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Modeling the Potential Effectiveness of Low Person-Centered Emotional Support: The Role of Relational Closeness, Goodwill, and Message Accuracy on Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Low person-centered (LPC) emotional support messages have been associated consistently with poor outcomes for message recipients because such messages typically blame the recipient and invalidate or ignore their emotions. Using the dual-process theory of supportive communication as its basis, this study proposed a model in which the detrimental effects of LPC messages may be weakened (and the potential for positive results strengthened) by a combination of existing conditions (i.e. relational closeness mediated by perceived goodwill) that work to influence appraisals of the accuracy of an LPC message. Together, the model proposes that these assessments will predict affective improvement, negative relational ramifications, and future support seeking. This premise was tested using a census-matched sample of 428 U.S. adults, and the results support the model as hypothesized for all three outcomes. In doing so, the data show that LPC messages are likely not as detrimental (and may even have beneficial outcomes) if they come from a relationally close supporter, but only if the support provider is seen to be acting in the best interest of the recipient: a combination that increases perceptions of message accuracy.

KEYWORDS

Emotional support; low person-centered messages; person-centeredness; relational closeness; message accuracy; goodwill

In celebratory moments, and in times of challenge, people typically want emotional support from others in their lives (Vangelisti, 2009). Having others cheer a person on or help when that person is in need is typically a relational expectation (Dorrance Hall & Shebib, 2020; Ray & Manusov, 2023) and is considered "a basic provision of interpersonal relationships" (High & Dillard, 2012, p. 100). However, most research in this area focuses on the occurrence of support when people need help, leading Burleson to define emotional support as the "specific lines of communicative behavior enacted by one party with the intent of helping another cope with emotional distress" (Burleson, 2003, p. 552).

Although the provision of emotional support may be part of the social contract between people who are in one another's life, that commitment may be violated either when no support is provided (i.e., nonsupport; Ray et al., 2019) or when the support offered is not the type or quality of support a person desires or expects (Vangelisti, 2009). More commonly, however, scholars have endeavored to distinguish the characteristics of more or less effective emotional support messages (High & Dillard, 2012; MacGeorge et al., 2008).

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A primary distinction when determining the effectiveness of such messages is the extent to which the emotional support reflects person-centeredness (Burleson, 1982).

More specifically, verbal person-centeredness (VPC) refers to the degree to which messages "recognize and validate the support recipient's experience" (Brisini et al., 2022, p. 89). Originally proposed as having nine levels tiered from highest to lowest person-centeredness, most studies consider three major tiers (high, moderate, and low VPC), and High and Dillard (2012) empirically verified the use of these primary forms. This study focuses specifically on low person-centered (LPC) messages, which are support messages that criticize or blame the support recipient, ignore their emotions, and typically lead to deleterious outcomes for the support recipient and the supporter-recipient relationship (e.g., Ray & Veluscek, 2018).

As with much of our interpersonal communication, however, closer inspection reveals a more complex set of circumstances. Malloch and Hether (2019), for example, found that there are times when LPC messages can be beneficial for the recipient. Other researchers have studied related processes, finding likewise that hurtful messages can be perceived as helpful in certain circumstances (Vangelisti, 2009; Young, 2010). The purpose of this study is to argue for and empirically test a model that illustrates instances when the negative outcomes tied to LPC messages are weakened and the potential for positive outcomes are strengthened.

We argue that three factors/perceptions—relational closeness, goodwill, and message accuracy—can create instances when LPC messages may be perceived as functional. In the forthcoming literature review, we situate our argument for the role of these three factors within the logic of the dual-process theory of supportive communication (Burleson, 2009; Bodie & Burleson, 2008), as this theory has previously explained how people process messages that vary in VPC and how this results in better or worse outcomes for the recipient. We begin with a summary of relevant research on emotional support and verbal person-centeredness before detailing the dual-process theory of supportive communication and proposing our model for instances when LPC messages can be effective.

Emotional Support and Verbal Person-Centeredness

Emotional support is often considered part of the "bright side" of interpersonal communication and relationships (Young, 2010). Particularly when it is in the form of HPC messages, support is viewed as helping people feel better regarding a stressor in their lives: an outcome called *affective improvement* (Bodie et al., 2012). Scholars provide evidence that HPC emotional messages help recipients reappraise stressors (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998) and are the type of support message most likely to lead to positive evaluations of another person's support attempt (what Bodie et al., 2012, refer to as message evaluations), which then produces more positive effects (or, in Bodie et al.'s terms, message outcomes) such as coping and well-being.

Messages that are LPC, on the other hand, tend to be judged more poorly and reacted to more harshly, in part because they are seen as a challenge from the provider to the recipient (Dailey, 2010). As such, this type of "support" often leads to detrimental outcomes (Bodie et al., 2012; Tian et al., 2020). But as with other forms of person-centeredness, recipients of LPC messages go through an assessment or evaluation process, and the nature of their appraisal ultimately influences the extent of the message effects (High & Solomon, 2016).

Given this, LPC messages are not *inherently* unsupportive, a claim supported by Malloch and Hether (2019). Rather, depending on how they are processed, LPC messages, can be beneficial, with research showing that they may increase support receivers' efficacy (Malloch & Hether, 2019) as well as their ability to cope and build resilience by facing their own responsibility for and agency in a difficult circumstance (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). We suggest that there are several factors that can work as evaluative mediators for more positive (or at least less negative) recipient outcomes of LPC emotional support messages and that these variables work within the existing logic of the dual-process theory of supportive communication.

