

THE GIFT OF LISTENING

A Guide to Mentoring Peers

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to help young people explore ideas and learn skills in helping their peers. There is no right or wrong way to use this guide. A young person who's interested in taking on or improving a peer mentoring role might want to explore the guide on their own, perhaps starting at the beginning and simply working their way through the contents and exercises. An educator might use the manual to guide or supplement a peer mentor training program at school.

“Peer mentoring” means different things to different people. It commonly conjures up images of initiatives involving trained supporters working with equals (people about their own age or who share something in common). Such programs might be called peer mentoring, peer counseling or peer listening.

In this resource “peer mentoring” is seen in a broader sense. It is akin to what has been called “peer support” – people sharing experience and knowledge with one another and offering emotional, social or practical help. The examples used in this guide all relate to supporting peers in addressing issues related to alcohol or other drug use or other potentially addictive behaviours. The skills explored, however, can be used more generally for virtually any issue. They can be employed within a formal program, but they can also be applied in normal interactions between peers.

KEY These three icons indicate exercises and additional information throughout the guide.



Writing exercise



External link



Thinking exercise

ABOUT MENTORING

Mentoring is a way of being

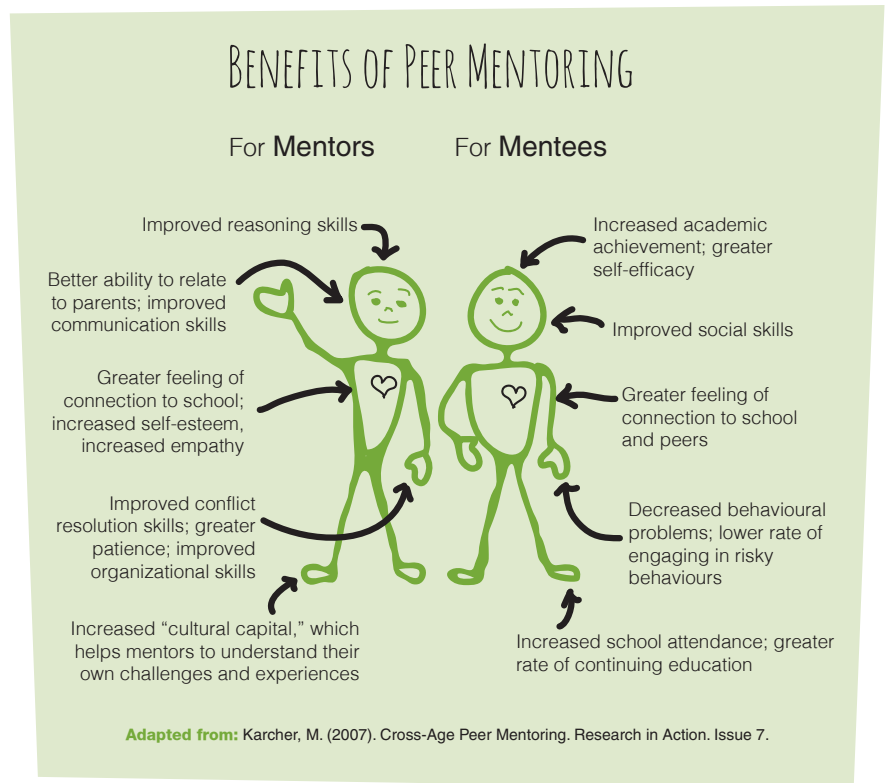
Mentoring is about being a person that others feel comfortable talking to because they sense you will listen in a caring and non-judgemental way, and because they trust and look up to you in some way.

Mentoring doesn't mean having all the answers or giving advice or even liking or agreeing with what a person is saying or doing. It means helping another person by giving them a chance to talk about something they're struggling with (school work, home life, boy/girlfriend) or that is in their way (drug use, money problems, food issues) so they can work through it and maybe find solutions. It means listening and showing that you hear what they're saying so they feel understood and acknowledged. And perhaps no longer alone.

