

What challenges might you face as a BCM mentor?

Engaging under-resourced urban teens through our wilderness mentoring experiences is typically very rewarding and it can also have a variety of challenges. Sometimes volunteer mentors head into the experience with a set of expectations and later realize the experience doesn't match their expectations. This can cause stress and challenges as mentors reconcile the gap between the expectations and the actual experience. It can also make it difficult for mentors to fully support the youth participants and the instructor. We hope that by sharing some of the challenges you might encounter it will help you make an informed decision prior to committing to a trip and in turn be in the best position possible to serve the youth and your adult team.

Our focus is serving the youth participants:

BCM expeditions involve long days with a variety of structured activities and a lot to do to keep the expedition running smoothly. Behind safety, our primary goal is making this the best possible experience we can for the youth participants. All members of the adult team are "on" throughout the full experience. Whether it's helping with cooking duties, teaching a lesson, helping the instructor with a task or lending an ear to a youth who is homesick.

It can be challenging to keep the youth in mind as a top priority throughout the week. You may find yourself craving adult conversations, wanting to take off for a solo day hike to a nearby lake, or getting impatient with a youth who has ADHD and can't sit still long enough to learn how to read a map. The challenges are real and the adults need to stay at the "top of their game" right up through the van ride home to help make this the best experience possible for the youth. It doesn't mean you never get a break in the action but participating in the experience will take a heightened level of awareness and energy.

Meeting youth where they are at:

This may sound easy but it can be very challenging putting it into practice. Every youth participant is unique, just like we are as adults. Some are in good physical shape and others will struggle significantly on the hike, some have good emotional skills and others will be prone to outbursts when pushed beyond their comfort zone, some are talkative and will be easy to strike up a conversation with while others will be quiet and hard to engage. There is a wide variety of unique qualities each of us has but the bottom line is the adult team needs to be extraordinarily accepting, non-judging, open, flexible, compassionate, understanding and have a heightened level of awareness to support the youth wherever they are at.

Expedition preparation (meetings, training, emails, reading the handbook, pre/post expedition activities):

There are several activities leading up to the expedition and with our busy lives it can be challenging to find the time to attend a meeting, go to training, answer additional emails, read the handbook and attend pre-expedition activities. We ask volunteers to engage in these activities to help you prepare and feel confident for your role serving youth with BCM.

Coaching, encouraging & guiding:

In many ways we live in a solution-based culture. We are always coming up with new inventions designed to fix a problem or try to make life better. Our mindset towards personal problems isn't much different. When we listen to a person sharing their challenges many of us immediately want to give them our solutions to fix their problems. It can be challenging for us to simply listen and discuss without providing solutions.

BCM trips are intended to provide a safe "container" that can help youth discover answers from within themselves. We are not here to "fix" them, give them answers to their problems or set them on any particular life path. Through mindful conversations we hope to provide them with tools to find their own answers. While we encourage mentors to share their experiences, it's important to not jump into the "fix it" mode and give them your answer. Instead, help them ask critical questions that will guide them towards their own self-discovery. Through this experience they will be learning a life-long skill that they can use to uncover their unique gifts, overcome challenges they thought were insurmountable and find a life path that connects to their authentic self-expression.

Personal space and time:

BCM trips have a significant amount of structure (details are outlined in our handbook.) Although the structure is flexible within the circumstances of each trip, there is limited personal space or time. While you will be away from work, it's definitely not a vacation. The limits of your personal space and time become crystal clear when you jump in the van to depart with 9 other people, lots of energy, and cramped space. Every day is full and the adults are "on" consistently throughout the trip. That's not to say there isn't some space here and there to relax but the overall experience can be very challenging for people that need a good daily dose of personal space and quiet time.

Positive role modeling & leading by example:

BCM's curriculum includes activities such as journaling, reflection conversations, daily roles, group meals, many lessons, group activities, etc. These are activities that most people do not do on a regular basis and they might present a challenge to you. It's important for all adults to be positive role models and participate fully throughout the trip. For example, when we set aside time for journaling we expect the adults to participate just like the youth. Please be sure to read BCM's handbook so you are familiar/comfortable with our curriculum and ready to support the instructor as she/he guides the experience.

This trip will not resemble your personal hiking trips:

You may have experienced backpacking before, but backpacking with 5 teenagers and 4 other adults that you don't know will be very different from your personal backpacking trips. You'll face different group dynamics, different food, different physical abilities, different trip goals, different safety concerns, different group gear, kids that will have challenges, group activities, unexpected behaviors, unforeseen events, and your pack will likely be heavier than you expect. Some or all of these items may present a challenge for you and we encourage you to take time to consider and reconcile how different this trip will be for you. .