The Dual-Process Theory of Supportive Communication

The dual-process theory of supportive communication explains under what conditions a supportive message may yield positive or negative outcomes and whether these outcomes will be long-lasting or temporary. In this sense, the dual-process theory of supportive communication is based on the idea that "a variety of message, source, recipient, and contextual factors influence the outcomes of supportive interactions" (Holmstrom et al., 2015, p. 527). Specifically, the dual-process theory of supportive communication posits that the degree of verbal person-centeredness in a message and the support recipient's motivation and ability to process such supportive messages work in tandem to produce outcomes. According to Bodie et al. (2011),

> [t]he core thesis of this theory is that the elements of supportive interactions produce certain effects as a joint function of the intrinsic properties of these elements (e.g., the sophistication of supportive messages) and how these elements are processed cognitively by their recipients (p. 352).

As such, the dual-process theory of supportive communication creates a more nuanced picture of how support messages are understood and the outcomes that they will have (Bodie et al., 2012; Bodie & Burleson, 2008); it also speaks to the inherent complexity researchers have identified in the support process. Whereas the dual-process theory of supportive communication concentrates on the *amount* of processing about messages, with greater focus on message content leading to differential outcomes, research using the theory has also inquired about what other message, source, recipient, and contextual factors might be processed when a support message is received. Next, we argue for three factors/perceptions that can result in LPC messages being perceived as functional.

Predictive Factors Underlying the Interpretation of LPC Support Messages

Previous research points to certain variables that may affect how people perceive emotional support messages, including those that may be considered LPC. Young (2004, 2010) refers to two types of factors. Distal factors are those that provide context for messages (such as qualities of the relationship between the supporter and recipient), whereas proximal factors are those that reference characteristics of the message. Two distal factors that can potentially affect how LPC messages are perceived are *relational closeness* and *supporter goodwill*. We also propose a proximal factor—*message accuracy*—will influence LPC message outcomes. In terms of the dual-process theory of supportive communication, relational closeness is

a contextual factor, supporter goodwill is a source factor, and message accuracy is a message factor. Next, we discuss each of these factors and do so in the proposed order that these evaluations would occur as predictors for outcomes in our model.

Relational Closeness

Ample scholarship discusses the role that people's degree of relational closeness has in determining responses to others' messages. For example, research shows that recipients report more cognitive reappraisals when receiving support from an ingroup member (to whom they are likely closer) rather than an outgroup member (Crowley & High, 2020). A similar result can be seen when another person offers advice, a potential overlapping characteristic of LPC messages. Advice communicated by someone relationally close is viewed as less face threatening than when it is provided by someone with whom the recipient is less connected (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). Closeness is additionally correlated with less relational distancing after receiving messages that can feel hurtful (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). This tie between closeness and assessments can help explain why relational closeness has been found to lessen the amount of hurtfulness seen in others' messages (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). These findings may also help explain why people tend to seek out emotional support from others with whom they feel close (Young, 2004), but, more importantly, they suggest that perceived closeness buffers the effects of LPC messages by potentially changing how the messages are assessed.

At the same time, it is unlikely that relational closeness alone will account for how a message is processed. In terms of the dual-process theory of supportive communication, how messages are assessed is dependent on support recipients being motivated to process the helper's message in the first place. We contend that receiving an LPC message from a supporter would likely capture the attention of the support recipient and lead to greater message processing given that the expectation when receiving support is for supportive messages to be positive and empathetic. This is supported by prior research on the negativity bias, which consistently shows that negative events and messages are experienced more actively than positive events and messages, which can be experienced passively (see Baumeister et al., 2001). Receiving an LPC message from a supporter would likely be unexpected and result in greater motivation to process the message.

According to the dual-process theory of supportive communication, if the recipient is motivated to process the message, able to process the message, and the message is low quality (e.g., an LPC message), then the outcome should be a support attempt that fails to generate any affective improvement and potentially even generate negative feelings toward the supporter. Next, we consider how supporter goodwill and message accuracy may interrupt this process and generate less detrimental outcomes (and even potentially positive outcomes) for LPC messages.

Supporter Goodwill and Message Accuracy

The dual-process theory of support asserts that, when a recipient processes a low-quality message extensively, it should result in "little change or negative changes in affect and behavior" and "negative feelings toward the helper" (Burleson, 2009, p. 29). When considering instances when LPC messages may lead to better outcomes than

predicted by the theory, we argue that relational closeness is a necessary *but insufficient* condition for an LPC message to generate more positive/less detrimental effects. The model presented in this paper contends that outcomes are likely also based on whether the LPC provider is perceived as acting with good intentions or goodwill (Faw et al., 2019). Notably, assessments of relational closeness may be part of determining that another acted with goodwill (De Clercq & Pereira, 2023) when communicating LPC support. Specifically, people tend to be close to others in part *because* they see those others as having their best interests at heart. Thus, to be "well-intentioned," messages must be seen to have come from "a supportive place that affirmed investment in the relationship" (Faw et al., 2019, p. 475). As Young (2010) contended, "[i]t may be that recipients view a partner's willingness to offer forthright negative evaluations as an indication that the partner cares" (p. 55). Given this, feeling close to a message sender, although not enough to determine outcomes, may lead to a stronger belief that another acted toward a message recipient from a well-intended place.

