Communication Studies

ISSN: 1051-0974 (Print) 1745-1035 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcst20

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To cite this article: Colter D. Ray & Kory Floyd (20 Jul 2025): Saying the Wrong Thing or Saying Nothing at All: Comparing Outcomes of Nonsupport Versus Low Person-Centered Emotional Support Messages, Communication Studies, DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2025.2532497

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2025.2532497

COMMUNICATION STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2025.2532497

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Saying the Wrong Thing or Saying Nothing at All: Comparing Outcomes of Nonsupport Versus Low Person-Centered Emotional Support Messages

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ABSTRACT

This study used expectancy violations theory as a framework to test whether nonsupport (i.e. not receiving support that was expected) is worse than receiving a low person-centered emotional support message. Participants were 886 U.S. adults who were census-matched based on age, sex, and ethnicity who participated in a survey experiment. Results showed that when providing emotional support to someone who suffered an injury, nonsupport generated less emotional improvement and more negative relational ramifications than a low person-centered emotional support message. However, when providing support to someone who has become unemployed, low person-centered messages created more negative relational ramifications than nonsupport. Results suggest that saying nothing at all is not always worse than communicating low person-centered messages, and this may depend on the nature of the stressor.

KEYWORDS

Expectancy violations theory; nonsupport; social support; supportive communication; verbal person-centeredness

People generally expect to receive support from others during stressful events (e.g., Davis & High, 2017), and emotional support is an important facet of the coping process. Effective emotional support messages can help people reappraise stressors (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998) and are routinely tied to a variety of positive health outcomes (Low et al., 2023). However, supportive interactions do not always occur even when expected. This occurrence, in which someone is expected to provide support but chooses not to do so, is referred to as *nonsupport* (Ray & Veluscek, 2018).

In their initial nonsupport study, Ray and Veluscek (2018) used a survey experiment to answer a relatively straightforward question: Would it be worse if someone tried to be emotionally supportive but said "the wrong thing" or if a supporter was expected to say something emotionally supportive but said nothing at all? The results showed that saying the wrong thing—in the form of a low person-centered (LPC) emotional support message—and saying nothing at all (i.e., nonsupport) were approximately equally detrimental to the supporter-recipient relationship. Results also showed nonsupport generated less emotional improvement than an LPC emotional support message, but the difference was not significant.

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2025.2532497

Although Ray and Veluscek's (2018) study provided a preliminary answer to the question of which would be worse, that study was conducted in the context of breast cancer and, accordingly, their sample was composed of women only. To date, no study has replicated these findings or directly compared the experiences of receiving LPC emotional support messages versus nonsupport regarding any other stressors or with a sample including other genders. Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate whether LPC emotional support messages and nonsupport differ in terms of psychological and relational outcomes in two serious, common, but distinct stressful contexts: experiencing a major personal injury and being dismissed from one's job. The ensuing rationale begins by reviewing prior research on LPC emotional support messages and nonsupport before considering the role of expectations in supportive communication.

Saying the Wrong Thing and Saying Nothing at All

For several decades, communication scholars have used verbal person-centeredness as a message characteristic that determines the quality of emotional support (see meta-analysis by High & Dillard, 2012). Verbal person-centeredness is defined as the degree that "messages vary in the extent that they recognize and validate the support recipient's experience" (Brisini et al., 2022, p. 89). Emotional support messages are typically categorized into one of three levels: high, moderate, and low person-centeredness. Highly person-centered (HPC) messages help the recipient contextualize and explore their emotions and experiences and are consistently associated with positive outcomes; however, the majority of supportive messages communicated are categorized as moderately person centered (MPC; Jones et al., 2018). MPC messages tend to recognize the recipient's feelings but often rely on distracting the person's focus away from their stressor. Problematic emotional support messages are categorized as low person-centered (LPC). These messages criticize the person's actions, blame them for their predicament, or challenge the legitimacy of the person's feelings. LPC messages are consistently associated with negative outcomes, such as less emotional improvement (Ray & Veluscek, 2018) and support recipients viewing the messages as less effective (e.g., Bodie et al., 2012). These messages, although problematic, are still an attempt to communicate support, as misguided as they may be.

Comparably less research has focused on instances of nonsupport as a problematic occurrence within the social support process. Contemporary models and theories of supportive communication (e.g., Burleson, 2009) typically start with the assumption that a supportive message will be communicated; however, recent research shows that nonsupport is relatively common. For example, 62% of young adult cancer patients reported experiencing nonsupport (Ray, 2024), suggesting that nonsupport may occur more frequently than problematic support such as low person-centered messages.

When nonsupport occurs, the unsupported are left to create their own narratives to explain why their expectations for support went unmet. This sensemaking process is a typical reaction to having one's expectations for social interactions violated (Burgoon, 2016). As such, expectancy violations theory (EVT: Burgoon, 2016) is used as a framework from which the study's hypotheses are deduced. The following section overviews EVT and the role of expectations in supportive communication.

Expectancy Violations Theory and Expectations for Supportive Communication

People have expectations for how others will behave in social interactions, including whether and how support will be provided during times of stress (Davis & High, 2017). This may include the amount and type of support they expect to receive and also who is expected to provide supportive messages. EVT explains how unmet support expectations may precipitate negative psychological and relational outcomes. Specifically, negative expectancy violations (i.e., when an interaction goes worse than expected) can occur regarding people's expectations for support during stressful life events (e.g., Crowley et al., 2019). Additionally, work has shown that people have expectations for support, and when they are not met, this can lead to negative relational outcomes (Ray & Manusov, 2023). Thus, it appears that both nonsupport and receiving problematic support such as LPC messages are negative expectancy violations. Or, stated differently, people expect others to support them during difficult times and to communicate such support with some level of competence.

The second proposition of EVT posits that communication outcomes are a function of the valence and magnitude of an expectancy violation (Burgoon, 2016). Considering that both receiving low-quality support (e.g., LPC messages) and experiencing nonsupport are examples of negative expectancy violations, the key question, then, is whether receiving an LPC message or experiencing nonsupport would be perceived as a greater violation and result in worse outcomes for the person in need and for their relationship with the (non) supporter. The following three subsections provide arguments for nonsupport being a more negative experience than receiving an LPC message.

Nonsupport is a Worse Expectancy Violation Than Receiving an LPC Message

Prior research on the magnitude, unexpectedness, and relational importance of different types of expectancy violations in close relationships can provide a potential answer to the question of whether nonsupport or LPC messages are more detrimental. In particular, Afifi and Metts (1998) inductively created a typology of nine types of expectancy violations that occur in close relationships. Of these nine categories, two align with the phenomena of LPC messages and nonsupport. The expectancy violation category of "criticism or accusation" consists of statements that are critical of a person or accuse them of a transgression. This aligns with characteristics of LPC messages, which include condemning the person's feelings and/or blaming the person for their stressor. Instances of nonsupport align best with the expectancy violation category of "acts of disregard," described as "behaviors that signal a lack of regard for relationship rituals, a lack of effort in showing affection or a lack of concern for the welfare of the respondent" (Afifi & Metts, 1998, p. 377). Nonsupport is an example of lacking concern for another's welfare and a lack of effort in affectionate behavior. Given the reciprocal nature of support within relationships (Wentowski, 1981), nonsupport also exemplifies a lack of regard for relationship rituals.

