E-MENTORING TIPS

Starting mentoring programs to support victims of human trafficking during Covid-19

LIBES

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Practical tips

Online mentoring is not new. The use of technology to connect mentors and mentees has been around for the last 20 years to serve isolated groups and people with special needs. Moreover, it has been increasingly used in traditional mentoring programs to supplement or expand face-to-face interactions.

E-mentoring is often used to achieve outcomes that are not easily addressed through traditional in-person mentoring formats. For instance, some programs targeting people with physical disabilities who may not be able to easily meet with a mentor in person have employed online tools to provide an opportunity for regular meetings without physical barriers.

Whereas e-mentoring solutions may not ensure the same sense of togetherness and immediacy that face-to-face meeting do, they do allow for conversations, exchange, learning, and the expression of feelings. Research indicates that the benefits associated with traditional mentoring were found to occur in e-mentoring as well (Single & Single, 2005).

The purpose of this quick guide is to offer tips for social workers and program managers to help buddies connect and establish a relationship remotely, under the mobility restrictions and social distancing measures in effect in Covid-19 affected areas.

What e-mentoring is

E-mentoring includes interactions between buddies taking place primarily, or exclusively, through the use of technology:

- Email
- Social media
- Chats
- Text-based communication
- Video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom, Skype, FaceTime or Google Hangouts)

If the mentee has no direct access to technology, there are still options:

- One-to-one outdoor meeting
- Phone calls
- Letters
- Public space where they can have access to a computer (a public library, the shelter, the office of the support NGO or agency, a café, etc.)

Physical distancing does not mean social disconnection

The advantages of e-mentoring

Virtual communication might be perceived as a barrier to intimacy and closeness BUT:

- Some buddies may feel more at ease at connecting remotely than in person
- Some people can build deeper connections in writing and in asynchronous interactions
- Mentors can show their support by simply.... being there. This can go a long way when people are suffering isolation and loneliness
- A caring and genuine exchange of messages can come very close to a conversation
- Flexibility in scheduling and the elimination of geographical barriers allow access to a greater number of diverse potential mentors

Virtual communication is better than no communication

The challenges

Research[1] has identified five major challenges to e-mentoring, that may apply also to matches with survivors of human trafficking, and that case managers and mentors should be aware of for early trouble-shooting:

- Likelihood of miscommunication
- Slower development of a relationship online than in a face-to-face environment
- Lack of proficiency in written communication and technical skills
- Connection and computer malfunctions
- Issues of privacy, confidentiality and online safety

Finding a focus

Based on the needs of the mentee, the relationship can focus on different domains:

- Emotional support, as an opportunity for the mentee (and perhaps also for the mentor) to escape isolation and loneliness, share thoughts, ask for advice, speak in their mother tongue, etc.
- Instrumental support, where the mentor helps the mentee with a specific task or goal, which may help to break the ice, engage both buddies and build a bond.

What buddies can do:

- Work on language skills through conversations, exchange of emails, exchange of text messages, exercises, etc.
- Help the mentee develop other skills they may need, for example write a CV, search for a job online, recognize real from fake job ads, explore their environment, identify safe and dangerous areas in town, exchange tips on preferred restaurants, markets or shops, etc.
- Send videos or songs to inspire, share, cheer up or amuse
- Share resources and tips about their town
- Watch a movie or TV series in tandem remotely and share thoughts afterwards
- Explore free activities: media library, virtual museums, free audio books, etc.

Choosing the means of communication

The means of communication. E-mentoring can happen through **synchronous** (same-time, such as Skype, Facetime, calls, etc.) and **asynchronous** (i.e. delayed such as text messages, social media, etc.) communication.

Choosing a communication tool:

Depending on the nature of the mentoring (for emotional or instrumental support), the match will choose the tools that fit best. Text messages and chat may be suitable to exchange greetings, but more meaningful sharing or content-heavy interactions may require a more text-heavy tool. Task-oriented interactions and relational support alike may benefit from asynchronous tools that leave more time to think, internalize and practice a good response.

There is no one-fit-all mentoring style. The online communication preferences of mentors and mentees, their access to and proficiency with technology, and the objective or focus of the relationship must be taken into consideration to select the most suitable medium.

Initiating the relationship

Establishing contact can be intimidating and challenging. Here are some tips to help your mentors through the first steps:

- Exchange a few text messages to break the ice before meeting online or by phone, if you plan to use synchronous tools
- Pick an activity, a game or a list of questions to propose to your mentee for your first meeting so that both know what to expect. Some examples:
    - Reading bills together (ex. the mentee can send a picture)
    - Finding job offers and writing an application
    - Writing a CV or simulating a job interview
    - Practice the language (ex. thematic messages or emails, thematic vocal messages, etc.)
    - Share recipes
    - Practice IT skills
    - Go on a virtual tour together –visit a museum, an aquarium, a tourist attraction[2]
    - If the mentee has children, think about an activity or a conversation where children may participate –reading from a book, showing your pet, etc.
- Play *show and tell* to get to know each other: ask your mentee to find "something within arms reach that is meaningful to you", and do the same. Each person will share about the chosen object, including information like where they got it, and why they keep it.
- Plan a group call with the volunteer coordinator and other mentors and/or mentees
- Having fun can be a great ice-breaker and stress-reliever. You can talk with your mentee about what you think would be fun, and make a list of things to do during your weekly phone or video dates –knitting, coloring, cooking, writing letters back and forth, reading a book out loud, doing a dance class or workout, sharing daily or weekly gratitude, etc.

