

Misjudging How to Help: Barriers to Effective Social Support Provision

by

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### Author's Declaration

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## Abstract

Relying on others for support is a common coping strategy. However, support providers often fail to provide effective support. Past work suggests that support providers may prioritize help aimed at alleviating others' distress at the expense of providing sufficient emotional validation to those seeking help (High & Steuber, 2014). Integrating past research on social support, motivation, and self-regulation, I propose that support providers' well-intentioned helping goals may lead them to devalue emotional validation, a form of support that tends to be beneficial to support recipients. Two studies ( $N = 415$ ) investigated support providers' perceptions of the helpfulness of different types of social support. Results suggest that emotional validation was seen as less helpful by support providers, particularly in comparison to support aimed at reducing or solving the support seeker's problem (e.g., offering advice or resources). By exploring the perceptions of support providers, this work offers new insight as to why support providers may fail to give adequate emotional validation during support interactions.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

From minor obstacles to major life changes, people regularly encounter stressors leading them to seek support from others. When people feel that they have received effective social support, they reap many benefits, including the development of better coping skills and emotional awareness (Feeney & Collins, 2015; MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011), improved physical health and longevity (Berkman et al., 2000; Uchino, 2004; Uchino, 2009), and enhanced psychological functioning and well-being (Cohen, 2004; Matsunaga, 2011). However, people do not always get the social support they need. In fact, support seekers often report receiving support that is ineffective, insufficient, or otherwise unhelpful (High & Stueber, 2014; McLaren & High, 2019; Xu & Burleson, 2001). I propose a self-regulatory framework for examining why support providers may struggle to provide effective support. Specifically, I argue that support providers may perceive certain types of social support as being more helpful, and therefore more conducive to their helping goals, than others. When taking the role of support provider, this may lead people to under-value (and under-provide) certain types of support.

### **Social Support**

Social support has been defined as “verbal and nonverbal behaviour produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing aid” (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, pp. 374). One important function of close relationships is to provide social support, as supportive interactions not only buffer against the negative effects of stress by making support seekers feel secure and comforted, but also encourage those facing adversity to grow and flourish because of (or despite) their circumstances (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Support provision can be manifested in an extensive range of behaviours, from sharing one’s perspective and suggestions, to offering messages of encouragement, to being a shoulder to cry on. Given that support

provision can involve such a wide variety of behaviours, researchers have developed taxonomies to better understand the different types of social support. Across a number of theoretical models, distinctions have been drawn between action-facilitating support aimed at helping another person solve their problem or eliminate their source of stress—known both as problem-focused support (e.g., Chen et al., 2012) and action-facilitating support (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Rains et al., 2015)—and nurturant support aimed at comforting or consoling a distressed person without directly trying to address their problem (known variously as emotion-focused support, e.g., Chen et al., 2012; emotional support, e.g., Burleson, 2003a; and nurturant support, e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Rains et al., 2015). Support researchers have further differentiated between types of support within each of these broader categories (see Table 1).

Within action-facilitating support, many taxonomies overlap in identifying two distinct types. Informational support involves offering advice, factual input, or feedback on actions that may help the support seeker manage or address their stressor (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; McLaren & High, 2019). For example, a person would be providing informational support if they offered their opinion and suggestions for action regarding an issue. By contrast, tangible or instrumental support involves the support provider offering their own resources to reduce the impact of the stressor or resolve the problem (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Klyver et al., 2018). Often, tangible support is offered in the form of sacrificing one's own time, money, and/or energy to provide goods or services to a support seeker in an attempt to address the problem and reduce distress (Xu & Burleson, 2001).

While the literature offers several ways to parse the unique elements of nurturant support, there are at least two types of support that typically fall within this category (see Table 1). First, esteem support involves expressions of confidence in one's skills and abilities, which are aimed

at enhancing people's sense of self-worth and promoting thriving in the face of stressors (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Burlleson, 2003b; Feeney & Collins, 2015). This type of support is characterized by emphasizing the support seeker's positive qualities and resilience in order to reduce their sense of threat as they manage difficulty (Burlleson, 2003b; McLaren & High, 2019). Second, emotional care support involves expressions of concern, care, affection, and interest (Cutrona, 1996; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Burlleson, 2003b). This type of support is focused on comforting the recipient to improve their negative emotional state (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Although these two types of nurturant support are distinct, they are both aimed at improving the support seeker's emotional state to alleviate their distress.

A third type of nurturant support that is often overlooked by researchers and support providers alike is emotional validation, which has historically been defined as communicating that a person's emotions are reasonable and legitimate (Linehan, 1997). The existing literature has generally conceptualized emotional validation as a component of either esteem support (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Ko et al., 2013; Xu & Burlleson, 2001) or emotional care support (McLaren & High, 2019; Burlleson, 1984; Burlleson, 2003a; Burlleson 2003b). However, I propose that emotional validation is a distinct type of nurturant support. Emotional validation involves helping support seekers work through their distress by listening to them, actively exploring their feelings, empathizing with their negative affect, and expressing that their reactions are appropriate and understandable (Burlleson, 2003b; Marigold et al., 2014). Validating actions such as these may be motivated by a distinct support goal—the goal to explore and validate the support seeker's negative feelings, even if it does not immediately alleviate distress (Burlleson, 1994; Burlleson & Samter, 1985). With this distinction in mind, I

define emotional validation as support behaviour aimed at inviting a person to fully express their negative feelings and experiences while conveying that they are understood and accepted.

**Table 1***Different Types of Social Support*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Type of Support</b>	<b>Behavioural Examples</b>	<b>References</b>
<b>Action-Facilitating Support:</b> Behaviour aimed at helping another person solve their problem or eliminate their source of stress	<b>Informational:</b> Behaviour aimed at increasing the support seeker's knowledge about their stressor or possible solutions to their problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering ideas and suggesting actions/ giving advice</li> <li>• Providing information about the situation</li> <li>• Giving feedback on current approach to the problem</li> </ul>	<p>Cutrona &amp; Suhr, 1992</p> <p>McLaren &amp; High, 2019</p> <p>Rains et al., 2015</p> <p>Sims et al., 2014</p> <p>Xu &amp; Burleson, 2001</p>
	<b>Tangible:</b> Behaviour aimed at directly reducing the impact of the stressor or resolve the support seeker's problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving/ expressing willingness to give the support seeker goods or money</li> <li>• Performing/ expressing willingness to perform a task directly related to the stressor</li> <li>• Joining/ expressing willingness to join the support seeker in taking action towards the issue</li> </ul>	<p>Cohen &amp; Wills, 1985</p> <p>Cutrona &amp; Suhr, 1992</p> <p>Klyver et al., 2018</p> <p>Sims et al., 2014</p> <p>Xu &amp; Burleson, 2001</p>
<b>Nurturant Support:</b> Behaviour aimed at comforting or consoling a distressed person without directly trying to address their problem	<b>Emotional Care:</b> Behaviour aimed at comforting, consoling, and expressing care to a support seeker.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering physical affection</li> <li>• Expressing concern about the situation and their emotional state</li> <li>• Emphasizing love and care for the support seeker</li> </ul>	<p>Burleson, 2003b</p> <p>Cohen &amp; Wills, 1985</p> <p>Cutrona, 1996</p> <p>Cutrona &amp; Russell, 1990</p>
	<b>Esteem:</b> Behaviour aimed at enhancing the support seeker's self-worth and optimism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighting one's skills and abilities</li> <li>• Expressing confidence that they will achieve positive outcomes</li> <li>• Reflecting a positive image of the recipient back to themselves</li> </ul>	<p>Burleson, 2003b</p> <p>Chen et al., 2012</p> <p>Cutrona &amp; Suhr, 1992</p> <p>Feeney &amp; Collins, 2015</p> <p>McLaren &amp; High, 2019</p>
	<b>Emotional Validation:</b> Behaviour aimed at conveying acceptance while allowing someone to express their negative feelings and experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inviting them to continue sharing</li> <li>• Empathizing with their emotions and experiences</li> <li>• Legitimizing their emotions</li> <li>• Actively listening</li> <li>• Expressing understanding of their feelings and values</li> </ul>	<p>Burleson, 1994</p> <p>Burleson, 2003b</p> <p>Burleson &amp; Samter, 1985</p> <p>Linehan, 1997</p> <p>Marigold et al., 2014</p>

