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Mentoring is critical for achieving full potential at every career stage and in every field. It promotes efficiency, increases productivity, and enhances career satisfaction. Effective mentoring is especially important for women in science.

Mentors do not necessarily need to share your gender, race, or field of research, but should be sensitive to your unique needs.

A Mentor: Key to Career Success

▶ *for mentees*

Men-tee: *noun* |men-'te| : one who is being mentored : PROTÉGÉ

Men-tor: *noun* |'men-,tôr, -tər| : a trusted counselor or guide : TUTOR, COACH

Mentoring Women in Science

Women are underrepresented in leadership positions in academia and often report feeling alienated and isolated.¹ According to the National Science Foundation, only 20 percent of full-time, full professors in science and engineering are women.² Access to quality mentoring remains important throughout a woman's scientific career. Women with mentors publish more frequently and are more likely to receive grant funding. Female assistant professors with mentors were 25 percent more likely to receive grant funding than their female colleagues without mentors.³

Why Have a Mentor?

Good mentors provide support, feedback, encouragement, and guidance. They nurture your professional development, discuss challenges, explore your potential, and expand your network. Studies have shown that quality mentorship supports career development, especially for women.^{3,4,5}

Finding Your Mentoring Team

Ideally, you will have a team of mentors who focus on distinct aspects of your career. For instance, you might have a research mentor, a teaching mentor, and a separate professional development mentor. Early career scientists often expect their research advisors to play all of these roles. In fact, your supervisor should be just one member of your mentoring team.

There are many options for finding additional mentors. Here are some places to start:

- Use professional organizations, special interest groups, networking events, and social media sites to build your network.
- Explore whether your academic institution or professional society has a formal mentoring program with matching services.
- Identify colleagues in your department whom you admire or who have backgrounds similar to yours.
- Tell your colleagues you are looking for a mentor and ask for recommendations.
- Identify fellowship or career development programs that include mentoring in their missions, such as the NIH Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH) program.

Building an Effective Relationship with Your Mentor

Like all relationships, mentoring pairs must learn to work together effectively. The following positive behaviors can help you start out on the right track:

- Set guidelines at the beginning of the relationship: How often will you meet? Will you focus on research, professional development, grantsmanship, work-life balance, or a combination of topics?
- Show up for all meetings on time, prepared, and with clear goals for the meeting.

The Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH) promotes women's health and sex differences research within and beyond the NIH and works to ensure that women and minorities are included in clinical research. ORWH establishes the NIH research agenda for women's health, co-funds research in partnership with NIH Institutes and Centers, and supports women in biomedical careers and women's health researchers.

"My mentoring team has been instrumental in the development of my independent research career. I am indebted to my mentors for their countless hours of commitment. As I develop into an independent researcher, I hope I can be as tremendous of an influence and inspiration to those who work with me."

—Holly Hull, Ph.D., assistant professor, University of Kansas Medical Center; Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH) Scholar

- Articulate your needs. Are you struggling with a specific issue, like grant writing, the tenure process, work-life balance, or personnel problems? Guide the conversation towards the most pressing issues in your professional life.
- Be polite, respectful, open, and honest. Give and receive feedback graciously.
- Take the lead on your own professional development.
- Recognize that your mentor is fitting your relationship into an already busy schedule, so try to be accommodating and flexible.
- Regularly evaluate and discuss the relationship. Are expectations being met? Is the relationship productive? How could it be improved?

Tools to Repair Relationship Breakdowns

Despite best intentions, difficulties can arise with any interpersonal relationship. If this happens, try to remain calm, rational, and professional. Address the problem as early as possible. Rocky relationships can sometimes be repaired by "managing up," where the mentee takes responsibility for articulating needs and directing the relationship. Seek support from other mentors. If necessary, use institutional resources, such as an ombudsman, to mediate your differences. In the most difficult situations, consider whether the relationship can be salvaged. If it is necessary to terminate the mentoring relationship, do not despair. Learn from the experience and focus on moving forward.

References and Resources

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For more information about career development for women scientists, visit the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health web site: <http://orwh.od.nih.gov/career.html>

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