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Anti-Comforting Messages

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No matter how hard you may try, there is no guaranteed, tried-and-true method for comforting someone when they are upset. Everyone has a different style of coping and responds best to varying types of comforting. You were socialized into ways to comfort others by your family members as well as friends. In some cases gender influenced this socialization as males often receive messages to avoid being feminine, and therefore sensitive, whereas females are encouraged to express their sensitivity. Therefore, some males learned that joking, one-liners, or general avoidance is a workable and appropriate way to get the other person to laugh or move on. Their female counterparts learned to talk things out and convey sensitivity. By young adulthood such communication rules become less powerful but, in many situations, individuals have difficulty conveying an appropriate sense of support when others are in emotional need. These are times that call for emotional support and when an inappropriate response can create relational frustration and hurt. As Brant Burleson (2003) so aptly puts it, "But seeking social support does not guarantee the receipt of sensitive, effective support" (p. 551). In describing how emotional support relates to communication Burleson (2003) suggests, "It is useful to view emotional support as specific lines of communicative behavior enacted by one party with the intent of helping another cope effectively with emotional distress" (p. 552). Yet, some attempts at providing emotional support fail miserably because they tend to reflect the respondents' discomfort with displaying direct sensitivity and lack of a wide communication repertoire from which to select the appropriate response to an emotionally charged situation. Therefore the response to another's bid for support results in distance and frustration instead of providing a sense of comfort and understanding.

According to Dale Hample, there are very specific strategies that are almost guaranteed to make another feel worse, not better. Even with the best intentions, these "anti-comforting" styles often serve to discount, disregard, or diminish the feelings of someone in emotional distress, under the guise of words of support or assistance. Using the underlying tenets of face theory and confirmation, disconfirmation, and rejection, Hample frames this unusual communication circumstance and demonstrates how certain attempts at supportive messages

can be hurtful. Further, Hample depicts multiple examples of the differences between content level anti-comforting and relationship level anti-comforting. Through the descriptions of each type of anti-comforting, the ways to recognize and avoid anti-comforting in one's own interactions are made clear. Overall, this chapter offers a very interesting and detailed discussion of a pervasive yet illusive and often unrecognized issue in communication.

As you read this chapter think about anti-comforting messages you have experienced and ask yourself the question, why did these messages fail and what might have been said or done differently?

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I've always really liked baseball, and I played slow pitch softball in a church league until I was nearly 50. I'm a right-handed hitter, but had realized many years ago that people like Ozzie Smith play on the left side of the diamond, and people like me play on the right. So I learned to hit to right field, and was pretty consistent at it. A couple of games into my final season, I decided to quit at the end of the summer. I hit a line drive between the first and second basemen, and as I trundled to first, the right fielder threw to the first baseman. I've always been pretty slow-footed, so the play was close. As the ball arrived, the umpire threw up his hands, but didn't call me out or safe. He shouted, "No play." Several of us were confused, so the umpire explained. Before the season had begun, the team captains had met and had decided on a new rule: outfielders couldn't throw runners out at first. As I drove home that night, I realized that the rule had probably been put in for me and a player on the Catholic team, who had the same game, age, and athletic makeup as I did. I felt a little embarrassed about it, and at the next game I made a couple of awkward comments about it to my team. I guess I was hoping for some sympathy or encouragement. But it turns out that guys are guys whether they're on a church team or not, and all I got for my trouble was having the rule named after me.

When we think about our lives in the short term, we wish that things would always go smoothly, without crises, disappointments, or humiliation. But in the long term, we often benefit from those stressful or hurtful moments. I got over my short term feelings about the Dale Rule, and don't really regret having left behind a game that I was getting worse at. My golf game has improved considerably, and I enjoy having my weekend nights back. I have had other experiences that I don't wish to share, and several of those have made me a better person and father, even though the first moments of my enlightenment felt awful. In the episode when the rule got named, I was looking for some comforting. What I got instead was anti-comforting, even though it was intended in a good humored way. It's nice to know that the guys didn't think I was fragile—most of them actually have good interpersonal skills and would have treated me differently if they had thought it was needed—but I actually wanted a little bit of social support. When our lives hit bumps, that's what we all want from those around us, whether we're self-contained or delicate or somewhere in between.

