



TRELLIS SOCIETY

Reflective Practice Mentorship

Companion Guide

For the Mentee

Prepared for the Trellis Society
Catamount: A Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers
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A Note on This Guide

This document was produced as part of the Catamount Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers at Mount Royal University, in community partnership with the Trellis Society ("Trellis") and under the faculty mentorship of Dr. Leda Stawnychko. It is a companion document to the Reflective Practice Mentorship Pilot Program's Design Framework and Implementation Guide "Program").

The Catamount Fellowship is an interdisciplinary learning experience offered by Mount Royal University's Institute for Community Prosperity. The senior level Mount Royal University students selected for the Fellowship work in collaboration with their community partner and faculty mentor and use social innovation frameworks, experiential learning, and deep listening to explore the root causes of a community identified complex social issue. This Companion Guide for the Mentee is one of the deliverables prepared in response to the following wicked problem:

How might we effectively support early career social service workers in developing skills needed to work with youth and families and to thrive, grow, and be retained in the sector?

The author, Ayden Osvath, has a Bachelor in Communication, major in Information Design and minor in Social Innovation. This Companion Guide and the recommendations that follow are not drawn from personal experience as a social service practitioner. They are grounded in a structured literature review and a review of best practices on reflective practice, mentorship, burnout, and early career support in social work and other social service fields. This document also incorporates feedback collected during a May 12, 2026, Trellis community engagement session.

A key feature of the proposed Program is that it is designed to meet the organizational realities of Trellis while remaining adaptable and scalable to meet not just existing but also future needs of Trellis. Trellis' own knowledge of its organization, workforce, and culture will shape the implementation and management of the Program.

On Methodology: Adapting Appreciative Inquiry

This Program adopts a modified version of the four-phase Appreciative Inquiry cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny), originally developed to initiate and support organizational change but has been applied to reflective supervision in UK social work practice. The Trellis adaptation is deliberate and significant. In the UK model, managers in supervision sessions focused on case decisions deliver the cycle. In this Program, your non-managerial RPM, who is structurally separate from your managerial administrative supervisor will deliver the cycle. The four phases are also reframed entirely around your development as a professional instead of case management. Your RPM will never decide what you

should do in a case. This will remain the jurisdiction of your administrative supervisor. This separation is the design innovation of the Trellis framework.

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A Note Before You Begin

This guide is for you, a social service worker who is still in their first three years of professional practice and you have been paired with a Reflective Practice Mentor (“RPM”) as part of the Trellis Reflective Practice Mentorship program (“Program”).

International research suggests that when you enter your professional practice you will navigate a real gap between the theory and the practical skills of relational work, emotional regulation, and managing difficult conversations. Your post-secondary education alone does not fully develop these skills. Instead, these skills develop deliberately and intentionally with the support of high quality relational guidance as you gain lived experience in your practice. [1, 2, 3]

This is why the Program includes each early career social worker at Trellis. Enrollment is automatic and universal. It is neither selective nor is it remedial. The goal is to develop, build, and strengthen your capacity and resilience before struggles manifest, not during or after.

If this is your first encounter with formal reflective mentorship, you may be unsure what to expect, what to bring, or how to make it useful. This guide is meant to answer some of your questions in advance, so when you sit down with your RPM for the first session, you have a sense of what this relationship is and what it can offer you.

You do not need to read this guide all at once. Some sections will be more helpful in your first two or three sessions; others will become useful as you encounter your first difficult case, your first emotional reaction you didn’t expect, or your first moment of doubt.

The Most Important Thing to Know

Your RPM is not evaluating you. What you share with your RPM in your Program sessions is **not** relayed or filtered back to your administrative supervisor. It is **not** used in any performance reviews. It is **not** part of your employment record. This is a safe place to discuss what may not be working along with what is working.

Bringing difficulty to your RPM is not a sign of weakness, being ready to address difficulty is a strength. This is why this Program is here.

There is **one caveat** to the confidentiality of your discussions: your RPM does not share session content with anyone, **except** when your safety, your client's safety, or the safety of third parties requires it.

