

5 Dangers of Life-Threatening Mentorship | JoHannah Reardon

Ways to recognize, identify, and avoid potentially harmful mentoring relationships

I have mentored many people over the years, and most of those relationships have been a great experience. However, I've had a few experiences that were disasters, so I want to give a word of caution: Not every mentoring relationship works. There have been a few times I've had to pull back from a relationship that I initiated, so I've learned over the years to be much wiser.

I recently realized I had been under a legalistic perception of mentorship and service for years. Ever since I became a Christian, I have been drawn to needy people. I've taken seriously passages including Luke 12:48, "When someone has been given much, much will be required in return." Because I had a stable, nurturing childhood, it seemed the least I could do was spread the love from that childhood around. But the obsession to be involved with the extremely needy was a compulsion that hasn't always been from God.

Because neediness is what draws me in, that very need has also been what turns me away. Sometimes neediness was so all-encompassing that it acted as a vortex and sucked all life into it like a bottomless pit. All my efforts were doing nothing to quench the need—instead, I seemed to feed the beast, the need, making it more powerful.

So rather than avoid mentoring, I needed to know when to step back from such a relationship. Here are five warning signs I've come to rely upon:

1) The person is so self-centered, they can think of no one else.

If a person is so needy that they can only take and never give, that's a clear warning sign. Does the person ever ask about how you are doing, or do they only greet you each time with a litany of their woes? If the latter, then they are on the road to sucking you dry. A healthy mentoring relationship should be two-way. You should feel that a friendship is forming and not that you have to be the person's sounding board for everything she feels is constantly wrong with her life. It's okay to bring this up with the person. Perhaps she hasn't realized what she is doing. But if you bring it up, and she resents you for it or refuses to change, that's the beginning of an unhealthy and abusive relationship.

2) The person is stuck spiritually.

When I mentor someone, I mentor them spiritually because that is the only thing I have to offer that can be of use to them. If that person seems to reject Scripture or the God who inspired the Scriptures, then I simply can't be of use to them. I have nothing to offer that will last. There have been times I've kept up a casual relationship with a person for years in hopes of them coming to Christ, but I don't mentor them as I would someone who loves God.

3) The person has not found help from professional counseling.

I've tried to mentor at least two women who were in professional counseling at the time I began to meet with them. But in both cases, the women complained that counseling wasn't helping them at all. In my younger, naïve years I thought that I'd be able to offer them love that a counselor couldn't, and would therefore help meet their insatiable need. However, these complaints should have instead been a neon-flashing warning sign. They weren't willing to listen to someone who really understood their complex problems, so I didn't stand a chance. They certainly weren't going to listen to me.

4) The person does not respect personal boundaries.

If you are going to mentor, you must set personal boundaries. Otherwise, you may become used up and exhausted, and may retreat from ministry entirely. Those boundaries should be clear to the person you are mentoring, and should include things like not calling after a certain hour of the day unless it's an emergency, not expecting you to answer the phone every time she calls (in fact, I'd recommend never answering when she calls—always let it go to voicemail and call back at your convenience), not dropping by constantly when she's not invited, not expecting you to drop all other relationships in exclusion to your relationship with her, and not expecting you to be her mother.

5) The person threatens your safety.

Abuse comes in many forms. It could be in ignoring the personal boundaries you've made clear, or it could be one step further that makes you feel your safety is threatened. If the person begins to make threats, then you should sever your relationship with that person immediately. When someone I was mentoring began to leave messages of rage as she yelled at the top of her lungs, I knew it was time to end things with her. I told her over the phone that I would no longer return her calls and explained that she'd stepped over a line of being abusive to me. Her response was to rage some more, so I had to hang up the phone. She tried to call repeatedly after that, but I never returned her calls. She never apologized for her behavior or admitted she'd done anything wrong; she just resumed her messages as if nothing had happened. Later, I learned that she was arrested for pushing a woman through a plate glass window, which easily could have been me.

Lessons learned ...

I still love to mentor people, but over the years I've become a lot more cautious about whom I mentor. I want to be useful to people, but I won't let people abuse me. It doesn't do them any good, and it wastes my energy on someone who is not willing to change. So, I've learned to pray about the mentoring relationships I enter, and am careful to look for warning signs.