## **Ineffective vs. Effective Support Provision**

Although there are many different types of social support (see Table 1), not all support messages are equally helpful to those seeking help. Across decades theoretical and empirical literature, researchers have several possible determinants of effective social support. Some work suggests that effective support is that which matches the needs and desires of support seekers (Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona & Russell, 1990). For instance, if a support seeker indicates that they want to vent their negativity and feel understood, a support provider would be giving matched support by offering emotional validation. Consequently, this matched support is likely to be much more effective compared to mismatched support (e.g., messages offering advice or information). Moreover, discrepancies between desired and received support can have a powerful negative influence on support seekers' outcomes, with mismatched support being associated with hurt feelings, poorer adjustment, reduced well-being, increased negative affect, and poorer relational outcomes (Brock & Lawrence, 2009; McLaren & High, 2019; Matsunaga, 2011; Maisel & Gable, 2009). Other work suggests that effective support is that which considers the nature of the problem, with action-facilitating support being more appropriate in relation to controllable stressors, while nurturant support is optimal for uncontrollable stressors (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Jones & Burleson, 1997; Valentiner et al., 1994). Other research indicates that the extent to which different types of support are effective is substantially moderated by the personality of the recipient, with certain traits having a powerful impact on how helpful support messages are to receivers. For instance, studies have found that identical support messages are rated as much less helpful by support seekers with an insecure attachment style (vs. secure; Collins & Feeney, 2004), or by support seekers with low self-esteem (vs. high; Marigold et al., 2014; Marigold et al., 2020). Still other work highlights the central role of "responsiveness,"

conceptualizing effective support as that which shows that the support provider cares and is attentive to and understanding of the core features of the seeker's self-concept (Reis et al., 2004), which has been linked to improved trust, emotional well-being, and thriving (see Reis & Gable, 2015 for review).

Although perspectives on what makes support effective are diverse, the different findings outlined above all converge on one key idea of critical significance for social support provision. That is, matching the desires of the support seeker, considering their situation, accounting for their unique traits, and affirming their self-concept all hinge on the support provider having a clear understanding of the support seeker and their perspective. Further, support tends to be especially helpful to recipients when it conveys acknowledgment and understanding while legitimizing their feelings and/or actions (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). This finding suggests that emotional validation may be a particularly important element of receiving effective social support.

Indeed, past work exploring emotional validation as a unique type of support provides evidence of its value to those seeking help. Emotionally validating support has been linked to reduced recipient reactivity, bolstered self-esteem, and improved relationship outcomes (Fruzetti et al., 2005; Shenk & Fruzetti, 2011). Some of the clearest empirical work on emotional validation has been in the domain of supporting those in physical pain (see Edmond & Keefe, 2015 for review). This research has found that support containing emotional validation is associated with higher recipient perceived support (Cano et al., 2008), less negative affect (i.e., worry, Linton et al., 2011; anger and frustration, Vangonsveld & Linton, 2011), more positive affect (Benitez et al., 2022), and more satisfaction with their relationship to the support provider (Cano et al., 2008; Leong et al., 2011). The aforementioned benefits are theorized to stem from



emotional validation creating a safe environment to disclose, explore, and process negative emotions and experiences (Benitez et al., 2022). This secure emotional atmosphere facilitates a sense of feeling understood by others, which not only fosters positive affect (Reis et al., 2004), but also buffers against decreases in positive affect and increases in negative affect (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011; Benitez et al., 2022).

Although evidence supports the importance of emotional validation during helping interactions, this critical element of support has been significantly understudied. In fact, only a handful of studies have explored how support providers perceive emotional validation (Jones & Burleson, 1997; Marigold et al., 2014). One of the notable exceptions is research by Marigold et al. (2014) that found that support providers perceived emotionally validating support to be especially helpful to certain support seekers (i.e., those with low self-esteem), and yet they still struggled to effectively provide this kind of support during real-world interactions (2014). The present research aims to bridge the motivation and social support literatures by proposing a self-regulatory framework for understanding how providers evaluate different types of support.

### **A Self-Regulatory Perspective**

I propose a self-regulatory account of how support providers perceive emotional validation in relation to their underlying motivation to help. Based on the existing self-regulation literature, I argue that support providers' helping goals may shed valuable light on their evaluation and selection of different types of support messages. According to hierarchical models of self-regulation, people's goals (i.e., cognitive representations of desired end-states) are connected to means (i.e., actions that support goal attainment). People tend to select means based on the extent to which those means are conducive to achieving goals (Bargh, 1997; Bargh & Barndollar, 1996; Higgins, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Kruglanski et al., 2002). In particular,

goal systems theory highlights that people are most likely to select means that are most strongly associated with facilitating progress on one or more valued goals (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Kruglanski et al., 2013).

Past empirical work in this area suggests that automatic associations formed between goals and means improve the likelihood of goal attainment (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000). More specifically, goals can automatically activate relevant means in a “top-down” fashion (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah & Kruglanski, 2000), and means can automatically activate relevant goals in a “bottom-up” fashion (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). For example, one’s goal to be more physically active could activate the means of walking to work (i.e., top-down), or the thought of walking to work could activate one’s goal to be more active (i.e., bottom-up). These automatic associations may be especially likely to develop under certain conditions, such as when people have multiple goals that are closely related because they can be achieved through the same means. When one action is perceived as a means to more than one goal, it is referred to as multifinal means (Kruglanski et al., 2013; Köpetz et al., 2008), and these perceptions have important implications for people’s behavioural choices. In other words, because multifinal means are associated with progress on multiple goals, they tend to be preferred over means associated with progress on only one goal (Kruglanski et al., 2013; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2009). Continuing with the above example, the goals of being more physically active and saving money on transportation can both be achieved by walking to work; therefore, walking to work is a multifinal means and is likely to be chosen over alternatives that may be conducive to only one of these goals.

