



*Promoting Health and  
Preventing Complications  
Through Exercise*

*Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Spinal Cord Injury*

# Spinal Cord Injury Peer Mentoring

2005

What are Peer  
Mentors and what  
do they do?

The word “peer” simply means someone who is similar to you, be it in age, gender, race, education, or disability. “Mentoring” simply means serving as a trusted counselor or teacher. When we talk about spinal cord injury (SCI) peer mentors we mean other people who have an SCI and have faced some of the same experiences and challenges that you may face. Peer mentors have learned from their own experiences. They are also knowledgeable about resources and living with SCI, so peer mentors can be helpful in many ways.

Peer mentors may work or volunteer at rehabilitation hospitals or community-based organizations such as Centers for Independent Living. Most serious and responsible peer mentor programs choose their peer mentors carefully and provide them with comprehensive training and supervision by health care professionals.

While peer mentors are not a replacement for the health care professionals that you usually work with, they can be a valuable resource in many ways.

...They can share with you thoughts and experiences about SCI...

Sure, your doctors, nurses, and therapists have explained to you how the SCI affects your life. Most likely, you have also received plenty of brochures and booklets, and perhaps watched some videos about SCI. However, you probably have plenty of unanswered questions, and new questions will also come to mind periodically. Therefore, it’s important to find someone with experience who can tell you about the realities of day to day living with an SCI. Based on their training and personal experience, peer mentors can provide you with this type of information. Listed below are some questions you can ask a peer mentor about SCI and your life:

- How will having an SCI affect my life?
- Now that I know about it, what can I do about it?
- Where can I find more information about this topic?
- Who should I talk to?

## ...They can help you cope with your SCI...

Shortly after their injury, some people with SCI may feel angry, frustrated, anxious, or depressed, or respond to their injuries in other ways. Peer mentors are good listeners and can provide emotional support when you need it. After all, they understand what you're going through because they've been there themselves. Peer mentors can talk about their own experiences during the first weeks or months after their injury. They can also tell you how they learned to confront their feelings and how they dealt with their emotions after their injury.

Keep in mind, peer mentors are not health professionals. Make sure to double check any advice or information you are receiving from peer mentors and other sources with your doctors and therapists.

## ...They can help you prevent medical complications...



During the first weeks and months after your injury, you'll confront changes in your body that can impact your life and may sometimes lead to serious, life-threatening problems. To prevent problems, you'll need to learn how to stay healthy and detect signs of complications such as urinary tract infection, autonomic dysreflexia, and pressure sores, among others.

Peer mentors can also talk with you about what they've learned that has helped them to avoid problems and can advise you about when and where to get help. They can show you how they do things and what they do to prevent medical complications. For example, a peer mentor might show you how to transfer safely from your bed or a chair to your wheelchair, how to ensure that your clothes don't put too much pressure on areas of your body that are prone to pressure sores, how to avoid dehydration, and how to do self-catheterizations.

## ...They can assist you with ways to live a healthy, active life...



Physical activity and maintaining a healthy lifestyle are as important for people with SCI as for anyone else. Based on their own experiences, peer mentors can help you find accessible exercise facilities, or they can assist you with exercises based on the recommendations of your doctor or therapist.

In addition, a peer mentor might go with you to the gym or help you do exercises at home. Peer mentors might also be active in tennis, basketball, skiing, sailing, or other sports, and they can introduce you to activities that you might not have thought you could do. Your injury may prevent you from doing things the "old way," but an SCI certainly doesn't stop you from doing most activities in a different way!

In addition, peer mentors can help you to develop new interests and hobbies, set new goals, and help you reach those goals. If you can think about something you wish to do, there is most likely a way to do it, and peer mentors can show you how!

## Choosing and working with Peer Mentors



A peer mentor can be paired up with an individual at any time after their injury, but frequently, a peer mentor is paired up with individuals as they enter a rehabilitation program. It is very important that you are at ease and comfortable with your peer mentor. Several additional criteria, including injury level, age, sex, interests and hobbies, and geographic area, may be considered. Some individuals may feel less comfortable with a peer mentor of the opposite sex, others think they would benefit more if they had someone with an injury similar to theirs, while for others common interests and activities are the driving force. It's your life, and you need to figure out which peer mentor works best for you!

Despite their best efforts, you might find that your peer mentor is not a “good fit” for you. If, after a few meetings, you can't see eye to eye or you feel you won't benefit from the relationship, contact the Peer Mentor Supervisor, who will connect you with another peer mentor. It is important that you find a peer mentor who is reliable, dependable, trustworthy, knowledgeable, resourceful, and active.

## Building your relationship with Peer Mentors

Every peer mentoring relationship is different. Not all contacts between peer mentors and “mentees” are in person. In fact, many contacts occur by phone or e-mail. It's up to you to decide how to develop and make good use of the relationship. Remember, though, that you must be an active participant if you are to benefit from the relationship. Learning how to set goals and to find ways to achieve them is an important part of the rehabilitation process and the return to an independent life. Peer mentors play a critical role in helping their mentees shape and achieve their life goals.

There are no clear rules about how long a peer mentoring relationship should last. Only you and your mentor can decide this! After a few weeks or several months, you may feel you've learned everything you need to learn in order to live as independently as possible, and may no longer feel the need to contact or meet with a peer mentor.

## What can you do?

To develop or maintain a positive, beneficial peer mentoring relationship, be sure to:

- Take active steps to get started. Talk with the staff of your rehabilitation hospital's SCI program or contact other organizations (such as the National Spinal Cord Injury Association; [www.spinalcord.org](http://www.spinalcord.org)) to find out if they can connect you to a local program.
- Clearly communicate your needs and interests. Let the peer mentoring program team and your peer mentor(s) know what you need.
- Be realistic. Your peer mentor can provide lots of support and information, but don't expect him or her to solve all your problems. They won't be available around-the-clock and can't take the place of your doctor or other trained professionals.



- Set personal goals. You need to actively set reasonable goals for what you want to gain from the relationship and each meeting.
- Be flexible. Remember that your peer mentor has other responsibilities, such as work, family, and social activities. Be flexible with his or her schedule as well.
- Be respectful. Treat your peer mentor respectfully and courteously—just as you would like to be treated. If you can't make an appointment or a call, let him or her know ahead of time.

This fact sheet has been extracted from the following chapter: Kroll, T. (2005). Peer Mentoring: Tap the Experience of Others with Spinal Cord Injury (Chapter 6). In Suzanne L. Groah (Ed.), *Managing Spinal Cord Injury: A Guide to Living Well After Spinal Cord Injury*. Washington, DC: NRH Press.

For more information or alternative formats, please visit [www.sci-health.org](http://www.sci-health.org) or call 1-866-380-4344.

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