

Communicating Social Support

DAENA J. GOLDSMITH

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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



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Communicating Social Support

When stresses and hassles challenge our abilities to cope, we frequently turn to family, friends, and partners for help. Yet social support from close relational partners does not uniformly benefit recipients or their relationships. By probing the communication processes that link enactments of social support to participants' reactions, this book provides new explanations for when and how receiving social support will be evaluated as helpful and relationally satisfying. The author's research addresses a variety of types of relationships and stresses, including young adult friends and romantic partners coping with the stresses of university life; adult friends, family, and spouses responding to everyday hassles; and married couples coping with chronic health conditions. This innovative program of research combines qualitative and quantitative methods to develop a distinctive communication-based framework for understanding why the content, form, style, and sequence of talk matter for our evaluations of the help we receive from others.

Daena J. Goldsmith (Ph.D.) is Associate Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her teaching and research span a variety of topics, including social support, communication theory, gender issues, and personal relationships. She is widely published in national and international journals in the areas of communication and personal relationships.

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Introduction

In an interview with a 49-year-old woman, the interviewer asked what advice she would give to friends or family members of persons with cancer. The woman replied, "let them talk about it and face the fears together. That I think is a measure of a true friend or a true relative, is they're willing to walk along that road with you."¹

In a study of conversations about everyday problems and stresses, a 28-year-old man explained his definition of a supportive person: "[They] give you feedback on your work or your actions. Also they are able to be honest with you and realize that the more we communicate our feelings and thoughts, the more our relationship will rest on a strong, passionate, and profound sense of intimacy."

In a letter to Dear Abby, "Hurting Friend" explains how she turned to a friend for support during a time of stress only to be rejected. She says that her friend's unwillingness to provide emotional support "was a slap in the face and one that hurt much worse than a physical blow. Abby, I feel hurt and betrayed."

Several decades of research reinforce the observation common to these examples from everyday life: Talking about problems with family and friends is important to individual and relational well-being. This book is about those conversations: what they look like, how and why they matter, and what are more and less effective ways of doing them. These conversations and their success or failure are important because they are the beginning of a chain of processes that can influence coping, relationship satisfaction, and individual health and well-being.

In the interdisciplinary literature relevant to these issues, concepts such as *enacted social support* and *troubles talk* capture some of what goes on in these conversations. Yet the research literature associated with each of

¹ I am grateful to Virginia McDermott for sharing with me this quotation from her interviews with members of a cancer recovery support group.

these concepts provides an incomplete picture. Those who study enacted social support have usually focused on how much of it a person reports and have overlooked the give and take of conversations in which it occurs. In contrast, those who study troubles talk have typically been concerned with the internal structure and organization of these conversations, without systematic attention to the import of these conversations for their participants' individual and relational well-being. There are exceptions to this generalization, scholars who share my interest in understanding how the features and processes of talk about troubles are evaluated by participants and how these evaluations translate into coping, well-being, and relational satisfaction.² Moreover, although much of the social support individuals receive comes from close relational partners, and although close relationships are often the setting for troubles talk, talk about stresses and problems has received less attention from scholars of close relationships than have other types of talk, such as conflict or self-disclosure. Consequently, there is much that we don't know about the contours and landmarks of troubles talk in close relationships, how partners navigate it, and the effects of this on their journey through the stresses and hassles of daily life. My goal in this book is to map some of the unexplored territory that lies at the intersection of research on social support, troubles talk, and personal relationships.

The research relevant to this book is spread across various disciplines, and the approach I take differs from that taken in most previous work, so it may be useful to explain my focus, its relevance to various audiences,

² For example, a number of researchers have examined messages or conversations in which comfort or support is provided. Burleson and his colleagues (see Burleson, 1994, for a review) have shown how students' reactions to comforting messages (and message producers) depend on the degree to which the message acknowledges, legitimates, and elaborates on the other person's feelings. Barbee and Cunningham (see Barbee & Cunningham, 1995, for a review) have examined how different ways of seeking help (i.e., directly or indirectly, verbally or nonverbally) are related to the kind of support one receives (i.e., problem-solving or emotion-focused support, approach or avoidance of problem/emotion). Cutrona and colleagues (e.g. Cutrona, 1996b; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992, 1994) have examined how different types of support (e.g., problem-solving, nurturant, or esteem support) may be more or less effective and satisfying depending on features of the problem situation (e.g., how controllable the problem is) and the recipient (e.g., personality, gender, and marital satisfaction). Pistrang and her colleagues (Pistrang & Barker, 1998; Pistrang, Barker, & Rutter, 1997; Pistrang, Clare, & Barker, 1999; Pistrang, Picciotto, & Barker, 2001; Pistrang, Solomons, & Barker, 1999) have identified the particular behaviors that are perceived as more and less supportive from different sources and by different raters. For reviews, see Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) and Burleson and MacGeorge (2002). There are other studies that do not examine social support per se, but nonetheless focus on conversations in which troubles are discussed, including the features of these conversations and their interpretations and consequences. For example, there are programs of research focused on how elderly and nonelderly individuals talk about problems faced by the elderly and what implications different styles of speaking may have for identities and stereotypes of the elderly (e.g., Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991; Hummert & Ryan, 2001).