Peer mentoring is a gift

Peer mentoring involves listening to and encouraging people within your own group to push through their problems in healthy ways. Sometimes it's easier for people to talk to and respect others who have something in common, like age, experience or environment. Some teens in particular prefer talking to peers over older people. So the role of the peer mentor is a truly special one.

Peer mentoring is also good for *you*, the peer mentor. Peer mentoring can improve your reasoning and communication skills, make you better able to relate to your parents, make you feel more connected to your school and community, make you more empathetic and patient, and even improve your organizational skills. It can also make you feel pride in knowing that your kind and caring approach helped someone out in some way: better grades, more confidence, improved social skills, better connection to school, or less into risky behaviours, such as gambling, drinking alcohol or using other drugs.



Peer mentoring is important when it comes to potentially addictive behaviours

You can be a big help to your peers when it comes to dealing with alcohol, other drugs, gambling or other potentially addictive behaviours. There are several reasons for this. Because these behaviours often involve "breaking the rules," young people might be hesitant to talk about them with adults (particularly those in authority). These behaviours are often promoted as attractive adult behaviours, but there is also a stigma attached to those who get into trouble with them. This can create a lot of confusion. Peers can provide the opportunity to discuss these issues with someone who understands the tensions and is not in a position to judge or punish. Besides, much of what we learn, we learn from each other within our peer group. For all these reasons, peer mentors have an important role in helping their peers through life's challenges.

Peer mentoring invites possibility, not pressure

It may seem like a big responsibility to be a peer mentor but that's only one way to look at it. Some people argue that everyone is a mentor and a mentee, or should be, or that everyone ought to have a variety of mentors in their lives. In other words, the weight of the world is not on your shoulders when you are a peer mentor. You play a role but not the only role.

YOU AND MENTORING

Some people seem born to be mentors. Their peers admire them and naturally look to them for guidance on a range of issues, from handling homework to dealing with difficult teachers to appeasing an upset parent. But, actually, you can choose to be a mentor. You can learn to be a mentor. It does take some work though.

The place to start is with some serious reflection on your own attitudes, beliefs and values. As a mentor, you likely want to help, to set things right, to fix problems. But *why* do you want to help your peers?



Exploring your reasons

Highlight or write in the most important reason(s) for wanting to help your peers.

- A desire to give back?
- In order to prevent or relieve suffering?
- To make a positive difference in the lives of others?
- To serve God or humanity?
- Other? _____

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

Share your reason(s) with other peer mentors and discuss different ideas about what makes peer mentoring meaningful, helpful, or attractive.

Whatever your reason, it is possible to become overly focussed on “fixing” people or situations. You might find yourself trying to give people advice, trying to help them not make a mistake. But helping someone learn something involves guiding, not doing, not directing. When you are engaging with someone in a conversation about their life, you have to remember whose life it is.



Take a moment to reflect on the following list of verbs. Then circle the ones that will be more useful in guiding. Cross out those that are more related to doing or directing.

awaken	tell	be with	lead
observe	listen	manage	offer
command	motivate	encourage	show
inspire	take charge	order	support
steer	decide	collaborate	determine

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

With a group of other mentors, discuss your reasons for selecting or discarding various verbs in the list above. Suggest other verbs that might relate to a guiding perspective.

Going forward ...

It takes practice to learn to be a good mentor. The next section will introduce you to some basic skills to use in developing your guiding abilities.

But before we go there, let's talk a bit about using alcohol or other drugs, gambling, and other potentially addictive behaviours. Helping peers around these issues is not about knowing all the facts. Your role is not telling them what to do. It is not actually about telling them anything. Nonetheless, it is important for you to reflect on your own attitudes, beliefs and values related to substance use and other potentially addictive behaviours.