Part 1: What This Relationship Is and What It Isn't

Research consistently identifies the first two to three years of a social service career as the highest-risk period for burnout and departure from the profession. The reasons are well documented and include: a real gap between what you were taught and what the work requires, the emotional weight of relational practice, and the difficulty of developing professional skills without deliberate structure to support that development. [1, 2, 3]

This Program is one of Trellis' direct responses to that pattern. It is not a perk. It is not a remedial intervention. It is a feature that has been designed to support Trellis and you, the early career social worker.

What Reflective Practice Mentorship Is

- A monthly conversation with an experienced Trellis social worker who is not your administrative supervisor.
- A safe time and space to talk about the relational and emotional dimensions of your work which includes what is happening with you and to you, not just what is happening in your cases.
- It is confidential because your RPM does not share session content with anyone, except when your safety, your client's safety, or the safety of third parties requires it.
- It is non-evaluative because your RPM has no role in assessing your performance and will not be sharing anything that is talked about in your sessions with individuals who are assessing your performance.
- It is developmental with the goal of helping you grow as a practitioner instead of managing you or your files.

What It Is Not

- Not therapy because your Mentor is not a clinical mental health professional.
- Not career coaching because the focus is not on promotion or advancement.
- Not supervision because your RPM does not direct your work, review your cases, or make decisions about cases.
- Not evaluative because what you share will not affect your employment.
- Not venting because you will be engaging in purposeful reflection, not just letting off steam.

There is a substantial research base for this kind of relationship. Social workers who participate in formal mentorship demonstrate measurable improvements in career success and satisfaction. In fact, benefits flow to both the mentor and the mentee. [1]

Part 2: How This Program is Different From Supervision

As a new social worker, you may not have had any reason to consider what is different between formal supervision and formal reflective mentorship. You are probably familiar with supervision, where you meet with someone senior to discuss your work, discuss your performance, review your cases and outcomes, and to seek direction and guidance on your cases. Mentorship does something quite different.

With Your Supervisor	With Your Mentor
• You report on your cases. • You receive direction on plans. • You may be evaluated on what you say. • Focus is on what you did and what you will do. • Records may be kept. • Outcome: action on cases and case outcomes.	• You explore how your work is affecting you. • You discover your own insights. • Nothing you say is evaluated. • Focus is on what the work is doing to you. • Content stays confidential. • Outcome: self-understanding and building your capacity and resilience.

Both Are Necessary

You need administrative supervision to do your job well, manage cases, meet your professional obligations, and meet organizational obligations. You need reflective mentorship to sustain yourself in this work over the long term and to develop the relational depth that makes good practice possible. You need both to develop and become a better professional.

Part 3: How to Prepare for Sessions

Sessions follow a four-phase rhythm: Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny. Your RPM will guide you through this structure, but you will get more from each session if you spend five minutes before each session to prepare.

The Four Phases of a Session

Discovery: What's happening to you, what's working, what's hard?

Dream: Who do you want to be in this situation?

Design: What could you actually try or experiment with?

Destiny: What will you take away from this session and carry forward until the next session?

You want to spend five minutes of preparation time to be ready for **Discovery**. The other four phases will usually develop based on what happens in this first phase.

Five Minutes Before the Session

Everyone has busy schedules and there may be a tendency to move from one meeting directly into the next. If you can spend five minutes in preparation before you meet your RPM, you will do a mental and emotional reset and consider the following:

- What have I spent a lot of time thinking about or worrying about since we last met?
- What has worked well for me since we last met, even if it is something small?
- What has been really hard for me since we last met?
- Is there a specific case, conversation, interaction, or outcome I want to explore in this session?
- How is my energy? My sleep? My appetite? My mood?

You do not need answers. You just need a starting point. Your Mentor will help you go deeper.

What Counts as a Worthwhile Topic?

As a new Mentee you may think that you do not have anything important to discuss in a session. Rest assured, you do. Anything in the following list is a worthwhile topic:

- A case that is troubling you, even if you cannot articulate why.

- A feeling or emotion that developed in a case that you did not expect to feel, such as anger, grief, relief, attachment, frustration, etc.
- Something a client said that you cannot stop thinking about.
- A moment when you felt unsure of yourself.
- A conflict or divide between what you believe and what the organization may require.
- A question about whether you are meant to do this work?