and how it complements work undertaken from other perspectives. This book focuses on *enacted social support* that is communicated in *troubles talk* conversations between *close relational partners*. Enacted support is but one facet of the broader social support construct and enacted social support can occur in contexts other than troubles talk in close relationships. Similarly, troubles talk is not limited to close relationships. However, the processes of enacted support are distinctive and the troubles talk conversations of close relational partners are a frequent and significant site for these processes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENACTED SUPPORT

As shown in the next chapter, *social support* is an umbrella construct used to refer to several related yet conceptually distinct social phenomena and processes. I study *enacted social support* (the things people say and do for one another) and how it can *buffer* individuals from the negative effects of stress by facilitating coping.

Enacted support is central to the broader social support construct. Prominent researchers in a wide variety of academic disciplines have defined social support in ways that state or imply it is conveyed through the actions of one person in interaction with another. For example, in his classic volume on social support and work stress, House (1981, p. 39) stated that researchers and laypersons alike conceive of social support as an "interpersonal transaction" that yields emotional concern, instrumental aid, information, or information relevant to self-evaluation. In a review of research on social support among the elderly, Antonucci (1985, p. 96) concluded, "most definitions assume that social support is based on supportive social interactions...." In a discussion of the significance of social support in personal relationships, Gottlieb (1985b, p. 361) stated that "in the coping process, it is the behavioural manifestations of support expressed by my close associates – its materialization in interpersonal transactions – that has greatest significance for the course and outcomes of my ordeal." Enacted social support is also central to research on interventions. Many support interventions are designed to provide or improve the interactions stressed individuals have with their relational partners, peers who have experienced a similar stressful condition, or healthcare professionals (Gottlieb, 1996; Heller & Rook, 1997; Wortman & Conway, 1985). In a review of research on social support interventions, Heller and Rook (1997, p. 650) suggested the social transactions through which support is expressed are "important building blocks" of relationships and of support interventions.

Given the conceptual centrality of social interaction to the social support construct, it is perhaps surprising that most researchers who study social support focus on other, related phenomena. The most common measures tap an individual's perception that support is available, and there is evidence these perceptions reflect a relatively stable and global sense

of acceptance rather than a summary report of what goes on in actual interactions (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). Similarly, even studies of supportive interactions more often enumerate their frequency rather than model their processes. For social support researchers, then, this book fills an important gap. Interactions in which individuals discuss their problems and communicate various kinds of support are a central feature of the multifaceted social support construct and yet these interactive processes are among the least studied components of social support.

TROUBLES TALK AS A KEY LOCATION FOR ENACTED SUPPORT

Troubles talk is one important type of conversation in which social support is enacted. The term was coined by Jefferson (1980, p. 153), who described it as "a conversation in which troubles are reported." In research I have conducted with my colleagues (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Goldsmith & McDermott, 1998), we have found that troubles talk episodes are recognized by many U.S. Americans not only by their topical focus on a trouble but also by the presumed purpose of the conversation, which is to assist in coping with the problem. Troubles talk is distinct from conversations in which participants discuss problems in their relationship. For example, it is different from complaining or arguing about the other's behavior (e.g., "I'm stressed out because you and I don't communicate very well" or "It's a problem for me that you smoke in the house") or from having a relationship talk with the hearer (e.g., "I'm worried about where our relationship is headed"). However, troubles talk may include stresses or problems external to the relationship that affect both partners (e.g., when one's spouse is ill, it is likely to be a concern for both; financial difficulties, moving, or changing jobs may be stressors faced together). Everyday conversations that are not focused on troubles are no doubt important to global perceptions of the supportiveness of a partner or relationship (Barnes & Duck, 1994; Gottlieb, 1985b; Leatham & Duck, 1990; Rook, 1990). However, my focus is on one particularly important and prototypical type of conversation in which social support is enacted: conversations in which individuals talk about problems, from the hassles of daily life to the major life events that pose stressful challenges, threats, or losses.

