



MEMBERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Membership Spotlight is a monthly e-newsletter with articles written by iaedp members that share their expertise, specialty, or research in the eating disorders field.

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TITLE

Mentoring as an Essential Component of Recovery

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I can sum up my own recovery from anorexia and bulimia with four words—*relationships replace eating disorders*.

When I became ill with anorexia at the age of eleven, I didn't know how to tell my parents what felt so wrong inside of me, and they didn't know what to say to help me open up to them. When they applied to our family pediatrician for help, he advised them that it was best not to discuss it with me and reassured them that I would soon grow out of it. My father, unhappy with this wait-and-see approach, then called the insurance company and was tersely informed that "eating problems" were not covered under the family policy. Left with only my pediatrician's advice to go by, my parents decided to keep silent.

What this meant was that the voice of the eating disorder was the only one talking to me on a regular basis, giving me confident-sounding advice about how to deal with life's daily challenges. And I, in my isolation and loneliness, became all too willing to listen. By the time I was a freshman music major in college, I was beginning to struggle with bulimia as well.

Then, scarcely two months after I had arrived at college the tendons in my hands gave out under the strain of my piano practice schedule. I was left with no choice but to withdraw from college and return home. My mother quickly located a physical therapist for me. She drove me to Annie's* office every week.

It didn't take Annie long to figure out that there was more going on with me than just hand injuries. One day, at my weekly session, she gently asked if I was okay. I opened my mouth to reassure her that all was well...and it all came spilling out—the fear of food, the hopelessness, the loss of my music, the loneliness that made me long to curl up and die. Amazingly, Annie asked if there was anything she could do to help.

Even more amazingly, I said "yes".

Since neither Annie nor I knew that much about eating disorders recovery, we embarked upon a learning quest together. Together, we began to brainstorm ways I could overcome my fear of food. She helped me find some local support groups and encouraged me to go. She shared books that had inspired her. We talked and she got to know *me*, which made all the difference in my daily willingness and ability to do the hard work of recovery.

In the power of the bond that formed between Annie and me, we unwittingly discovered the eating disorder's strength, and its fatal weakness. It had thrived while I was in isolation, but now I had a trusted friend by my side—someone who could see me apart from my eating disorder and who was not nearly as intimidated by it as I. And over time, my relationship with Annie began to replace my need for the relationship I had

formed with the eating disorder. As we met each week, I, too, began to be able to look past the eating disorder and see myself through Annie's eyes—as a hero in my own life.

Without Annie's help and support, I would not be here to share my story of hope and triumph today. This is the power of mentoring.

Mentoring 101

Today, we have so many more resources than what was available when I was struggling with an eating disorder. But one fact remains unchanged—we still need support to get better and stay that way.

Just what is a mentor? Who can serve as one and what are the benefits of a mentoring relationship? How do you know you are ready to be mentored? For that matter, how do you find a good mentor, or learn to become one?

What do you mean by “mentor” and “mentee”?

A mentor, in this context, is a trusted guide who has knowledge and experience in a certain area, and is willing and able to share it. A mentee is a person who is in need of guidance and support, and is willing to receive it. While it is not absolutely necessary (although it is extremely desirable) that your mentor be familiar with the specifics of eating disorders, poor body image, or other related issues, the person you choose must be able to relate to your struggles on some personal level and express a willingness to learn how to best support you.

Who can be a mentor?

The beauty of a mentoring partnership is that it can happen both within and outside the context of a traditional therapeutic relationship. It is quite common for many of the principles of a quality mentoring relationship to be found in the bond that forms between therapist and patient—many former sufferers credit their recovery success to the guidance of compassionate, caring treatment team members. However, teachers, coaches, parents, siblings, clergy, significant others, spouses, friends, and other individuals may also be uniquely positioned and qualified to serve as mentors.

What is a mentor's “job description”?

First and foremost, the mentor serves as a resource and cheerleader to a person who wants to meet certain recovery goals and is willing to do the work that is required. Mentoring is driven by the mentee's need for support and desire to recover. A mentor's role, therefore, is necessarily reactive rather than proactive, as it is the mentee who is driving the process by seeking out the mentor's guidance, assistance, and advice for navigating both the day-to-day and the larger recovery issues as they arise.