Most important, worthwhile topics are not just what is hard, but what is good or even great:

- A moment when you felt confident and sure of yourself and want to understand what worked and replicate it.
- Something positive you want to celebrate but have not had the chance to.

If You Show Up With Nothing

That is fine, it happens. Tell your RPM: "I didn't come in with anything specific." Your RPM will help you guide you and find what is there. When you have a chance to sit down with someone whose job is to listen to you, there will be moments, occurrences, emotions, and feelings that you will discover that you did not realize were impacting you, either positively or negatively.

Part 4: Questions You Can Bring to Your RPM

The mentorship relationship is non-evaluative, which means you have permission to ask the kinds of things you might not ask elsewhere.

Questions About Their Experience

Drawing on your RPM's lived practice helps normalize what you are going through.

- "Was there a time early in your career when you felt the way I'm feeling right now?"
- "What was the hardest part of your first two years?"
- "Was there a moment when you thought you weren't cut out for this? What happened?"
- "How do you deal with the difficult cases? What have you figured out?"

Questions About Practice

Your RPM **cannot** make case decisions for you, but they can offer perspective on professional practice that will help you make decisions, on your own or with your administrative supervisor.

- "How do you decide when to push and when to wait, in a difficult conversation with a parent?"
- "How do you process not being able to fix something?"
- "How do you build trust with a family who doesn't want you there?"

Questions About Yourself

Sometimes a useful question is to ask your RPM to question you on something specific. Being questioned by someone else may help you process something that is difficult to do on your own.

- "Can we talk about [this feeling/this case] for a minute? I don't want to move past it too quickly."
- "Can you push me on this? I think I'm avoiding something."
- "What are you noticing that I'm not?"
- "Am I making sense, or am I missing something?"

Questions About the Sector

Your Mentor has perspective on the broader landscape that you may not yet have.

- "Is what I'm experiencing here unusual, or is it the work?"
- "What changed for you over time about how you saw this profession?"
- "When did you stop being a 'new' social worker, and was there a trigger or moment when this happened?"

Part 5: Getting the Most from the Relationship

Research on newly qualified social workers identify several factors that increase the likelihood you will stay in this profession and thrive, and your mentorship relationship is one of those factors. How much you get from this Program will depend in part on how you engage with it.

Things That Strengthen the Relationship

- Show up. Do not cancel a session unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. Consistently attending your meetings is how you will grow, build, and strengthen your capacity and resilience.
- Be honest, even though it may be uncomfortable.
- Do not pretend or act like you are okay when you are not okay.
- Tell your RPM what you feel is working and what is not working in your sessions. There is flexibility and opportunity for you and your RPM to change structure of your sessions, of your conversations, or even your relationship. Discovery and reflection on what works and what does not work, as a professional social worker, includes this Program.
- Bring back the same difficulty or problem if it remains unresolved or an ongoing issue. Some difficulties take time and different approaches, so you are not expected to figure something out in a single session.
- Try to bring into each session something that is working, not just what is not. Your growth and achievements need to be talked about and reflected on as well.

Things That Weaken the Relationship

- Treating your sessions as something to get through.
- Sharing only what you believe is safe or impressive to share.
- Expecting your RPM to fix things for you.
- Holding back feedback to your RPM when something is not working in your relationship.

If the Match Isn't Working

Sometimes the pairings in the Program just do not fit. Personalities, communication styles, or even incompatible schedules can make the relationship feel forced. The Program includes a rematch process. If you believe that the relationship will not work out, or is no longer working out, you can raise this with the Program Coordinator, and a new match can be found without any judgment or stigma.

Part 6: Recognizing Your Own Signals

Reflective mentorship will help you notice things about yourself that you may be difficult to see on your own. However, reflective mentorship will also help build your capacity and learn how to notice your own signals. What you do after you notice a signal is important. Bringing what you notice to your RPM may be one of the most useful things you can do.

The most important signals to watch for fall in three categories: compassion fatigue (sustained emotional exhaustion from exposure to others' suffering), secondary traumatic stress (intrusive trauma-like symptoms from indirect exposure to client trauma), and early burnout (chronic exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced sense of effectiveness). [3, 4, 5]

These are not weaknesses. These are predictable responses to demanding relational work. Recognizing them early is the difference between a workable adjustment and a crisis.