Not only do these associations exist between means and goals, but they also exist between closely related goals (Bargh & Barndollar, 1996; Fishbach et al., 2003; Köpetz et al.,

2008; Kruglanski, 1996), even those outside of our conscious awareness (i.e., implicit goals, Kőpetz et al., 2008; Chun & Kruglanski, 2005). In fact, we often fail to realize the powerful influence these implicit goals can have on our behavioural choices. For instance, a study conducted by Chun and colleagues (2011) explored how the activation of an implicit goal affects people's evaluation and selection of means to an explicit goal. Researchers compared the choices of participants in an experimental condition, who had both explicit and implicit goals activated, to the choices of those in one of three control conditions: only explicit goals activated, only implicit goals activated, and no goals activated. They found that compared to people in the control conditions, those in the experimental condition disproportionately made selections that were associated with progress on both their explicit and implicit goals (Chun et al., 2011). This work suggests that when pursuing explicit goals, people may be inclined to make choices that simultaneously satisfy their closely related implicit goals.

While these associations between implicit and explicit goals are typically adaptive and linked to maximizing progress on multiple goals (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000; Kruglanski et al., 2013), sometimes the means that advance explicit goals and those that advance implicit goals are at odds. To illustrate, consider a person with the explicit goal of living a healthier lifestyle, which has become implicitly linked with their unconscious goal of losing weight. Although these goals are closely related through a number of multifinal means, this person may encounter problems if their behavioural choices begin to be driven primarily by their implicit weight-loss goal, rather than their explicit health goals. For example, they may dramatically reduce caloric intake to dangerous levels or obsessively count calories to the detriment of their physical and mental health. Ultimately, a goal initially developed because it was so closely related to one's health goals could pave the way for less healthy behavioural choices.

## **Support Goals' Impact on Means Evaluation**

These principles can be applied to means evaluation across a number of goal domains, including the process of selecting which types of social support to provide. Although support providers typically have the explicit goal of helping the support seeker cope, I propose that this often becomes strongly associated with certain implicit helping goals, namely the goal of making the support seeker feel better in the moment<sup>1</sup>. When the opportunity to provide support simultaneously activates these helping goals, support providers may be more likely to prioritize multifinal means (i.e., types of support perceived as conducive to both their explicit and implicit goals). This, in turn, will lead to the devaluation of means that serve only one of these goals.

To outline this process in more detail, I begin by considering the different types of support (i.e., emotional validation, emotional care support, esteem support, informational support, and tangible support) as different means through which to achieve one's helping goals. Support providers' evaluation of these means is colored not only by their goal of helping the support seeker cope, but also by their goal of helping the support seeker feel better during the support interaction. As stated above, means that are perceived to be multifinal (i.e., conducive to both goals) are likely to be preferred over unifinal (i.e., conducive to just one goal) alternatives because they maximize the value of behaviour (Kruglanski et al., 2013; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2009; Chun et al., 2011).

All five types of support discussed thus far are conducive to helping the support seeker cope. However, from the perspective of the support provider, these means may not be uniformly perceived as leading to progress on the goal to help the support seeker feel better during the interaction. Specifically, expressing care and concern (i.e., emotional care support) or

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<sup>1</sup> The goal to make the support recipient feel better in the moment does not necessarily have to be implicit. However, I argue that even if this goal is implicit, it can affect support provision.

communicating confidence in one's abilities (i.e., esteem support) may both be perceived by support providers as means to immediately improving the support seeker's emotional state. Similarly, giving advice (i.e., informational support) or offering one's own resources (i.e., tangible support) could both be perceived as means to quickly improving the state of the problem. Despite its value to support seekers (Benitez, 2020, Cano et al., 2008, Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011), emotional validation invites support seekers to express their negativity, which may lead support providers to assume it will not improve, or may even immediately worsen, the seeker's state. In this sense, providers may perceive emotional validation as an effective means for helping the support seeker cope, but an ineffective means for their implicit goal of making them feel better right now. For this reason, they may prioritize offering other types of support, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will provide adequate levels of emotional validation. In other words, it is the very motivation to help that may be paving the way for suboptimal support provision. The present research aims to provide preliminary support for these ideas while laying a foundation for future work to explore the impact of these dynamics on support provision.

## **The Present Research**

### **Overview of Current Studies**

I propose that support providers may be devaluing emotional validation because it is less conducive to the goal of making someone feel better in the moment than other types of support. Specifically, because emotional validation does not involve a direct attempt at improving the support seeker's emotional state or the state of the problem, support providers may assume it is unhelpful or insufficient compared to other types of support that are more associated with immediate improvements. Support providers may also perceive emotional validation as less effortful because it may be seen as simply reflecting back to the recipient (e.g., "ugh, that sounds

so frustrating and painful), rather than requiring additional, original input (e.g., “one way to solve this problem might be to talk to your boss in this way”)<sup>2</sup>.

Two studies aimed to provide preliminary evidence for this idea by exploring whether support providers perceive emotional validation (vs. other forms of support) as less helpful to support seekers. Taking the role of support provider, participants were presented with three scenarios in which a close friend discloses a recent negative event causing them emotional distress. After reading each scenario, they were presented with five unique support responses to that scenario, each reflecting a different type of social support. Each response was then rated for how effective, sufficient, and effortful it was perceived to be. Compared to support messages focused on improving the support seeker’s emotional state (i.e., emotional care and esteem support) or improving the state of the problem (i.e., informational and tangible support), I predicted that emotionally validating support messages would be rated as less effective, sufficient, and effortful by support providers. Establishing that support providers tend to devalue emotional validation is a critical first step in understanding how providers’ helping goals may be influencing effective support provision.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, this perception may be erroneous – skillful emotional validation is likely very effortful. However, I propose that people’s naïve theories may not recognize this.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### *Participants*

This study used a fully within participants design to explore the effect of support type on providers' perceptions of helpfulness. Initially, two hundred and twenty-six undergraduate students were recruited online through the research participant pool at the University of Waterloo to participate in this study in exchange for course credit. Six participants were excluded for completing less than 50% of the study, leaving 220 for analysis (180 women, 32 men, 4 non-binary/another identity, 4 did not report gender;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.6$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.7$ ; 42.7% White or European, 22.3% South Asian, 19.5% East Asian, the remaining 15.5% consisted of multiple groups including Black or African, Hispanic or Latino, Indigenous and Middle Eastern, none of which constituted more than 5%). This sample size provided 95% power to detect effects as small as  $f = 0.10$  in a one-way (support type: emotional validation vs. emotional care support vs. esteem support vs. informational support vs. tangible support) repeated-measures analysis of variance (two-tailed), with an assumed correlation among repeated measures of .50 and correcting for sphericity violations ( $\epsilon = 0.85$ ).

#### *Procedure*

Participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario in which a close friend discloses a recent negative event causing them significant emotional distress, and then reported their perceptions of event negativity and seriousness. Following this, participants read five unique support responses to that scenario, each reflecting a different type of social support. Each support response was immediately followed by a series of questions in which participants reported their perceptions of how effective, sufficient, and effortful they believed that response to be. After

completing this process for all five responses to all three scenarios, participants completed additional exploratory personality measures. Scenarios and support responses were presented in a random order for each participant. The complete text for the scenarios and support responses are included in Appendix A.

