



New England (HHS Region 1)

**MHTTC**

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network  
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

**HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL**  
Department of Psychiatry



# School and Work Coaching for Youth at Clinical High Risk for Psychosis

**Center for Early  
Detection, Assessment,  
and Response to Risk**

[www.cedarclinic.org](http://www.cedarclinic.org)



*Emma Parrish, BS and  
Michelle Friedman-Yakoobian, PhD*

## Why vocational support for youth at risk for psychosis?

Young people who are experiencing signs of clinical high risk (CHR) for psychosis (for more info, see [CHR for psychosis clinical brief](#)) are also struggling in work or school (Carrion et al., 2011, Cornblatt et al., 2007, Velthorst et al., 2018). At our clinic ([www.cedarclinic.org](http://www.cedarclinic.org)), more than 75% of our clients have at least mild impairment in role functioning at baseline.

To help address this, we have developed CEDAR Individualized Vocational and Educational Support and Training (CEDAR INVEST) that helps clients get back on track with educational and vocational goals. CEDAR INVEST coaches are Bachelor's level clinicians or college student volunteers that are supervised by a licensed clinician. In this brief, we will describe some of the strategies that INVEST coaches use to help clients meet their education and vocational goals. Many of these strategies can be implemented by providers outside of a coordinated specialty program (CSC) like CEDAR – such as therapeutic mentors, vocational specialists, peer advocates, or other undergraduate or Bachelor's level program staff.





Many of these strategies can also be used to help people who have experienced a first episode of psychosis (FEP), but providers may want to consider one of the existing evidence-based vocational rehabilitation programs for FEP clients such as Individual Placement and Support (IPS; Killackey et al., 2008) or Supported Employment and Education (SEE; Mueser et al., 2015; Rosenheck et al., 2017) if those services are available.

## General Philosophy

Coaching is client-centered, and coaches act from the assumption that clients can and will make progress toward their goals. A coach has the unique opportunity to connect with the client about their functioning, providing a different perspective than an individual therapist who may need to focus more on symptoms and risk management.

Because coaches are integrated within the mental health team, coaches communicate regularly with mental health providers. For example, a coach will send a summary email at the end of each session to the client's individual clinician. Clinicians can also help to formulate a coaching plan and problem solve with the coach about what can be most helpful to focus on.

Coaches do not need to have expertise in the subject matter being studied or the job being pursued by the client in order to be helpful. For example, a coach may be a psychology student helping a mechanical engineering student. Though the coach does not understand the ins and outs of thermodynamics, the coach can help the client organize their schedule, prioritize assignments, find time to complete assignments, and arrange for outside subject matter tutoring.

### Growth Mindset

Coaches encourage clients to adopt a "growth mindset." Based on research by Carol Dweck (Dweck 2007), there are two types of mindsets – a fixed mindset, in which individuals believe that intelligence and qualities are fixed and cannot be changed, and a growth mindset, in which individuals believe they can improve and develop their intelligence and qualities over time. Coaches encourage clients to work hard and persevere, viewing challenges as opportunities to learn and grow.





## School Strategies

### Organization and Time Management

Clients benefit from help with making a paper or electronic calendar to write down dates of assignments and exams. Coaches can work with clients to prioritize tasks and plan time to complete them. They help clients to set aside specific time to study, and other times to juggle activities and appointments. Many clients have noted they benefit from accountability (they know their coach will ask them about their progress on planned goals to make sure they are staying on track).



*Example: Jose worked with his InVEST coach to begin using a to-do list and calendar on his phone. He wrote a list of due dates for all scheduled tests and assignments for the next two months. The coach helped develop a weekly schedule for when he would complete assignments and set up reminders in his phone.*

### Study Techniques

Many of our clients benefit from learning about and practicing the [Pomodoro technique](#). This involves using a timer to work in 25 minute chunks with 5 minute breaks in between. Our InVEST coaches usually encourage clients to use non-screen break options, such as eating a snack, playing with a pet, or going for a quick walk. The Pomodoro technique helps people to work in ways that maximize attention span and reduce procrastination (the person only needs to set a goal to work on something for 25 minutes rather than sitting down with the goal of finishing the project or completing studying).

*Example: Sophia worked with her InVEST coach to implement the Pomodoro study strategy, using her phone timer to track her studying progress. Her coach encouraged her to take breaks that didn't involve a screen, such as working on her knitting project.*





## Self-Advocacy Skills

Sometimes a client may not need specific accommodations in class, but may need to meet with a professor in office hours or ask for extra help on an assignment. Our coaches often help clients contact relevant individuals in session, encouraging them to ask for help when they need it. If necessary, coaches will work with the client's individual therapist to obtain formal disability accommodations, and information from coaching can often inform these accommodation requests.