People often find themselves in emotional need. Perhaps the problem is a very substantial one, such as a death in the family or a positive diagnosis of HIV, perhaps it seems huge in the moment but might dissipate with time, such as abandonment by a relational partner, and perhaps it's even more minor than the Dale Rule. But in varying degrees, and with varying justification, people sometimes need the aid of those around them. Those of us fortunate enough to have a supportive social network and to receive good quality comforting from others reap a number of substantial benefits: we are more at peace, we have better health, we find more satisfaction in our relationships, we feel better about ourselves, and we have a generally more positive outlook on life (see reviews in Burleson, 2003, or Goldsmith, 2004). When our emotional needs are not met, either by circumstances or by others, we suffer in some measure.

This essay is about talking to those in emotional need, whether that need is great or small. Forming such messages—deciding what to say and how to say it—is one of the most intricate of all communication skills. Unfortunately, most of what we say to others day to day really isn't consequential, and so we form the habit of simply expressing whatever first comes to mind, without much worry about getting it wrong. When comforting is called for, however, our messages are almost never neutral in their effects, and we have to overcome the routine habit of just talking without reflection. We can make things better, or we can make them worse. And what we say in those moments can reverberate for a surprisingly long time.

Some time ago, I got curious about what I'm calling anti-comforting messages. These are things that are intended as emotional support, but are so incompetent that they actually backfire. (The Dale Rule is a mild example.) I expressed my interest on crtnet@natcom.org, a discussion list for people (mostly faculty and graduate students) with advanced interests in communication, and invited others to send me examples. Eventually I compiled them and put them on my own website, (www.wiu.edu/users/mfdjh), where you can see the whole list. (If you have more examples, they will be welcome.) I will use these to illustrate the points I make here.

SETTING THE STAGE: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Before plunging into the abyss of communication incompetence, we need to start by seeing why emotional support messages are so hard to accomplish properly. The first thing to notice is that every message has two levels of meaning, content, and relationship (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Suppose I were to say, "go back one paragraph, and highlight the definition of anti-comforting messages." The content of that statement involves highlighting, paragraphs, and definitions. What the sentence means, more or less on its surface, is the content level of meaning. But the statement also has relational meanings, because it implies who I am, who you are, and what our relationship is. Thus it has several other meanings as well: you need to be told what to highlight; I am entitled to tell you what to highlight; and you have to do what I tell you. If you're annoyed at my statement, we can probably trace your unrest to the relational implications of it, not its content. Every message projects a relationship between the two people. It can be a projection of dominance, as in the highlighting command, or it can suggest equality, caring, contempt, or any number of other things. Routine comments—those that are given and heard as routine, that is—generally don't create any new relational issues. But when people are in emotional need, things can be more labile.

Relationships are composed of people, or more precisely, of identities (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Each person has what we call positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which consists of the positive things we want others to think about us. Commonly, we want to be seen as smart, friendly, good humored, and so forth, but sometimes we might want to be viewed as cold or dangerous. Even though the identity we want can change, we still intend that others see what it is, acknowledge it, and positively confirm it. The other person is doing the same thing, and there is a kind of unspoken social contract by which we each agree to support the other's identity if at all possible. We also have negative face, which is the desire to be unimpeded. We want to be free to act and think as we please. When events or people impede us, or try to, that is negative, and we resist it (Brehm, 1966). The same social contract applies here, too: we each try to avoid interfering with the other's freedoms. When circumstances or accident result in an affront to either negative or positive face, we often engage in facework to repair things: we apologize, we try to take it back, we give a compliment. All interpersonal communication involves a negotiation of identities, and this is done in part by the relational meanings of what we say, because these bear on face.

Three particular kinds of relational meaning are important (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). When we become aware of another person's projected identity, we can confirm it, reject it, or

disconfirm it. To confirm the other's definition of self is to support it. If the other hints that she is a good student, we immediately compliment her studiousness or grades. Rejecting the other's identity means confronting it and disagreeing. If someone says he is adept at video games, we can refute that projection by suggesting that his little brother is better. Disconfirming a definition of self involves simply ignoring it. A spouse casually sets a new trophy on the dining room table, and the other spouse puts it in a box without comment or eye contact. These three relational meanings, as you might suppose, are in order of supportiveness: confirmation is most positive, following by rejection (at least the identity was noticed, after all), and disconfirmation is worst (the relational message being, "you don't exist"). Notice that there aren't any other possibilities. When you are drawn into a conversation, you have to do one of these three things (or perhaps more than one, in different degrees).