Understanding how support is enacted in the context of troubles talk is important theoretically. One of the ways social relationships facilitate well-being is by providing access to this kind of interaction, in which individuals can receive assistance with coping (Thoits, 1986). Many measures of social support include items that measure the availability of someone with whom you can talk about problems, someone who will listen to you talk about your feelings, or someone to console you when you are upset. Evidence of the importance of troubles talk as a context for social support is also found in studies of the positive effects of access to a confidant. Having

at least one person with whom you can talk about personal problems or troubles is consistently associated with individual well-being (for a review, see Cohen & Wills, 1985; see also Uchino, Cacioppo, Malarkey, Glaser, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1995).

There are also practical reasons for seeking to better understand troubles talk. Conversations in which one participant discloses a problem and seeks assistance can be challenging, both for the person who makes him- or herself vulnerable by disclosing and for the partner searching for words that can bring insight, comfort, and solidarity. Jefferson's (1980, 1984a, 1984b) conversation analytic studies showed how talk about a trouble poses special problems for the organization and coordination of conversation. Metts, Backhaus, and Kazoleas (1995) explained how troubles talk conversations depart in significant ways from the usual topics and structures of everyday talk: One person may take more than his or her share of the floor time to tell an extended narrative, the topic of the narrative may focus on negative emotions rather than the positive emotions that are preferred, and the hearer of the narrative will eventually feel a need to generate some contribution to the conversation that is topically relevant and yet sensitive to the potential for the other person to be embarrassed and vulnerable. In short, talking about a trouble initiates a type of conversation that differs from "business as usual." Hearing about another person's difficulties can create discomfort and anxiety and this, in turn, can lead hearers to say things that are insensitive and potentially hurtful (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986). For these reasons (and others I explore in Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5), enacting support in troubles talk conversations is often experienced as highly salient and meaningful and yet potentially difficult to do well. Showing individuals how to participate more effectively in troubles talk empowers them to take better advantage of the assistance close relationships can offer.

CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS AS A PRIMARY CONTEXT FOR SUPPORT AND TROUBLES TALK

The literature on social support emphasizes benefits to individual health and well-being, but troubles talk also contributes to relational functioning and satisfaction (Acitelli, 1996). For example, Cutrona (1996a) suggests that social support contributes to marital satisfaction by preventing emotional withdrawal or depression during times of stress, by preventing conflicts from escalating in intensity, and by strengthening the intimate bond between partners. Burleson, Albrecht, Sarason, and Goldsmith (1994) note that supportive interactions are a defining feature of healthy family interaction and crucial to friendships and amicable work relationships.

Among North Americans, close relationships are a primary context for social support in general and for talking about problems in particular (Wade, Howell, & Wells, 1994). Wellman and Wortley (1990) interviewed

adults in a residential area just outside Toronto who provided various kinds of support. Talking about problems was significantly more likely to occur in relationships that were intimate and voluntary and spanned more than one context (e.g., two friends who interact in one another's homes, talk over the phone, and work in the same organization). Seventy-two percent of these "strong ties" provided emotional aid and the authors concluded that "respondents appear to get most of their social support – of all kinds – through their small number of strong ties" (Wellman & Wortley, 1990, p. 566). Young, Giles, and Plantz (1982) reached similar conclusions in their study of social networks in rural communities in the eastern United States.

Further evidence of the importance of close relationships as a context for troubles talk comes from the Americans View Their Mental Health studies. These large nationwide representative surveys of adults in the United States were conducted in 1957 and 1976 (see Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). In response to a question about what you do "if something is on your mind that is bothering you or worrying you and you do not know what to do about it," 86% of the respondents reported talking about their worries and most of these conversations occurred in close relationships. About half of those who reported talking about worries said they talked only to their spouse. In addition, family, friends, and neighbors were mentioned more often than formal sources of support such as clergy, doctors, and mental health specialists. In a follow-up study, Swindle, Heller, Pescosolido, and Kikuzawa (2000) examined data from the Americans View Their Mental Health surveys as well as similar data from the 1996 nationwide General Social Survey. They focused on responses to the more serious circumstance in which individuals reported having felt an impending nervous breakdown. Across the forty-year period represented in their data, there was a strong increase in reliance on family and friends as partners in troubles talk. This trend remained even after controlling for demographic characteristics and perceived reason for the breakdown.

Troubles talk is a strong expectation of close relational partners. Caughlin (2003) asked college students to describe the communication patterns of people in families with "good communication." The ability to share problems with one another and count on family members for support were among the most frequently mentioned and strongly endorsed standards students used for evaluating good family communication. Similarly, a study that asked students to tell stories about their families found talking about problems and responding with instrumental or emotional support were prominent themes (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999).

