



# Protecting & Promoting Mental Health: A Toolkit for Mentors in Entrepreneurship

presented by **canada** *life*™



**rise**

Empowering people  
Launching ideas



"[My mentor] has been very specific in his advice and has been a reliable voice of encouragement for me and my business. We've formed a friendship through the mentoring experience."

— Todd, Rise Small Business Lending Program client

Entrepreneurship can be an exciting and fulfilling career path for many. For individuals with mental health and addiction challenges, it can be a remarkably empowering step in their recovery. Amongst the population of people with disabilities, those with a mental illness face the highest degree of stigmatization in the workplace and the greatest barriers to employment. While entrepreneurship is an effective way for individuals to take ownership of their income and careers, it can also be confusing and intimidating, uncharted territory.

That is why mentorship is so important. As an experienced professional, your knowledge is like a lighthouse, helping to guide your mentee and their business to shore.

So, thank you.

We've created this toolkit as a resource to help you enhance your mentoring partnership from a mental health perspective. It is a guide full of questions and exercises to help you navigate and contribute to a successful mentorship. Of course, no two mentoring partnerships are the same, so follow what feels right to you and your mentee's experience, your view of relationship building, personal comfort, etc. As a mentor, you are not expected to be a counsellor, therapist, or any kind of clinician. The goal of this toolkit is not to solve your mentee's mental health challenges, but rather give you the skills to foster relationships that are considerate of the mental health and wellness of all parties involved.

Based on feedback from Rise mentees and mentors and a cumulation of research and experience, *Protecting & Promoting Mental Health: A Toolkit for Mentors in Entrepreneurship* has been created in partnership with [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#), compliments of Canada Life (Workplace Strategies).

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Workplace Strategies  
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## What Makes A GREAT MENTOR?

Mentoring is a trust-based, non-hierarchical partnership focused on the mentor sharing their knowledge and experience to support a mentee in achieving their goals.

People rarely receive formal training to learn how to be a mentor, but the good news is, you don't need special skills. Your expertise is your lived experience, and your impact will come from how you apply many of the successful skills and traits that you've already developed in your business and personal life.



"The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves."

— Steven Spielberg

## WHAT MAKES A GREAT MENTOR?

A great mentor:

- **LISTENS** actively, patiently, and with empathy to form a clear understanding of the mentee's needs and to create a safe and confidential space for learning and sharing.
- **COMMUNICATES** openly, with respect and vulnerability, to build trust and help the mentee navigate challenges and achieve their goals.
- **EMPOWERS** the mentee as the decision-maker, responsible for driving both the business and the mentoring partnership.
- **SHARES** their knowledge and experiences, providing the mentee with insight and suggestions from another's perspective.
- **ASKS** questions to help their mentee apply answers they already know, and/or to guide them to discover new information for themselves.
- **SUPPORTS** success through coaching and leadership, helping mentees refine their vision, while enabling them to define their own goals and draw their own conclusions.
- **LEARNS** from the mentee's experiences and is a champion of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- **RESPECTS** personal and business boundaries established at the start of the relationship.

## MENTORING WITH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Mentorship can be a very fulfilling endeavour, but that doesn't mean it's easy. Being a mentor requires a level of personal and emotional investment that can affect both you and your mentee's mental health. Developing your **Emotional Intelligence (EI)** is one way for mentors to positively impact the effectiveness of their relationship.

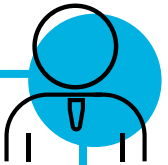
An emotionally intelligent mentor understands and empathises with their mentee's emotions and is aware of their implicit biases and the assumptions they make about others' behaviours or experiences.

**Understand your EI strengths and areas for improvement by completing Workplace Strategies' [Emotional Intelligence Self-Assessment](#).**

### HONE YOUR SKILLS

There is no finish line when it comes to growing as a mentor. Here are some activities to better understand your own mentorship characteristics and strengthen your skill set:


- Get insight into your best qualities with the [VIA Survey of Character Strengths](#) self-assessment.
- What's your personality type and how does it affect your relationships? Try the 16Personalities [Personality Test](#) to learn more.
- The [Psychologically Safe Leader Assessment](#) helps you identify and strengthen your competence in fostering psychologically safe professional environments.





## RELATIONSHIP FIRST: Building Trust & Setting Expectations

The most important factor to the success of a mentoring partnership is trust. The first meeting between mentor and mentee should be focused on building trust by getting to know each other and defining the parameters of the relationship. **As mentor, your number one job is to understand your mentee's needs and establish how you will support them to achieve their goals.**



**"My favourite mentor  
unleashed my passions,  
channeled my energy,  
guided my growth  
and encouraged my  
success."**

**— Anna Letitia Cook**

# BUILDING TRUST IN A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

## Getting to Know Each Other

It sounds cliché, but something as simple as taking turns responding to the proverbial “tell me about yourself” prompt can get the ball rolling. Listen to your mentee’s story and ask thoughtful questions to get a sense of who they are as a person and as an entrepreneur.

**Remember:** It’s your mentee’s prerogative whether or not they share personal information with you. As a mentor, you can build trust by sharing your own story and experiences openly from the start, but it is ultimately up to the mentee what personal details they volunteer to disclose.

## Discuss your values.

Our values fundamentally influence our decision making, shape our priorities, and affect our behaviour. So, as a mentor, understanding your mentee’s values can help you to gauge what ideas and advice might be most beneficial to them.