APPLYING THE BASIC PRINCIPLES TO MOMENTS OF EMOTIONAL NEED

Every moment of emotional hurt is unique, and every person is different. Still, there are some likely features that we should be alert to. First of all, the upset person is emotional and perhaps not thinking as clearly as usual. This is not the time to expect him or her to be perceptive about your intentions or feelings. In fact, when people are in the throes of depression or anger, they may well lash out with little provocation, or mistake a helpful overture for taunting. For this reason, Burleson (2003, p. 580) suggests that the support provider actually be explicit about wanting to help (e.g., "I'm on your side in this"). The person in need is likely to be especially sensitive to identity issues, because emotional pain inevitably creates a focus on self. And most of all, it is his or her moment, not yours. The support provider may have to put self in the background, and exclusively feature the other.

Second, different categories of things create emotional stress. A key consideration is whether the problem is manageable, that is, whether it can be fixed with constructive action. For instance, a family member passing away is uncontrollable, and nothing instrumental can be done to reverse this (Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984, have studied bereavement support). In contrast, being stressed because of an upcoming public speaking responsibility is open to instrumental advice or assistance. Advice is out of place if the problem isn't manageable, but might be allowable if the problem is potentially malleable. Another consideration is whether the support provider can do something substantial to alleviate the problem. If a friend is late to work and you have a car, offering a ride might be more effective and appropriate than a conversation about feelings.

A third issue is that emotionally hurtful events don't come with obvious labels. Something that bothers one person might pass unnoticed by another. One friend might take a speeding ticket in stride, but another might be extremely upset by it. Whether the instigating event seems justifiable in its emotional effects is really irrelevant to the person who is hurt. It is his or her feelings that are at issue, not your independent judgment about how weighty the circumstances really are. Everything must be seen through the eyes of the person in need, if genuine comfort is to be provided.

Lastly, we should pause for a moment to consider the support provider. As I've implied, giving good emotional assistance isn't easy. As with any voluntary behavior, offering support depends on motivation and ability (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). If you don't really have a strong impulse to help, you may not be likely to do well even if you have a high level of skill. Adults can generally create a temporary artificial motivation to help others, though. Most of us can force ourselves to be nurturing, to go through the motions even if we are honestly indifferent, just because it seems to be called for in the moment. Ability deficits are harder to repair. The support provider has to be perceptive about others, has to form the right goals for the interaction, has to be able to think of appropriate and effective things to say, and has to be able to work them into the conversation.

What should the goals be? They need to be chosen with the other person in mind, and his or her wishes should be respected. If the distressed

person wants information or advice, give it. If he or she wants to feel better, try to accomplish that. In the absence of reliable signals, though, here are some things to consider.

Identity and relationship issues are permanent considerations. Giving advice usually carries the relational message, "you're not as competent as I am, so I'll help you," which of course affronts both positive and negative face. "Correcting" the other's feelings, perhaps by suggesting that they are unjustified, is an insult to positive face. A great deal of facework is probably going to be necessary in any emotional support effort, and this may involve showing your own vulnerability, to make things seem more or less even. But even "this has happened to me, too" might have the implication of devaluing the other's feelings, and moving the spotlight to you. The problems that make people upset are rarely one-dimensional. The situation might well call for information, assistance, advice, and identity confirmation, and not just one of them. The support provider's goals should be flexible, and adaptable at every moment.

ANTI-COMFORTING MESSAGES

With these general considerations in mind, let us finally look over some examples of anti-comforting messages, and try to understand what went wrong. These were all sent to me with the understanding that one person had actually been trying to help the other, but the effort had backfired. (Some of the contributors were willing to share their names, and those credits are on my website. No one expected their story to be in a book.)

A common sort of episode was being abandoned by a relational partner. Here are some awful things to say.

- Don't take it so hard. She was a slut anyway.
- That's okay. You don't need him anyway.
- Come on, you know you had this coming. You were overdue for payback.
- I think she was a narc.
- He was always a jerk about you behind your back, telling everyone how bitchy you were and how you tried to control him. Who needs that?
- Get over it. Everyone knows college relationships don't really last anyway.