Even though recipients might want (and even expect) others to provide HPC emotional support, when they do not, the closeness they have to the sender and subsequent assessments of sender goodwill should lead them to make sense of the message *as accurate* in order to explain why the sender chose to communicate as they did. As Fletcher and Kerr (2010) stated, "[l]ove is both blind and firmly rooted in the real world" (p. 628). That is, people can expect those close to them to provide truthful—if challenging—support messages when they need it, leading recipients to judge LPC messages as having veracity. This claim is centered in other research that documents perceived goodwill can make a receiver more likely to judge a provider's message as accurate (Baumeister, 1998). This evidence is important, as people often want, and are more persuaded by, accurate information or appraisals from others (Baumeister, 1998; Bodie, 2013).

Overall, we argue that relational closeness can lead to higher assessments of goodwill, and both factors might help people believe that the message—even if in the form of LPC—is likely accurate. We propose that these factors can lead to instances when the detrimental effects of LPC messages may be weakened (and the potential for positive results strengthened). In the ensuing section we consider this possibility in regard to three outcomes: affective improvement, negative relational ramifications, and future support seeking.

Potential Outcomes of LPC Emotional Support Messages Under Predictor Factors

Prior research on verbal person-centeredness, the dual-process theory of supportive communication, and social support research more broadly has looked at a variety of outcomes related to the quality of supportive messages. For the sake of testing a proposed model in which relational closeness, goodwill, and message accuracy may attenuate the negative effects of LPC messages, we have selected three outcomes: affective improvement (a perceptual outcome), negative relational ramifications (a relational outcome), and future support seeking (a behavioral outcome). We review each in the sections below.

Affective Improvement

The primary outcome that has been explored by researchers investigating emotional support is affective improvement. As Burleson (1994) wrote, effective support can lead to enhanced affect, particularly regarding the stressor that led to the need for support. This makes sense, as emotional support research has focused on its use in times of distress when a recipient may want the support to help them alleviate the stress and negativity that their situation has brought about. Studies that have investigated message outcomes of VPC have provided evidence for this premise (e.g., Jones & Guerrero, 2001). The most effective support makes a recipient feel better, and even supportive messages that might be construed as hurtful can achieve this, depending on the speaker's motives (Vangelisti, 2009).

Negative Relational Ramifications and Future Support Seeking

LPC messages can be a difficult form of communication to enact, and people might be concerned with how they will impact the relationship that a provider has with the recipient. Young (2004) explained that hurtful messages, which include LPC emotional support (Rook, 1990), can be a source of strain in relationships. There is good reason for this, as research has shown that LPC messages can generate greater negative relational ramifications than MPC or HPC messages (Ray & Veluscek, 2018). But how a person assesses another's message can influence their likelihood of distancing themselves from the message provider (Vangelisti & Young, 2000), with favorable assessments leading to more satisfying (and lasting) relationships (Burleson, 1994).

Similarly, future support seeking has been found to be inhibited after people receive certain forms of emotional support. For instance, cancer patients at times chose not to seek support from those whose support messages were previously ineffective (Ray & Veluscek, 2017). Likewise, in a study of survivors of sexual assault, 80% reported it was unlikely they would seek additional support when the initial disclosure of their assault led to secondary revictimization (Campbell, 2005), a phenomenon that includes victim-blaming attitudes and behaviors that can align with some forms of LPC messages. We propose, however, that if support is appraised as coming from a "good place," it has the possibility of incurring different outcomes.

Proposed Model

To synthesize, previous research shows that low-quality social support is typically ineffective at facilitating coping and can also affect the quality of the supporter-recipient relationship and future support seeking behaviors. We propose, however, a model that accounts for instances when low-quality messages can lead to better outcomes than those originally proposed in the dual-process theory of supportive communication. Our model begins with relational closeness (a relatively stable perception, and contextual factor, which is formed in regard to the supporter over time). Relational closeness relates to goodwill, and is an evaluation about someone (i.e., a source factor) that also develops over time and usually a result of feelings of closeness. In turn, assessments of goodwill relate to message accuracy given that people may give more consideration to the perceived "reality" of messages (a message factor) when they come from sources who are perceived as caring about the

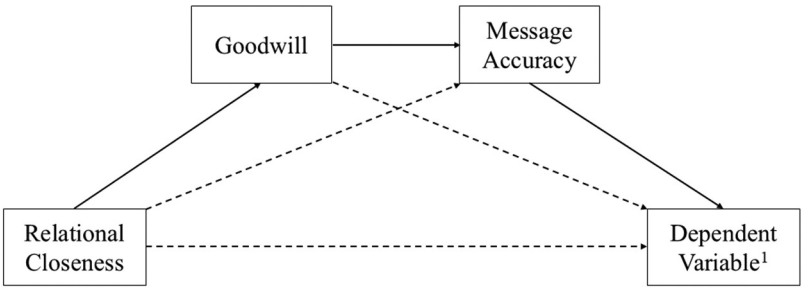

Figure 1. Hypothesized model. The hypothesized model is represented by solid lines; dashed lines are indirect and direct effects that are not hypothesized as part of the model. [1]This model was tested on three dependent variables: affective improvement (H1a), negative relational ramifications (H1b), and future support seeking (H1c).

recipient. That is, judgments of goodwill and accuracy will follow from assessments of relational closeness and mediate/explain the connection between closeness and various outcomes.