One way to explore your own beliefs and attitudes about drugs is to take some time to work through the **You and Substance Use** workbook, <http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/workbook/you-and-substance-use-stuff-to-think-about-and-ways-to-make-changes>.



Pop culture music videos are also useful for exploring different attitudes, beliefs and ideas about substance use or other potentially addictive behaviours. Think of some of your favourite songs or music videos. Do any of them allude to drugs or gambling? What do they imply? How could you use these songs or videos to start a discussion with your peers about decisions related to these potentially addictive behaviours?



You might also watch the **Cycles** video (<https://vimeo.com/76482991>) and reflect on your beliefs and values about drugs and mentoring.

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

View the **Cycles** video with a group of peers and then discuss the following.

1. How might the film help you reflect on your own decisions related to drug use?
2. What might the film suggest about the role of a mentor?
3. Discuss one or more scenarios from the list below.
 - a. You're Lisa and you just shared with Olin that your parents are separating. What other ways could he support you through this difficult time?
 - b. You're Lisa's lab partner in science. You notice her attendance has changed since the beginning of school and, when she does attend, she looks either high or burnt out. You're really worried about her. How do you approach Lisa to share your concerns?
 - c. You're at a party. You see your neighbour, Eric, out on the back deck. He's sharing a joint with his girlfriend who happens to be your best friend. Then, 30 minutes later, you see them both heading out the front door. Eric has car keys in his right hand and it looks like his recent marijuana use had an effect on him. What do you say? How do you approach the topic?
 - d. Last summer, you smoked weed a few times with your friend. Recently, you've noticed that your friend is now blazing a lot more often and starting to miss classes. You are concerned about what you are noticing. How do you talk to your friend? What do you say?
 - e. You're at school with a bunch of friends during lunch hour. Someone approaches your group and asks you if you want to join them at the smoke pit for a joint. Your friends decide to join them. What do you say to your friends and the other person?



“...people in general do not know how to listen. They have ears that hear very well, but seldom have they acquired the necessary aural skills which would allow those ears to be used effectively for what is called listening.”

—Ralph Nichols and Leonard Stevens, <https://hbr.org/1957/09/listening-to-people>

SKILLS FOR MENTORING

At the beginning of this booklet we said that mentoring is about being a person that others feel comfortable talking to because they sense you will **listen**. When you really listen to a person and they know it, you are sending the message: “You are important, as a person, no matter what mistakes you’ve made, no matter what your problems may be. You are important and deserve to be listened to and cared about.” That’s a HUGE deal, especially for a person with a low sense of self-worth. Feeling like you matter makes you feel better inside, makes you calmer and able to see more clearly so you can take steps forward.

A lot of people aren’t very good at listening. They assume they know about listening—that everyone does—because it seems to be part of everyday interactions at home, school or work. But, in practice, most of us are not good listeners.

Some researchers say our society seems to be getting weaker in the art of listening. Maybe this is due to all the distractions in our high-tech world. But it may also be that we find it difficult to resist the urge to give advice and “fix the problem” for the person instead of letting them talk and figure out their own solutions.

Now more than ever it seems we need to rethink the value of listening and put some effort into getting good at it. Developing good listening skills, after all, takes skill and practice.

Thinking about listening



Listening involves more than just hearing the words that are directed at us. Listening is an active process by which we make sense of, assess, and respond to what we hear.¹

When you read that quote, what thoughts come to mind? What is the difference between hearing and listening? What do you think the author means in saying that listening is an active process? Is responding to what we hear really an essential part of listening? Why, or why not?



Before a person speaks, he or she has a certain meaning to communicate. The meaning is encoded into words, often imperfectly. People don’t always say exactly what they mean. The listener has to hear the words accurately and then decode their meaning. Thus there are three steps along the way where communication can go wrong: encoding, hearing and decoding.²

How does this quote add to your understanding of listening as an active process? What might contribute to problems in decoding? As a listener, what do you think you could do to minimize problems in decoding?