Let's begin by noticing that any of these might have been well intentioned. They really are awful, but they don't necessarily arise from unfriendly intentions.

These remarks are similar in several ways. Consider the identity work they are doing for the upset person. They devalue his or her feelings ("don't take it so hard," "get over it") and suggest that they are illegitimate. In fact, the upset person was incompetent to have even been in this position ("she was a slut," "she was a narc"). In other words, not only are the current feelings wrong, but so were the original ones. Rather than having negative feelings, the injured person should be pleased ("you don't need him," "who needs that?"). All of these are actually damaging to the identity and feelings of the person who is already feeling hurt.

Some other instances of anti-comforting in this same circumstance just seem to miss the whole point, or to distort it.

- That's too bad. Wanna go out Friday?
- Aww, that's nothing! You know how I got dumped?
- Well, at least you are free to go on to graduate school now.
- I know exactly how you feel. My cat ran away from me once. I needed a few weeks to heal after that before I could get another cat.

The first example almost seems like disconfirmation, as though the support provider felt vaguely obliged to say something, but really just wanted to get on with things. The second message is genuinely disconfirming because it changes the conversational focus to the provider. The third one offers consolation of sorts, but does so by implying that the breakup is a good thing, not something to be legitimately mourned. And the last one devalues almost everything: the lost relational partner, the value of being in love (with a human),

the stressed person's identity, and the durability of one's feelings.

To this point, we have been concentrating on the relational level of meaning, which bears directly on identities and relationships. But the content of what we say is important, too. If we are offering emotional support, it needs to be sincere. If we are sharing information, it needs to be accurate. If we provide advice, it needs to be wise. Here are some content problems.

- At a funeral home a women remarked to my father about my grandmother's death that it happened "for a reason." My father, tired and grief-stricken, responded, "and what would it be?"
- Look at it as a growth experience. This way, your first divorce won't hit you so hard.
- Wow, now that it is finally over, I can tell you she's been cheating on you, dude!
- You can't have everything you want in this life.

In the first case, we see a woman trying to give solace in a way that is common in some religious communities. But she mistook the man or his mood, and found herself being asked for proof and elaboration. She could not support her information. He must have seen her comment as superficial, empty, and devaluing. He might have felt that if she had truly cared, she would really have had something to say. The second example offers some advice on how to understand a relational breakup. But the advice is immature and insulting. On top of whatever the upset person was presently feeling, now divorced (and the "first" one, at that) has been piled on. The third message certainly provides information. But even assuming that it's true, it has not been very well adapted to the goal of being helpful. Rather than giving emotional assistance, the information provides other things to be upset about—having been so blind as to date a cheating woman, and having a friend who wouldn't tell you about it. The last example is a cliché. It isn't apparently adapted to the upset person or the circumstances. Aside from having very little content at all, its very commonness suggests insincerity—that the speaker felt he or she had to say something but didn't really care, so said the simplest and quickest thing that occurred. It really doesn't seem to show much interest.

CONCLUSIONS

This has been the opposite of a how-to essay. But often we can most easily see the right way to do things by looking at examples of failure (Petroski, 1985). If you would like to read more positive material, I can recommend Burleson's (2003) advice, as well as Goldsmith's (2004) careful studies of supportive conversations.

It is no wonder that people sometimes fail to give useful emotional support, even when they want to. The conversations may be highly charged, and both identities and relationships may be at risk to an unusual degree. A person who is in need is thereby vulnerable and sensitive, too. And the task of navigating through the various demands and goals is so risky that even the provider may feel in danger as well. Perhaps that is one reason that some people try to dodge this basic obligation of close relationships.

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QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS

1. One predictable place to find examples of anti-comforting is in televised situation comedies. What makes them so funny in this context? If audiences have seen so many examples of this communication strategy, why do people continue to do it?
2. The general discussions of interpersonal communication and emotionally challenging situations give a number of principles for comforting properly. Identify five anti-comforting messages and construct appropriate messages to replace the anti-comforting ones. Identify the context for each message.
3. For the most part, comforting actually takes place in a conversation, rather than as a simple message. How would you try to participate in a conversation to give another person emotional assistance?

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