

Why Women Need Mentors

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Women need mentors. We all need that loving cheerleader saying, "Don't give up. Stay the course." More importantly, we need someone who offers wisdom and insight. This goes beyond the Facebook thumbs up you receive when you announce a recent accomplishment. Mentors provide guideposts and their own stories offer hope and inspiration. Yes, instruction books offer valuable facts, often provide detailed steps on how to complete a challenging task, but nothing can top an in-depth, no nonsense conversation. The mentor is someone you can have a frank conversation with, and your tough questions are met with honest answers. The mentor's only agenda is to help you reach your full potential.

Mentors know what is close to your heart. They may be a someone with the title "coach" or they can have a less formal role. I found my mentors when I least expected it. In January 2012, like thousands of other Americans, I was trying to figure out a plan to achieve my New Year's Day goal: run my first marathon. Let me preface this by saying I'm not a natural athlete. In elementary school gym class, when students were picking others to be on their team, I was the last one chosen. Then in high school, the assistant junior varsity track coach made it clear to the other students that I was "slow." In other words, running a marathon was a stretch.

After hearing about my goal, a friend suggested I join the 501 Novi, MI running group. Reluctant yet willing to try anything to help reach my goal, I emailed the coach. Within minutes, Coach Suzi replied. Three days later, on a 12 degree Michigan winter morning, I was at a metro park meeting other runners. Before my first group run, I heard other runners talk about training for Boston (Marathon), running multiple times a week, and I felt then that I was out of my league. Recognizing that I was new to the group, Coach Doug guided myself and another new group runner through the snowy run. While running, he proudly announced that he was turning 70 next month and set various national race records. At this point, the only record I was setting was running in the winter.

The marathon regimen was intense. By July, I completed my first 20 mile run and the group cheered. This was a major training milestone. In late August, I was running over 50 miles a week. That month, I was injured. I could hardly walk and the panic set in. I sought three different medical opinions, and each expert had the same diagnosis: hip / groin injury. I was crushed. Sure, it wasn't the end of my world, but not running a month before a marathon shook my confidence.

Immediately, Coach Suzi and others without prompting emailed me offering words of encouragement. They shared their own injury stories. My new focus was to complete the 26.2 miles without getting injured. On that October marathon Sunday, two miles from the finish line, I thought I was near death. I looked around and saw others walking. I seriously thought about doing the same until I heard my two friends and Coach Suzi yell my name. Surprisingly, they were standing there waiting to run me in. Just as I was trying to say "thank you," I heard Coach Suzi yell, "you're not slowing down here." The three of them ran with me until I could see the finish line. I'll never forget that moment when I conquered that marathon.

While you may not be running a literal marathon and aren't searching for a "running" mentor, note that a mentor can also guide you in the right professional direction. Women tend to become emotionally involved when rejection occurs, wondering, *Why don't they like me? What did I do*

wrong? Women assume they made a big mistake, then fear and anxiety rises. These emotions can get in the way of rational thoughts. A mentor can bring you back to practical thinking. When you face an obstacle, the mentor provides an alternate plan to help you still reach the same goal.

Currently, I'm in uncharted professional territory. I'm cowriting my first book while learning firsthand how the writing world meets the business world. These are two worlds I'm completely foreign to. Lack of experience in both of these areas leads to a lack of confidence, and it shows. Recently, I was visiting with a lovely woman, who knew nothing about me, and my aunt, who introduced me by saying this, "This is my niece Kristin. She is writing her first book and writes for the Huffington Post." The woman asked me about it and I felt my voice begin to go softer. She looked right at me and said, "You have to self-promote. It's not about ego here. Tell me everything".

This invitation led to a deep discussion about women in business. Recently, she started her own business and said, "women wear a lot of different shoes, literally, but we need help.". She went on to talk being stretched in different directions, and feeling the growing pains of a new business. She underscored the importance of asking for what you want.

I am fortunate to have a mentor who also believes you should ask for what you want. She is best selling author Laura Munson. Over the past two months, we bonded over a few phone conversations, and several emails about the process of writing and publishing. I kept thinking, *Why is she being so kind to me? I can't do a thing for her.*

Laura understands that my co-author, psychologist James Windell, and I took on the difficult task of transforming the way widows respond to grief. Part of the book research involves my co-author and I talking with widows who lost their husbands to difficult circumstances, and writing about how they overcame this tragic loss. Although in many ways, these are stories of inspiration, I told Laura more than once, that I struggled with hearing about a death caused by suicide or substance abuse. Laura continues to encourage me to write about the stories that matter.

Eventually, I was led to a book agent. Last week, when the book proposal got rejected, I took it personally. She reassured me that there are plenty of wonderful agents. Her words of wisdom were, "Take heart. Believe in yourself."

Within two days of these words, an agent contacted James and I. While nothing is set in stone with an agent, I know this much is certain, mentors all carry that same message, "Take heart. Believe in yourself."