¹ The Importance of Listening. In *Boundless Communications* (sec. 1, chap. 5). Retrieved 19 Feb. 2017 from <https://www.boundless.com/communications/textbooks/boundless-communications-textbook/learning-to-listen-and-helping-others-do-the-same-5/understanding-listening-29/the-importance-of-listening-132-8285/>

² Miller, W.R. & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*. 3rd ed. New York: Guilford.



In developing a person-centred approach to helping, Carl Rogers (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0neRQzudzw>) describes the active process of listening as “accurate empathy.” In doing so he draws attention to the fact that in order to fully understand a person we must try to see the world through the other person’s eyes, feel the world from their perspective. This is more than the shallow response that we sometimes pass off as sympathy. Take a look at Brené Brown’s discussion of this in her [video on empathy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>).



If helping is not coming up with solutions for the other person, what is it? According to Brown, it is “connection.” How can we listen so as to create and communicate connection? Jot down your ideas.



This short video on being a good listener (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BdbiZcNBXg>) highlights how listening is fundamental to real connection between people yet is undervalued and usually viewed with less importance than speaking.



Take a moment to reflect. Can you think of people you know who embody the skills and vibe in the video, i.e., people who are good at listening, good at speaking, good at both?

Learning listening skills

Four key skills for helping other people in a person-centred way have been identified. They can more easily be remembered by using the acronym **OARS**.

- O – open questions
- A – affirming
- R – reflective listening
- S – summarizing

An **open question** encourages a person to explain something, to think a bit before answering. An open question is like an open door – it is not clear where the person will go with it. The opposite, a closed question, elicits a short factual response and limits the person's options for answering it. If you think about it for a moment, it's pretty clear why open questions usually provide a better opportunity for you to come to understand the person – how they are feeling, why they are feeling that way – and to make a connection to them. Likewise, the process of answering open questions helps the other person better understand themselves and their situation.

Affirming redirects our attention from focusing on the problem to focusing on the positive. This is not in some shallow “well, at least ...” kind of way. To affirm is to support and encourage. In listening with a desire to accurately understand the other person, we communicate, “What you say matters, and I respect you.” Early on you might say something like, “It's good you are reaching out and want to talk. I'd be really interested in hearing more about how you see your situation.” As you come to understand the person through this process of active listening, you will be able to identify specific strengths. For example, you might say, “You seem to really care about your mom even though she frustrates you.” By affirming them, you draw attention to the positive resources the person has and that they can use in responding to their current challenges. Affirming also builds connection in that people are more likely to trust, be open with, and listen to people who recognize and affirm their strengths.

Reflective listening is a way to improve the decoding process mentioned earlier. Reflective listening involves responding to the other person in a way that suggests what you think you heard and encourages a further response to either correct your assumption or build on that understanding in a way that develops the thought further.

Mentee: My best friend is getting on my case about smoking. But I barely ever smoke!

Mentor: So, you think she's overreacting.

Mentee: Totally. I mean I only smoke one, maybe two, and not even every day. More like occasionally.

Mentor: So, she thinks you're “a smoker” and you don't.

Reflective listening is not always just checking the decoding process. It also allows you to guide the conversation toward “change talk” by drawing attention to those elements where the other person talks about ways they could change or bring about change.

Mentor: So, she thinks you're “a smoker” and you don't.

Mentee: Yeah, something like that.

Mentor: So, why, do you think, she thinks you are a smoker?

Mentee: Well, like last night, I was kind of stressed out and I smoked a couple.

Mentor: So, you always tend to smoke when you are stressed.

Mentee: Well, not always, but, yeah it does seem to be a pattern.

Mentor: So, what other ways do you have for dealing with stress?