Stuck on how to introduce the subject? Here’s an easy exercise to try:

- List the top three core values that guide you in your professional life and ask your mentee to do the same.
- Discuss why each is important to you as an entrepreneur and how they affect your approach to business. For example:
  - Prioritising quality may mean investing more time in fewer projects. However, lengthy review processes can also lead to procrastination. Conversely, valuing speed or quantity may mean quicker progress, but also lower quality work.
  - Neither value is better or worse than the other. It’s important to discuss values with your mentee without judgement, shame, or blame. In either case—quality or quantity—they may need encouragement and tools from your toolbox to help them stay motivated and on task.





## Understand your mentee's motivations.

Motivation is the force within that drives ideas into actions, but it's not self-sustaining. It requires support and nurturing. Take time to understand your mentee's business motivations, their reasons for pursuing a mentor, and their intentions for the relationship.

Having a clear picture of your mentee's motivations will help you determine the best way to motivate and encourage them, especially during difficult times. Ask your mentee questions like:

- *"How would you describe your business to me?"*  
*"What motivated you to start it?"*
- *"What is your vision for your business?"*  
*"What are some of the barriers keeping you from doing that now?"*
- *"What do you consider your greatest strengths as an entrepreneur?"*  
*"What areas do you want to grow/develop in?"*
- *"What have been your greatest challenges so far?"*  
*"How did/are you addressing them?"*
- *"What do you hope to get out of this relationship?"*  
*"What types of support can I provide that would be most valuable to you?"*

## Check your bias.

As you get to know your mentee, it's important to check in with yourself to identify any prejudices you hold which may affect the relationship. Intersectionality, implicit bias and microaggressions all affect how people interpret and internalize their experiences and can impact both mental health and approaches to entrepreneurship.

- **Intersectionality** refers to the various places that people's identities intersect (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, etc.).
- **Implicit biases** are unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that we hold against a particular group of people.
- **Microaggressions** are subtle, often indirect and unintentional forms of discrimination.

How can biases and microaggressions be avoided?

- Consider the question, "Where are you from?" For immigrants or people of colour, it may feel loaded with judgement about their place in Canadian society. Instead of asking direct identifying questions, try sharing details about yourself to find common interests. For example: *"I'm from Toronto and am a lifelong Maple Leafs fan. Do you have a favourite sports team?"*
- **Implicit curiosity** is the practice of asking respectful questions about your mentee's preferences and opinions. For example, rather than asking a mentee about their gender identity directly, mutually clarify pronouns right from introduction: *"My pronouns are she/her. What are yours?"*

Want to learn more about addressing intersectionality, implicit biases and microaggressions? Check out these resources from [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#).







## QUICK REVIEW: Building Trust in a Mentoring Partnership

- Get to know each other. Ask easy conversation starters like, “Tell me about yourself” or “What are some of your interests?”
- Be empathetic to and aware of your differences as individuals and entrepreneurs. Your mentee’s identity and lived experience no doubt affect both their approach to business and mental health.
- Don’t start by asking probing questions. Instead, share information about yourself to demonstrate and build trust.
- Start with “big picture” conversations that give context to the state of the mentee’s business and your forthcoming relationship.

### INTRODUCTORY TOPICS TO COVER:

**Talk about your values.** Each share your three most important core values and explore how they influence your business style.

**Understand your mentee’s motivations.** Ask subjective, relevant questions, such as:

- What’s your motivation/vision for your business?
- What are your greatest strengths as an entrepreneur and where do you want to grow?

**What do you expect from each other?** Share your motivations and expectations for the mentoring partnership so you can start this journey both pointed in the same direction. Ask:

- What do you hope to get out of this relationship?
- What types of support can I provide that will be most valuable to you?



### BONUS TIP

One of the best questions you can ask when trying to get to know someone is, **“Why?”**



## SETTING EXPECTATIONS & BOUNDARIES

Clarifying expectations and boundaries at the start of the relationship leads to more successful mentorship by creating a reliable, referenceable framework for managing the partnership moving forward. During your first meeting together, work to come to a shared understanding of how your partnership will operate.

### Define success.

Every entrepreneur has to write their own definition of success. It is informed by the knowledge and expertise gained through their own lived experience, personal and professional. Don't let the "MBA Factor" get in the way—there are myriad ways to be successful, which value different ways of doing business. Particularly for entrepreneurs managing mental health and addiction challenges, business success can be as much about recovery as it is about revenue. Invest the time and energy to understand your mentee's needs as *they define them* so you can best help them to achieve the success they seek.

- Instead of asking, "What are your sales goals this year?" ask a more open question like, "What does success mean to you?"
- Your mentee might respond with business figures, might talk about supporting their family, or about building their confidence by fulfilling the lifelong dream of running a business.
- Continue the conversation with questions like: Can you be more specific? How do you see your business helping you achieve that? What can I do to support you?
- How your mentee responds will help shape how you move forward together.

### Understand needs.

Drill down to understand your mentee's learning style, working style, communication style, and how they manage setbacks. Ask questions that help your mentee identify their needs and how you can support them in the most effective way.