### ***Materials***

**Scenarios.** Participants read three hypothetical scenarios in which a close friend disclosed that they were experiencing distress as a result of a recent negative event. Each scenario involved a distinct negative event (see Appendix A). Specifically, one scenario involved the support seeker disclosing that their parents are getting an unexpected divorce (e.g., “I just found out that my parents are getting a divorce... Apparently, they just don’t love each other anymore.... I just can’t believe this is happening – it’s really over for them”). Another involved the support seeker explaining that they have a difficult boss who yelled at them in front of their colleagues (e.g., “My new boss is the worst – he is inconsiderate, condescending, and rude to everyone in the office... [Yesterday] he screamed at me in front of everyone...it was so embarrassing... I’m feeling really drained”). A third scenario involved the support seeker expressing their self-doubt and frustration about consistently being disappointed by their grades (e.g., “No matter how hard I try in my classes; I can’t seem to get above a 75%...it just feels so unfair! Maybe I don’t have what it takes to be in university... I am so frustrated and exhausted, and nothing I do is good enough”).

**Scenario-Specific Perceptions and Experiences.** Participants responded to a short series of questions about each scenario, thereby providing exploratory data about event type in case this was associated with differences in how people provide support (see Appendix B). Specifically, they responded to four questions designed to assess their perceptions of event negativity (How



negative do you think this event is; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*), perceptions of event seriousness (How serious do you think this event is 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*), experience of similar events (To what extent have you experienced an event similar to the one described; 1 = *I have never experienced anything like this*, 7 = *I have experienced something extremely similar to this*), and experience of similar disclosure situations (To what extent have you experienced a disclosure situation similar to the one described; 1 = *I have never experienced anything like this*, 7 = *I have experienced something extremely similar to this*).

**Support Responses.** After reading and rating each scenario, participants read five different potential support responses that could be given to the support seeker, each reflecting a different type of social support (see Appendix A). All responses were roughly the same length.

**Emotional Validation.** Emotionally validating support responses were focused on legitimizing the support seeker's feelings and expressing understanding of their emotional state. For example, an excerpt from the emotionally validating response for the parental divorce scenario read, "...you must be really struggling right now. I can't even imagine what you are going through; you have every right to feel blindsided and disheartened."

**Emotional Care Support.** These support responses expressed concern and care to the support seeker to improve their emotional state. A quote from the emotional care support response to the difficult boss scenario is, "I am always here for you if you need to vent out your frustration about your boss to someone."

**Esteem Support.** Esteem support responses involved attempting to improve the seeker's emotional state by communicating encouragement and confidence in their abilities. For example, part of the esteem response to the disappointing grades scenario reads, "You have faced tough

courses in the past and you have always made it through them, so I know that you will get through this term as well!”

***Informational Support.*** Responses reflecting informational support involved providing advice or feedback to the support seeker to improve the state of their problem. An excerpt from the informational support response to the parental divorce scenario reads, “...it might help to talk to [your parents] about how you are feeling...talking might help them understand the impact that this is having on you.”

***Tangible Support.*** Tangible support responses involved the support provider expressing a willingness to sacrifice their own resources (i.e., time, money) to reduce the impact of the stressor. For example, the tangible support response to the disappointing grades scenario includes the quote, “I know that I have taken some of your current classes in past terms and I finished those courses with good grades, would you like some free tutoring?”.

**Support Response Perceptions.** Participants then indicated their agreement with a number of statements designed to assess how effective, sufficient, and effortful they perceived each support response to be (see Appendix C). All items were measured on a 1-7 scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*).

***Effectiveness.*** Effectiveness items aimed to capture the extent to which a support message is perceived to effectively help the support seeker and is associated with feeling competent at providing support (e.g., “My friend will feel better about the situation”; “I will feel like a helpful person”). Effectiveness was initially predicted to be three separate constructs: (a) other-focused effectiveness, or the idea that the support is effective at improving the support seeker’s state (3 items); (b) self-focused effectiveness, or the idea that giving that support message would make the provider feel effective at providing support (3 items); and (c) value, or

the idea that the response demonstrates their value as a support provider and friend to the support seeker (3 items). Factor analyses indicated that 8 of these items captured the same construct (factor loadings ranged from .71 - .94); therefore, they were combined into one overall effectiveness variable with high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .94-.95$ ). One reverse-coded value item, “My friend will seek support from others because I am not giving them what they need”, loaded more highly with sufficiency. I conducted separate analyses with this item included in the aggregate scores for both effectiveness and sufficiency; the pattern of results did not change. Therefore, I created the effectiveness composite including this item to fit with the initial conceptualization of the construct.

***Sufficiency.*** Three reverse-coded items assessed sufficiency, or the extent to which a support message is believed to be enough to help the support seeker (e.g., I will feel like I am not saying enough”; “My friend will wish I had said more). Sufficiency items all loaded together (factor loadings ranged from .90-.93) and showed high reliability ( $\alpha = .84-.87$ ).

***Effort.*** Two items measured effort, which was conceptualized as the extent to which providing a certain support message is associated with cognitive and emotional costs (e.g., “It will take a lot of effort”; “I will feel like I am using a lot of mental and emotional energy”). These items were highly correlated (Pearson’s  $r = .96, p < .001$ ).

**Personality Variables.** After completing this process for all five support responses to all three scenarios, participants responded to measures of four personality traits that I suspected may influence peoples’ perceptions of different types of social support and planned to use in exploratory analyses (see Appendix D).

***Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980).*** Participants responded to three subscales of the IRI, which were combined to create an overall measure of empathy. The

perspective-taking subscale assessed participants' tendency to consider events using the point of view of others (e.g., I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective; 1 = *does not describe me well*; 5 = *describes me very well*;  $\alpha = .825$ ). The empathic concern subscale assessed participants' tendency to experience sympathy and concern others in distress (e.g., I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me; 1 = *does not describe me well*; 5 = *describes me very well*;  $\alpha = .808$ ). Lastly, the personal distress subscale assessed participants' tendency to experience personal anxiety and discomfort in distressing interpersonal settings (e.g., I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation; 1 = *does not describe me well*; 5 = *describes me very well*;  $\alpha = .676$ ). Collapsed across all three subscales, this scale showed modest reliability ( $\alpha = .754$ ).

**Big Five Inventory – 2 – Short Form (BFI-2-S; Soto & John, 2017)** Trait agreeableness ( $\alpha = .716$ ) and negative emotionality ( $\alpha = .805$ ) were measured using their corresponding BFI-2-S subscales (e.g., I am someone who assumes the best about people; I am someone who worries a lot; 1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*).

**Self-Esteem.** Participants' self-esteem was measured using the single item "To what extent do you consider yourself to be someone with high self-esteem?" (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses Examining Gender

Due to the small number of participants who identified as neither men nor women, analyses exploring gender effects included only participants who identified as either women or men. There were no main effects of gender for effectiveness and sufficiency ratings, and no significant interactions between gender and support type on ratings of effectiveness, sufficiency,

or effort. There was a significant main effect of gender on effort ratings,  $F(1,210) = 6.426, p = .012$ , such that that men tended to give higher effort ratings than women across support types. This finding should be interpreted with some caution, as a relatively small number of men participated in this study.