Summarizing involves pulling together several things the other person has told you. Summaries can be affirming because they show that you have been listening carefully. They are also important in helping the other person make sense of their own reflections. In summarizing you can shine a light on positive qualities the person can build on or draw attention to certain elements of the conversation that, if explored further, might lead to greater insight. You can make connections between different things the other person has said at different times that might provide new insight. Getting good at summarizing takes a lot of practice. But just being aware of this skill and trying to develop it is a good start.

Practising the skills



Forming questions

Imagine a peer has come to you and wants to talk about their drug use. Make a list of six to ten questions that quickly come to mind. Then examine your questions. Try to imagine the response that the other person might give to each question. How many are open questions? How many are closed? If you have included closed questions, try to rewrite them in a way that would make them into open questions. How would the response to the new question be different?

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

You could build on the above exercise by working with another peer mentor to role-play the questions and answers, and then work together to reframe any closed questions you discover.

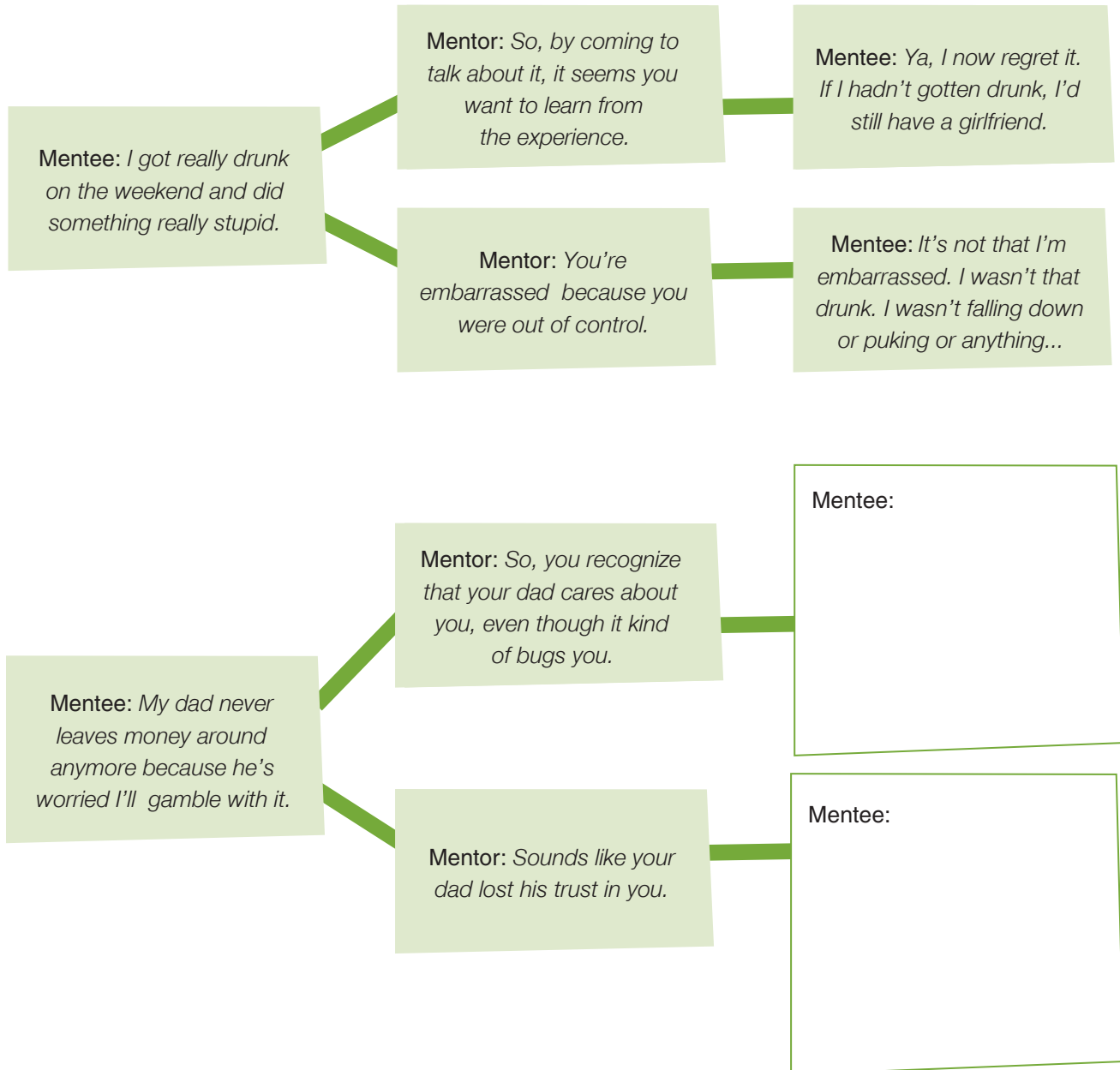
In our fact-oriented world, we often go first to closed questions because they go straight at the facts. But in trying to support or help someone deal with challenges the *why* and the *how* are usually more important than the *what* and the *when*. This is where open questions shine.