Here are some examples of how to start the conversation, then drill deeper:

**MENTOR:** Are you a planner, or do you like to deal with things as they come?

**MENTEE:** As they come.

**MENTOR:** How might we structure our time together so we can stay on course but still leave room for spontaneity?

**MENTOR:** What's your communication style? Do you like to talk things out, or prefer to communicate via email?

**MENTEE:** Email.

**MENTOR:** What kind of email communication is best? Do you like a lot of context and explanation, or do you prefer bullet points with only the essential information?

**MENTOR:** How do you like to receive feedback?

**MENTEE:** A face-to-face conversation.

**MENTOR:** How might we structure those conversations so that you feel comfortable expressing your feedback and concerns?

**MENTOR:** How do you manage stress?

**MENTEE:** I'm a procrastinator. I avoid stressors.

**MENTOR:** What kinds of things create stress for you?

**MENTEE:** Deadlines.

**MENTOR:** How might I help you to plan ahead so you can work through the stress?

It's important to treat your mentee as a person first and an entrepreneur second, acknowledging that their needs can change during the relationship, and that mental health may, at times, be a determining factor. The clearer that you can see things from their perspective, the more competently you will be able to support them in setting goals, determining next steps and problem solving towards success.

## Here are some other important areas to set expectations for the health of the relationship:

- **DIFFERENCES OF OPINION.** You will inevitably experience them, so try to understand how your mentee manages conflict and outline a process for how you'll address it together.
- **OPEN MINDEDNESS.** Listen to each other's opinions and perspectives without judgement.
- **HONESTY.** Embrace "I don't know" and commit to finding answers together.
- **EXPERIMENTATION.** Adopt a mindset of experimentation and trying new ideas and approaches together, without taking credit or laying blame.
- **COURTESY.** The future is unpredictable, so commit to informing each other if you need to miss a meeting or need to step away from or end the relationship at any point.
- **ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES.** In the beginning, your mentee may feel that their role is unclear or passive—that as the mentor, you lead and they follow. But in the most effective mentoring partnerships, it's the mentee in the driver's seat.



## Set boundaries.

Setting boundaries is the practice of placing guardrails around your relationship to ensure shared expectations can be upheld and personal lines are not crossed. These include:

### Limiting your time:

- *How frequently will we meet, in person or virtually?* (While there is no rule, at least once per month is recommended.)
- *How frequently will we communicate between meetings? What are appropriate communications for email, phone call, text, etc.?*
- *If either of us need to cancel/reschedule a meeting, how many days in advance will we each try to inform the other? (There's no rule, but as a courtesy, we recommend 2-3 days' notice, acknowledging that there may be extenuating circumstances.)*
  - Create boundaries that limit your time but still ensure an environment where your mentee is comfortable reaching out to you when issues arise. For example, put clear limits on your evening and weekend availability, but commit to a response time.

### Professional boundaries:

- Your mentee may need tactical support running their business, especially if they're experiencing mental health challenges. However, your role is to help them find solutions, not provide solutions or direct business support.
- You are not a therapist or a counsellor. As a mentor, you'll do your best to support your mentee through mental health challenges from the perspective of achieving their entrepreneurship goals, but you will not provide health advice.
- Define how you will use your network to support your mentee and what asks are off limits.
  - For example, you may leverage your network to introduce your mentee to other professionals for advice; however, you will not engage your network for any investment opportunities on the mentee's behalf.



## Privacy and confidentiality:

- All personal information, especially sensitive information such as finances or mental health, must be disclosed voluntarily and remain confidential between the mentor and mentee unless explicit consent is given to share it.
- While the degree to which you share personal information may change as trust in your relationship grows, you and your mentee may want to have a conversation early in your partnership about any topics that either of you consider “out of bounds.”
  - For example, your mentee may consider specifics about a diagnosis or a family situation out of bounds. Respect that any such topics will remain off limits throughout the relationship unless your mentee chooses to divulge information on the topic.

## MENTORSHIP AGREEMENT



Trust isn't just about honesty; it's about following through on what you say you'll do. Work together with your mentee to draft an agreement that formally outlines the shared expectations and boundaries discussed. This will act as the framework of your mentoring partnership.

Try filling out our [Mentorship Agreement template](#).

This agreement captures:

Code of Conduct | Roles & Responsibilities | Communications Expectations | Personal & Professional Boundaries

The Mentorship Agreement template is an example of one way you might outline the parameters of your relationship. Use it verbatim or adapt elements to create a personalized agreement format that best serves you and your mentee.

## QUICK REVIEW:

### Setting Expectations & Boundaries

In your first meetings, take time to understand your mentee's needs and definition of success, and set expectations and boundaries for your relationship accordingly.

- Define success by asking open questions without assumptions. For example, “What does success mean to you?”
- Understand your mentee's needs by digging into their learning, working and communication styles. Ask questions like: “How do you like to get feedback?” or “How do you manage stress?” and “How can we best structure our time together to create a safe space for those conversations?”
- Together, set expectations around conflict management, open mindedness, experimentation, honesty, and courtesy.
- Set boundaries around factors such as your time, qualifications, and confidentiality.
- Capture your agreed upon roles and responsibilities, expectations and boundaries in a Mentorship Agreement that can be referenced throughout the relationship.

## DEFINING SUCCESS: Goal Setting and Tracking

Supporting your mentee to set goals and track against them is one of your most important roles as a mentor.