### **Main Analyses**

**Support Response Perceptions.** Descriptive statistics and correlations between key DVs within the same support type are reported in Table 2. Notably, some unexpected negative correlations emerged between ratings of response effort and sufficiency, such that as the effort associated with providing a given support response increased, perceptions of response sufficiency decreased. Given the surprising nature of this correlation, I aimed to see if it would be replicated in Study 2. As such, I will return to exploring this association when reviewing Study 2 and in the General Discussion.

One-way repeated-measures ANOVAs compared participants' ratings of the effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort across different types of social support messages. Analyses were also conducted at the scenario level (See Appendix E); however, these showed similar patterns of results, so analyses reported below have been collapsed across scenarios.

**Table 2.***Key Dependent Variable Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Support Type	Variable	Descriptive Statistics		Correlation Within Support Type		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Effectiveness	Sufficiency	Effort
Emotional Validation	Effectiveness	4.28	0.92	--	.50**	.32**
	Sufficiency	3.45	1.06	--	--	-.09
	Effort	2.99	1.42	--	--	--
Emotional Care Support	Effectiveness	4.61	0.83	--	.44**	.29**
	Sufficiency	3.63	1.06	--	--	-.13
	Effort	3.08	1.43	--	--	--
Esteem Support	Effectiveness	4.60	0.94	--	.53**	.20**
	Sufficiency	3.77	1.15	--	--	-.23**
	Effort	2.96	1.48	--	--	--
Informational Support	Effectiveness	4.45	0.90	--	.45**	.26**
	Sufficiency	3.78	1.12	--	--	-.22**
	Effort	3.10	1.43	--	--	--
Tangible Support	Effectiveness	5.18	0.96	--	.56**	.15*
	Sufficiency	4.37	1.23	--	--	-.16*
	Effort	4.04	1.47	--	--	--

*Note.* Ratings were aggregated across scenarios for each support type; Correlations reflect

Pearson's *r* within support type (e.g., validation effectiveness with validation sufficiency).

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  level.

**Effectiveness.** There was a significant main effect of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(3.65, 802.11) = 46.11, MSE = 0.61, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .173$ )<sup>3</sup>. Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc analyses showed that, consistent with my predictions, emotionally validating support responses were rated by participants as significantly lower in effectiveness ( $M = 4.28, SD = 0.92$ ) than emotional care ( $M = 4.61, SD = 0.83$ ), esteem ( $M = 4.60, SD = 0.94$ ), and tangible ( $M =$

<sup>3</sup> Results revealed a significant sphericity violation for the main effect of support type on perceptions of effectiveness, *Mauchly's W* = .85,  $p < .001$ ; a Greenhouse-Geisser correction yielded fractional *df*. Further analyses suggest that this violation is being driven by emotional validation. When validation was removed, the violation was no longer significant, *Mauchly's W* = .97,  $p = .287$ .

5.18,  $SD = 0.96$ ) support responses (all  $ps < .001$ ; see Figure 1). Emotionally validating support did not significantly differ from informational support in ratings of effectiveness.

**Sufficiency.** There was a significant main effect of support type on ratings of response sufficiency, ( $F(3.63, 799.46) = 37.78, MSE = 0.78, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .147$ )<sup>4</sup>. As predicted, participants rated emotionally validating responses as being the least sufficient of the five types of support ( $M = 3.45, SD = 1.06$ ), and Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc tests indicated that validation was seen as significantly less sufficient than esteem ( $M = 3.77, SD = 1.16$ ), informational ( $M = 3.79, SD = 1.12$ ), and tangible ( $M = 4.37, SD = 1.23$ ) support messages (all  $ps < .001$ ; see Figure 1). Emotional validation and emotional care support responses did not significantly differ in ratings of sufficiency.

**Effort.** There was also a main effect of support type on ratings of response effort ( $F(2.71, 596.87) = 92.58, MSE = 0.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .296$ )<sup>5</sup>. Further, emotionally validating support responses were among the lowest in perceived effort ( $M = 2.99, SD = 1.42$ ), which was significantly lower than tangible support responses ( $M = 4.05, SD = 1.47; p < .001$ ; see Figure 1). Importantly, this effect was not as strong compared to those found for effectiveness and sufficiency, and emotional validation did not significantly differ from emotional care, esteem, and informational support in ratings of response effort.

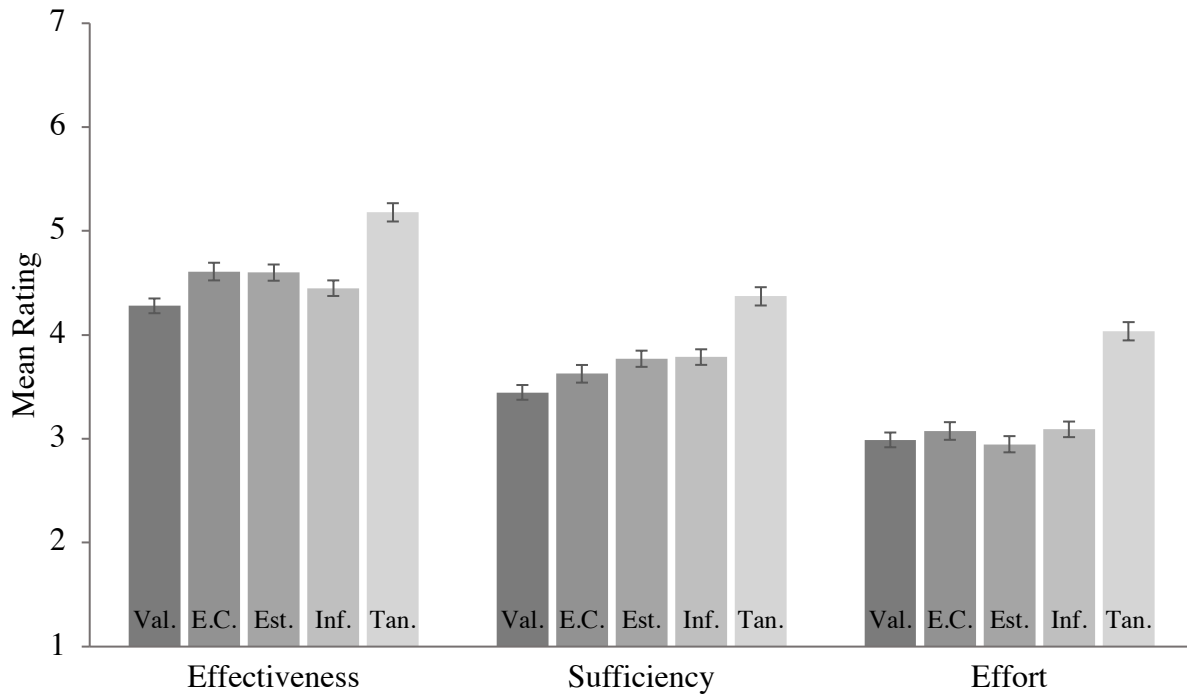
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<sup>4</sup> Results revealed a significant sphericity violation for the main effect of support type on perceptions of sufficiency, *Mauchly's W* = .84,  $p < .001$ ; a Greenhouse-Geisser correction yielded fractional *df*. This violation does not appear to be driven by any one form of support.

