

Setting Boundaries in Mentoring Relationships

NIH-HHS Mentoring Program

While it may feel strange to do at the beginning, it is important to discuss and agree on the appropriate boundaries of the mentoring relationship between you and your partner early on. When boundaries are too loose, they may be misinterpreted, and when they are too rigid, they can also incapacitate the relationship. If you haven't already, or have experienced misunderstanding or confusion on this issue, please take the time to cover these bases with each other in your next session.

Everyone has different boundaries, from the degree to which one is comfortable with physical proximity, to talking about personal and confidential issues, to the amount of time one wants to spend with a mentor or mentee. As for time, NIH mentors of the HHS Mentoring Program are required to spend one hour per month with a mentee to discuss issues of growth and development one-on-one. We also recommend spending some time attending a lecture or training together, participating in a shadowing activity, or other activities.

Do take the time to talk frankly about what each of you expect to give and take in terms of time, as it will vary from relationship to relationship. Also, make sure that you are on the same page about how you prefer to interact. Questions below can guide you through this.

Both:

- Talk about your responsibilities, what you can and can't do.
- Agree on frequency, duration and intervals of meetings/communications and how this will occur.
- Beyond agreeing to confidentiality, discuss what confidentiality actually means to each of you in various scenarios.

Mentors:

- What kind of access does the mentee have to you? What is the limit?
- Does being a mentor mean the employee has unlimited access to you for the duration of the relationship?
- Does communicating require an appointment?
- What kind of telephone access does the mentee have to you?

Refer on if necessary, using the resources listed at the bottom of this page. Debt, financial issues, or personal problems can crop up; only discuss those issues you are comfortable with and refer to the appropriate professionals below.

Mentees:

- Avoid unhealthy dependence. For example, mentors are not expected to have definitive answers or be available 24/7.
- Consider "what would I do if..." in assessing your own boundaries.
- Prioritize how you wish to best utilize your mentor's time and expertise.
- Know there are additional resources out there for you! See below.

Resources

For personal concerns that may affect the quality of your work and family lives, the **Employee Assistance Program** provides NIH employees with confidential counsel: <http://dohs.ors.od.nih.gov/eap/>

For interpersonal and work conflicts, the **NIH Ombudsman** provides informal, confidential conflict resolution services in a productive and mutually satisfactory manner: <http://ombudsman.nih.gov/overview.html>