“Find a good mentor.” At each level of our career, this is the advice we receive from well-meaning advisors. Professional development panels always include advice on the importance of cultivating mentoring relationships with more-established scientists. These vertical relationships are critical to strengthening your career, but advice provided by peer mentors at your same professional stage can also be crucial. What if you need help holding yourself accountable to goals you’ve set? Who do you talk to about a toxic work environment without worrying about it coming back to colleagues or affecting the way a supervisor evaluates you? How can you get practice and feedback on tasks essential to a scientific career (mentoring junior scientists, building confidence in presentations, negotiating, having difficult conversations, etc.)? What if you’re struggling to navigate your career path and just want to talk to someone who is in the same boat as you?

Why Peer Mentoring?
Several years ago we developed peer mentoring groups at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) to complement vertical mentoring and to address some of these challenges and risks. Though vertical mentoring, where junior mentees are paired with senior mentors higher up the professional ladder, is highly valuable, finding and pairing mentees with senior mentors can be time consuming, and mentors and mentees often have different goals, levels of commitment, expectations, and life experiences. And there is the complicating issue of inherent power dynamics of the vertical relationship.

Peer mentoring starts with participants who are equals. They get to practice both sides of a mentoring relationship, improving mentoring and leadership skills while providing and receiving essential career support and advice. Done either in a group or one-on-one, peer mentoring can increase self-efficacy and self-reflection and enhance problem-solving and decision-making abilities. Moreover, peer mentoring can foster a sense of inclusion and belonging that is critical to the success of underrepresented minorities in STEM. In fact, there are clear and long-lasting benefits to peer mentoring at every career stage, specifically for underrepresented minorities in STEM, including women and people of color.

Our Postdoctoral Women’s Peer Problem Solving Groups were formed at UCSF to increase professional development among postdoctoral women, foster community, and enable the sharing of practical advice between women at the same professional stage. Some inspiration came from successful peer mentoring and career development groups such as those described by Ellen Daniell in Every Other Thursday. Each of our groups is composed of about 6–10 women who meet monthly over lunch for one- to two-hour discussions. As postdocs leave UCSF, we invite new members to join. Over the past three years, these groups have provided a stable source of support for participants, helping our peers navigate difficult issues including fellowship applications, authorship issues, job negotiations, career trajectories, and work-life balance.

Aside from targeted career development discussions, the groups also provide a necessary sounding board to practice difficult conversations. One participant used a...
members leading a focused discussion on an issue affecting women in STEM. We recommend emphasizing confidentiality to allow free discussion of sometimes difficult or personal topics. Relationship building may be harder in a group than in dyad peer mentoring, but this is balanced by a substantial benefit in being able to receive diverse feedback on an issue.

3. **Focus on problem solving.** Peer mentoring shouldn’t devolve into a therapy session or serve as simply a forum to air complaints. While venting should be allowed, it is important to focus on developing an action plan in response to issues, including identifying end goals, obstacles, and a way to move forward. Our participants frequently cite accountability to a plan of action as one of the benefits of group peer mentoring, along with follow-up course-correction if the first plan is not beneficial.

4. **Foster a sense of community.** Peer mentoring dyads or groups can strengthen connections with people outside your field, department, or lab. A large professional peer network has been linked with increased success in STEM fields. It’s important for the success of peer mentoring endeavors that participants can obtain practical advice for issues they are facing. Avoiding abstraction and focusing on the needs of participants is a great way to foster community. For group peer mentoring, requiring consistent attendance for participation fosters community and prevents having to waste time filling in participants on ongoing issues. Also, creating an online space (either via a LinkedIn group, Slack channel, or shared email listserv) can help participants in group peer mentoring stay connected even after they have moved on to different positions.

**Three keys to success for UCSF Postdoc Women’s Peer Problem Solving Groups** have been confidentiality, flexibility, and consistency. Participants’ goals and personalities are critical for shaping the format of peer mentoring.

**Important Considerations When Establishing a Peer Mentoring Group**

Here we share a few points to consider when establishing your own peer mentoring program or group:

1. **Identify participants.** Consider first whether to use a one-on-one versus a group mentoring format. One-on-one peer mentoring takes much more administrative management and it can be difficult to grow organically. Relationship building may be more difficult in a group, but if individual groups are kept small (under 10 members), group peer mentoring can be personal and scalable. Determine whether to make a peer cohort from a specific demographic or across demographics. If you decide on a group mentoring model, will there be a single moderator to guide and facilitate the discussion, or will it be a role that rotates among group members?

2. **Define your mission/goals.** Key points to consider, particularly for group peer mentoring, are format and focus. Our groups have shifted organically between group problem solving roundtable sessions and individual

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groups and can make this approach an invaluable resource at every career stage. — Katharine White and Katherine L Thompson-Peer, University of California, San Francisco

References


It can be challenging to know what career is the best choice for you, but this can be made more concrete if you determine what a single ideal day might look like.