<sup>5</sup> Results revealed a significant sphericity violation for the main effect of support type on perceptions of effort, *Mauchly's W* = .384,  $p < .001$ ; a Greenhouse-Geisser correction yielded fractional *df*. This violation appears to be largely driven by tangible support. However, the violation lessened but was still significant when tangible was removed from these analyses, *Mauchly's W* = .74,  $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1**

*Support Response Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

### Exploratory Analyses

**Personality Variables.** Across all five types of support, negative emotionality ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) and self-esteem ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) were not significantly related to ratings of support message effectiveness, sufficiency, or effort (all  $ps > .05$ ). As such, these variables were excluded from further exploratory analyses. Empathy and agreeableness were found to be related to certain types of support ratings. These effects are probed below. Descriptive statistics and correlations between these variables and the key DVs are reported in Table 3.



**Table 3***Personality Variable Descriptive Statistics and Correlations with Key DVs*

Personality Trait	Descriptive Statistics		Correlations with Key DVs			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Support Type	Effectiveness	Sufficiency	Effort
Empathy (IRI)	3.30	0.45	Validation	.01	-.10	.27**
			Emo. Care	.08	.02	.31**
			Esteem	.03	-.07	.30**
			Informational	.05	-.07	.28**
			Tangible	-.15*	-.21**	.09
Agreeableness (BFI)	4.75	0.68	Validation	.01	.14*	-.31**
			Emo. Care	.20**	.22**	-.25**
			Esteem	.12	.19**	-.28**
			Informational	.06	.13**	-.27**
			Tangible	.21**	.26**	-.17*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  level.

**Empathy.** Participants' empathy moderated the relationship between support type and ratings of how effective ( $F(3.61, 780.10) = 2.657, MSE = 0.61, p = .037, \eta_p^2 = .012$ ), sufficient ( $F(3.64, 785.91) = 2.871, MSE = 0.76, p = .026, \eta_p^2 = .013$ ), and effortful ( $F(2.75, 594.78) = 7.626, MSE = 0.70, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .034$ ) different responses were. Each of these effects were further explored. Although empathy did moderate some effects (i.e., the effectiveness and sufficiency of tangible support), it did not moderate ratings of the effectiveness or sufficiency of emotionally validating support. Empathy did moderate how effortful emotionally validating support was rated, such that people who were lower in empathy ( $-1SD$ ) tended to rate providing emotionally validating support as significantly less effortful than people who were higher in empathy ( $+1SD$ ),  $b = 0.86, SE = 0.21, t(216) = 4.091, p < .001$ . However, similar effects on perceived effort were found for other types of support (i.e., emotional care, esteem, and

informational). In other words, the moderating role of empathy did not appear to have a unique impact on ratings of emotional validation compared to other types of support.

**Agreeableness.** A marginally significant interaction was found between participants' agreeableness and their ratings of the effectiveness of different support responses,  $F(3.63, 784.76) = 2.472$ ,  $MSE = 0.60$ ,  $p = .049$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .011$ . Further analyses suggest that although agreeableness moderated some effects (i.e., ratings of the effectiveness of emotional care and tangible support responses), there was no indication that agreeableness moderated ratings of the effectiveness, sufficiency, or effort of emotionally validating support responses.

**Scenario-Specific Perceptions and Experiences.** I also collected data about certain aspects of each of the events being disclosed (i.e., event negativity, event seriousness, experience of similar events, and experience of similar disclosure situations). These variables were included to gain a better understanding of how such situations are perceived by support providers and to explore how each of these may be correlated with ratings of the effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort of different support responses<sup>6</sup>. Although there were some significant correlations (see Table 4), there were no consistent patterns across the three scenarios. For the purposes of my thesis, these variables were not explored further.

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<sup>6</sup> Analyses indicated that these single-items were not highly correlated with each other; therefore, I did not create composite variables from these items.

**Table 4***Scenario-Specific Perceptions and Experiences Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Scenario	Scenario-Specific Variable	Descriptive Statistics		Correlations with Support Response Ratings			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Support Type	Effectiveness	Sufficiency	Effort
Parental Divorce	Event Negativity	5.93	1.25	Validation	.07	.01	-.12
				Emo. Care	.01	-.09	-.08
				Esteem	.10	-.02	-.13
				Info.	.10	.03	-.16*
				Tangible	.16*	.00	.06
	Event Seriousness	6.00	1.15	Validation	.04	-.02	-.14*
				Emo. Care	.10	-.04	-.12
				Esteem	.13	-.04	-.13
				Info.	.16*	.04	-.06
				Tangible	.19**	-.03	.07
	Experience of Similar Events	2.96	2.23	Validation	.02	-.05	.18**
				Emo. Care	.02	-.03	.09
				Esteem	.02	-.07	.13
				Info.	.02	-.06	.11
				Tangible	.02	-.09	.05
Experience of Similar Disclosure Situations	4.46	2.15	Validation	.01	-.01	-.01	
			Emo. Care	.10	-.02	.02	
			Esteem	.13	-.07	.03	
			Info.	.02	-.03	-.04	
			Tangible	.13	.01	.10	
Difficult Boss	Event Negativity	5.75	1.07	Validation	.01	-.06	-.16
				Emo. Care	.16*	-.020	.00
				Esteem	-.03	-.12	-.13
				Info.	.20**	.10	-.07
				Tangible	.10	-.04	-.03
	Event Seriousness	5.28	1.30	Validation	-.02	-.07	-.12
				Emo. Care	.22**	.01	.04
				Esteem	.14*	-.11	-.07
				Info.	.22**	.07	-.00
				Tangible	.12	-.03	-.04

Experience of Similar Events	3.91	2.09	Validation	.16*	.05	.12	
			Emo. Care	-.02	-.15*	.02	
			Esteem	-.03	.06	.07	
			Info.	.08	.01	.08	
			Tangible	.07	-.02	.11	
Experience of Similar Disclosure Situations	4.43	1.92	Validation	.13	.01	.04	
			Emo. Care	.04	-.08	-.07	
			Esteem	.09	-.09	.01	
			Info.	.05	-.08	.03	
			Tangible	.03	-.06	.06	
Disappointing Grades	Event Negativity	5.59	1.25	Validation	.03	-.08	-.01
				Emo. Care	.19**	-.08	-.07
				Esteem	-.02	-.10	.01
				Info.	-.02	-.06	-.02
				Tangible	.15*	.02	-.06
Event Seriousness	5.39	1.32	Validation	.05	-.04	-.04	
			Emo. Care	.22**	.00	-.08	
			Esteem	.07	.01	-.02	
			Info.	.07	-.04	-.06	
			Tangible	.22	.04	.01	
Experience of Similar Events	5.52	1.77	Validation	-.09	-.03	-.06	
			Emo. Care	.04	-.03	-.18*	
			Esteem	.10	.07	-.08	
			Info.	-.07	-.05	-.11	
			Tangible	.04	.04	-.03	
Experience of Similar Disclosure Situations	5.52	1.61	Validation	-.09	-.02	-.13	
			Emo. Care	-.05	-.10	-.23**	
			Esteem	.13*	.10	-.14*	
			Info.	-.07	-.06	-.10	
			Tangible	.15*	.03	.09	

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  level.

