exhibit exemplary/role model behavior.
- Recognize and encourage potential.
- Monitor your mentee’s progress and provide helpful feedback.
- Introduce your mentee to co-workers, physicians, and other significant individuals.
- Offer guidance in the customs/culture of the unit/organization.
- Build a relationship of trust.
- Discuss the confidential basis of the relationship.
- Live up to promises and commitments.
- Publicly praise your mentee’s accomplishments and abilities.
- Provide support in times of personal crises or problems.
- Assist in making decisions through listening, support, and feedback. Ask, “Why?”
- Share appropriate life experiences to personalize and enrich the mentoring experience.
- Encourage your mentee to take risks and learn from mistakes.
- Agree to a no-fault termination of the relationship if it isn’t working or when the time is right.

**Tips for Mentees**

- Assume responsibility for your own learning and growth.
- Seek challenging assignments and responsibilities.
- Be receptive to and ask for feedback. Also, give constructive feedback to your mentor.
- Live up to promises and commitments.
- Articulate your professional and learning needs to your mentor.
- Ask questions. Share concerns.
- Be prepared for meetings with your mentor.
- Discuss your long-range career planning with your mentor.
- Ask for advice/feedback on handling difficult situations/behaviors.
- Discuss clinical decisions that you made.
- Progressively increase your independence in your role.
- Honor the confidentiality of the relationship.
- Agree to a no-fault termination of the relationship if it isn’t working or when the time is right.

**Need-to-Know Advice for Mentors and Mentees**
may become a clone of the mentor and lose their individuality. They may also become too dependent on their mentors. An unfavorable incident may occur in which the mentor or mentee feels let down or betrayed. Jealousy and personal or ethical disagreements can also strain the relationship.

There is also the case of toxic mentors who are detrimental to the success of their mentees. Toxic mentors may be unavailable or inaccessible to mentees or may throw the mentees to the wolves to either sink or swim. Toxic mentors may also block the mentees’ progress or criticize them in various ways.

Both mentors and mentees can learn from the problems others have encountered in the mentoring relationship. If signs of these problems begin to develop, both individuals have a responsibility to confront the situation and actively plan a resolution or dissolution.

Prior to entering into a mentoring relationship, both parties should agree to a no-fault separation if one or both individuals realize the relationship is not working.

**Mentoring Facilitates Professional Growth**

Mentoring has proven to be a successful way of facilitating the professional growth and development of new graduate nurses and other nurses transitioning to a new role.

The Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses (AMSN) has long recognized the value of mentoring for nurses in the acute care setting. AMSN has recently evolved its long-standing Nurses Nurturing Nurses (N3) mentoring program into a self-directed format that provides the tools for designing a successful mentoring program of your own whether you are a mentor, mentee, or a mentoring program coordinator.

The AMSN Mentoring Program is provided on a complimentary basis on the AMSN Web site (www.amsn.org/mentoring). The program contains a Mentor Guide, Mentee Guide, Site Coordinator Guide, and an Introduction to Mentoring article. You may use and customize the information and tools provided in any manner you deem appropriate for your facility or yourself.

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