The specific outcomes likely to be the result of this process are reports of more affective improvement, fewer negative relational ramifications, and greater likelihood of future support seeking. This model is represented in Figure 1. Stated as a hypothesis, we predict that *goodwill and message accuracy will mediate the relationship between relational closeness and (H1a) affective improvement, (H1b) negative relational ramifications, and (H1c) future support seeking*.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

All procedures were approved by an institutional review board. After approval, the first author contracted Prolific Academic to recruit the sample. Prolific Academic is a crowdsourcing site that people can join to search for and participate in research studies. Potential participants who have registered with Prolific Academic can view all the available studies for which they qualify based on inclusion and exclusion criteria set by researchers, and they can opt in to participate in the studies that interest them. Participants interested in taking the survey were 741 U.S. adults who were matched on U.S. census information based on age, sex, and ethnicity. Participation consisted of completing an online questionnaire hosted on Qualtrics. All participants were compensated $3.00US for completing the questionnaire. The median time to complete the survey was 17 minutes and 15 seconds.

After providing consent, participants were asked to choose one of two scenarios that would be more distressing for them: (1) being fired from their job or (2) experiencing a health issue. After selecting which scenario would be more distressing, participants rated the severity of the stressor using three 7-point semantic differential items: (1) *not at all serious* to *very serious*; (2) *not at all severe* to *very severe*; and (3) *not at all upsetting* to *very upsetting*. Additionally, we asked participants about the likelihood of the scenario happening to them (or having happened to them). The majority of prospective participants (54.8%) responded that the scenario had either happened to them in the past year ($n = 128$) or had

happened to them more than a year ago ($n = 279$). An additional 280 prospective participants reported the stressor had not happened to them but could happen in the future. To increase the ecological validity of this study, those who responded that this scenario had never happened to them and probably never will happen to them ($n = 56$; 7.5% of prospective participants) were removed from the study.

To have participants identify a person to imagine as the provider of a forthcoming supportive message, we modified the procedure for using the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1992). The scale is a single-item pictorial measure showing seven sets of overlapped circles in the style of Venn diagrams. Participants were told that one circle represents them, and the other circle represents the other person. They are typically asked to select the set of circles that best symbolizes the closeness of their relationship with another person. Selecting a set of circles that is more overlapped signifies that the participant believes they have a close relationship with this person.

The sets of circles are assigned values of one to seven, with greater overlap (i.e., more closeness) rated with higher values. As a modification to this scale, participants were shown the seven sets of circles and then randomly assigned to one specific set of circles and asked to then think of someone that represents this level of relational closeness. This procedure resulted in an almost perfectly even dispersion of supporters across the seven levels of relational closeness.

Additionally, prior research has shown that women typically produce more sensitive emotional support messages (Burleson et al., 2005); however, other research has shown that LPC messages communicated by women are viewed as less effective than those communicated by men (Holmstrom et al., 2005). Therefore, we asked participants to report the gender of the supporter they chose for this study, and there was an almost even split between cisgender women supporters ($n = 212$) and cisgender men supporters ($n = 209$). Five participants reported thinking of a supporter who was transgender or non-binary, whereas two indicated that they preferred not to answer regarding the supporter's gender.

Based on the scenario they chose, participants were provided with a randomly assigned LPC emotional support message related to that stressor (see Table 1). These messages were adapted from prior examples of LPC messages in a meta-analysis of verbal person-centeredness (High & Dillard, 2012). Participants were asked to rate the realism of receiving the message as if it came from the person they previously identified as a supporter. As an

Table 1. LPC messages used in this study.

	Health Issue Scenario	Job Loss Scenario
Version 1	I think this shows you have to start living a healthier lifestyle. You have to take care of yourself and not rely on luck when it comes to your health. You're being kind of overly dramatic about this. Shake it off and realize sometimes bad things happen. Ultimately you have to rely on yourself to get healthy and stay healthy.	I think this shows you have to start taking your professional life more seriously and realize you're responsible for making sure things like this don't happen. I don't think you should be upset with anyone but yourself because I think that you didn't give it your best. Ultimately you have to get out of this situation you've created for yourself.
Version 2	This just shows you have to start living a healthier lifestyle. You have to take care of yourself and not rely on luck when it comes to your health. You're kind of making this bigger than it is. Get it together. Realize that sometimes bad things happen. Ultimately, you have to rely on yourself to get healthy and stay healthy.	This just shows you have to start taking your professional life more seriously and you're responsible for making sure things like this don't happen. The only person you should feel upset with is yourself because I don't think that you gave it your best. You got yourself into this situation and it's on you to get yourself out of it.

additional way to increase ecological validity, prospective participants who rated the realism below the midpoint of the scale ($n = 259$; 35% of prospective participants) were also excluded from the data analysis. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 428 U.S. adults ranging in age from 18 to 84 ($M = 45.79$, $SD = 16.28$). See Table 2 for their demographics.

Measures

The measures in this study are discussed in the order the items appeared in the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, intercorrelations, and internal reliability estimates for the study's variables are presented in Table 3.

Supporter Goodwill

To measure supporter goodwill, participants were asked to complete the source credibility scale (McCroskey & Teven, 1999) regarding the person they had chosen as a support provider. The scale is composed of three factors: goodwill, competence, and trustworthiness. We used only the goodwill factor, which is composed of six items presented on 7-point semantic differential scales and anchored by pairs of adjectives that describe the support provider (e.g., "cares about me / doesn't care about me" and "has my interests at heart / doesn't have my interests at heart").