## Discussion

Overall, Study 1 provided some preliminary evidence for my main hypotheses. Specifically, support providers generally rated emotional validation as less effective and less sufficient than most other types of social support. Moreover, emotional validation was rated as less effortful than tangible support, indicating that people may be particularly prone to devaluing validation in relation to messages that are aimed at more directly addressing a support seeker's

stressor. The exploratory analyses suggest that these findings are not simply a matter of certain individual differences (i.e., empathy, agreeableness, negative emotionality, and self-esteem), aspects of the situation (i.e., event negativity and event seriousness), or the support providers' past experiences (i.e., experience of similar events or disclosure situations).

## STUDY 2

The goal of Study 2 was to expand upon the results of Study 1 by introducing two manipulations that I predicted would impact support providers' focus, thereby altering their evaluations of different types of support messages (see Appendix F for full manipulation materials). I propose that one reason why support providers devalue emotional validation is that it does not optimally align with their goals of improving the support seeker's emotional state or the state of their problem in the immediate future. With this in mind, offering a direct manipulation of support providers' goals should produce differences in their evaluations of support messages. In my initial conceptualizations, I proposed that support providers' focus on their own helping goals may reduce the perspective-taking necessary to appropriately evaluate emotional validation. To explore this idea, I randomly assigned participants to a goal-focus condition, which instructed participants to concentrate on their own goal of being as helpful as possible; a perspective-taking condition, which asked participants to reflect on each support message from the perspective of the support seeker; or a control condition, which provided no instructions about focus. I predicted that thinking about one's own helping goals would amplify support providers' devaluation of emotional validation, while taking the perspective of the support seeker would reduce this devaluation effect. However, this manipulation was developed prior to the detailed conceptualization outlined in the introduction, and in hindsight was not the strongest test of the proposed mechanism. It is perhaps not surprising that there was no effect of the manipulation on support ratings (i.e., no main effects or interactions). Consequently, the data from this study has been collapsed across manipulation conditions and has been analyzed as a replication of Study 1. Again, it was predicted that participants would rate emotionally validating support responses as less effective, sufficient, and effortful than other types of support messages.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Initially, two hundred and three undergraduate students were recruited online through the research participant pool at the University of Waterloo to participate in this study in exchange for course credit. Eight participants were excluded for completing less than 50% of the study, leaving 195 for analysis (152 women, 38 men, 4 non-binary/another identity, 1 unspecified;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.1$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.3$ ; 35.4% White or European, 29.2% South Asian, 21.5% East Asian, the remaining 13.9% consisted of multiple groups including Black or African, Hispanic or Latino, Indigenous, and Middle Eastern, none of which constituted more than 10%). With this sample size, I had 95% power to detect an effect as small as  $f = 0.10$  for the primary analysis of my hypothesis – a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (two-tailed), with an assumed correlation among repeated measures of .50 and correcting for sphericity violations ( $\epsilon = 0.89$ ).

### ***Procedure***

To ensure that participants were reading the materials carefully, Study 2 added an attention manipulation at the beginning of the study. Upon successfully completing this manipulation, participants followed a similar procedure to Study 1 using identical scenarios and support responses (see Appendix A). After rating of all five support responses for all three scenarios, participants responded to personality measures, provided some demographic information, and were given a debriefing letter outlining the purpose of this study.

### ***Materials***

**Attention Manipulation.** Participants were presented with a short passage and an open-ended question (see Appendix G). At first glance, the passage appeared to be about research on decision making, but it went on to explain that participants must type a key phrase in response to

the open-ended question in order to move forward with the study. This manipulation was designed to encourage participants to read the study materials carefully.

**Scenarios and Support Responses.** The Study 2 negative disclosure scenarios and support response stimuli were identical to those used in Study 1 (see Appendix A).

**Support Response Perceptions.** Like Study 1, participants reported how effective, sufficient, and effortful they perceived each support response to be (see Appendix H). These measures were altered slightly from those used in Study 1. All items were measured on a 1-7 scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*).

**Effectiveness.** To minimize measure redundancy, I reduced the number of items used to measure effectiveness from nine items in Study 1 to four items in Study 2. This reduction in items was not associated with a significant change in reliability ( $\alpha = .82 - .93$ ) or factor loadings (.93-.94). The Study 1 effectiveness item that loaded with sufficiency was not included in Study 2.

**Sufficiency.** Sufficiency items were identical to those used in Study 1. These items all loaded together (factor loadings ranged from .83 - .92) and showed modest reliability ( $\alpha = .73 - .89$ ).

**Effort.** In addition to the two effort items from Study 1, Study 2 added three new items to assess the extent to which providing a given response is associated with experiencing discomfort (i.e., “I will feel uncomfortable”). These new items were originally predicted to be distinct from the other support response variables, however factor analyses indicated that these items loaded heavily with effort (factor loadings ranged from .87-.94), therefore they were added to this measure in the analyses ( $\alpha = .89 - .95$ ).



**Scenario-Specific Perceptions and Experiences.** Participants responded to the same four questions from Study 1 that were designed to assess perceptions of event negativity, event seriousness, experience of similar events, and experience of similar disclosure situations (see Appendix B).

**Personality Variables.** Like Study 1, Study 2 asked participants to respond to four personality measures (see Appendix D). Specifically, to measure empathy, participants completed the perspective-taking ( $\alpha = .81$ ), empathic concern ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and personal distress ( $\alpha = .76$ ) subscales of the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI; Davis, 1980). Aggregating across the three empathic subscales showed moderate reliability ( $\alpha = .78$ ). Participants also completed measures of agreeableness and negative emotionality, which each showed modest reliability ( $\alpha = .76$  and  $\alpha = .80$ , respectively; *BFI-2-S*; Soto & John, 2017). Lastly, participants responded to a single-item measuring their self-esteem.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analyses with Gender**

As in study 1, analyses were conducted to explore possible gender effects associated with identifying as either a man or a woman. There was a significant main effect of gender on ratings of support effectiveness,  $F(1,188) = 6.862$ ,  $MSE = 2.08$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .035$ , and ratings of effort,  $F(1,188) = 7.003$ ,  $MSE = 6.01$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .036$ , such that men typically gave lower effectiveness ratings and higher effort ratings compared to women.

### **Main Analyses**

**Support Response Perceptions.** Returning to the perplexing finding from Study 1 regarding the small negative correlations between response effort and sufficiency, Study 2 replicated these correlations, and a second unexpected negative correlation was found between

effort and effectiveness. As discussed further in the General Discussion, the items included in the measure of effort in Study 2 may have contributed to this pattern.

