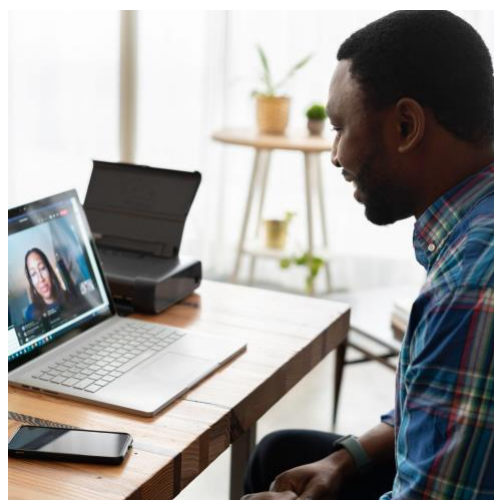


## Our Virtual Mentoring Program is Shaping the Next Generation of Neurorehabilitation Researchers

An excellent mentor can help early-career professionals identify and address critical gaps in their career development and provide advice on how to navigate tricky situations that may arise in the workplace. However, because neurorehabilitation is a smaller and newer field, it can be difficult for people starting out in the field to connect with relevant mentors in their institution or region. In some cases, an individual may be the only neurorehabilitation researcher and/or clinician in their department, or they may be the only person whose work bridges multiple disciplines that are split into siloed departments.



### How It Began

To meet this need for mentorship in the field of neurorehabilitation, the American Society of Neurorehabilitation (ASNR) offers a Virtual Mentoring Program, where members can apply to be paired with a more senior member of the organization to help them overcome hurdles and reach their career goals.

The idea for the Virtual Mentoring Program arose as a result of discussions during ASNR's strategic planning process about five years ago. The group, led by Dr. Carolee Winstein and the Board of Directors, identified that there was a general lack of well-organized, accessible professional development resources for trainees and early-career faculty in the field as a whole. From there, the group proposed various initiatives that could be implemented by the Society to assist early-career members. Beyond educational content related to research or treatment approaches, ASNR wanted to develop programming to help members succeed in their goals and better prepare the future leaders of the field.

In late 2019, ASNR revamped its Education Committee and began working to launch a virtual webinar series and establish the Virtual Mentoring Program. At the time, virtual gatherings were less common, but as the pandemic began in 2020, embracing a virtual format became more widespread. Drs. Heidi Schambra, Ahlam Salameh, and Diane Adamo spearheaded the efforts to design and implement the program.

“The Program was designed to help early-career members wade through the sometimes murky waters of academia and provide critical advice at a very vulnerable period in their career,” noted Dr. Schambra. “We created a way for mentees to learn all of the things they don't teach you in your traditional academic training. We focus particularly on things that may be difficult for people to learn by reading an article or interacting with local colleagues, where conversations may be hampered by departmental politics, biases, or other factors. Having an external perspective can

also be really helpful to give someone a barometer on what is normal and what they should expect in the field,” she continued.

From the Program’s inception, mid- and senior-career ASNR members have enthusiastically supported this initiative and generously invested their time, energy, and insight. This really highlights the spirit of the organization and the genuine desire of the membership to attract more people to the field of neurorehabilitation and help each other thrive. Mentees who have participated in the program have reported finding the Program valuable, making an important connection with a mentor, and having very positive experiences. This feedback supports that virtual mentoring can be as successful as in-person mentoring.

“ASNR’s virtual mentoring program helped me find a mentor who could easily identify with my background as an underrepresented woman in neuroscience. The program was structured to provide enough time for the mentor and mentee to get to know each other while also being mindful of the amount of effort that was needed.” remarked Dr. Shanie Jayasinghe, one of the mentees who participated in the Program. “I particularly liked that this mentorship program was designed to go beyond just providing support for writing grants or manuscripts, and was instead focused on professional and personal growth. I am very grateful to ASNR for pairing me with a wonderful and supportive mentor with whom I continue to develop a meaningful relationship!” she affirmed.

#### How It Works

Each fall, ASNR publishes a call for applications to invite members to apply to participate in the Virtual Mentorship Program. Applicants may range from master’s students through to assistant professors (or equivalent), and individuals may have basic, translational, or clinical backgrounds. [The application](#) is relatively short and straightforward, but ASNR encourages applicants to take time to reflect on their career paths and prepare thoughtful responses to ensure a competitive application. It is important to emphasize that this Program is designed to provide general career development advice, not to fill gaps in technical knowledge or guide research directions.

When selecting participants for the Program each year, ASNR considers a number of factors, and applications are scored and ranked. For example, one factor assessed is the applicants’ need for mentorship, and this can be influenced by aspects such as the availability of local mentoring resources and the proximity of a career transition. The Education Committee also ensures that mentees are invested in their own careers and are willing to take the steps needed to grow and make positive changes.

ASNR members who are interested in serving as mentors for the program provide basic information about themselves and their research to facilitate matching with a mentee with similar research interests and/or a similar type of position. Matching by research area can help ensure that the advice shared is relevant for an individual’s subfield. Consideration is also given for requests by mentees from underrepresented groups to be matched with a mentor of a similar

background to provide important perspectives on unique challenges and matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As part of the program, mentees engage in 60-minute virtual meetings with their mentor every quarter, as well as virtual group meetings with multiple mentors and mentees on a semi-annual basis to facilitate group discussion, provide mentees with diverse perspectives, and provide additional connections within the field. In addition, mentees receive guidance from near-peer mentors from the prior year's Program cohort. The Program provides flexibility and more opportunities for people around the world to interact and discuss career development. Mentors and mentees are able to meet at their convenience from anywhere in the world. "During group meetings, the Program allows mentees to connect with like-minded mentors and other mentees and learn from one another without having to be in the same space," Dr. Ahlam Salameh explained. "Finding your way through your career can be pretty lonely. We want the mentees in the Program to know that they're part of a like-minded group of individuals who are also going through this process. That social support is key," added Dr. Schambra.

The mentors who participate in the Program have years of experience and exposure to a wide variety of situations and research environments through their own career paths as well as prior mentoring opportunities. Clear expectations are set for both the mentors and mentees to make sure that mentees can make the most of their interactions while respecting the time commitments of the mentors. "I am grateful for the welcoming and supportive environment that I have experienced with the ASNR. It has inspired me to give back through participation in the Virtual Mentoring Program. This is a professional society that values working together with our members to support them in the early stages of their career. I strongly encourage our members to participate in this rewarding program," said Dr. Michael Ellis, one of the Program's mentors.

ASNR's Virtual Mentoring Program has connected 28 early-career neurorehabilitation professionals with exceptional mentors, and the program continues to grow. "It has been really wonderful to see this Program expand. I've been so impressed by both the enthusiasm of the mentees and the selflessness and generosity of the mentors. It's about accessibility, growth, passing down knowledge to the next generation of scientists, and nurturing the rising stars in our field," Dr. Schambra reflected.

You can [learn more about ASNR's Virtual Mentoring Program on our website](#), and stay tuned for an announcement this fall with details about our next application cycle.