The results from three studies reported by Afifi and Metts (1998) showed that, compared to criticism or accusation, acts of disregard were viewed as more negatively valenced, more unexpected, and more relationally important (i.e., more impactful to the relationship). That is, the results consistently illustrated that acts of disregard were worse than criticism or

accusation. Analogously, nonsupport (as an act of disregard) should precipitate more detrimental outcomes than LPC messages (a criticism or accusation).

LPC Messages Can Be Interpreted More Positively Than Nonsupport

In addition to the type and magnitude of negative expectancy violations, the way a person interprets and evaluates such violations may exacerbate or mitigate their effects. Negative expectancy violations and the coping process both have been shown to evoke a sensemaking process (Burgoon, 2016). The interpretation-evaluation appraisal process espoused in EVT states that after experiencing an expectancy violation, people interpret whether the violation was accidental or has meaning and evaluate whether the violation was positive or negative.

LPC messages provide more possibilities for interpretation and have more potential for being reframed in a positive light compared to nonsupport for three reasons. First, it is possible that the support recipient can reappraise LPC messages as well intentioned but ineffective or recipients can focus on the fact that the supporter at least tried to be supportive. Second, recipients may empathize with the supporter by reflecting on past instances when they themselves were a supporter who communicated unhelpful or insensitive emotional support messages. Third, recipients may respond positively to LPC messages by interpreting them as "tough love." Prior research on a similar type of messagehonest but hurtful messages—showed that honesty was related to positive relational ramifications, whereas the hurtful portions of the same messages were associated with negative relational ramifications (Zhang & Stafford, 2008). This suggests that messages that blame or criticize a person, such as LPC messages, can at times be interpreted as at least partially positive (Ray & Manusov, 2025). Such interpretations could reduce LPC messages' negative effects.

Nonsupport, however, may not be as likely to be interpreted as well intentioned because there is no verbal message to interpret. That is, the adage "it's the thought that counts" cannot be employed as a positive reappraisal because the would-be supporter made no apparent effort at all. At best, those who experience nonsupport can guess why someone has not supported them, and indeed these guesses as to why nonsupport happened are as varied as the reasons why supporters engage in nonsupport (Ray et al., 2024). For example, many nonsupporters report forgoing communicating support because they do not know what to say or fear saying the wrong thing. Although unsupported individuals at times also assume these are the reasons for not hearing from someone, they also surmise that someone has not supported them because they do not care or are selfish or narcissistic. That is, the reasons why nonsupporters forgo communicating support do not always align with unsupported individuals' guesses as to why they have not been supported. Moreover, recent research has shown that the acceptability of a reason for nonsupport (as judged by the unsupported person) partially mediates the relationship between support expectations and negative relational ramifications (Ray & Manusov, 2023).

Nonsupport Generates Multiple Expectancy Violations

A third argument for nonsupport being worse than receiving an LPC message is that, whereas nonsupport and LPC messages both violate a person's support expectations, instances of nonsupport create an additional negative expectancy violation. Specifically, nonsupport violates reciprocity norms surrounding social support within relationships

(Wentowski, 1981). EVT states that people assume others will conform to societal and relational norms (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), and people have expectations about the support they will receive from others (Davis & High, 2017). When people forgo communicating support, it disrupts the reciprocal nature of support in relationships. This is consequential for the future of the relationship, as people tend to respond to negative behaviors with additional negative behaviors.

To summarize these arguments, instances of nonsupport creates a stronger negative expectancy violation in comparison to receiving an LPC support message. Nonsupport also creates a pile up of stress as it not only violates expectations for receiving competent support but also violates reciprocity norms and calls into question the value of the supporter-recipient relationship. An important question remains: What outcomes are influenced by instances of nonsupport and LPC messages? The following section answers this by considering two psychological outcomes and two relational outcomes.

Outcomes Associated with Emotional Support and Negative Expectancy Violations

The relevant outcomes of LPC messages and nonsupport can be categorized across the psychological effects on the person in need and the effects on the relationship between the person in need and the (non)supporter. Beginning with psychological outcomes, it is important to note that the goal of emotional support is not to resolve a stressor but to guide the recipient through the process of reappraising a stressor (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Thus, an important outcome to consider when comparing LPC support messages and nonsupport is the emotional improvement experienced by the person in need. Second, supportive communication research has noted that emotional improvement is preceded by evaluations of support (Bodie et al., 2012). That is, those in need of support evaluate the (non)supporter's inaction or supportive messages and then subsequently experience more or less emotional improvement depending on their evaluation of the message or nonsupport.

Ray and Veluscek (2018) note in their initial nonsupport study that LPC messages and nonsupport can potentially damage the supporter-recipient relationship, too. LPC messages and nonsupport were both associated with negative relational ramifications (operationalized as decreases in trust, liking, and relationship strength). Prior EVT research also supports this claim, as negative expectancy violations have been shown to damage relationships (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Similarly, research on gaps between desired support and received support (to which instances nonsupport would certainly contribute) have also been tied to decreased relational quality (Brock & Lawrence, 2009).

Finally, as noted earlier, social support operates in relationships under an expectation of reciprocity (Wentowski, 1981). Receiving inadequate support or experiencing nonsupport may decrease the likelihood of future support seeking from the nonsupporter or a supporter who has said something ineffective or inappropriate. For example, research has shown that cancer patients who are dissatisfied with the support they receive may choose to restrict the information they share with incompetent supporters (Ray & Veluscek, 2017). Thus, based on the argument that nonsupport is a higher-magnitude and more relationally important negative expectancy violation than receiving an LPC message, and considering the various psychological and relational outcomes that are influenced by nonsupport and LPC messages, the following hypotheses are offered:

Compared to receiving low person-centered messages, nonsupport is evaluated less positively (H1), generates less emotional improvement (H2), generates greater negative relational ramifications (H3), and is a greater deterrent to future support seeking (H4).

Testing These Hypotheses in the Contexts of Two Different Stressors

A contribution of this study is comparing the relative negative effects of nonsupport and LPC messages in stressors beyond the breast cancer context from Ray and Veluscek's (2018) initial study. The two contexts chosen for this study were following a major personal injury and following involuntary dismissal from one's job. These contexts were selected because they are serious stressors that would reasonably generate expectations for emotional support. Moreover, the major personal injury context was specifically chosen as it is adjacent to the breast cancer context of the initial study (i.e., both are physical health events), which allows for some level of replication of Ray and Veluscek's initial study. Alternatively, the involuntary job loss context was selected because it is a distinct, non-health-centric stressor, thus allowing us to test these hypotheses in a stressful, non-health context.

Methods

Procedures and Participants

All procedures were approved by the institutional review board at the lead researcher's university. The researchers contracted the company Prolific Academic to recruit a sample of U.S. adults that matched with U.S. census data based on age, ethnicity, and sex. This study's sample consisted of 886 U.S. adults ranging in age from 18 to 93 years ($M = 46.17$, $Mdn. = 46.00$, $SD = 15.10$). Table 1 presents all demographic information.