As a mentor in entrepreneurship, you're likely familiar with this stage of your mentee's business development, whether in its early stages, or navigating a difficult growth phase. It's human instinct to want to help by taking control based on your own experience. Instead, it's critical that you help facilitate an environment where your mentee feels empowered to take responsibility for their business goals and set them according to their own needs and definition of success.

This approach is about creating a situation where your mentee feels that they are making a commitment to themselves and their business, not complying with someone else's expectations.



"Mentoring is  
a brain to pick,  
an ear to listen,  
and a push in the  
right direction."

— John Crosby

## Start small. Be specific.

Discuss your mentee's overarching vision for their business, but keep in mind that the "big picture" can create unintended performance expectations and place added pressure on the relationship. Already the experience of mental health challenges can erode an individual's confidence and sow seeds of self-doubt, so it's important to create a goal-setting atmosphere where your mentee feels a sense of positive accountability and control.

- Focus on setting micro-goals. These are the small, achievable goals that help build confidence, and foster a sense of progress and accomplishment.
- Micro-goals should ladder up to larger goals.

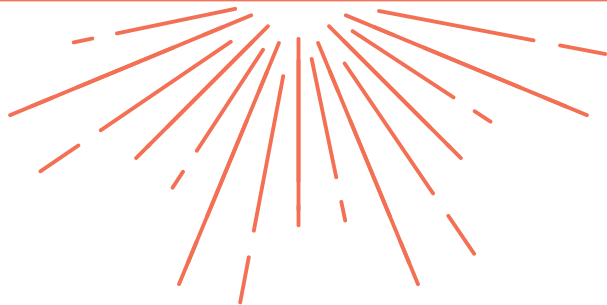
As mentor, you can provide "big picture" perspective, while helping your mentee to narrow their aim to set practical, actionable goals. The more specific a goal can be, the easier it will be to track and achieve. Specificity can also help to identify potential obstacles before they arise. For example:

### EXAMPLE #1:

**MENTEE:** I want to sell \$100,000 of product in the next 12 months.

**MENTOR:** "Ok, what are some more immediate tactics that you can do to strengthen your sales this month?" or "Explain the process for how you will get there for me."

**MENTEE:** I will commit to cold calling prospective clients for at least 15 minutes each day.



As your mentee builds confidence through manageable micro-goals their progress will accumulate and you can begin to set larger, more specific business goals. (i.e., "OK, now that you're comfortable cold calling, how many prospective clients should you aim to convert to sales each week?")

Refining goals can also help to reduce associated fear and stress.

### EXAMPLE #2:

**MENTOR:** What is a business skill that you want to improve in?

**MENTEE:** My networking skills.

**MENTOR:** What part of networking are you already good at? What part of it is most challenging for you?

**MENTEE:** I have social anxiety.

**MENTOR:** What is the end goal of a networking interaction for you? How can we develop some opportunities that you will be comfortable in?

- You won't always agree with your mentee's perspective but keep an open mind and help them to explore all options.
  - For example, rather than using statements like, "I've tried that, and it won't work," ask your mentee, "How can that tactic improve sales tomorrow?" Share your own experience without imposing it—your mentee needs to evaluate all their options and make the best decision for themselves.
- Create a positive and supportive space where mentees feel safe to share their ideas and to reflect on and learn from misjudgements and missteps.
- Your perspective can help to ground your mentee's expectations and guide them towards Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-based (S.M.A.R.T.) goals relevant to their vision.





## Share your struggles.

Often times, lessons derived from your challenges are even more valuable to share with your mentee than your success stories.

### TRY THIS EXERCISE:

What are some examples of obstacles and failures that you've overcome in entrepreneurship, which are either relevant to your mentee's business experiences or demonstrate personal/professional growth?

Share those struggles with your mentee, reflecting on how you dealt with your mistakes/failures and, importantly, what you learned from the process. When discussing disappointment, explore:

- What opportunities did the disappointment eventually make possible?
- How did it help you grow, develop or change?

The purpose of this exercise is to normalize mistakes and failure as a part of learning. Displaying confident vulnerability also helps to build trust.

(Adapted from Workplace Strategies' [Mistake Meetings](#) and [Deal with Disappointment](#))

**"Confident Vulnerability" is courageous wisdom.**  
It's accepting failure as a necessary part of learning, and embracing your and others' strengths, weaknesses and needs without judgement.<sup>1</sup>

## RECORDING & TRACKING GOALS EFFECTIVELY



It's important to record your mentee's goals so you can measure progress against them.

As the mentor, be the one to take notes during your discussions. Write down your mentee's goals as you understand them. To clarify, ask questions like:

- "How would you write that?" to capture the statements in your mentee's voice.
- After the discussion, follow up to verify that what you heard and wrote down is aligned to what your mentee meant to express.
- It's important for your mentee to hear their own voice in their goal plan, so that when you reference it later, they can recognize and remember their intent.

Don't make assumptions about how or why your mentee's progress is going the way it is, because things change.

Set a regular schedule and replicable process for reviewing the goals and reassess them throughout the relationship to ensure they are responsive to your mentee's evolving needs and business realities.

Try using our [Goal Planning & Tracking worksheet](#).

The Goal Planning & Tracking worksheet is an example of one way you might capture your mentee's goals and measure progress throughout the relationship. Use it verbatim or adapt elements to create a personalized goal tracking format that best serves you and your mentee.