Maintaining a successful connection online: do's and don'ts

- Talk about your likes and dislikes, find out about your mentee's

- Practice active listening: 1) pay attention; 2) show that you are listening (nod, smile, encourage the person to continue, etc.) 3) provide feedback by way of paraphrasing what has been said, ask for clarification or summarize, 4) defer judgement, 5) respond appropriately by asserting your opinions respectfully and being open and honest

- Focus on getting to know the person, but do not try to uncover their past or talk about the trauma they suffered unless the conversation is initiated by the mentee

- Get to know your buddy's personality and preferences to build the foundation of your relationship:

- *Is the mentee a morning or an evening person?*

- *Is the mentee an introvert or an extrovert?*

- *Does the mentee get tired with long conversations and prefers shorter sessions or she/he needs time to tune in?*

- *What does your buddy like to do for leisure?*

- *Does the mentee prefer to use your time together for leisure or skill development?*

- *What are her/his role models?*

These questions can help you figure out how to structure your relationship and to adapt to the mentee's needs and personality, but they are not meant to be used as labels. Keep an open mind!

- Use emojis to convey emotions ☺

- Pick activities or topics appropriate to the age, education and interests of the mentee

- Instead of asking questions, speak about yourself. Share a story or talk about your daily routine

- Use plain but reassuring and kind language

- Use tact, empathy, and respect at all times

- Keep the questions open and avoid conversation killers like "yes or no" questions

Ex. If your mentee shows anger feelings, do not point it out. Try instead to let the person talk: "How was your day?" "Did something trouble you?" "I sense you are disappointed, can I help?"

- Avoid jokes, sarcasm or slang that might be difficult to understand for a person with a migrant background
- Avoid any ambiguity in writing, try to craft well-thought-out messages
- Make sure you are understood and always check with your mentee when you think there might have been miscommunication
- Reassure your mentee that there is no "quick" or "delayed" answer, they must feel comfortable with what and when to communicate
- If the mentee has pressing concerns like finding a job or paying the bills, it may be difficult for the person to enjoy a mundane conversation; they may be under pressure and not present to themselves. Do not try to fix the problem for them but ask if you can help and activate your empathy and active listening skills to respond in the most appropriate way:
- *The mentee might need to vent; practice active and compassionate listening. Be sure to ask "How did that make you feel?"*
- *The mentee might need distraction; avoid talking about the problem*
- *The mentee might want to ask for advice or help; listen, evaluate the situation and discuss it with the case manager, if needed.*

Determining the frequency

E-mentoring can work if there is consistency in the interactions. Communication must happen on a regular basis.

- Suggest a framework for regular contacts.

  What about a video-call while having a coffee together? This could help to start conversation or a ritual.

- Before the time is up, schedule the next day and time you will communicate. This will give the match something to look forward to and prepare for.

- *DON'T: Can I call you now?*

- *DO: When are you going to be free next week?*

Problem-solving and nurturing the relationship

- If the mentor finds it difficult to pick a suitable activity or establish a connection, use **collective intelligence**: let mentors e-meet and brainstorm, share challenges and ideas. Create a space for peer support and sharing amongst mentors.

- Case managers and volunteer coordinators can schedule remote check-ins:

- *Has the mentee/mentor had any technical challenges?*

- *Was the mentee comfortable in engaging in a conversation with the mentor?*

- *Were the activities chosen appropriate/enjoyable/helpful?*

- Be a model: create short sessions with your colleagues and the mentors to show how to generate engaging conversations

- Always facilitate bringing the match to closure if it does not work, while affirming the contributions of the mentor and mentee

- E-mentoring does not exclude training for mentors: it still key to provide trauma-informed guidance.

Footnotes

1. Ensher, Ellen & Heun, Christian & Blanchard, Anita. (2003). Online Mentoring and Computer-Mediated Communication: New Directions in Research. Journal of Vocational Behavior. 63. 264-288. 10.1016/S0001-8791(03)00044-7. ↑

2. Here is an example of a list of digitally accessible tourist attractions
   https://kidsactivitiesblog.com/135714/virtual-field-trips/ ↑

Resources

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Garringer, M. (Mentor), Kaufman M. (Johns Hopkins University), Stelter S. (iRT), Shane J. (Mentor), Kupersmidt J. (iRTE-Mentoring), Supplement to the Elements of Eff¬ective Practice for Mentoring, December 2019

Higley, E., Isolation Without Loneliness: Staying Emotionally Connected in Times of Physical Distance, March 27, 2020: https://greatlifementoring.com/staying-emotionally-connected-in-times-of-physical-distance

Webinar #Keepmentoring Road to the Summit, especially Tina Braun, from Universität der Bundeswehr München and Laura Cardús from University of Barcelona

Single, Peg & Single, Richard. (2005). E-Mentoring for Social Equity: Review of Research to Inform Program Development. Mentoring & Tutoring. 13. 10.1080/13611260500107481.

Libes Handbook for setting up a mentoring program for victims of human trafficking (in progress).
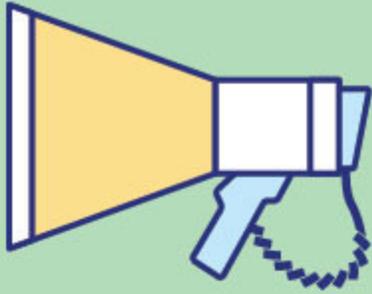
Life Beyond the Shelter

"Life Beyond the Shelter" is an EU-funded project designed to ensure positive long-term integration for third-country national victims of trafficking in the host society by reinforcing support in the transition from shelter life to independence