Participation consisted of completing an online questionnaire, which was hosted on Qualtrics. After consenting to participate, participants were asked to select which stressor had happened to them most recently: suffering a major personal injury or being dismissed from their job. If neither had ever happened to the participant, they were instructed to choose the stressor that would be the more stressful of the two. The health context was used for one scenario because prior research shows nonsupport is common after a health issue (Ray, 2024) and because it is similar to the breast cancer context from Ray and Veluscek's previous study. The job loss context was chosen because it is a serious stressor that is unrelated to a person's health and because unemployment is often less visible than recovering from a personal injury. By using two different contexts, we can test if nonsupport and LPC messages are viewed differently based on the context.

Next, participants were instructed to identify a person from whom they would expect to receive support regarding the stressor they chose. Participants reported their relationship to this person, the person's gender, their relational closeness to this person, and the degree to which they expect this person to provide support. Information regarding these potential supporters is provided in Table 2.

Participants were then told that they were about to see some messages and that they should "imagine these messages are coming from the person you said would likely support you, and that these messages are about the stressful situation you selected." Qualtrics then randomly assigned the participant to either one of two low person-centered (LPC)

Table 1. Participant demographic information ($N = 886$).

	n (%)
Gender	
Man	431 (48.6%)
Woman	429 (48.4%)
Non-binary/third gender	12 (1.4%)
Transgender woman	6 (0.7%)
Transgender man	2 (0.2%)
Prefer not to say/no response	6 (0.7%)
Ethnicity	
White	694 (78.3%)
Black/African American	115 (13.0%)
Asian	57 (6.4%)
Latinx	36 (4.1%)
Native American/First Nations	7 (0.8%)
Multiple Ethnicities (Unspecified)	3 (0.3%)
Prefer not to answer/no response	5 (0.6%)
Race	
Not Hispanic	791 (89.3%)
Hispanic	89 (10.0%)
Prefer not to answer/no response	6 (0.7%)
Romantic Relationship Status	
Single/not in a committed relationship	269 (30.4%)
Committed dating relationship	144 (16.3%)
Engaged	15 (1.7%)
Married	340 (38.4%)
Divorced/separated	89 (10.0%)
Widowed	22 (2.5%)
Prefer not to answer/no response	7 (0.8%)
Employment & Student Status	
Full-time work (35+ hours weekly)	469 (52.9%)
Part-time work (< 35 hours weekly)	153 (17.3%)
Full-time student	31 (3.5%)
Part-time student	11 (1.2%)
Unemployed	113 (12.8%)
Retired	101 (11.4%)
On Paid Disability	23 (2.6%)
Homemaker	8 (0.9%)
Household Income ($USD)	
$0	6 (0.7%)
$1–$9,999	34 (3.8%)
$10,000–$24,999	117 (13.2%)
$25,000–$49,999	218 (24.6%)
$50,000–$74,999	147 (16.6%)
$75,000–$99,999	146 (16.5%)
$100,000–$149,999	124 (14.0%)
$150,000 or more	80 (9.0%)
Prefer not to answer/no response/unsure	14 (1.6%)
Disability Status	
No disability reported	716 (80.8%)
Mental health impairment (e.g., anxiety)	75 (8.5%)
Mobility impairment (e.g., arthritis)	60 (6.8%)
Cognitive impairment (e.g., ADHD)	29 (3.3%)
Sensory impairment (e.g., hearing loss)	19 (2.1%)
Another diagnosis	30 (3.4%)

Notes. Percentages for some attributes may not equal 100% exactly due to rounding error or allowing participants to select multiple responses to some questions.

Table 2. Information about people identified by participants as likely supporters ($N = 886$).

	n (%)
Gender	
Woman	500 (56.4%)
Man	372 (42.0%)
Non-binary/Third gender	7 (0.8%)
Transgender man	2 (0.2%)
Transgender woman	1 (0.1%)
Prefer not to say	4 (0.5%)
Relation to Participant	
Friend	336 (37.9%)
Romantic partner/spouse	284 (32.1%)
Mother	89 (10.0%)
Sibling	70 (7.9%)
Daughter	30 (3.4%)
Father	25 (2.8%)
Son	18 (2.0%)
Cousin	8 (0.9%)
Co-worker	7 (0.8%)
Medical professional	5 (0.6%)
Aunt	4 (0.5%)
Niece/nephew	2 (0.2%)
Uncle	1 (0.1%)
Grandchild	1 (0.1%)
Ex-spouse	1 (0.1%)
Acquaintance	1 (0.1%)
Other (not specified)	4 (0.5%)

emotional support messages that refer to the stressor context they selected or to instead receive one of two different prompts telling them to imagine that the supporter actually did not communicate any supportive messages to them about the stressor. The remaining pages of the questionnaire consisted of several scales used to measure various outcomes of interest and demographic questions. The median time to complete the questionnaires was 12 minutes and 1 second. Participants were compensated $3.00US for participating.

Creation of Low Person-Centered Messages and Nonsupport Prompts

Four LPC messages were used in this study. These messages were borrowed verbatim from a previous study (Ray & Manusov, 2025) and were originally created to mimic the structure and characteristics of LPC message examples provided in a previous meta-analysis of verbal person-centeredness (High & Dillard, 2012). Two LPC messages were created for the major personal injury stressor context and two LPC messages were created for the job loss stressor context. Preliminary analyses showed no significant differences in any outcome variable based on which version of the LPC message was received for the selected stressor. Therefore, in the forthcoming analyses, the researcher combined the participants who received different message versions when testing for differences between low person-centered messages and nonsupport for each stressor.

Participants who were randomly assigned to the nonsupport condition were shown one of two differently worded prompts that notified them to imagine the person they selected did not provide support for the stressor they selected. No significant differences occurred on any outcome variable depending on which nonsupport prompt was shown to the

participant, allowing for the researcher to combine participants across the two versions of nonsupport prompts. The LPC messages and nonsupport prompts used in this study can be viewed as online supplementary material (Tables S1 and S2) at https://osf.io/4kjqr/.

This resulted in 647 participants opting into the personal injury scenario, with 325 receiving an LPC message and 322 receiving a nonsupport prompt. Of these 647 participants, 353 (54.6%) reported actually experiencing this scenario and another 255 (39.4%) reported that the scenario had not happened to them but could in the future. The job loss scenario was selected by 239 participants, with 120 receiving an LPC message and 119 receiving a nonsupport prompt. Of those who selected this scenario, 124 (51.9%) reported having experienced losing a job at some point in their life, and an additional 74 (31.0%) reported that becoming unemployed could happen to them in the future.

Measures

Descriptive statistics for the study's variables are reported in Table 3. Higher scores indicate a greater magnitude or higher degree of the variable. Unless noted, all measures used 9-point Likert-style items with responses ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 9 (*Strongly Agree*). We also provide the descriptive statistics for the study's variables separated by each of the four experimental conditions in Supplementary Tables S3-S6, which can be accessed at https://osf.io/4kjqr.

(Non)Support Evaluations

Evaluations of the (non)support condition to which participants were randomly assigned were measured using the Multidimensional Evaluation of Enacted Support Scale (MEESS: Goldsmith et al., 2000). The MEESS consists of 12 semantic differential items, with the items distributed evenly across three factors measuring supportiveness, sensitivity, and helpfulness. Example items are Encouraging – Discouraging, Appropriate – Inappropriate, and Useless – Useful.