*Example: Sneha was struggling in her biology class. When she was feeling depressed last week, she did not attend class and is now behind on her notes. Her InVEST coach helped her write an email to her professor asking for information about the work she missed. Sneha did not wish to share her mental health challenges with her professor, so her coach helped her figure out what she wanted to say in order to ask for what she needed. The coach also helped Sneha with her worries about her professor being mad at her by helping her realize that many students occasionally miss class because of health issues and that asking for information about the missed work would be the best way to communicate with her professor that she cared about the class.*

## Space to do Schoolwork

Clients often benefit from a supportive, quiet environment to work on completing tasks. For example, if a client is studying for an exam such as the GRE or SAT, coaches can create a mock testing environment for them and set up time for them to work on the task with a coach nearby to check in if needed.

Coaches also encourage clients to modify their study environment if they are getting distracted. For example, if a client is continually getting distracted by a video game, a coach may problem solve with the client and make a plan to work in the library and away from the Xbox.

*Example: Jayden was studying for the SAT. However, he had not taken a full length practice test yet. His InVEST coach set aside some time for Jayden to take an SAT practice test in a quiet conference room. His coach checked in regularly during his breaks to see how he was doing and*





*provided encouragement. His coach helped him make a plan to stay after school to study in the library instead of at home so he would be less tempted by distractions.*

## **Work Strategies**

### *Job Hunting*

Our coaches help clients in a job search to find a position that matches their interests. In session, coaches often sit with a client and help them comb through website postings, finding a search strategy that works well so that clients can continue the search independently.

*Example: Natasha wanted to get a summer internship in her field. Her InVEST coach helped her come up with a search strategy that works for jobs she may be interested in (“research,” “biology,” “neuroscience”). Then, the coach helped Natasha to set up a spreadsheet to keep track of jobs in which she was interested. Her coach encouraged Natasha to look for jobs independently and then checked in with her in their next session to see how things were going.*

### *Resume Editing and Cover Letter Writing*

Before a client officially submits a job application, a coach can help the client to edit their resume or cover letter. A coach can either help a client establish one of these documents or help to edit an existing one for readability and professionalism.

*Example: Harry has never had a resume. An InVEST coach sat down with Harry to help him create his first resume, listing his relevant experience and skills. Then, the InVEST coach helped Harry to write a cover letter for a particular job he was interested in.*



### *Mock Interview*

Clients often benefit from mock interview sessions with a coach. After the mock interview, the coach will give the client positive and constructive feedback about their performance.

*Example: Jenny had an interview with a film production company. This internship was her dream, so she was very nervous. An InVEST coach pretended to be an interviewer for the*





position and asked Jenny interview questions. Then, the InVEST coach gave Jenny constructive feedback about her performance, and praised her for things that she did well. The InVEST coach also walked Jenny through logistical factors in the job interview, such as what to wear or creating a plan to arrive early.

### On-the-job Support

After a client obtains a job, they may need regular check-ins to see how things are going and troubleshoot any problems that may come up.

*Example: Amir just got a new job at a pharmacy. His InVEST coach met with him biweekly to check in – for example, his coach may ask him how he is doing with time management, or if he is getting along well with his supervisor. If there are any issues, Amir problem-solved with his coach.*

### **Some resources for help with school/ work coaching:**

[Pomodoro technique](#)

[Navigate Manual – View “Supported Employment and Education”](#)

[Transitions ACR Tip Sheets – Education and Employment](#)

[Accommodations Search Website](#)

“Wait But Why” Articles on Procrastination – [Article 1](#) and [Article 2](#)

## **References**

- Carrión, R. E., Goldberg, T. E., McLaughlin, D., Auther, A. M., Correll, C. U., & Cornblatt, B. A. (2011). Impact of neurocognition on social and role functioning in individuals at clinical high risk for psychosis. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 168(8), 806–813.
- Cornblatt, B.A., Auther, A.M., Niendam, T., Smith, C.W., Zinberg, J., Bearden, C.E., & Cannon, T.D. (2007). Preliminary findings for two new measures of social and role functioning in the prodromal phase of schizophrenia. *Schizophr Bull*, 33(3), 688-702.
- Dweck, C.S. (2007). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Killackey, E., Jackson, H. J., & McGorry, P. D. (2008). Vocational intervention in first-episode psychosis: individual placement and support v. treatment as usual. *The British journal of psychiatry*, 193(2), 114-120.
- Mueser, K. T., Penn, D. L., Addington, J., Brunette, M. F., Gingerich, S., Glynn, S. M., ... & Cather, C. (2015). The NAVIGATE program for first-episode psychosis: rationale, overview, and description of psychosocial components. *Psychiatric Services*, 66(7), 680-690.
- Rosenheck, R., Mueser, K. T., Sint, K., Lin, H., Lynde, D. W., Glynn, S. M., ... & Kane, J. M. (2017). Supported employment and education in comprehensive, integrated care for first episode psychosis: Effects on work, school, and disability income. *Schizophrenia Research*, 182, 120-128.
- Velthorst, E., Zinberg, J., Addington, J., Cadenhead, K. S., Cannon, T. D., Carrión, R. E., ... Bearden, C. E. (2018). Potentially important periods of change in the development of social and role functioning in youth at clinical high risk for psychosis. *Development and Psychopathology*, 30(1), 39–47.