<sup>1</sup> <http://qfour.net/u/Q4-Confident-Vulnerability-FEB16.pdf>



## QUICK REVIEW: Setting Goals

Support your mentee to take the lead in setting small and S.M.A.R.T. goals that are responsive to their needs, their definition of success and true to their voice.

- Start small with micro-goals that are achievable and strengthen your mentee's skills as they build up to larger, longer-term goals.
- Keep the conversation open-minded and avoid imposing your business views. Instead of statements like, "I've tried that, and it won't work," ask "How will that tactic have an impact?"
- Share your experience and opinion as another perspective to consider, not an instruction to follow.
- Dig into goals to refine them and make them as specific as possible.
- Practice confident vulnerability by sharing your stories of struggle and failure to build trust and help your mentee analyze challenges and assess solutions.



## CRITICAL COMMUNICATION: Navigating Difficult Conversations

**Our mental health informs our attitudes and behaviours... but so does everything.**


You may speak to your mentee one day and get the sense that something is wrong. They disclosed to you previously that they experience anxiety and depression, and you immediately wonder, “How can I know if that’s what this is?”

The short answer is you can’t.

As a mentor, you are not expected to be a therapist or counsellor. Your mentee may experience challenges that you are not qualified to handle. And that’s ok. What’s important is equipping yourself with tools and strategies to effectively navigate difficult conversations with your mentee.

It’s also important to learn how to observe another’s mood or attitude without making assumptions. Sometimes a person’s demeanour is affected by their mental health, and sometimes they’re just having a “bad day.”

Disclosing personal and mental health information must always be voluntarily initiated by your mentee.



**“Mentor: Someone  
whose hindsight can  
become your foresight.”**

— Anonymous





## Listening to understand.

Mental health challenges can often cause negative and repetitive thoughts that affect focus. Here are some tools for not only listening actively, but also listening to understand your mentee's perspective, so you can help them keep focused on their business:

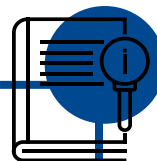
- Listen patiently, without being presumptuous or dismissive.
- Allow for pauses without interrupting your mentee or jumping into solutions mode. Give them the time and space to express themselves, without pressuring them for an answer.
- Acknowledge what your mentee chooses to disclose. Seek clarification and/or show you understand by paraphrasing what they've said using phrases such as:
  - What I've heard you say is... Is that what you meant?
  - What do you mean when you say...?
  - I get the impression that...
  - I'm sensing that you're quite discouraged...
  - It seems that they really upset you...
- Try not to agree or disagree with what your mentee says, and refrain from evaluating their situation or giving advice. Instead, continue to ask questions like, "How are you managing?"

(Adapted from Workplace Strategies' [Listening to Understand for Leaders.](#))

## Communicating through emotions.

If you notice an atypical change in your mentee's behaviour, use unbiased, non-judgemental questions to open communication. Rather than trying to diagnose or "fix" a problem, focus on demonstrating that you are there for your mentee. For example:

Instead of commenting...	Try "notice" conversation starters...
"You seem depressed today."	"I notice you don't seem yourself today. Is everything ok?" OR "I notice you sound down. What has changed for you lately?"



Explore Workplace Strategies' resources on how to [Acknowledge Differences](#) and [Practice Non-Judgemental Interpretations.](#)



## Communicating through fear.

At the root of conflict is fear, often of needs that are either threatened or unmet. Fear and worry can manifest as negative emotions like anger and defensiveness. For inexperienced mentors in particular, it can be difficult not to react emotionally and try to fix things. But remember that your mentee's emotional distress is rarely about you, yet you can still play an important role in supporting them towards a solution.

As an example, inexperienced entrepreneurs in particular can become attached to a vision or idea of how they want their story to play out according to their values. Fear of failing that vision can result in an unwillingness to try new things or venture in different directions.

If your mentee makes statements such as "I can't do that...", "That won't work..." or "I'm afraid...", follow up with questions to understand and discuss why they feel that way:

- What's the worst thing that could happen by attempting it?
- How likely is it that this worst-case outcome will occur?
- How can we protect against that happening?
- If it were to happen, what would you do?
- What other challenging situations have you been in that show us you could probably handle even that worst-case scenario?
- What's the best thing that could happen if you were to try it?

## Difficult conversations come down to intentions.

In difficult conversations, reassure your mentee that you are not there to criticize, judge or fix them, but that your intention is to continue helping them achieve their entrepreneurial goals.

You can direct the conversation back to your relationship by asking:

- "How do you feel this is affecting your business?"
- "What would be helpful right now to get you back on track?"

The experience of stress can cause people to lose sight of their strengths, which can take its toll on confidence and motivation. In difficult conversations, try not to dwell on the problem. Instead, direct the conversation towards your mentee's personal strengths to remind them of their competence, and work together to find realistic and attainable solutions.

# COMMUNICATING FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Honesty is critical to helping your mentee achieve the personal and professional growth they seek. That means, sometimes, you may have to provide them with negative or critical feedback. Without strategy, such conversations can easily lead to feelings of judgement and defensiveness.

## Keep it constructive.

To provide negative feedback effectively, it's important to make sure you are being constructive by providing clear feedback specific to something that can be adjusted, such as behaviour or strategy—not your mentee's personality traits, character, etc. It's like the difference between calling someone “controlling” and working together to find ways to help them delegate work.