Emotional Improvement

Emotional improvement (referred to as affective improvement in some studies, e.g., Bodie et al., 2012) was measured using five items derived from the Comforting Responses Scale (Clark et al., 1998). Example items are "These messages made me feel better about myself" and "I feel better after receiving these messages."

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of the Study's variables ($N = 886$).

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	*M*	*SD*	ω	Observed Range
1. (Non)support Evaluation	–						3.40	1.96	.98	1–9
2. Emotional Improvement	.74**	–					2.86	2.05	.96	1–9
3. Negative Relational Ramifications	−.58**	−.47**	–				4.28	2.28	.85	1–9
4. Future Support Seeking	.48**	.43**	−.71**	–			5.41	2.42	.97	1–9
5. Perceived Stressor Severity	−.16**	−.16**	.11*	−.04	–		8.05	1.20	.92	1–9
6. Relational Closeness	−.06	.01	−.17**	.10**	.10*	–	5.46	1.62	–	1–7
7. Expectation to Receive Support	−.15**	−.10*	−.10*	.26**	.16**	.60**	7.92	1.39	.89	1.40–9

Notes. *$p < .01$. **$p < .001$ (two-tailed). ω = the internal reliability statistic McDonald's *omega*. Means and standard deviations for (non)support evaluation and emotional improvement are based on values prior to performing a log10 transformation on these variables.

Negative Relational Ramifications

Negative relational ramifications were measured using a subset of three items adapted from the Consequences of Hurtful Episodes Scale (Leary et al., 1998). The three items ask if the person's actions would lead to trusting the person less, disliking the person, and viewing their relationship with the person as weakening.

Future Support Seeking

Six items from the English version of the Utrecht Coping List (Schreurs et al., 1988) were used to assess future support seeking intentions. Example items include how likely the participant is to "seek comfort and understanding from the person in the future" and "share your worries with the person in the future."

Covariates

Results of exploratory bivariate correlations among the study's variables revealed three variables to be included as covariates when testing the study's hypotheses. *Problem severity* was measured using three semantic differential items (e.g., not at all serious – very serious). *Relational closeness* to the potential supporter identified by the participant was measured using the single-item Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992). *Expectation to receive support* from the potential supporter identified by the participant was measured using five Likert-style items (e.g., "In general, I expect this person to support me").

Results

Statistical Assumptions of MANCOVA

All hypotheses were tested by using a MANCOVA and conducting follow-up ANCOVAs to probe significant interaction effects. In the MANCOVA, the independent variable was whether the participant was randomly assigned to experience non-support or receive a low person-centered (LPC) emotional support message. Stressor context (injury or job loss) was also included as a factor. Expectations of receiving support from the identified supporter, relational closeness to the supporter, and perceived severity of the stressor were included as covariates. The four dependent variables were (non)support evaluations, emotional improvement, negative relational ramifications, and future support seeking.

All statistical assumptions were met, except in two cases. First, the results of Box's M test were significant, suggesting that the homoscedasticity assumption was not met at the multivariate level. This is unsurprising given the unequal group sizes, and to combat this, Pillai's trace (denoted as V) was used in place of Wilks's Λ as the test statistic at the multivariate level. Second, at the univariate level, significant results on the Levene's test for two of the dependent variables—(non)support evaluation and emotional improvement—suggested violations of the homoscedasticity assumption. This violation was addressed by performing log10 data transformations on these two variables. As a result, values for these two outcomes were no longer measured on their original scale.

Multivariate Level Results

At the multivariate level, a significant interaction effect between support condition (nonsupport or LPC) and stressor context (major personal injury or job loss) occurred, $V = .021$, $F\ (4,\ 843) = 4.557$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .021$. Likewise, significant results occurred at the multivariate level for the comparison between nonsupport and LPC messages, $V = .081$, $F\ (4,\ 843) = 18.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .081$, and for the comparison between the major personal injury and job loss contexts, $V = .023$, $F\ (4,\ 843) = 4.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .023$. These significant results at the multivariate level allow for the univariate results to be interpreted.

Univariate Level Results: Hypothesis Tests

The univariate level results contain the analyses needed to adjudicate the study's hypotheses. For each dependent variable, a significant interaction effect occurred between support condition (experiencing nonsupport or receiving an LPC message) and the stressor context (injury or job loss) at the univariate level of the MANCOVA. Therefore, each hypothesis was tested by running ANCOVAs that served as probes of these interaction effects. For each dependent variable, two ANCOVAs were conducted: one for participants in the injury context and one for participants in the job loss context. In each of these ANCOVAs, the independent variable was support condition (nonsupport or LPC message) and the covariates were the same as those included in the MANCOVA: expectation of receiving support from the identified supporter, relational closeness to the supporter, and perceived severity of the stressor. Because of the complexity of the results, they are reported below in narrative form. Full results of the statistical analyses are provided in Table 4. Additionally, graphs of the significant univariate interaction effects are provided in Figures 1 through 4.

Table 4. Results of univariate interaction effects and subsequent ANCOVAs to probe group differences in each stressor context.

						Nonsupport		LPC Message	
Dependent Variable	Statistical Test	*F*	*df*	*p*	η^2	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
H1: (Non)support Evaluation[1]	Interaction Effect	6.43	(1, 846)	.011	.01				
	ANCOVA (Injury) †	41.32	(1, 621)	< .001	.06	.41	.24	.53	.27
	ANCOVA (Job Loss)	1.06	(1, 222)	.305	.004	.40	.23	.42	.25
H2: Emotional Improvement[1]	Interaction Effect	14.65	(1, 846)	< .001	.02				
	ANCOVA (Injury) †	45.32	(1, 621)	< .001	.07	.29	.28	.44	.32
	ANCOVA (Job Loss)	0.10	(1, 222)	.747	< .001	.31	.29	.29	.27
H3: Neg. Rel. Ramifications	Interaction Effect	9.57	(1, 846)	.002	.01				
	ANCOVA (Injury) †	7.21	(1, 621)	.007	.01	4.40	2.24	3.93	2.31
	ANCOVA (Job Loss) ↔	3.87	(1, 222)	.050	.02	4.23	2.41	4.90	2.41
H4: Future Support Seeking	Interaction Effect	8.14	(1, 846)	.004	.01				
	ANCOVA (Injury)	.73	(1, 621)	.395	.001	5.67	2.35	5.54	2.46
	ANCOVA (Job Loss) ↔	14.80	(1, 222)	< .001	.06	5.51	2.21	4.25	2.45

Notes. [1](Non)support evaluation and emotional improvement underwent log10 transformations to mitigate heterogeneity of variances at the univariate level, resulting in values < 1.00 even though the variables were originally measured on scales ranging from 1–9.

† = Results were significant and in the hypothesized direction for this stressor (i.e., nonsupport was worse than an LPC message).

↔ = Results were significant but in the opposite direction than hypothesized (i.e., an LPC message was worse than nonsupport).

