



Common Phases of a Mentoring Relationship

Every relationship—friendships, parent-child, sibling, marriage—goes through different stages or cycles as it matures. At each stage, mentors and mentees may experience some common anxieties and behaviors that reflect what is happening in the relationship at that stage.

The Big Brothers Big Sisters program of the Greater Twin Cities in Minneapolis, Minnesota, outlines four stages in the growth cycle of a mentoring match, as well as some helpful strategies for successfully navigating each stage:

1 Beginning the relationship—In this stage mentors and mentees are testing the waters with each other. Mentees may feel nervous or wary, and they may be putting on their best behavior for you. They may also get frustrated if things don't go as they expected. You as a mentor may want to “fix” everything. You may find yourself adjusting your initial expectations about being a mentor, once you've experienced it for real. Both of you may be trying to bridge each other's age, cultural, and lifestyle differences as well as finding things in common.

Strategies for this stage:

- Be consistent and reliable.
- Show you are willing to listen.
- Focus on doing things *with* rather than *for* your mentee.
- Be aware of your own feelings about age, cultural, and lifestyle differences.
- Be nonjudgmental.
- Reach out, be available.
- Be open and honest about what you can, can't, or have to do.

2 Building trust—Now that the two of you know each other better and have some shared experiences under your belt, you and your mentee may experience greater trust. Your mentee may be coming out of his shell, feeling better about himself, or simply more confident because you have demonstrated that you care. As a result, he may share more information with you. He may start to rely on you more for support and validation in this stage, possibly to the point of becoming over-dependent. At this stage, you may be experiencing more satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. You also may, however, be feeling overwhelmed by the extent of the issues faced by the mentee.

Strategies for this stage:

- Be patient.
- Expect setbacks.
- If you think your mentee is becoming too dependent, set limits around the frequency and duration of visits and encourage him to broaden his support network.
- Be involved, yet keep perspective.
- Continue to be consistent and reliable.
- Continue to treat your mentee as capable.

③ Testing the relationship—Now that rapport and trust are built, it is typical for the mentee to start testing boundaries in the relationship. Deep down, she may still want to see just how much staying power this relationship really has. Your mentee may make inappropriate requests of you. She may even show resentment or hostility toward you. You may start resenting what seems like negative behavior, and you might also feel caught in the middle between your mentee, her family, or other service providers.

Strategies for this stage:

- Don't take testing personally.
- Reinforce limits, if necessary.
- Continue to treat your mentee as capable.
- Reaffirm your intention to remain in the relationship.

④ Increasing independence—Once you have come through the trust building and relationship testing, you may find your mentee becoming less dependent on you and finding other sources of support. On the upside, you might see an increased self-worth in your mentee. However, setbacks are still possible during this stage as your mentee may take bigger risks in his life and in the relationship. As a result of all of this, you may feel discouraged or less needed during this stage.

Strategies for this stage:

- Point out the shifts in behavior that you are observing and reinforce your mentee's efforts to seek support from others.
- Continue to support your mentee while encouraging independence.
- Expect some setbacks as a natural part of this stage.