Personal Signals to Share With Your RPM

- Persistent fatigue that rest does not help.
- Difficulty leaving cases at work mentally.
- Numbness or detachment when you used to feel affected.
- Increasing cynicism about clients, families, colleagues, or the organization.
- Sleep disturbances, including dreams about cases.
- Dread about going to work.
- Feeling like you are going through the motions.
- A sense that nothing you do makes a difference.
- A growing private thought that you are not cut out for this work.

If You Recognize Yourself Here

Bringing these signals to your RPM's attention is exactly why you are developing this relationship. No one expects you to figure these things out alone. If what you are experiencing feels significant or sustained, your RPM may prompt you to seek additional supports. Remember, seeking help shows professional strength and is not a weakness.

If You Are in Crisis

If you are experiencing thoughts of self-harm, significant mental health symptoms, or anything that feels beyond what mentorship can hold, please access formal support directly. If you feel you need help now, do not wait until the next session.

References and End Notes

Evidence based claims in this guide are marked as end notes. For a summary of the source and its relevance to this problem please refer to the Research Dossier prepared for Trellis.

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 - 3 Pazer, S. (2025). Burnout among social workers structural causes, coping strategies and organizational interventions. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies* 7(1), 583-587 (2025).
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APPENDICES

Practical Tools

Appendix 1: Example Ground Rules for the First Session

Appendix 1: Example Ground Rules

Ground rules should be agreed to during your first meeting with your RPM. This may be an informal get to know you session or your very first mentorship session. You want to make sure you have a set of shared expectations for what the relationship will and will not be. The list below is a starting template. You and your RPM are encouraged to adapt, add to, or rephrase any of these to fit your working styles.

Ground rules only need to be agreed to once, but they can be revisited and amended if either party feels a revision is needed.

How to Use This Appendix

At the first session, go through this appendix together and discuss what needs to be adjusted. The very process and act of being able to agree to a set of rules is one of the first steps in building the trust and relational foundation the rest of this Program will be based on.

Suggested Ground Rules

1. We mutually decide what we will discuss. The Mentee will usually bring the topic, but we shape the conversation together. Either one of us may suggest something to explore.
2. It is okay to avoid a topic if either party does not feel ready to discuss it. Acknowledging that you are not ready is a positive. Pushing through when someone is reluctant, is not.
3. We both listen actively. That means concentrating fully on the conversation and not checking phones or thinking about other work.
4. The feedback in these sessions will be about development and not evaluation. The RPM offers observations, questions, and guidance, not assessments of the Mentee's competence. The Mentee may ask for feedback at any time.
5. There are no wrong answers. This is not a test. The purpose is to support and develop the Mentee's practice and wellbeing.
6. In a relationship built on trust, especially when difficult topics may be addressed, disagreements are inevitable, but our disagreements must always be respectful. We can disagree without making the relationship feel unsafe.
7. We can speak openly, without fear of reprisals. The Mentee may share concerns about the organization, their supervisor, their work, or themselves and these concerns will stay in this space.
8. Confidentiality is held by the RPM, with one exception: any disclosure that implicates the safety of the Mentee, a client, or a third party may need to be acted on. Beyond that, nothing leaves this space.

9. Session content is never shared with the Mentee's administrative supervisor or used in performance evaluation. The Mentor will not provide reports, references, or feedback about the Mentee to anyone in the Mentee's administrative chain.
10. Either party can request a rematch after the first two sessions if the relationship is not working. This is not a failure. This will happen and has been specifically built into this Program.
11. Frequency: we will meet at least once every 4 weeks for 60 minutes, or up to 90 minutes if either one of us requests a longer session. We can meet sooner, if either one of us requests that. To be effective, we will build this time into our schedules, and we will not double book during the time we set aside for us.
12. We will use the four-phase session structure (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) as our shared rhythm, at least during our initial sessions. However, neither of us will treat the four phases as a rigid script.

Pairs are encouraged to add, modify, or remove items above to fit their relationship. The ground rules are a living agreement, not a contract.