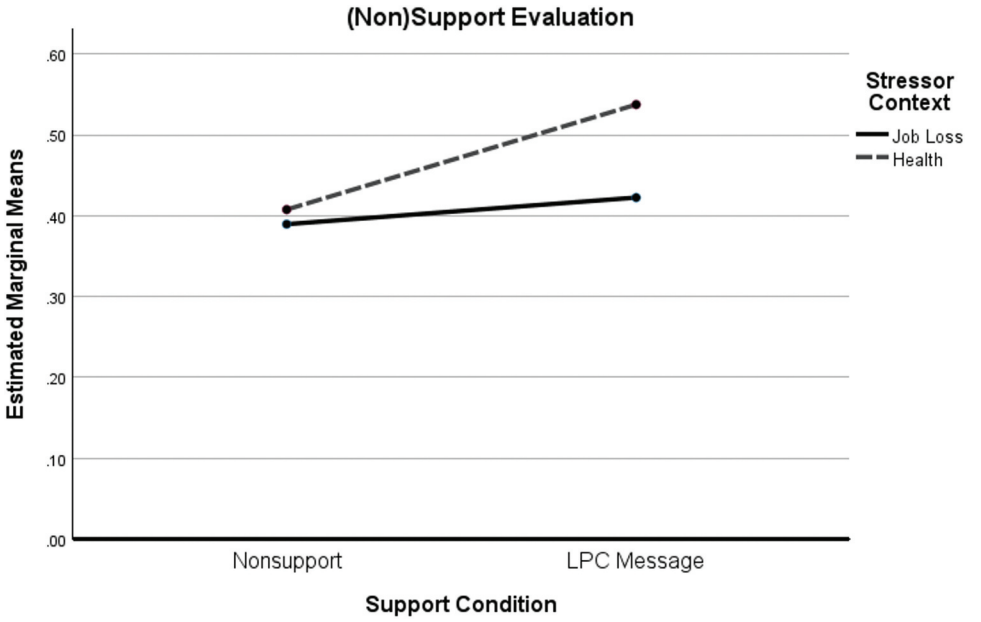

Figure 1. Graph of the univariate interaction effect between support condition and stressor context on (Non)support evaluation.

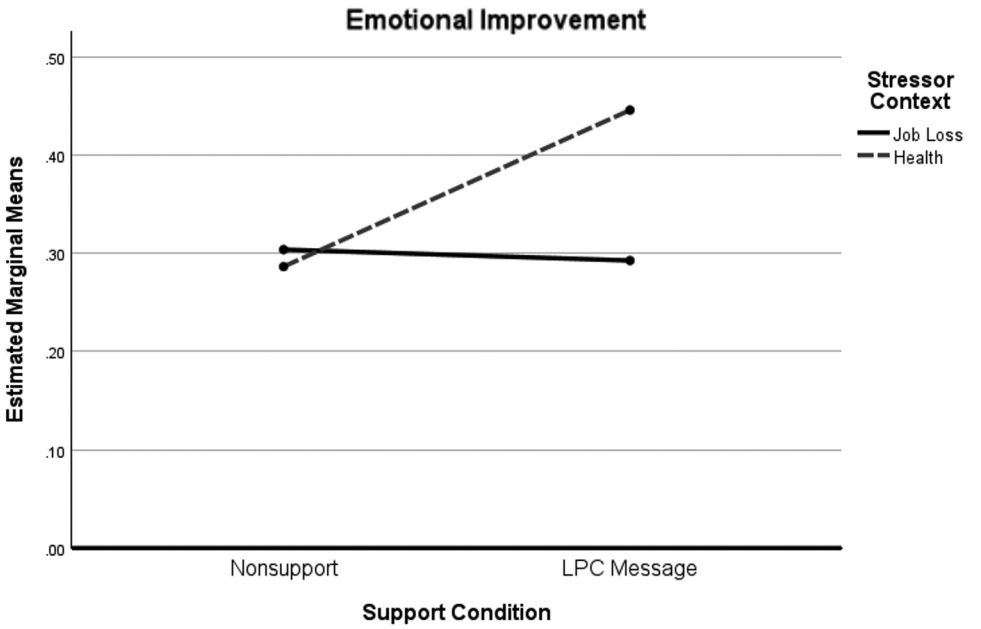

Figure 2. Graph of the univariate interaction effect between support condition and stressor context on emotional Improvement.

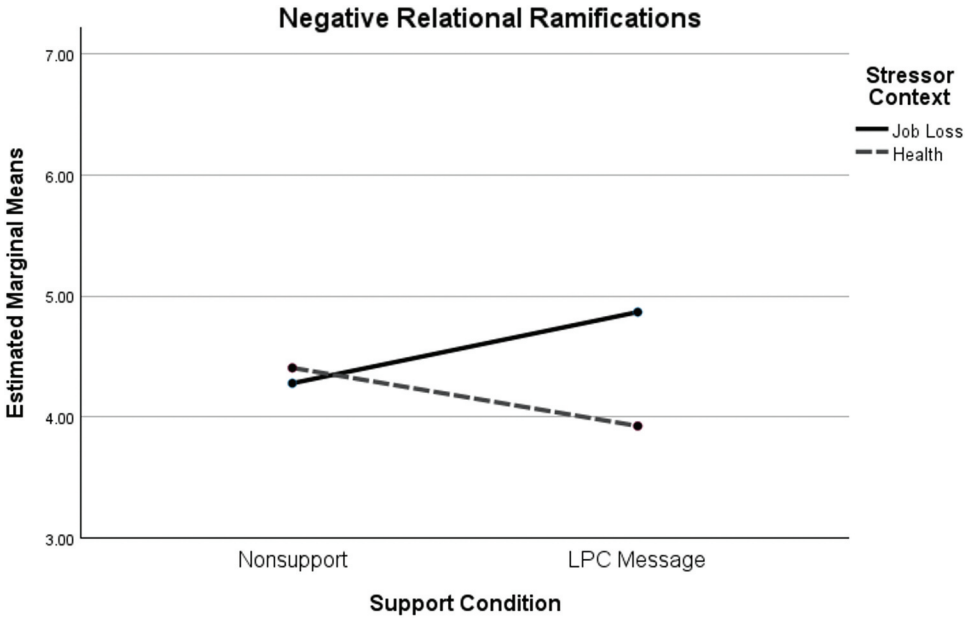

Figure 3. Graph of the univariate interaction effect between support condition and stressor context on negative relational Ramifications.

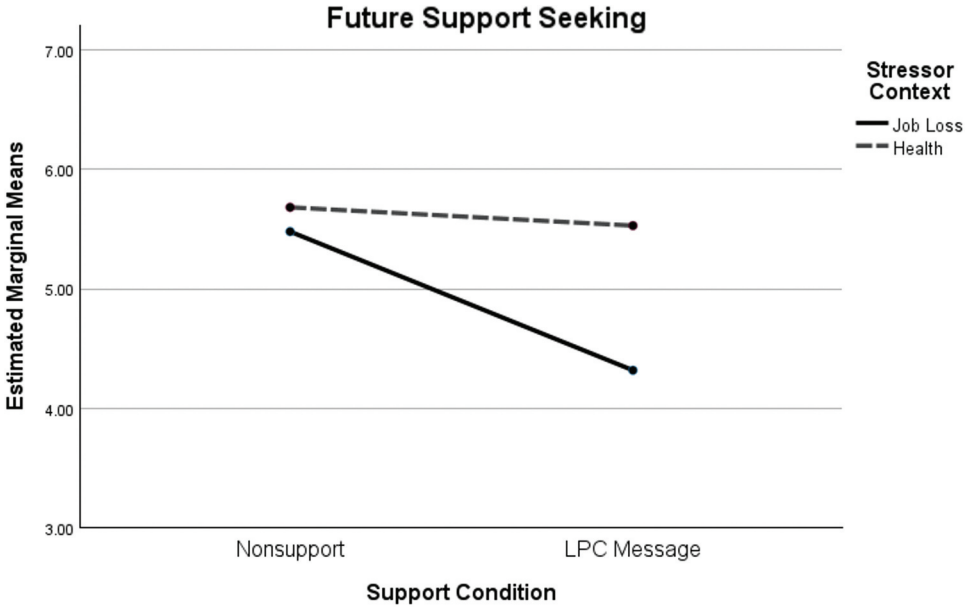

Figure 4. Graph of the univariate interaction effect between support condition and stressor context on likelihood of future support seeking.