Here are some tools for a providing constructive criticism effectively:

- Begin by acknowledging your mentee's strengths and efforts.
  - “I appreciate how organized you are and that you come to every meeting prepared.”
- Don't scold or lecture. Remember this is a non-hierarchical partnership. It's not your job to police or parent the mentee.
- Give a clear, concrete example of the negative behaviour being criticized and explain how you see it affecting the mentee's business and well-being, and/or the mentoring partnership.



## LET'S GET TALKING

Explore Workplace Strategies' comprehensive [Supportive Conversation Library](#) for tips, techniques and guidelines for managing a wide variety of sensitive scenarios.

- Always try to frame the feedback as an opportunity for professional growth.
  - **Less constructive:** “You don't pay attention to detail, and it makes your work seem unprofessional.”
  - **More constructive:** “I notice some errors in your documents and I want to discuss steps we can take to polish the finished product.”
  - **Less constructive:** “You take everything I say too personally.”
  - **More constructive:** “How might I deliver feedback in a way that's more comfortable for you to receive it?”
- Give your mentee time and space to respond to the feedback uninterrupted. Encourage them to ask clarifying questions and repeat the feedback in their own words to ensure they are hearing the same message you intend to convey.
- Don't take an emotional response personally. Criticism, no matter how constructive, may trigger your mentee. Allow them space to react without dismissing their emotions.





## HOW TO MANAGE BREAKS IN COMMUNICATION

Mental health challenges or not, life is hard. As a mentor, you may experience breaks in contact with your mentee, and it's important to know that it's okay.

As a part of your mentorship agreement, you may have established expectations or a process for ending the partnership openly and respectfully, with consideration for the other person's time and feelings. Even then, sometimes the mentee will step away from a mentoring partnership without any warning or explanation.

It's important to understand and internalize that this is not a reflection of you as a mentor. Life happens, and there are countless reasons that a mentee might become incommunicado. As with navigating all difficult conversations, nothing is gained by speculating. You are a volunteer providing an invaluable service and hopefully have built a connection with your mentee. You may want to know what has happened to them out of care and concern, but it's important to remember that:

- 1) It's your mentee's decision whether or not to disclose what they're going through to you.
- 2) It's not personal.

The reality is that sometimes business has to take a back seat to mental health and well-being. And sometimes life just gets in the way:

- Priorities change
- Other pressures and demands dominate the mentee's time
- They lose motivation and/or decide it's time to move on
- They simply don't have the space in their life to accommodate mentorship at the moment/anymore

If your mentee becomes absent from the relationship, reach out to let them know that you remain a source of support:

- After missing a meeting and/or failing to make contact for a few weeks, reach out via a passive communication, such as email, and let your mentee know that you are still there and are ready to resume the relationship when they are.
- Avoid any communication that:
  - Assigns guilt (*"I waited for you and you didn't show up."*)
  - Accuses, blames or shames (*"You're wasting my time." "What's wrong with you?"*)
  - Positions you as a victim (*"All I wanted to do was help you and you took advantage of that."*)
  - Lashes out defensively (*"Don't blame me if your business fails."*)

### Plan ahead for resilience.

When working with a mentee who experiences mental health challenges, addiction and/or episodic illness, it is important to plan for the likelihood of disruptions to business.

You can help by supporting your mentee in developing a resilience plan for their business. Knowing a plan is in place to mitigate damage/disruption will help alleviate stress.

Discuss:

- Who are your mentee's emergency contacts and backup supports? Note that as mentor, you should not be included on this list. Remember, you are a support to the business, not a part of the business.
- Outline what needs to happen for the business to keep going in your mentee's absence.

### RESILIENCE PLANNING

Discuss and complete the [Resilience Planning: Preparing for Disruptions to Business worksheet](#) with your mentee. If this format is not right for your relationship, feel free to adapt the content to best suit your needs.





## QUICK REVIEW:

### Difficult Conversations

The nature of human relationships is such that you and your mentee will be faced with difficult conversations.

#### COMMUNICATING THROUGH EMOTIONS

- **Don't diagnose:** Check in with your mentee using unbiased, non-judgemental questions such as, "I notice you don't seem yourself today. Is everything ok?"
- **Listen to understand:** Listen patiently and without presumption, allowing your mentee the time and space to express themselves and what they are feeling. Demonstrate empathy and understanding by reiterating their message using phrases such as:
  - *What I've heard you say is... Is that what you meant?*
  - *I'm sensing that you're quite discouraged...*
- **Face fear:** Help your mentee overcome barriers by asking questions that expose underlying fears limiting their progress. If your mentee says, "I can't do that...", examine the various hypothetical outcomes of trying something new. Ask:
  - "Why not? What's the worst that could happen?"
  - "What's the best that could happen?"
- **Intentions matter:** Make sure your mentee knows that your goal is to understand their perspective to help them achieve their business goals. You're not there to criticize, judge, or "fix" them.

#### COMMUNICATING FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

- **Keep criticism constructive:** When providing feedback, give clear and concrete examples of behaviours to address, and explain how they are affecting business and/or your partnership. Do not criticize personality traits or characteristics, and phrase your feedback constructively:
  - **Less constructive:** *"You don't pay attention to detail, and it makes your work seem unprofessional."*
  - **More constructive:** *"I've noticed some errors in your documents and I want to talk about steps we can take to really polish the finished product."*

#### BREAKS IN COMMUNICATION

You may experience breaks in contact with your mentee, and it's important to remember that it's okay. It's not personal. You are valued as a volunteer and as a professional, but sometimes life just gets in the way.

