

TIPS FOR MENTORS SHIFTING TO TEXT-BASED COMMUNICATION

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The social distancing guidelines and corresponding widespread adjustments in programming made by youth-serving organizations in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has obviously made it considerably more challenging for mentors and mentees to stay in contact with one another. This new reality is especially unfortunate for the nation's young people, who may have been struggling with feelings of isolation or anxiety before this virus spread or who may have come to a mentoring program precisely because they were already suffering from a lack of sufficient supportive and individualized adult engagement. This pandemic has further isolated some of the nation's most vulnerable youth and mentoring programs are scrambling to find ways of keeping mentors and mentees in contact with each other, as in-person meetings may be out of the question for the foreseeable future.

Just as we are seeing in many workplaces, one of the ways that mentors and youth are staying connected during this time is to lean more heavily on technology, namely video check-ins and phone calls when possible. While these don't quite offer the intimacy and sense of togetherness that an in-person meeting might, they certainly allow for normal conversation and the nuanced expression of feelings and ideas. Other matches are also increasing their use of text-based communication—email, social media, message boards, text, etc.—and some matches may find that's all they have to work with.





MENTOR recently completed an [*E-Mentoring Supplement to the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*](#), and while this resource is most helpful to programs in the development phase or to those who are looking to strengthen practices, it does offer some research-informed information that might be helpful to mentoring programs and mentors who are using text-based technology to stay in touch with their mentee during the pandemic. In developing that resource, we reviewed over 72 published studies, book chapters, and evaluation reports on e-mentoring programs, many of which used text-only communication platforms. There were several concepts and tips that emerged from that review that mentors who are newly thrust into the world of text-based mentoring can keep in mind when communicating with their mentee during this time of social distancing:

- **Note the strengths and weaknesses of the communication tool you are using –**

Email may allow for a deeper level of expression and the ability to include attachments and other helpful resources, but these conversations are not taking place in real time. There can be gaps in between the sending of a message, the reading of it by the recipient, and the crafting of a response. This can lead to mentees or mentors feeling ignored or rejected, even if it's simply a matter of one participant forgetting to check an inbox or having some other obligation they are attending to. Message boards and other proprietary platforms can also suffer from this “lag in the conversation” and this delay can send all kinds of unintended messages. It's also worth noting that email and message boards also put a considerable burden on youth to do a lot of typing, which may not be ideal based on their proficiency or access to a good keyboard.

Alternatively, social media and chat may offer much quicker back-and-forth communication that comes closer to approximating an in-person conversation, but it often comes as a cost. These tools often have character limits that hinder the complexity of thoughts and emotions and limit the types of media that can be shared. They may be perfectly adequate for a quick check-in or the exchange of a funny meme, but they are unlikely to be satisfying if used to discuss a serious issue or problem, particularly in cases where the mentee has a lot to say but is struggling to find the right words. And depending on how notifications come to each user, these tools can still suffer from the same “response lag” issue that email does.

Mentors should take the time to think about the nature of their relationship with their mentee and the type of communication needed and use the tools that seem to fit best. Text and chat may be fine for quick hellos, but more substantive interactions and sharing may benefit from a more text-heavy tool if options like talking on the phone are not an option.






- **Put a lot of effort into the first few messages you send your mentee**, especially if you are in a newer relationship – One of the more consistent themes in the literature we reviewed was the many ways in which these text-based interactions can go sour rather quickly if the first few messages seem off-note to one of the participants. This was especially true of brand new matches where getting off on the wrong foot was often something that these relationships never recovered from. But it can also hinder existing relationships that are trying to figure out if this new communication method will be worth the effort. In the research we examines, these initial messages seemed to be better received by mentees when mentors would include interesting or relevant details about themselves, used a very friendly and upbeat tone, and asked open-ended questions that demonstrated a genuine interest in the details of the mentee’s life.

Unfortunately, not all mentors excelled at getting these exchanges off to a good start. Mentors who struggled with these early messages used a “voice” in their writing that was short, to the point, and devoid of much emotion or enthusiasm. Male mentors, in particular, really struggled with being too limited in their word count, often adopting a “just the facts” tone that was often perceived negatively by their mentees. Those not comfortable with text communication, and men in particular, may need to put extra effort into not limiting their thoughts and overall volume of writing when communicating via text. These gender-based differences are not as much of an issue in in-person mentoring, but it was noted multiple times as a real challenge in the e-mentoring literature.





Remember some key strategies for effective text-based communication - There were some common things that successful text-based matches shared in their communication styles:

- 1.** Mentors avoided closed questions that could easily be a conversation-killer when responded to with a short response by the mentee.