For (non)support evaluation (H1), experiencing nonsupport was only evaluated as significantly worse than receiving an LPC message when experiencing an injury and not when experiencing job loss. Therefore, H1 is partially supported.

A similar pattern of results occurred for H2, as nonsupport generated significantly less emotional improvement than receiving an LPC message in the injury context, but not in the job loss context. Thus, H2 was also partially supported.

Regarding negative relational ramifications (H3), significant differences occurred in both stressor contexts; however, the differences in the job loss context were in the opposite direction than what was hypothesized. In the injury context, experiencing nonsupport generated significantly more negative relational ramifications than receiving an LPC message, as hypothesized. Therefore, H3 was partially supported.

Lastly, H4 stated that experiencing nonsupport would inhibit future support seeking more than receiving an LPC message. There was no significant difference between nonsupport and LPC messages for those in the injury context, and in the job loss context, those who received an LPC message were more likely to seek support in the future than those who experienced nonsupport. This latter result, although significant, was in the opposite direction of what was hypothesized. Thus, H4 was not supported.

Discussion

This study extended prior research on nonsupport to provide a more nuanced answer to a straightforward question: Is it more problematic to not receive support when it is expected (i.e., nonsupport) than to receive a low person-centered (LPC) emotional support message? Although a previous study using a sample of women with breast cancer found that nonsupport was evaluated as a worse experience than receiving LPC messages and both instances were approximately equally as detrimental to the supporter-recipient relationship (Ray & Veluscek, 2018), the present study reports more complex findings. Unexpectedly, these findings were dependent on the stressor (suffering an injury or involuntary job loss). Therefore, the results are interpreted in light of the nature of these two stressors as well as prior research on supportive communication and expectancy violations theory.

When Someone Suffers an Injury, Saying Nothing at All is Worse Than Saying the Wrong

A useful place to begin is with the findings from the health-related stressor in this study that overlap or align with the findings from the initial study comparing nonsupport versus LPC messages (Ray & Veluscek, 2018). Although this study's health-related stressor was a personal injury as opposed to a breast cancer diagnosis, both studies report that nonsupport is evaluated worse than LPC messages. Results from the initial study also showed nonsupport generated less emotional improvement than receiving an LPC message and approximately the same degree of negative relational ramifications, but these differences were nonsignificant. It is possible that these nonsignificant results in the initial study were due to a comparably smaller sample size than the present study, resulting in less statistical power to detect relatively small effect sizes, such as those reported herein. In the present study, nonsupport created significantly less emotional improvement and significantly greater negative relational ramifications than LPC messages.

This pattern of results, however, did not replicate in the job loss context. Considering that expectations for interactions, including receiving support, are a function of social norms (Burgoon & Walther, 1990), it is possible that the unique social norms surrounding these two stressors can explain this inconsistent pattern of results. Two characteristics that might influence such norms and subsequent reactions to negative expectancy violations are the extent to which the stressor is a threat to one's face (i.e., desired public image) and perceived responsibility for one's predicament.

Suffering an injury is less likely to be face threatening compared to being fired from one's job, as unemployed individuals may experience guilt and shame regarding their unemployment or be perceived as being more responsible for their unemployment than for having sustained an injury. As a result, they may be more sensitive to messages that are face threatening. LPC messages, which blame and criticize people's actions while invalidating their feelings, are the exact type of message that would further threaten one's face, and indeed face threats are a common reason for viewing support as unhelpful or unwanted (Ray & Veluscek, 2017). Receiving an LPC message regarding one's unemployment might be equally as bad as nonsupport, as such messages act as the proverbial "salt in the (psychological) wound" created by being fired.

Conversely, those who have sustained a physical injury might not be as primed to react negatively to LPC messages that are face threatening or that blame them for their predicament. When an LPC message does not cause additional harm to one's face needs or their already damaged self-esteem, it creates space for the LPC message recipient to consider the intentions behind the LPC message. One such interpretation is that the person who communicated the LPC message had prosocial intentions behind their insensitive support, and people generally react positively to support when it is believed to have been done from a place of positive affect for the recipient (Ames et al., 2004). Finally, given the well-documented connection between support evaluations and the degree to which someone subsequently experiences emotional improvement (Bodie et al., 2012), it is unsurprising that the results for emotional improvement followed a similar pattern across support conditions and stressor context. Nonsupport is generally evaluated negatively and leads to minimal emotional improvement, and LPC messages only result in minimal emotional improvement when they can be construed as well-intentioned and not threatening the recipient's face needs or further harming one's already damaged self-esteem.

When Someone Becomes Unemployed, Saying the Wrong Thing is Worse for Relationships Than Saying Nothing at All

The relational outcomes of this study were negative relational ramifications and the likelihood of future support seeking. Unlike prior research, in which breast cancer patients rated nearly identical levels of negative relational ramifications between LPC messages and nonsupport, the present study showed that nonsupport was more detrimental than receiving an LPC message in the personal injury condition. Complicating the results was that a small, significant difference occurred in the opposite direction in the job loss context: LPC messages generated less negative relational ramifications than nonsupport. Additionally, receiving LPC messages had a larger negative effect on the likelihood of future support seeking compared to nonsupport, but only for the job loss context.

When interpreting these results, it is important to note that the mean scores for both of these outcomes were slightly beyond the scale midpoint. This suggests that nonsupport and LPC messages, although resulting in relational damage, may not be doing as much damage as originally expected. This is likely the result of both of these negative expectancy violations occurring within the context of a long-term relationship between the supporter and recipient. Although having a friend or family member avoid communicating support or saying the wrong thing is hurtful, it is likely those individuals have adequately provided support during different past crises. Past instances of support from over the course of the relationship may dilute the negative relational outcomes of nonsupport or LPC messages. EVT research supports this notion, as singular instances of negative expectancy violations can be rationalized as an anomaly, whereas a pattern of negative expectancy violations leads to solidified negative evaluations of the violator (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000).

Regarding negative relational ramifications, differences between nonsupport and LPC messages occurred in opposite directions based on the stressor context. One interpretation is that injuries are often plainly visible, whereas unemployment can be hidden from others. Thus, those who have lost their job may have to seek support more directly and self-disclose that they have lost their job. Admitting this is likely face threatening, so if this disclosure is responded to with an LPC message, it may result in more relational damage than if the person had simply avoided saying anything whatsoever. Conversely, the visibility of an injury and social norms that create expectations for a variety of people in one's life to provide support regarding health issues (Pennant et al., 2020), may create an expectation for most people to at least make the effort to communicate something. As a result, instances of nonsupport are viewed as creating more negative relational ramifications than an LPC message in health contexts.