- Reach out to your mentee to let them know that you are still there as a support, and ready to resume the relationship when they are.
- Even though you may be concerned and/or hurt, it's important not to speculate about what has happened to your mentee and to remain empathetic, supportive, and respectful of their privacy.
- Help your mentee plan for resilience so that they are equipped to manage disruptions to business.

**SUPPORT DURING CRISES:** This resource is not intended as a mental health intervention. If your mentee discloses a relapse in their recovery, suicidal ideation, or any indication that they may be a risk to themselves or others, encourage them to reach out to their network and seek qualified mental health support.

Visit Crisis Services Canada for a list of local resources and support:


<https://www.crisisservicescanada.ca/en/looking-for-local-resources-support/>



## MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: Self-Care & Mindfulness

By its very nature, entrepreneurship can be a stressful, lonely, and isolating endeavour, and balancing the demands of business ownership with mental health can be difficult. Studies have found that 62% of Canadian entrepreneurs felt depressed at least once a week and that mental health issues interfered with work for nearly half (46%) of them.<sup>2</sup>

As a mentor, not only can you be an important influence to help your mentee prioritize self-care and mindfulness, but it's also important to keep your own mental wellness in check.



**"We need to  
do a better job  
of putting ourselves  
higher on our  
'to do' list."**

— Michelle Obama

2. <https://cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GoingitAlone-CMHA-BDCReport-FINAL-EN.pdf>



## PUT SELF-CARE ON THE 'TO DO' LIST

Dedicate a few minutes of every meeting with your mentee to a mental health check-in. This is neither a one-way conversation, nor a time to try to diagnose or fix issues; it's a chance to talk about shifting priorities between life and work, stressors that might be affecting business, and ways to manage them.

### Keep getting acquainted.

Getting to know each other shouldn't just be an exercise at your first meeting, it should be an ongoing practice of trust-building, comradery, and wellness. Letting go of the "all business" attitude common to entrepreneurship in favour of a deeper human bond creates space for both you and your mentee to address the role that work plays in your lives and how it affects mental wellness.

Without violating their privacy or any boundaries you've established, check in with your mentee on life outside of work. Here are some easy conversation starters:

- What kind of things do you do to keep your mind and body active?
- Do you have any hobbies you like to do to take you mind off work?
- How have you been spending your evenings and weekends? (*Note, if the answer is "working," try to understand the motivation—a tight deadline? Unhealthy expectations? Inability to unplug?*)

Follow up on personal details and life events that your mentee has shared to demonstrate your investment in the partnership and to ensure they have continued to prioritize them. For example:

- You mentioned that your son was graduating this month. How was the ceremony?
- How is your mother doing after her surgery? Have you had time to visit her?
- You said you were anxious about an upcoming inspection. How are you feeling about it now?

### Lead by example.

There is a mindset often touted in entrepreneurship that stress and exhaustion are all a part of the "hustle," and to complain is a sign of weakness. As an experienced entrepreneur, you can combat that stigma by demonstrating competent vulnerability and sharing the reality of your own stressors.

- As with all personal details, your mentee should share their experiences only when ready, but as mentor you can create a safe and supportive space by leading the conversation.
- Talk openly about your stressors and what your triggers are when experiencing them. Share with your mentee:
  - What you do to prevent/mitigate stress when you feel it starting to affect you.
  - What you do to manage stress when you're experience it.
  - How your most common stressors have evolved through your career.

This type of conversation is important to have early in the relationship and to revisit throughout, because it sets the expectation that entrepreneurship can be stressful. The goal is not to avoid stress, but rather to manage it, learn from it and overcome it.



**TRY THIS EXERCISE:** Discuss the types of scenarios that commonly create stress for your mentee. Because personal life stressors can have a significant impact on work life, this should be a broad discussion including topics like:

- Childcare
- Financial concerns
- Conflict at home
- Feeling underappreciated
- Slow/stalled progress
- Physical wellness (i.e., illness, injury)

- When your mentee identifies a stressor experienced frequently, ask questions to detail the source of stress. For example, if discussing the stress of conflicting demands, ask:
  - *What about conflicting demands creates stress for you?*
    - Their answer may be, “I find it hard to shift between deliverables with similar deadlines.”
  - *What control do you have over those timelines that run up onto one another?*
    - With discussion, you may discover that the root of this stressor is not deadlines, but an inability to say no to clients, colleagues, family members, etc.
- Discuss instances when your mentee has experienced the stressor previously, how they reacted, and what helped. A reminder of how they coped in the past can be a helpful tool to lean on the next time your mentee experiences that stressor.
- Apply these same conversation tactics to conversations about stressors that your mentee is experiencing in real time.



## EXTINGUISH BURNOUT

A normal level of stress is expected in entrepreneurship. It can even be healthy and enhance one’s performance; however, chronic work-related stress left unmanaged can result in what the World Health Organization (WHO) has classified as an occupational phenomenon: burnout.

Though not a mental illness, burnout is a significant mental health concern, which often manifests as emotional exhaustion, negativity, and ineffectiveness.