Message Accuracy

To measure message accuracy, participants completed a subset of items from the Perceived Persuasiveness Scale (Thomas et al., 2019) in regard to the message they received. Specifically, we utilized the *message quality* factor of the scale, which assesses the accuracy of a message with three items: "The message is accurate," "The message is trustworthy," and "I believe this message is true." The items were presented in a Likert-style format with response options ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*).

Affective Improvement

Affective improvement was measured using five Likert-style items from the Comforting Responses Scale (Clark et al., 1998). Possible response options ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Example items include "I feel more optimistic now that I have received this person's message" and "This person made me feel better about myself." These five items have been used to measure affective improvement in prior research on supportive communication and verbal person-centeredness (e.g., Bodie et al., 2012; Ray, 2024).

Negative Relational Ramifications

Negative relational ramifications were measured using items developed as part of the Consequences of Hurtful Episodes Scale (Leary et al., 1998). The items asked to what extent participants felt the message they received made them "trust the person less," "dislike the other person," and "view their relationship with the other person as weakening." These items have been used previously to measure the negative relational ramifications of problematic support messages (e.g., Zhang & Stafford, 2008).

Table 2. Participant demographics ($N = 428$).

	n (%)
Gender	
Cis-man	256 (59.8%)
Cis-woman	162 (37.9%)
Non-binary/third gender	6 (1.4%)
Transgender man	1 (.2%)
Transgender woman	2 (.5%)
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1 (.2%)
Race/Ethnicity[a]	
White	320 (74.8%)
Black/African American	62 (14.5%)
Asian	34 (7.9%)
Latinx/Hispanic	21 (4.9%)
Native American/Alaskan Native	5 (1.2%)
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1 (.2%)
Prefer not to answer	2 (.5%)
Sexual Orientation	
Straight	375 (87.6%)
Bisexual	27 (6.3%)
Gay/Lesbian	11 (2.5%)
Pansexual	6 (1.4%)
Asexual	4 (.9%)
Queer	1 (.2%)
Prefer not to answer	4 (.9%)
Romantic Relationship Status	
Single/not in a committed relationship	132 (30.8%)
Committed dating relationship	69 (16.1%)
Engaged	9 (2.1%)
Married	165 (38.6%)
Divorced/separated	34 (7.9%)
Widowed	10 (2.3%)
Prefer not to answer/no answer	9 (2.1)
Education[b]	
Did not complete high school	5 (1.2%)
High school or equivalent	63 (14.7%)
Technical, trade, or vocational school	18 (4.2%)
Some college but no degree	77 (18.0%)
Associate's degree	47 (11.0%)
Bachelor's degree	144 (33.6%)
Master's degree	61 (14.3%)
Academic Doctoral degree (PhD, EdD)	6 (1.3%)
Professional degree (e.g., JD, MD, DDS)	6 (1.3%)
Prefer not to answer	1 (.2%)
Employment Status[c]	
Full-time work	196 (45.8%)
Part-time work	93 (21.7%)
Self-employed	17 (2.3%)
Unemployed	59 (13.8%)
Full-time student	17 (4.0%)
Part-time student	8 (1.9%)
Retired	51 (11.9%)
Paid disability	3 (.7%)
Stay-at-home parent/homemaker	8 (1.9%)
Disability Status[d]	
No reported disability/impairment	364 (85.1%)
Sensory impairment (vision/hearing)	12 (2.8%)
Mobility impairment	28 (6.5%)
Learning disability	13 (3.0%)
Mental health disorder	26 (6.1%)
Another disability/impairment	8 (1.9%)
Household Income[e]	

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

	n (%)
$0	1 (.2%)
$1–$9,999	15 (3.5%)
$10,000–$24,999	61 (14.3%)
$25,000–$49,999	110 (25.7%)
$50,000–$74,999	81 (18.9%)
$75,000–$99,999	68 (15.9%)
$100,000–$149,999	47 (111.0%)
$150,000 or more	34 (7.9%)
Prefer not to answer/no answer/unsure	11 (2.6%)

Percentages for each attribute may slightly exceed 100% due to rounding error.
[a]Percentages across race/ethnicity responses total to 104% because participants could report more than one race/ethnicity.
[b]Highest level of education completed unless otherwise noted.
[c]Percentages for employment status responses total to 104% because participants could report more than one status (e.g., working and being a student). Full-time work was operationalized as 35 or more hours of work per week. Self-employed individuals did not report the number of hours they worked per week.
[d]Percentages for disability status responses total to 105.4% because participants could report more than one type of disability.
[e]Income reported in $USD.
Participants reported living in 42 of 50 states. No participants reported living in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Vermont, Wyoming, or Washington, D.C.

Table 3. Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics.

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	*M*	*SD*	ω
1. Relational Closeness	–							3.98	2.01	–
2. Goodwill	.41***	–						5.26	1.47	.92
3. Message Accuracy	.14**	.34***	–					4.67	1.61	.93
4. Affective Improvement	−.09	.30***	.73***	–				3.46	1.68	.96
5. Negative Relational Ramifications	−.21***	−.52***	−.68***	−.66***	–			3.18	1.71	.89
6. Future Support Seeking	.25***	.56***	.70***	.76***	−.81***	–		4.18	1.85	.97
7. Stressor Severity	−.04	−.05	−.12*	−.11*	.17***	−.15**	–	6.08	.93	.88
8. Participant Age	−.02	.16**	.09	.09	−.13**	−.12*	−.01	45.79	16.28	–

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed). ω = the internal reliability statistic McDonald's *omega*. Reliability scores are not provided for variables that were measured using single items. Except for age, all variables above were measured on 1–7 scales. The observed range for all variables in the models (goodwill, messages accuracy, affective improvement, negative relational ramifications, and future support seeking) consisted of the full theoretical range of 1.00 to 7.00.