Finally, on average, participants still intended to seek support from their supporters in the future, suggesting that singular instances of nonsupport or receiving an LPC message do not permanently alter expectations for emotional support in close relationships. One potential exception was if someone received an LPC message in the job loss context, as this was the only group with a mean beyond the midpoint of the future support seeking scale. As previously mentioned, unemployment is stigmatized. Thus, receiving an LPC message, in particular, may exacerbate feelings of low self-esteem and people may be wary about approaching that same person for emotional support in the future.

Alternatively, nonsupport in the job loss context may not be as detrimental as LPC messages as it essentially amounts to the potential supporter choosing to forgo any face-threatening acts that could occur by offering support (see Floyd & Ray, 2017). Those who have yet to provide support may be viewed as an untapped source of future support (i.e., perceived as potential future supporters) instead of viewed as bad supporters. Ray and Veluscek (2018) noted this in their initial study—stating that nonsupporters might be counted as perceived available support, whereas those who have communicated LPC messages may no longer be viewed as a potential supporter in the future.

Implications for Supportive Communication Research and Expectancy Violations Theory

Communication researchers focus on the quality of support messages, as opposed to other social scientists who may put greater emphasis on network density or perceived available

support. Although this approach has generated several useful theories and explanations for why support messages work (e.g., Burleson, 2009), this perspective often presumes that support will be communicated in the first place. Thus, in addition to verbal and nonverbal communication as important domains of research on supportive messages, researchers should continue to explore what is communicated through silence and inaction and to what effect.

For example, nonsupport may reverberate throughout a network of supporters. If taking the perspective that social support is a resource, then instances of nonsupport are particularly detrimental. It leaves the remaining members of a support network to expend more effort providing support to make up for another person's inaction. Providing emotional support requires effort and having fewer supporters may result in those supporters experiencing burnout more quickly (High & Crowley 2018). This has also been seen in the young adult cancer context as some supporters (e.g., parents and other family) may have to expend energy inviting support from those who have yet to communicate support (Iannarino, 2018). Nonsupport may also be distressing enough to the unsupported person that they seek emotional support from others in their support network regarding this expectancy violation. This could further deplete the energy of the remaining supporters as they are now providing support regarding both the initial stressor and the relational transgression of nonsupport.

The results of this study also extend the scope of expectancy violations theory to consider the unique facets of moments when a lack of communication acts as an expectancy violation. Historically, EVT initially considered issues of proxemics and later expanded to include other nonverbal communication channels before broadening again to include verbal communication (Burgoon, 2009). This study, along with other recent nonsupport studies (e.g., Ray, 2024), justifies extending EVT to consider nonsupport and other forms of noncommunication, such as ghosting (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020), as creating expectancy violations. This assertion is based on nonsupport creating a set of multiple expectancy violations at different levels (e.g., psychological and relational). Specifically, inaction when action was expected not only violates the expectation for a supportive interaction but also calls into question the value of the relationship with the person who did not communicate.

In summary, nonsupport should be thought of as a unique, additional, negative form of communication that occurs within the context of supportive communication. Nonsupport research can expand supportive communication research both at the interpersonal level by broadening the scope of existing theories and models to include a "provision decision phase" that accounts for the complexities of deciding whether to offer support. Likewise, nonsupport as a topic of study can expand the scope of supportive communication research to consider the effects of one supporter's inaction on the broader network of supporters expected to communicate support during difficult times.

Practical Implications for Those Expected to Communicate Support

People in close relationships are expected to communicate support from time to time; however, it can be difficult to ascertain what people desire for support depending on the specific stressor. This study's findings demonstrate how expectations and norms regarding support may differ based on the nature of the stressful situation. Furthermore, some people in need of support may simply appreciate any effort made, whereas others might pay closer

attention to the actual quality and content of the support they receive. The results from this study show that at times nonsupport is worse than saying the wrong thing and vice versa, depending on the stressor. Moreover, face needs, stigmatization, the (in)visible nature of a stressor, and perceived responsibility tied to a stressor may affect to what extent a recipient focuses on the actual content of a message versus being appreciative that someone simply made an effort to be supportive.

It is also worth keeping in mind that supporting someone during a stressful time, such as a health crisis or during unemployment, is typically an ongoing effort. For example, expectations for support change as cancer patients transition through phases of their cancer journey (e.g., from treatment to survivorship, see Felder et al., 2019). Competent supporters are those who make multiple efforts to communicate support over time throughout such crises. Although this can be burdensome, it also points to multiple opportunities to improve as a supporter or to provide support even after initially engaging in nonsupport. EVT research has shown that initial negative expectancy violations can be downplayed, justified, or ignored, but subsequent violations tend to lead to more definitive negative perceptions of the violator (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000). In the context of providing support, saying the wrong thing or not being there when expected might be allowable on occasion so long as it does not become a consistent pattern.

Therefore, the most practical takeaway from this study for supporters is that nonsupport and LPC messages are both insufficient, negative support strategies. This is reinforced by the fact that even when we did see significant differences between LPC messages and nonsupport, the effect sizes for these differences were small. The most certain path forward to being a competent supporter is 1) to ensure that what is said is at least moderately person-centered, and 2) to consistently make efforts to communicate support and not eschew the responsibility of supporting others. Moreover, the pressure to be a good supporter may not be as intense as it seems, as the occasional negative expectancy violation can be diluted by a broader set of successful support attempts over the course of the relationship. We offer these practical takeaways with the caveat that in some instances those in need can end up taking advantage of their supporters, which can lead to supporter burnout (Ray et al., 2024). In such instances, withholding additional support may be justified if someone is not willing to help themselves, take some level of responsibility for their predicament, or make efforts to address the ongoing issue. In such instances, tough love messages (Faw et al., 2019) may be warranted, and recent research has shown that LPC messages can potentially be effective if the supporter is relationally close, perceived as acting with goodwill, and the LPC message is viewed as accurate (Ray & Manusov, 2025).

Practical Implications for Those Expecting to Receive Support

From the perspective of those expecting to receive support, it is important to realize that not everyone is equally adept at communicating support. Some people may be more naturally gifted at communicating support and some people may also have more life experience providing support (Iannarino, 2018). Importantly, relational closeness or the expectation that someone will be a skilled supporter does not necessarily translate to a person actually being an effective supporter. It is natural to have expectations for support but it is important for these expectations to be realistic and to prepare for the possibility that some people will be worse supporters than originally anticipated.

Expectancy violations theory states that having one's expectations met (i.e., a positive expectancy confirmation) results in positive outcomes; however, a positive expectancy violation (e.g., an instance when someone's actions exceeded expectations in a positive way) produces even better outcomes than if one's expectations are simply met (EVT, Proposition 7a: Burgoon, 2016). Both instances are also more preferable than either having negative expectations confirmed or experiencing a negative expectancy violation (EVT, Proposition 7c: Burgoon, 2016). If receiving support from several people about a stressor, the times when support expectations go unmet might receive greater attention. As EVT notes, expectancy violations are both psychologically and physiologically arousing (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Additionally, people have an innate negativity bias (i.e., a tendency to give greater attention to negative events, Baumeister et al., 2001), and by default may focus attention on instances of negative events—in this context, either non-support or LPC messages. Instead, it is important to fully appreciate and experience gratitude for those who have met or exceeded any support expectations, and to avoid ruminating on the instances when support expectations were not met.