The benefits of this experience for the youth may not be apparent:

BCM's curriculum is designed to set the stage for personal growth, fun, deep connection and skill building. The vast majority of our trips provide powerful life-changing experiences for the youth. However, we encourage adults to temper expectations of the experience. After your trip you may feel that you didn't connect deeply with any of the youth or have any meaningful conversations with them. You may walk away at the end of the week dead tired and have no idea how important the trip was for the youth. Many times the benefits and impacts of the experience for the youth will never be known. This can be challenging, disappointing and maybe even discouraging. Although you may feel like this, BCM staff have seen the impacts year after year and we encourage you to trust that your time with them and this experience will leave a lasting impression.

Outdoor skills:

With all the wonderful outdoor gear we have access to, being outdoors for a week can still be extremely challenging for those that have limited outdoor skills. It can be even more challenging in a group setting where we are relying on each other to help the expedition flow smoothly. There is a lot to do while on a BCM expedition and it's important for all members of the adult team to be comfortable outdoors and have the necessary outdoor skills to take care of themselves in a variety of conditions. Not only will it make your experience more enjoyable it will help the adult team stay focused on supporting the youth and provide for a safer experience for all. If you do not have outdoor skills but want to volunteer we strongly suggest you get some experience and training through groups like REI.

Physical challenge:

If you have been backpacking before you have a good idea of the physical challenges associated with this activity. If you haven't been backpacking we strongly suggest that you take at least one personal trip before you commit to going on a BCM expedition. Although the distances that we cover in a day are relatively short, the days can still be very long. Many groups hike at a speed of 1 mile an hour or less and travelling 5 miles could take the group all day. In addition to carrying your own personal gear you will be carrying a bear can with group food and group gear that will add at least an additional 10 pounds to your pack. Please also be aware that there are situations where we may need to lighten the load for one of the youth participants that is struggling and you may end up with even more weight. The weight of your pack will likely be 40 - 50 pounds.

Mental challenges:

If you don't spend much time around teenagers a BCM expedition can be mentally overwhelming. If you are inclined to do high adventure activities a BCM trip might seem boring. If you are an ultralight backpacker you may be frustrated with the weight of the gear we carry. These are real challenges that adults have had on past expeditions and can take their focus away from being at the top of their game serving the youth.

The ability to have patience with the youth is one of the most common challenges noted on our feedback forms. This can show up in a variety of ways such as; youth walking at a slow pace, stopping multiple times for breaks, listening to teenage "chatter", late morning starts, etc. These are all examples of actual trip challenges and perfect opportunities for adults to meet youth "where they are at" with patience, grace and compassion.

We have all heard the saying "It's about the journey, not the destination." This is very true for BCM trips. We are on a journey with them and while we do have a destination on the map that is not our primary goal. Some trips never make it to their destinations or summit spot but end up being more life-changing through the challenges they encounter along the way.

Full participation helps the team thrive:

Many backpacking programs have two instructors on their trips. BCM is a bit different and uses a single instructor model. We are comfortable with this approach because we rely on our agency partners to provide a staff member and we have up to 3 additional volunteers to support the instructor in a variety of tasks.

BCM instructors have many responsibilities and it's very important for the adult team to proactively support the them throughout the trip to ensure a high functioning team. It can be challenging to put out extra effort especially when we have had a long day, are tired, hungry and our bodies ache. However, that extra effort is exactly the kind of help we need from everyone on the adult team. Sharing the responsibilities evenly across the team will help ensure a smooth expedition and set a great example for the youth.

Conservative safety approach:

BCM is entrusted with the lives of the youth on our trips and we take that responsibility very seriously. There may be times during an expedition that the instructor makes a risk management decision that may be more conservative than you would make on your own personal trip. This can be challenging for adults that have years of backcountry experience and have the knowledge/skills to make their own decisions. While we encourage group decision making, the instructor is ultimately responsible for safety on the trip and we ask that all adults fully support their decisions.

Are you up for the BCM challenge?

We love our volunteer mentors and we don't want to discourage anyone from participating. However, we do want to help ensure you have a good understanding of the challenges that others have faced and deeply consider if this experience is right for you. We rely on mentors as an integral part of a high-functioning adult team and want to be sure you are as prepared as possible for the journey.

The folks that have the most rewarding experiences are those that have some or all of the following qualities:

- Enjoy the company of teenagers
- Can be very flexible
- Able to prioritize the youth's experience over their own
- Have the ability to cope well with unexpected challenges
- Work well in group settings
- Have a good self-awareness
- Are compassionate
- Can stay calm during tense situations
- Have a positive disposition
- Good listeners
- Have conflict resolution skills
- Can give and receive constructive feedback
- Willing/able to support the BCM instructor in a variety of ways