Future Support Seeking

The intention to seek support from this supporter in the future was measured using six items from the Utrecht Coping List (Schreurs et al., 1988). Example items include the likelihood to "discuss your problems with the person" and "share your worries with the person." These six items have been used previously to measure behavioral intention regarding future support seeking (e.g., Ray et al., 2021).

Results

Initial Exploratory Analyses

Exploratory analyses were used to determine if any covariates should be included in our analyses. Results showed that participant age and the perceived severity of the stressor were both significantly correlated with one or more dependent variables tested in the models and

were therefore included as covariates. On the other hand, there were no significant mean differences for the dependent variables based on the gender of the supporter or participant, nor were there differences based on which of the two message versions participants received (e.g., job loss message version one and job loss message version two). As such, the LPC messages were collapsed into two conditions: a health issue scenario and a job loss scenario. There was a significant mean difference between those who were in the health issue scenario and job loss scenario for each outcome. Therefore, scenario (health issue or job loss) was dummy coded and included as a covariate.

Testing the Model

Hayes's PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model #6) was used to test the proposed model using serial mediation. The model was tested once per dependent variable. In each model, the independent variable was relational closeness, the first mediator variable was goodwill, the second mediator variable was message accuracy, and the dependent variable was either affective improvement (H1a), negative relational ramifications (H1b), or future support seeking (H1c).

The direct effect of relational closeness on each dependent variable (affective improvement, negative relational ramifications, and future support seeking) was nonsignificant. In each test of the model, two significant indirect effects emerged. First, as hypothesized, the relationship between relational closeness and affective improvement (H1a), negative relational ramifications (H1b), and future support seeking (H1c) were each serially mediated by goodwill and message accuracy. Second, a unhypothesized indirect effect occurred in each model in which goodwill was the sole mediator between relational closeness and the three dependent variables. All mediation analysis results are reported in Tables 4–6 and illustrated with standardized coefficients in Figures 2–4. The hypothesized model was supported for all three dependent variables.

Table 4. Serial mediation analysis results: affective improvement (H1a).

Relationship	Indirect Effect β (SE) [95% CI]
Relational Closeness → Affective Improvement (Direct Effect)	−.05 (.04) [−.12, .03]
Relational Closeness → Goodwill → Message Accuracy → Affective Improvement (Hypothesized Model: H1a)	**.10 (.02) [.06, .14]**
Relational Closeness → Goodwill → Affective Improvement	**.04 (.02) [.003, .07]**
Relational Closeness → Message Accuracy → Affective Improvement	−.01 (.03) [−.08, .06]
Total Indirect Effect	**.12 (.04) [.05, .20]**

Effects are standardized. Significant indirect effects are bolded.

Table 5. Serial mediation analysis results: negative relational ramifications (H1b).

Relationship	Indirect Effect β (SE) [95% CI]
Relational Closeness → Negative Relational Ramifications (Direct Effect)	.002 (.04) [−.07, .07]
Relational Closeness → Goodwill → Message Accuracy → Neg. Rel. Ramifications (Hypothesized Model: H1b)	**-.08 (.02) [−.11, −.05]**
Relational Closeness → Goodwill → Negative Relational Ramifications	**-.13 (.02) [−.18, −.09]**
Relational Closeness → Message Accuracy → Negative Relational Ramifications	.01 (.03) [−.05, .06]
Total Indirect Effect	**-.20 (.04) [−.28, −.13]**

Effects are standardized. Significant indirect effects are bolded.

Table 6. Serial mediation analysis results: future support seeking (H1c).

Relationship	Indirect Effect β (SE) [95% CI]
Relational Closeness → Future Support Seeking (Direct Effect)	.02 (.03) [−.05, .09]
Relational Closeness → Goodwill → Message Accuracy → Future Support Seeking (Hypothesized Model: H1c)	**.08 (.02) [.05, .11]**
Relational Closeness → Goodwill → Future Support Seeking	**.15 (.02) [.11, .20]**
Relational Closeness → Message Accuracy → Future Support Seeking	−.01 (.03) [−.06, .05]
Total Indirect Effect	**.22 (.04) [.14, .29]**

Effects are standardized. Significant indirect effects are bolded.

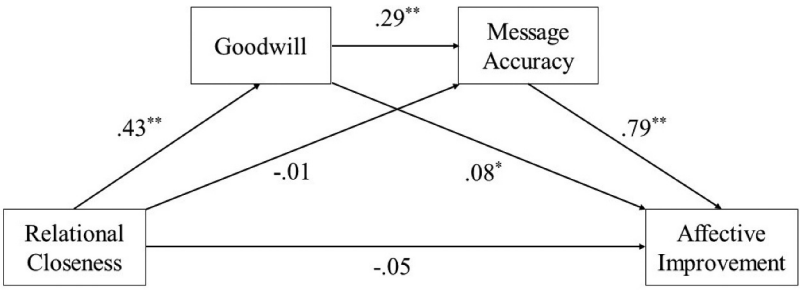

Figure 2. Serial mediation analysis: affective improvement (H1a). *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$. All coefficients are standardized.