Mentors used emojis, GIFs, memes and other “digital” flourishes to convey emotions, make their messages more visually appealing, explain complex nuances, and to inject some humor into the interactions. The more of these digital “assets” adults can use in their text communications, the better. Meme culture in particular is a digital language that will be familiar to most mentees and might help them feel more connected to or understood by their mentor. However, mentors should only use these types of content when the conversation is fairly light.
- 2.** Mentors used appropriate self-disclosure to let mentees know they understood their perspectives. Obviously, most of us have not been through a global pandemic before, but chances are mentors have experienced some of the emotions that mentees are feeling right now—we have all felt uncertain, isolated, or anxious in the past. Sometimes sharing a personal experience that lets the mentee know you understand their feelings and concerns can go a long ways toward building trust and opening up more dialogue.
- 3.** Mentors avoid language that could be easily misunderstood. Conversation tools such as sarcasm, irony, and “gallows’ humor” may all seem appropriate in a crisis, but these types of communication are much more clearly experienced in-person and successful text-based matches tended to avoid using language that could be misinterpreted. They were especially clear to label things such as dry humor and sarcasm as “a joke” so that there was no ambiguity about intent.
- 4.** Successful matches addressed misunderstandings in their conversations when they did occur. If two people communicate via text long enough, it’s extremely likely that one participant will take issue with the tone, content, or “meaning” of a message. What’s critical is that participants talk it through and clear up any misconceptions that may linger into future interactions.
- 5.**



- **Respond quickly... but not too quickly** — As noted above, text communications inherently beg a response, and those that go unrequited for long periods of time can easily lead to resentment or feelings of abandonment, especially in situations like this crisis, when the mentee may already be feeling a lack of support. In the literature we reviewed, both mentors and mentees almost universally expressed frustration with the frequency and volume of responses. Mentors felt like a slow or terse response was a sign of disinterest or disrespect, (when it easily could have been something benign such as their mentee being busy with another obligation or not wanting to type out a more personal response with others around—something much more likely to be the case as everyone is trapped inside in quarantine-like conditions). Mentees, on the other hand, felt like a delayed response by their mentor was a bit of a betrayal and a sign that maybe this person isn't interested in me after all. And all of this can be exacerbated by mentors and mentees having different schedules and different levels of privacy and autonomy in how they communicate via text.

All of that is to say that mentors and mentees should try and respond to messages as quickly as they can, within reason. But it's also important to remember one of the major strengths of e-mentoring suggested by the literature: the ability to craft a perfect response. Mentors meeting in-person have mere seconds to respond to a key disclosure, a cry for help, or a startling revelation. Many a relationship has been damaged by a surprised mentor blurting out the wrong things in a tense moment where they felt compelled to offer some quick response. But e-mentoring, at least via text, offers a window of time to choose words carefully, think about all the nuances of a response, and to reply back with a well-reasoned and on-note message. In fact, when done well, these "ideal" responses give online relationships a level of closeness and mutuality that is almost impossible for in-person relationships to achieve. So mentors should take a bit of time in making sure that the words they are typing are the right ones. Not only will this avoid misunderstandings, it may also open up higher levels of support than off-the-cuff responses in-person communication may have provided.





- **Take the uncertainty out of text communication frequency by scheduling it** – As noted here, there are challenges in text-based mentoring tied to its often asynchronous nature. One potential solution to that, especially when using a quick communication tool like text, chat, or social media, is to simply schedule some times to interact. This removes the pressure to be “on call” all day long and sets up a context where a shorter or seemingly low-quality message is not a big deal because it’s part of a dialogue that both parties know is ongoing in the moment. Matches might find success by setting up a designated check-in time periodically, with an understanding that they are always available for a more in-depth communication should something arise in the meantime. Building in a consistent meeting schedule might give both mentors and mentees some thing to look forward to during these often boring periods stuck inside with the same people during social distancing.



The reality is that text-based communication can lead to very strong relationships in mentoring contexts; sometimes even stronger than in-person communication. But the keys are to do it consistently, do it with intentionality of thought and language (because there are no nonverbal cues to be read), and to maximize the volume of sharing and expression because mentees may be feeling more isolated than ever at this time.

Phone calls and video chat can avoid many of the issues noted here, but if those options are not available—and even if they are—the principles outlined here can maximize text-based interactions and keep mentors and youth engaged and building closeness and trust with one another. And more than anything right now, we encourage mentors to reach out as much as possible, not only to reassure their mentee in these uncertain times, but also to offer practical support to the mentee’s family as needed. Frequent text communication with mentees can be a great way of making sure their whole family is safe, healthy, and getting their needs met during this unprecedented crisis.

You can learn more about effective practices for developing and implementing e-mentoring programs, as well as the body of research used to inform our guide and these recommendations, on the MENTOR website at: www.mentoring.org/ementoring.