Help your mentee prevent and manage burnout by learning to recognise its signs and symptoms:

- Neglecting basic needs, such as nutrition and sleep
- Reduced energy, efficiency, and motivation
- Poor performance and a dismissal of errors
- Changes in behaviour, especially increased cynicism, negativity, and aggression
- Fatigue, irritability, and suspiciousness
- Revision of values (for example, a drop in quality or new apathy towards customer care)
- Accepting and/or justifying their struggle with statements like: “I’m just tired,” “No one else can do the work,” “I’ll be fine once this project is over,” or “People depend on me.”

Left unaddressed, burnout can take a dramatic toll. It affects physical and mental health, can breed self-doubt, dissatisfaction and depression, decrease productivity and cause communications breakdowns.



While your mentee may not be readily able to identify burnout or want to talk about it, here are some strategies you can use to encourage them towards acknowledgement and recovery:

- **Reiterate their value** — Help your mentee understand and appreciate their value by focusing on their smaller, daily accomplishments and mapping those to larger goals.
- **Assess and reprioritize workload** — Burnout often leads to longer hours but lower productivity. Suggest to your mentee that they make a list of their work demands, then support them by discussing which are high priority, which can be delegated to others, and which can be put on hold or dropped altogether.
- **Stop multitasking** — Support your mentee to focus on one thing at a time, breaking down overwhelming projects into manageable tasks, and work at a consistent, reasonable pace.
- **Set boundaries** — Help your mentee set boundaries on their time and energy by creating a replicable daily workplan with set hours and built-in breaks.
- **Champion “no”** — Encourage and help your mentee to practice the art of saying no.
- **Help them find help** — Use your knowledge, experience, and network to help your mentee find the right kind of support to help them overcome their burnout.
- **Make self-care the goal** — In your regular reassessment of goals, encourage your mentee to elevate self-care by creating goals to be measured alongside business milestones.

## HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE ACTIVITIES FOR CALMING & RELAXATION YOU CAN SHARE:

**Reminder to breathe:** With your mentee, set a daily reminder on your phones/computers and commit to each other that you will stop whatever you’re working on when it goes off and sit still for two minutes to breathe deeply. While breathing, focus on the words, “inhale” and “exhale” to relax the mind.

**Mobile brainstorm:** If stress is running high during a meeting with your mentee, leave the desk/table and take your discussion around the block. Even with virtual meetings, you can switch to a phone call for 10-15 minutes and both get out for the benefits of fresh air.

**Strength spotting:** Take time to notice and record your mentees strengths. Name those strengths out loud, explaining how you have observed them in your mentee and express appreciation for the value of that characteristic.

**MINDFUL MEETINGS:** Both you and your mentee should commit to a buffer of time before and after all your meetings in order to prepare and be present. This is an easy but critical step because your own mental health and the daily pressures you experience can impact meetings with your mentee. It’s important to clear your head, relax, and try to let go of any negativity from your day beforehand.

- This means not scheduling back-to-back meetings, not bringing other demands into your shared time and space, and eliminating distractions.
- Try taking a short walk immediately before meeting with your mentee to clear your mind.
- At the end of the meeting, don’t just jump to the next thing. Take time to debrief with yourself, observe your emotions, prioritize next steps/deliverables, and to simply decompress.

We asked Rise clients how they take care of their mental health. Their answers? **Sleep. Hydrate. Rest. Exercise. Mindfulness.**



## DON'T FORGET YOUR OWN SELF-CARE

Being a great mentor is a lot of work. Investing your own time, energy, and enthusiasm in someone else's entrepreneurial dream can be an intense experience, both emotionally and mentally. Don't forget to take care of yourself and prioritize your own wellness.

Like your mentee, we're grateful to you for taking on this life-changing volunteer role. Know that every minute you give is a minute of impact, but that you must also protect time for your own self-care and mindfulness.



### QUICK REVIEW: Self-Care & Mindfulness

Entrepreneurship can be an intense endeavour and elevating self-care and mindfulness equal to business priorities is an important factor for success.

- **Keep getting acquainted:** Throughout the course of your mentoring partnership, continue to build trust and rapport with your mentee by continuing to get to know each other through open conversation. These casual chats can also open a window to the “life” side of the work-life balance equation. Ask questions that speak to how personal time is spent:
  - Do you have any hobbies you like to do to take you mind off work?
  - How is your mother doing after her surgery? Have you had time to visit her?
  - That new bike you mentioned buying, have you managed to get out on it much?
- **Lead by example:** Help to combat the unempathetic “hustler” attitude pervasive in entrepreneurship through leading by example when it comes to disclosing your struggles with stress and burnout. Share what your stressors are, what triggers you when you are experiencing them, how you have managed them in the past, and how they have evolved throughout your career.
- **Extinguish burnout:** Learn the signs and symptoms of burnout to help identify it in your mentee. If you observe the neglect of basic needs, a reduction in energy, efficiency, and motivation, poor performance, or an overall more cynical, negative attitude, they may be signs of burnout.
  - Use strategies such as reiterating value, reprioritizing workload, setting boundaries, and making self-care a goal to help your mentee address burnout even if they are not prepared to acknowledge it.
  - Practice easy changes to the workday such as taking deep breaths, getting outside to clear the brain, and highlighting each other's strengths.





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