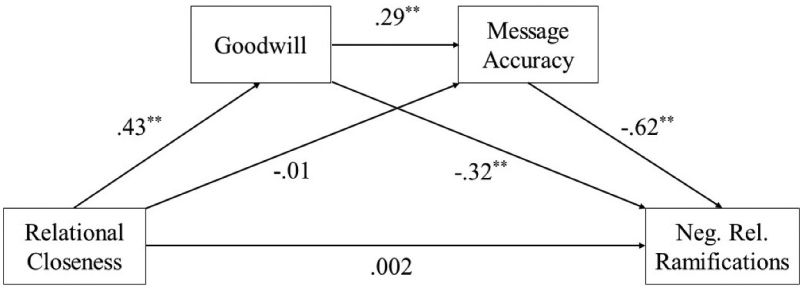

Figure 3. Serial mediation analysis: negative relational ramifications (H1b). *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$. All coefficients are standardized.

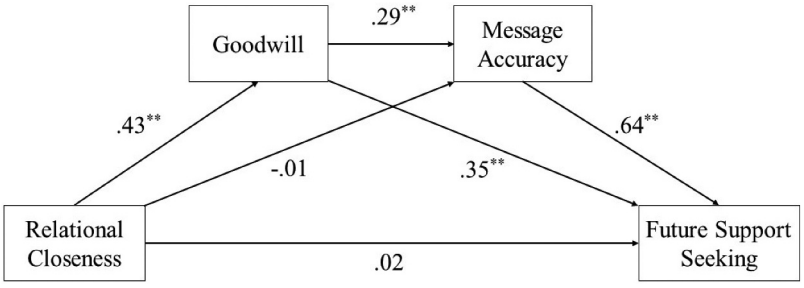

Figure 4. Serial mediation analysis: future support seeking (H1c). *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$. All coefficients are standardized.

Additional Exploratory Analyses

Because the purpose of this model is to identify instances when LPC messages may either mitigate negative outcomes or have potentially positive outcomes, we investigated whether the average score for each dependent variable was significantly above the midpoint of the scale (4.00) for affective improvement and future support seeking and significantly below the midpoint of the scale for negative relational ramifications (given that negative relational ramifications are a detrimental outcome). This was accomplished using a series of one-sample *t*-tests, and because these tests were directional, the *p*-values reported below are one-tailed.

For affective improvement, the mean (3.46) was significantly below the scale midpoint, $t(427) = -6.61$, $p < .001$. This suggests that LPC messages are not typically generating a positive amount of affective improvement. Conversely, the mean for future support seeking (4.18) was significantly above the scale's midpoint, $t(427) = 1.97$, $p = .025$, and the mean for negative relational ramifications (3.18) was significantly below the scale's midpoint, $t(427) = -10.00$, $p < .001$. Together, these results suggest two things: (1) LPC messages typically result in low levels of affective improvement, but (2) there are certain instances when LPC messages might have the potential to be evaluated more positively and generate less animosity in the supporter-recipient relationship than they typically would, as evidenced by our data regarding negative relational ramifications and future support seeking.

Discussion

Low person-centered (LPC) emotional support messages are often considered an inherently problematic communicative form, and they may occur when a supporter does not know how to communicate supportive messages that are sensitive and constructive. Given the functional ambivalence of communication, however, such messages may be effective and appropriate in certain situations. How a recipient makes sense of the message can potentially alter how positive or functional the outcomes of the message might be. Following this logic, we proposed a model that could explain the differential functionality of LPC emotional support, based on the dual-process theory of supportive communication. Using hypothetical messages, and assignment to a relational closeness condition, our findings supported the proposed model whereby reports of affective improvement, negative relational ramifications, and likelihood of future support seeking were a function of relational closenessnot directlybut mediated by perceived goodwill of the supporter and the perceived accuracy of an LPC message. This discussion section summarizes our findings and considers the conceptual and practical implications of our work before accounting for some limitations of our study and discussing future research directions.

Prior research notes that LPC messages can fail as a result of psychological reactance in which recipients of LPC messages experience anger and/or engage in counter-arguing against the message (Tian et al., 2020), with other scholarship suggesting that recipients of LPC messages evaluate them as ineffective and subsequently experience worse outcomes (High & Solomon, 2016). Thus, for an LPC message to be helpful, the message itself cannot be dismissed as ineffective or inaccurate. We believe our model works because the distal factors (relational closeness and supporter goodwill) buffer against psychological reactance, and perceptions of message accuracy (a proximal factor) result in a recipient giving thought to the LPC message as opposed to immediately engaging in counter-arguing, experiencing anger, or dismissing the

message as incorrect. That is, our model tests instances when LPC messages may be perceived as having a strong argument based on its accuracy, an assessment that can be dependent on closeness and goodwill.

Our findings have conceptual implications for LPC messages, which have historically been conceptualized as reliable predictors of negative outcomes (High & Dillard, 2012). It is worth challenging any broad statement that LPC messages are *always* ineffective, just as it can be incorrect to say high-quality emotional support is unequivocally positive (Matsunaga, 2011). Our model reinforces the need brought forward by the dual-process theory of supportive communication to consider LPC message evaluations and outcomes in the context of who is communicating the message and the relational history between the supporter and recipient. Shifts in evaluations of a message's accuracy appear to occur through the perceived goodwill that can follow feelings of closeness to a message provider, which together affect the likely outcomes of the LPC message.