Imagine what they will say

In the first scenario below, reflect on how the conversation is shaped by the mentor's responses. You might notice how the affirming response encourages the mentee to open up or take a risk whereas the non-affirming responses tends to result in defensive or more closed reactions.

In the second scenario, try to imagine what your mentee might say if you responded as indicated. Then in the third, craft possible mentor responses (one affirming and one not) and imagine how the mentee might respond to each.



Mentee: *I can't sleep these days, and nothing I use to get to sleep works, not even sleeping pills.*

Mentor:

Mentee:

Mentor:

Mentee:



*“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch,
a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an
honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring,
all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”*

—Leo Buscaglia



Mirror, mirror

There's an almost endless variety of ways to reflect back what you have heard in ways that may build understanding and connection or be helpful to the other person. Consider each of the following:

Example 1

Mentee: *My parents won't give me money anymore because they think I'll just spend it on weed.*

Mentor: *So, your parents are worried about your use of marijuana.*

Mentee: *Yeah, but it is not as if I smoke that much. But I guess they worry that I'll be like my cousin.*

Example 2

Mentee: *My mom found some pills in my room and now she's super pissed.*

Mentor: *She basically freaked out over nothing.*

Mentee: *Well, no, I guess she's just worried. With everything in the news about overdoses, I guess I can sort of understand.*

Example 3

Mentee: *My friend was over and we had a few drinks at my place. Her mom found out and now she's not allowed to come over any more.*

Mentor: *So, just a whiff of alcohol and you are both being punished.*

Mentee: *Yeah, it seems unfair. Though, to be honest, my friend did get a bit a drunk. She's not used to drinking the way I am.*

One way to think of reflections in reflective listening is to think of flat, concave and convex mirrors. Each is useful, but it is important to know how they work in order to use them appropriately.

The mentor's response in Example 1 is like a reflection from a flat mirror. The mentor is basically repeating what the mentee has said but has dropped the part about the money because that is not the most important part. The response encourages the mentee to reflect on his or her personal use or on the parents' concern. The mentee's response opens up the possibility to further explore the legitimacy of the parents' concern, and to reflect on the difference between his or her use and that of the cousin, and may lead to further discussion around ways we can protect ourselves from drug-related harms.

Example 2 is like a convex mirror that exaggerates the reflection. Here the mentor is intentionally overstating what the mentee has said. This encourages the mentee to empathetically defend her or his mother and in the process begin to understand the mother's position. This creates a foundation for further discussion.

In example 3 the mentor focuses in on "how much alcohol?" by understating the amount ("a few drinks" was reduced to "a whiff" – like a concave mirror shrinking the image down). This encourages the mentee to honestly reflect on the nature of that element and maybe reframe the issue of risk. As it turns out, the mentee then provides an opportunity to explore his or her own drinking relative to that of the friend.



Think of **typical scenarios**, in or out of school that you may have experienced or could experience. Create dialogue snippets like those above to illustrate different kinds of reflections. Then make some notes about why you might use that particular reflection.

