

KENT COUNTY VETERANS TREATMENT COURT



Nullum Relinquam Post Veteran—“Leave No Veteran Behind”

How a Peer Mentor Can Help

A mentor can help facilitate the recovery process for the veteran. A person who has confronted similar issues, feelings, barriers, and experiences can empathize with the veteran. Peer mentoring helps the veteran regain a sense of direction and control over his/her life and changes can be small, especially at the beginning. Your job is to set the veteran up for success.

To be an effective peer mentor and help the veteran achieve his/her goals, a volunteer must:

- Engage the veteran by inviting conversation and asking the veteran to identify his or her concerns.
- Listen to the veteran and pay close attention to what is being said and left unsaid. Pay close attention to the body language of the veteran.
- Restate what the veteran has said to make sure you both understand the veteran’s concerns.
- Respond with empathy, respect, and honesty.
- Encourage reflection of the veteran by asking them what they think, want, and need.
- Motivate the veteran to be actively involved in setting goals and developing a plan.
- Recognize and evaluate the progress the veteran has made in achieving goals.
- Celebrate progress.\

One-on-One Communication Skills:

Being an effective peer mentor involves good communication. Communicating effectively as a mentor requires being:

Responsive: Schedule times to be available, respond to phone calls, emails, and other inquiries in a timely manner, and develop back up mechanisms for responding when unavailable

Engaging: Be an active listener, because it is important to focus attention on the issues at hand. Active listening and paraphrasing are helpful so that the veteran knows the mentor understands.

Pleasant: A smile and a sense of humor go a long way toward breaking the ice, easing anxiety, and defusing conflict.

Patience: Do not try to fix the situation immediately. Give the veteran the opportunity to vent before trying to get to the root of the problem and find solutions.

Clarity: Make sure the veteran is clear about their expectations and the mentor/veteran relationship. Be certain that the veteran is aware of upcoming meetings, court appearances and the next steps to achieve their goals.

Supportive: The attitude should be, “We can work through this together.”

Realistic: Change takes time. Help the veteran to take things one step at a time.

The challenge is to apply these skills, when dealing with anxious, impatient, or confrontational veterans.

Establishing Healthy Boundaries

Setting boundaries provides a structure for your relationship. Establishing strong boundaries can help ease anxiety or discomfort and establish a more comfortable rapport. It is important that these boundaries are set up early in the relationship so that both people understand what is expected of them and what limits there are. Establishing boundaries from the out-set will make it much easier to focus on the task at hand.

Consider what your boundaries are before you are matched with a veteran. Ask yourself, what are the limits of this relationship? By setting and maintaining good boundaries you will avoid becoming “burned out.” Unhealthy boundaries are harmful to both people involved in the relationship. Mentors who do not set strong boundaries often feel used and disrespected. It is much easier to set very strong boundaries and loosen them over time than it is to strengthen weak boundaries. Talk to other mentors and the mentor coordinator for assistance in setting healthy boundaries.

It is important to continue to check in with each other as the relationship progresses to ensure that you are both comfortable with the established boundaries.

Examples of healthy boundaries to establish:

Schedules: When and when not will you be available to meet or take phone calls.

Relationships: There will be no relationship beyond the limits of the program such as dating or business relationships.

Personal Responsibility: Do not do something for the veteran that they can do themselves.

Money: Establish the fact that you will not be available to provide financial support. You are only there to provide support.

Personal Space: When is it appropriate to invade personal space?

What Mentoring is not?

When beginning your journey as a volunteer veteran peer mentor it can be a little overwhelming as you try to figure out what you should and should not be doing to help the veteran regain his or her place within the community. The following is a short list of practices that should not be practiced in the relationship between you, the mentor and the veteran.

- Peer mentoring is **not** giving professional advice.
- Peer mentoring is **not** trying to change the veteran's values, attitudes, and or beliefs (if changes do occur it should be the veteran's choice, not yours).
- Peer mentoring is **not** swooping in and solving all of the veteran's problems. This robs the veteran of dignity and the chance to learn from their mistakes.
- Peer mentoring is **not** spending the entire time sympathizing with the veteran's problems, because this will make it unlikely that the veteran will do anything to change their situation.
- Peer mentoring is **not** just chatting or having coffee. The mentor and the veteran are going to have to work to produce the changes needed for the veteran to achieve their goals.

Ending the Mentor Relationship

Mentoring relationships can change over a period of time for a variety of reasons. Some of the reasons why the relationship with your veteran could end may include:

- The veteran is removed from the program
- The veteran completes the KCVTC program and its conditions
- Mentors discontinue their service in the mentor program
- Mentor/mentee may not get along and the relationship is not a good fit

Regardless of the reason that the mentor relationship ends, it is important that it is done carefully and thoughtfully. The way that your mentor relationship ends can shape what your veteran thinks about and learns from the experience. If done right, this transition can be a time of growth for both you and the veteran.

Here are some strategies that you, the mentor, can use when it comes time to terminate your relationship with the veteran.

- Have the transition take place gradually. Ensure that the veteran knows that the termination is approaching.

- Be clear about the date of your last meeting. Do not wait until the last time you meet with your veteran to say goodbye.
- Be honest and supportive regardless of the reason that your relationship is ending.
- Be prepared for feelings of sadness, grief and anger over the loss of this relationship by both you and your veteran.
- If you feel comfortable, allow the veteran to continue having you as their chain of support. Discuss how you will continue to stay in touch.
- If the veteran is successfully completing their program, ensure that they understand their accomplishment.