What are the benefits of having a mentor?

The mentor, not being intimidated by the eating disorder, can serve as a voice of reason, compassion, tough love, and kind encouragement. The mentor is also able to remind the mentee of past successes and future payoffs for continuing to work on recovery.

Ideally, the mentor also possesses first- or second-hand experience with the recovery process, and thus comes into the partnership equipped with some level of awareness of how it feels and what it takes to overcome these types of significant life challenges. The mentor may even have personal experience with the process of transitioning through various stages of care, and is therefore well positioned to serve as a source of ongoing support throughout the entire length and breadth of the mentee's recovery journey. The mentor can also act as a resource and support to the mentee in the unfortunate situation where further treatment may not be affordable, available, or both.

How do I know I am ready for a mentor?

There is some truth to the old saying that "when the student is ready, the teacher appears." Beyond that, readiness to begin working with a mentor is born out of a sincere determination to achieve recovery by whatever means necessary (which includes the active willingness to attempt to replace the eating-disordered thoughts and coping skills with healthier connections and behaviors). As with all successful partnerships, courage, trust, and a sense of adventure are paramount to success.

Do I have to pay for mentoring?

Each mentoring partnership is unique. Some mentors may choose to charge for their time and others may wish to offer their support free of charge, on a sliding scale, or pro bono. Some universities and non-profit organizations offer mentoring as a part of their menu of support services. The most important thing is to find a mentor who appears to be willing and equipped to serve. From there, it becomes possible to design a mentoring partnership that will work for both participants.

How can I find a mentor?

Locating and assessing potential mentors is both a logical and intuitive process. Certainly, it makes sense to look close to home for someone within your family, local community, or spiritual home. Is there a teacher with whom you felt some rapport or a trained member of a peer support group or counseling center at school? Perhaps you might consider approaching a relative who has expressed a past interest in your health and well-being. Participating in reputable online recovery sites, such as **MentorCONNECT**, my organization's private, monitored online mentoring community, is also a great way to connect with individuals who want to help each other build positive support systems. Or you could attend a local meeting of Eating Disorders Anonymous, Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous or Overeaters Anonymous, which are all fellowship organizations that consider the mentor-mentee (or "sponsor-sponsee") relationship as integral to successful recovery. If you are looking for therapy specifically, organizations

such as Gürze Books and the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) offer referral directories of professionals who are specifically knowledgeable about eating disorders.

Brainstorm a list of potential mentors, challenging yourself to consider both obvious and not-so-obvious candidates. From there, take a leap of faith! Pick a method of contact (in person, phone, mail, email, text, etc.) that feels comfortable. Explain to that person what type of support you are seeking, offer some ideas for how they could best support you, and invite them to discuss the possibility further with you. A mentoring partnership is still first and foremost a relationship, and it is important to “click” with your mentor, and vice versa, to ensure that you will derive the most benefit out of your time together.

If I have a mentor do I still need a treatment team?

In a word — YES. When I was ill, for reasons both unfortunate and unavoidable, my relationship with Annie was all that I had in terms of a treatment team. She stood right in between me and the eating disorder, helping me to remember why I chose recovery and reminding me that I had the power to choose to fight, survive, and thrive. Even so, I would never advocate attempting to “go it alone,” even with a caring mentor by your side. Rather, the true value of mentoring can be found through integrating a mentor into the efforts of a full treatment team, using the unique talents and contributions of each member to fully support the person who is striving to get better. When we all work together on behalf of someone who is striving to achieve recovery from an eating disorder, the sky is the limit when it comes to setting—and exceeding—our shared recovery goals!

*a pseudonym has been used to protect privacy



Shannon Cutts is the author of *Beating Ana: How to Outsmart Your Eating Disorder and Take Your Life Back* and the founder of *MentorCONNECT*. Her website has information about how to find or become a mentor: www.key-to-life.com. Also, be sure to visit her “Beating Ana” Gürze blog at www.eatingdisordersblogs.com.