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

Share your scenarios with another peer mentor and discuss different ideas about how to use reflective listening to promote connection and help the mentee move forward in addressing the current challenge(s).

Looking back – looking forward

Take a look at the following sequence. And then provide a variety of short summary statements that serve different purposes in the ongoing dialogue. Which summary you use will depend on several things: the nature of your relationship with the other, the level of trust that has been built, the confidence you have that you understand and feel where the other person is at, and the opportunities you see to move the conversation forward to achieve greater insight.

Mentee: *I have a pretty high tolerance for alcohol. And my mom doesn't really care if I drink because she knows I can handle myself.*

Mentor: *It sounds like you feel pride in knowing you can drink with your friends and are trusted not to overdo it.*

Mentee: *I wouldn't say pride exactly but it's nice to know I can stop before I get too drunk.*

Mentor: *So, at some point you worried you might not be able to gauge yourself.*

Mentee: *Well, my mom said she used to drink too much so I wonder sometimes if I'm like her or not.*

Mentor: *You want to monitor yourself to make sure you don't overdo it, like your mom sometimes did. How do you think you could do that?*

Mentee: *Not really sure, but maybe keeping tabs on every time I drink and checking with myself after, to see how I did.*



Suggest a summary that briefly *collects* a few related thoughts (you might follow this with, “What else?”)



Suggest a summary that links two or more different things in the conversation that, when drawn together, might provide new insight (you might follow this with, “So, what do you make of that?”)



Suggest a summary that helps close the conversation for the time being (you might start with, “I know we both have to go soon, but let me see if I understand where we are at ...” – then summarize important insights and close with a statement about what the other person has agreed to try to do going forward).

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

1. Compare your summaries with those of other peer mentors.
 - a. How were they similar or different?
 - b. What might account for any differences?

Role-play a conversation with another peer mentor. When playing the mentee, pick a topic in which you're open to considering some changes in real life. Have a short conversation. Then listen as the mentor offers a summary statement. Discuss the purpose of the statement and how it might help the conversation. Then reverse roles and repeat.



To learn more about skills for helping other people in a person-centred way, check out the **Art of Motivation** (<http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/publications/helping-schools/aom/index.php>) toolkit.

TAKE CARE

Listening to and helping peers with their challenges takes energy and focus, both of which can be sapped if you're not taking care of yourself. A big part of caring for yourself is being clear about the people in your life who can **help you** when you're struggling with something yourself. It's important to know where you draw your strength to be resilient – the ability to adapt in the face of adversity – and who you can turn to when challenges seem over your head.

Other important ways to take care of yourself include

- exercising regularly (physical activity relieves stress and releases feel-good chemicals in your brain),
- eating healthy food most of the time (food is medicine), and
- getting enough sleep (it's hard to function without it).

But the list of specific things you can do to feel good or give yourself a lift when stressed or troubled is endless. You might

- listen to your favourite music (and dance around if you feel like it),
- have healthy fun – make yourself and a friend a sumptuous stir-fry, and share dark chocolate fondue for dessert,
- express yourself through art that engages your imagination (draw, paint, sculpt, or just cut out magazine words and pictures and make a collage of messages that “speak” to you in some way).

Tips and tools



Login to **Drugs & Driving** (<http://drugsanddriving.ca/>) and use the Your Social Circle app to explore the resources within your social networks. Who might be most helpful in supporting you in your peer mentoring role? Why?



What are some of the things you do to care for yourself? Are there things you'd like to add to your list? Write down what you're doing and what you would like to do to live and feel your best so you can help others.

A NEVER-ENDING STORY

The skills and ideas you have been introduced to here can be used in all areas of your life. As you practice them your skills will improve, but you will also be less conscious of the processes. They will disappear. They will simply become part of you. But they will still be there—guiding you and being passed on to those around you.



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