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Mentors: On Belay?

By **Tim Landers**, PhD, CNP and **Taura Barr**, PhD, RN. Both authors are 2012 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation **Nurse Faculty Scholars** who recently participated in *Outward Bound* as part of their orientation to the program. Landers is an assistant professor at The Ohio State University College of Nursing; and Barr is an assistant professor in the School of Nursing, West Virginia University.

Belay: 1) to secure (as a rope) by turns around a cleat, pin, or bitt, 2) stop, 3) to secure (a person) at the end of a rope, to secure (a rope) to a person.

--Merriam-Webster Dictionary

In rock climbing, the rock climber is watched over by someone called a belayer who stands at the bottom of the cliff and is attached to the climber with a rope and some hardware.

Belaying is a lot like mentoring.

The primary job of the belayer is



safety. It's not that the climber won't make mistakes and won't fall – it's that when the climber makes mistakes, the results aren't catastrophic. When the climber slips, he or she has a chance to learn from the belayer and to try again. Sometimes, the belayer is a coach, pointing out where to place your hands and feet next or identify easier routes up the rock, but the belayer's primary job is to stay alert for slips and falls, letting out slack as needed and letting the climber climb.

There is a standard communication technique between climber and belayer. This contract is "legally enforceable" and uses standard phrases that let both the climber and belayer know what is expected of them at that time. First, the climber asks if the belayer is hooked up and ready and the belayer responds that he or she is ready. One receiving this feedback, the climber indicates his or her intention to climb, and the belayer responds with permission to begin climbing. The exchange goes:

Climber: "On Belay?"

Belayer: "Belay On"

Climber: "Climbing"

Belayer: "Climb on!"

Using this exact phrasing ensures both the climber and belayer are on the same page and know what to expect will happen next. It also conveys that one will not make a move without permission from the other. It is an agreement from the belayer that he/she is ready and able to provide back-up and support to the climber. When the climber is safely returned to the

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bottom of the cliff, there is a command indicating that the climber is done and no longer needs the active support of the belayer: *Offbelay*.

One result of being belayed is that your progress is almost always forward up the cliff. Mistakes and errors slow you down, but don't send you back to the bottom.

Being a belayer is hard work. Especially with a new climber, being attentive, using your arms and legs to keep the climber safe, and pulling the rope when needed requires a lot of physical and mental effort. Done properly, belaying is the only thing you can be doing at that time. It is critical to stay alert and focused on the climber's progress.



Sometimes, we as climbers forget the work that our mentors are doing to ensure our forward progress.

When the climber reaches the top of the cliff, it is a success not only of the climber, but also of the belaying team. The best "thank you" we can give to our belayer is to reach the top of the rock face – and to give the belayer a chance to climb with us as well!

This is a lot like how I think of mentoring. Mentors are working hard to keep us focused on our forward progress and keep us safe.

These are important messages about mentoring. The primary job of the mentor is safety. Sometimes, the mentor can provide guidance and coaching, but this should not distract from ensuring the safety and forward progress of the climber. We also need to recognize that our mentors are working hard. Saying "Thank you" to our mentors can be helpful. The biggest thank-you we can give our mentors is to reach the top of the cliff. Finally, it is critical to establish clear communication between the belayer and climber. It is important to let our mentors know when we are beginning our climbs and request explicit acknowledgement that they are ready and able to support us. Clear communication ensures both the mentor and mentee are on the same page and is essential to success.

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11 hours ago

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