Of course, it is natural to want to focus on negative expectancy violations, and EVT notes that people try to generate explanations for unexpected behaviors by discounting, rationalizing, or ignoring the violation (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000). At times, people may create narratives that incorporate "worst-case readings" of why others behave in unexpected ways (Schlenker, 1980, p. 136). Therefore, if ruminating on instances of nonsupport or LPC messages, it is worth considering some of the more acceptable, but still feasible, positive explanations of these behaviors (e.g., not wanting to generate negative emotions or to protect one's privacy, see Ray & Manusov, 2023). Lastly, those whose support expectations are not being met should consider becoming increasingly direct regarding their support desires from specific individuals in their social networks. Prior research has found that direct support seeking increases the frequency of supportive responses and decreases the frequency of unsupportive messages (Williams & Mickelson, 2008), and this would likely apply to minimizing instances of nonsupport as well.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations that must be noted and that can also act as directions for future research. First, although this study used a more diverse sample than Ray and Veluscek's (2018) initial nonsupport study, all participants were adults residing in the United States. This creates a geographic and cultural boundary for the generalizability of these results. Future research should explore how nonsupport is perceived in collectivistic cultures that place a greater emphasis on facework and maintaining harmony, which may subsequently affect support seeking and provision (e.g., Kim et al., 2006).

Second, this study specifically focused on emotional support, and there are several other forms of social support that might be preferable depending on the stressor. Choosing to focus on emotional support is beneficial as emotional support is viewed as the most universally welcomed form of support (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), whereas informational support, advice, and other forms of problem-focused support are at times not desired, especially if unsolicited (Iannarino, 2018). Given the extent that the results of this study depended on the context of the stressor, future research studies should explore how nonsupport compares against problematic forms of problem-focused support such as informational support or advice.

In particular, we believe a useful next step in nonsupport studies would be to compare the effects of nonsupport when various forms of support were expected besides emotional support. For example, research has shown that esteem support messages can be effective at relieving feelings of shame and guilt (e.g., Holmstrom et al., 2021), and therefore the negative effects of not receiving esteem support may be particularly salient when someone is facing a stressor that is esteem threatening, such as losing one's job (see Paul & Moser, 2009) or during the subsequent job seeking process (e.g., Shebib et al., 2020).

Thinking more broadly, it may also be time for nonsupport research to move beyond testing message effects in experiments that use researcher-created messages. Supportive interactions in real life are rarely composed of messages that neatly classify into one of the five types of social support and instead are often an amalgamation of conversational turns in which supporters offer emotional and esteem support, advice, information, humor, stories, sympathy, and condolences. Therefore, future researchers should look at the various expectations people had for the supportive interactions that did not happen to fully understand the effects of nonsupport. For example, someone expecting a person to provide information or advice may be able to find that information through other sources, whereas someone desiring emotional or esteem support may experience greater hurt when those messages are not communicated because they have few other sources for those messages.

Although survey experiments such as the one in the present study are useful in that they provide a level of control for the researcher, this comes at the cost of sacrificing ecological validity. Future studies should adopt designs that expand nonsupport research while contributing to the ecological validity of the findings, such as conducting semi-structured interviews that provide rich descriptions of issues of nonsupport and expectations. Future studies can also continue to use experimental designs, too, but under the advice of moving those experiments into a laboratory setting with face-to-face interactions. This would allow for real-time violations of support expectations and could result in more ecologically valid results.

Another consideration for future research is that certain stressors are stigmatized and less likely to be discussed, which may result in nonsupport occurring more frequently. The only study to date that has quantified the frequency of nonsupport was done in the context of young adults diagnosed with cancer (Ray & Manusov, 2023). For example, communication is often constricted when discussing stigmatized issues such as sexual health (Basinger et al., 2023), which can lead to people desiring more support than they received regarding stigmatized stressors (High & Crowley, 2018). Those experiencing stigmatized stressors may experience greater frequencies of nonsupport. Future research should empirically confirm the frequency of nonsupport in these various contexts.

Additional research can also look at how nonsupport and LPC messages violate support recipients' expectations and create negative outcomes depending on whether support was sought directly or indirectly from the nonsupporter. We surmise that a person who directly seeks support but is responded to with nonsupport would experience a greater expectancy violation and greater negative relational ramifications. We base this on prior research that has shown greater support expectations leads to a higher threshold for what is considered an acceptable reason for a person to not provide support, and subsequently, unacceptable nonsupport reasons resulted in greater negative relational ramifications (Ray & Manusov, 2023). If someone directly sought support, they would likely view nonsupport as unacceptable because they have made their need for support known. Alternatively, someone relying on

indirect support seeking could attribute instances of nonsupport to the other person not recognizing their indirect strategies as a signal for support.

Other future studies should also further explore if the characteristics of the person communicating the LPC message or engaging in nonsupport matters. Similar to how direct or indirect support seeking may influence expectations for support, the type of relationship and relational closeness also likely matters. As noted earlier in this discussion, LPC messages from those who are relationally close and perceived as acting with goodwill may generate less intense negative outcomes (Ray & Manusov, 2025). Likewise, prior research has found that the amount of negative relational ramifications that result from instances of nonsupport differs between friends and family members (Ray & Manusov, 2023). Finally, preliminary analyses did show that the gender of the supporter and recipient at times created significant differences on some of our outcome variables. However, the effect sizes of these analyses were small and we made the decision to opt for a more parsimonious model that did not include additional factors such as the gender of the supporter or recipient. One prior study has investigated nonsupport and gender and found that no significant differences between men and women when it came to experiencing nonsupport or being a nonsupporter (Ray, 2024), but future research should continue to explore the role gender may play in influencing nonsupport outcomes.

In summary of our limitations and future directions, researchers interested in nonsupport should continue to explore the interplay between a variety of factors discussed herein. This includes but is not limited to the nature of the stressor (e.g., severity and stigma), the type(s) of support communicated, the relationship between the (non)supporter and person in need (e.g., family or friend), and the (non)supporter's actions (e.g., nonsupport or an LPC message) as factors that affect a variety of outcomes.

Conclusion

This study tested Ray and Veluscek's (2018) claim that saying the wrong thing (i.e., LPC messages) is as detrimental as saying nothing at all (i.e., nonsupport) when it comes to communicating emotional support. Whereas their original study was conducted in the context of breast cancer and found that nonsupport and LPC messages were equally damaging to the supporter-recipient relationship, the present study resulted in a more complicated set of findings. Specifically, in the context of suffering an injury, nonsupport was significantly more damaging to the relationship than receiving an LPC message. However, in the context of losing one's job, LPC messages were more detrimental than nonsupport. Therefore, our study illustrates the important role of the nature of a stressor in determining the relative consequences of saying the wrong thing or saying nothing at all. Ultimately, the best option for supporters is to say *something* instead of nothing and to make sure that any emotional support messages communicated are either moderately or highly person-centered.

Disclosure Statement

We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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