The ability to talk about problems and respond supportively not only is an abstract relational ideal but also serves as a strong predictor of relational satisfaction. Young adults' satisfaction with their family relationships are strongly correlated with their perceptions that family members share

problems with one another and respond supportively (Caughlin, 2003). In a sample of women juggling work, home, and childcare demands, Erickson (1993) found emotional support from one's husband was a key predictor of marital well-being and protected against the risk of marital burnout. Dehle, Larsen, and Landers (2001) asked married students to report daily for one week on the support they received and desired from their spouses. When expectations for support were met in day-to-day interactions, spouses had higher levels of marital satisfaction. In another survey of young married couples in a university community, Sprecher, Metts, Burleson, Hatfield, and Thompson (1995) compared the relative importance of companionship, supportive communication, and sexual expression. They found that supportive communication (which included items about "listening when I need someone to talk to," "helps me clarify my thoughts," and comfort with "having a serious discussion") was the best predictor of marital satisfaction. Conversely, in a sample of individuals drawn from divorce court records, not having "someone to talk things over with" headed a list of marital complaints (Kitson & Holmes, 1992). Even when partners were acknowledged to fulfill instrumental roles in the marriage (e.g., providing for a family or keeping house), the failure of spouses to achieve satisfactory communication, support, and concern was seen by many as sufficient reason to end a relationship. Observational studies confirm that patterns of giving and receiving social support are associated with concurrent and prospective marital satisfaction (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). The links between giving and receiving social support and marital satisfaction are particularly poignant in studies of couples coping together with health problems (e.g., Abbey, Andrews, & Halman, 1995; Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992; Lydon & Zanna, 1992; Peyrot, McMurry, & Hedges, 1988; Rankin, 1992; Revenson & Majerovitz, 1990; Swanson-Hyland, 1996).

Responding supportively to a partner in need is a strong expectation of close relationships and yet one that may be difficult to fulfill. At first glance, we might predict that troubles talk would be less difficult in close relationships because of the trust and concern that define our notions of "close." However, some of the same attributes that make a relationship close (e.g., interdependence, strong emotion, past history, and obligations) can complicate our ability to seek, give, and receive support. Sometimes, the dynamic is one of empathy: When those we love hurt, we hurt, and we want more than anything to make the hurt go away. This desire to "fix" the other's problem can actually interfere with the provision of effective support (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). In other instances, we may struggle with conflicting feelings of frustration at the other for being in trouble (again!) and guilt for not having more altruistic impulses. The strong expectation (and obligation) to help may be tried by a history of troubles talk in which the assistance provided brings about no apparent improvement

in the recurring trouble (e.g., Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988). Thus, the close relational context for support enacted in troubles talk is distinctive in ways that merit close attention.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The social support literature is the source of much of what we know (and don't know) about how talking about problems can help people cope. Researchers in this tradition have amassed a vast array of data pointing to the importance of personal relationships for individual well-being and one of the primary explanations for these beneficial effects is that social support improves coping with stress. However, only a small portion of this body of research focuses on what people say and do (enacted support) and the findings that emerge from these studies raise as many questions as answers. Chapter 1 describes several problems in the study of enacted support and proposes that attention to communication processes provides an explanation for these difficulties.

Chapter 2 summarizes the theoretical underpinnings of a communication-based approach. I discuss my assumptions about the nature of enacted support and the social, cultural, and relational processes that link enactments of support to evaluations of support. I also show how my approach is distinct from but complementary to other ways of studying enacted social support. Then, in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I show how my framework explains several puzzles in the literature.

Chapter 3 addresses the question: Why isn't advice a more helpful form of enacted support? When close relational partners talk about troubles, they frequently give advice and yet advice often goes unappreciated. Attention to *what* people actually advise and to *how* they communicate it helps to differentiate episodes in which advice is seen as helpful from those in which it is seen as unhelpful or even harmful.

Chapter 4 examines matching models of enacted social support. It is widely assumed (and quite reasonably) that effective social support must be matched to the problem for which it is offered (e.g., for a controllable problem, it is helpful to offer advice about how to improve the situation, but for an uncontrollable loss, it is better to offer comfort). However, matching models have had only limited success in predicting the circumstances under which support will have beneficial effects. I propose an alternative model in which close relational partners adapt the support they offer to external constraints on coping as well as modify and coordinate their views of the environment to facilitate coping.

Chapter 5 examines how studying support in the context of close relationships challenges implicit assumptions about the provision and receipt of support. The effects of a stressor on both partners, and the challenge of coordinating each person's preferred way of coping, can complicate