At the same time, a second significant indirect path emerged in our model that did not include message accuracy. In this unhypothesized path, relational closeness is associated directly with supporter goodwill, and goodwill is significantly associated with the three outcome variables. This indirect effect was stronger for negative relational ramifications and future support seeking than it was for affective improvement. This finding suggests that, for outcomes related to the supporter-recipient relationship and future support seeking, the accuracy of LPC messages is not necessarily vital, so long as the support is perceived as being done with good intentions.

It may be that some close supporters are so trusted by those in need that their attempts to provide support are enough to reinforce a sense of love and caring regardless of the accuracy of any message communicated. In this sense, one's closest supporters' attempts may be understood as "the thought that counts" as opposed to the specific characteristics of the emotional support message. But without the assessment of goodwill, relational closeness does not appear to be a predictive factor. This finding adds to the complexity of the relationship between relational closeness and reactions to social support found elsewhere in the literature. In terms of affective improvement, the evaluation of an LPC message's accuracy appears more important, a contention that aligns with prior research showing supportive messages are first evaluated for their effectiveness, which then predicts subsequent outcomes such as affective improvement (e.g., Bodie et al., 2012; High & Solomon, 2016). Again, however, these relationships could not be predicted from relational closeness alone.

Practical Implications

For a variety of reasons, a supporter may contemplate providing emotional support messages that are blunt, insensitive, or that otherwise have the potential to be both helpful and hurtful. It may be, for instance, that they have tried more person-centered forms that have not been effective, or they might think that the recipient needs to hear the message in an LPC form for it to get through to them. Our results can help guide the decision as to whether relationally close others should communicate such messages. We offer this recommendation with the caveat that meeting the conditions of being relationally close, acting out of goodwill, and communicating an accurate message does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes and might only mitigate the damage that would be done if the same message was communicated by someone with different characteristics.

Likewise, these factors are ultimately perceptions made by the recipient about the supporter and their message. Even if a supporter believes they are relationally close enough to a recipient, are acting with goodwill, and are communicating LPC messages that are accurate, it does not mean the recipient will hold the same perceptions. Overall, we believe the best path forward for providing emotional support is to do so with moderate and highly person-centered messages that recognize the recipient's emotions and help the person engage in cognitive reappraisals. But we also recognize that certain situations may call for blunt and less sensitive messages, such as LPC messages, and our model can help determine if this is a viable path for communicating such forms of support.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Like other research, the present study has both strengths and limitations that warrant discussion, and testing a newly proposed model also produces several potential directions for additional research on LPC messages. One strength of our study is the size and diversity of our sample. By recruiting over 700 adults, we were able to employ strict criteria for inclusion in our data analysis to boost the ecological validity of our findings. The 428 participants ultimately included in our sample all reported the scenario having either happened to them or as possibly occuring in the future. They also reported that the hypothetical LPC message they were shown was at or above the midpoint of a message realism assessment. Although these efforts do not fully address ecological issues inherent to experiments that employ hypothetical support messages, it does mitigate them.

Prior social support research protocols at times ask participants to identify a supporter to think about as the person who would deliver a hypothetical support message that is then evaluated by participants. This typically results in participants self-selecting someone in their life to whom they are close when relational closeness is measured (e.g., Ray, 2024), and when reported, there is typically minimal variance in relational closeness between participants and chosen supporters (i.e., standard deviations <1.50; e.g., Brisini & Wang, 2024; Pearce et al., 2019). To ensure that participants in our study were imagining supporters who varied across the spectrum of relational closeness, participants were randomly assigned to think of a supporter at one of seven levels of relational closeness based on Aron and colleagues' Inclusion of Other in the Self scale: a single-item, pictorial scale commonly used to measure relational closeness. This methodological decision is another strength of this study as it allowed for the variance necessary to test a model that relied on relational closeness as a variable.

A limitation of this study is that the analyses relied on cross-sectional data, which bring into question the extent to which we can argue that relational closeness, goodwill, and message accuracy are causally related to the outcome variables. Other researchers have argued that this concern can be diminished if the variables are arranged according to how they would occur conceptually in time (i.e., the Hyman-Tate conceptual timing criterion; Tate, 2015). As mentioned, our predictor variable of relational closeness and the first mediator variable (goodwill) are both distal variables that develop over the lifespan of the relationship. The second meditator (message accuracy) is proximal in that it refers to message characteristics and would be perceived in light of the distal variables. Thus, we argue we have ordered the variables in our model based on when they would occur in time.

Future studies, however, should test these mediation models using data collected longitudinally. Doing so would better establish time order as part of the argument for causal

relationships among the variables. It would also allow researchers to track how various outcomes change over time as people potentially ruminate on and reevaluate the LPC messages they have received. Prior research suggests this is likely happening. For instance, tough love messages communicated in parent-child relationships often initially generate strong emotional reactions and it is not until later that the recipient comes to understand the purpose and effectiveness of such messages (Faw et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Based in the dual-process theory of supportive communication, this study proposed and tested models that illustrate the conditions whereby low person-centered (LPC) emotional support messages may be viewed as more beneficial, or at least less damaging, than they are typically theorized to be. When an LPC message is communicated from someone relationally close, who is perceived as doing so with goodwill, and the message itself is perceived as accurate, there is potential for these typically ineffective messages to result in more positive outcomes related to coping, the supporter-recipient relationship, and future support seeking behaviors. Supporters who are considering communicating LPC emotional support messages that are blunt, insensitive, or that have the potential to be potentially hurtful should consider this model when determining if communicating such messages will ultimately be effective.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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