One-way repeated-measures ANOVAs compared participants' ratings of the effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort across different types of social support messages. Ratings were collapsed across scenario and condition (See Appendix E for within-scenario analyses). Descriptive statistics and correlations between key DVs within the same support type are reported in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Key Dependent Variable Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Support Type	Variable	Descriptive Statistics		Correlation Within Support Type		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Effectiveness	Sufficiency	Effort
Emotional Validation	Effectiveness	4.27	1.02	--	.46**	-.15*
	Sufficiency	3.64	1.20	--	--	-.28**
	Effort	2.77	1.17	--	--	--
Emotional Care Support	Effectiveness	4.65	1.01	--	.51**	-.16*
	Sufficiency	3.79	1.07	--	--	-.28*
	Effort	2.68	1.22	--	--	--
Esteem Support	Effectiveness	4.55	0.95	--	.49**	-.12
	Sufficiency	3.87	1.10	--	--	-.30**
	Effort	2.79	1.20	--	--	--
Informational Support	Effectiveness	4.65	0.88	--	.38**	-.23**
	Sufficiency	4.04	1.02	--	--	-.47**
	Effort	2.92	1.24	--	--	--
Tangible Support	Effectiveness	5.48	0.92	--	.55**	-.35**
	Sufficiency	4.74	1.22	--	--	-.46**
	Effort	3.22	1.15	--	--	--

*Note.* Ratings were aggregated across scenarios for each support type; Correlations reflect

Pearson's *r* within support type (e.g., validation effectiveness with validation sufficiency).

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  level.

**Effectiveness.** Study 2 showed a significant main effect of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(4, 709.54) = 54.84, MSE = 0.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .250$ )<sup>7</sup>. Consistent with my hypotheses and the findings from Study 1, post-hoc analyses showed that emotionally validating responses were rated the lowest in effectiveness ( $M = 4.27, SD = 1.02$ ), which was significantly lower than the ratings for emotional care ( $M = 4.65, SD = 1.01; p < .001$ ), esteem ( $M = 4.55, SD = 0.95; p < .01$ ), informational ( $M = 4.65, SD = 0.88; p < .001$ ), and tangible ( $M = 5.48, SD = 0.92; p < .001$ ) support responses (see Figure 2).

**Sufficiency.** Replicating the results of Study 1, there was a significant main effect of support type on participants' ratings of response sufficiency ( $F(4, 652.85) = 55.00, MSE = 0.77, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .221$ )<sup>8</sup>. Consistent with my predictions, emotionally validating support responses ( $M = 3.64, SD = 1.20$ ), were also perceived as being significantly less sufficient than informational ( $M = 4.04, SD = 1.02; p < .05$ ) and tangible ( $M = 4.74, SD = 1.22; p < .001$ ) support responses. Emotional validation did not significantly differ from the other types of nurturant support (i.e., emotional care support and esteem support) in ratings of sufficiency (see Figure 2).

**Effort.** Study 2 also replicated the significant main effect of support type on ratings of response effort ( $F(4, 692.19) = 34.06, MSE = 0.29, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .149$ )<sup>9</sup>. Consistent with my predictions, emotional validation ( $M = 2.77, SD = 1.17$ ) was rated as being significantly lower in effort compared to esteem ( $M = 2.79, SD = 1.20; p < .05$ ), informational ( $M = 2.92, SD = 1.24; p$

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<sup>7</sup> Results revealed a significant sphericity violation for the main effect of support type on perceptions of effectiveness, *Mauchly's W* = .84,  $p < .001$ ; a Greenhouse-Geisser correction yielded fractional *df*. This violation does not appear to be driven by any one form of support.

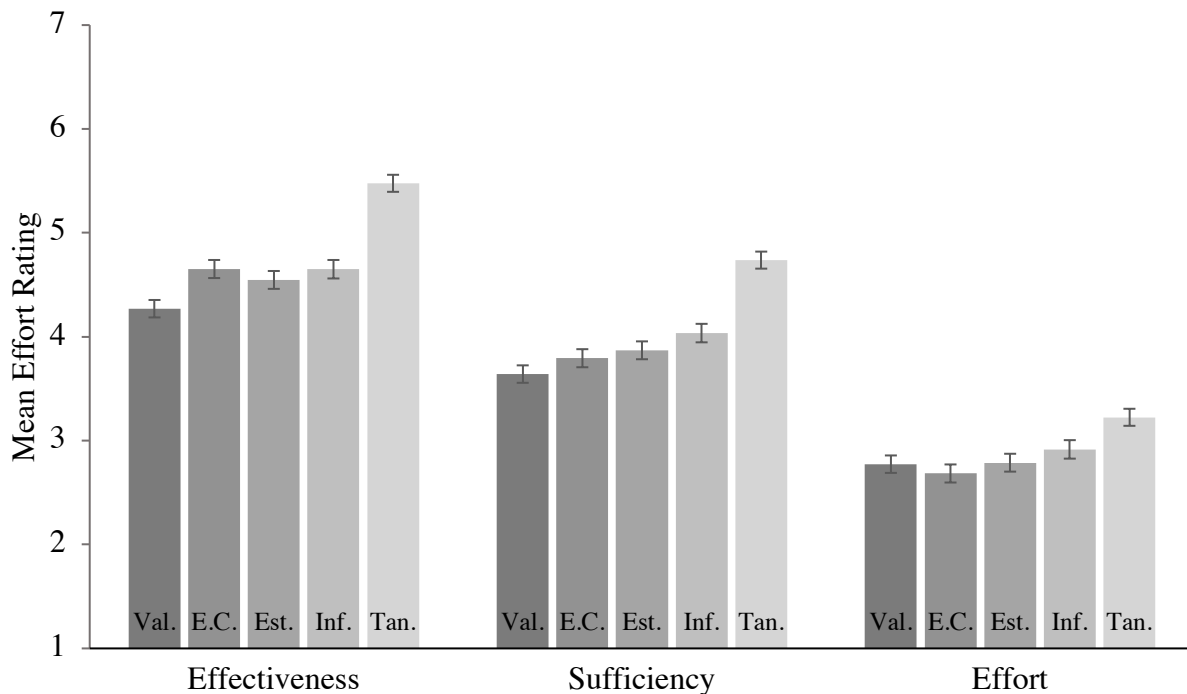
<sup>8</sup> Results revealed a significant sphericity violation for the main effect of support type on perceptions of sufficiency, *Mauchly's W* = .73,  $p < .001$ ; a Greenhouse-Geisser correction yielded fractional *df*. This violation does not appear to be driven by any one form of support.

<sup>9</sup> Results revealed a significant sphericity violation for the main effect of support type on perceptions of effort, *Mauchly's W* = .79,  $p < .001$ ; a Greenhouse-Geisser correction yielded fractional *df*. This violation does not appear to be driven by any one form of support.

< .001), and tangible ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.15; p < .001$ ) support responses, but did not significantly differ from ratings of emotional care support (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Support Response Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

### Exploratory Analyses

**Personality Variables.** As in Study 1, negative emotionality ( $M = 4.14, SD = 0.83$ ) and self-esteem ( $M = 3.10, SD = 1.04$ ) were not significantly related to ratings of support message effectiveness, sufficiency, or effort for any of the five types of social support (all  $ps > .05$ ).

Empathy and agreeableness were found to be related to certain types of support ratings (see Table 6). These effects are probed below.

**Table 6***Personality Variable Descriptive Statistics and Correlations with Key DVs*

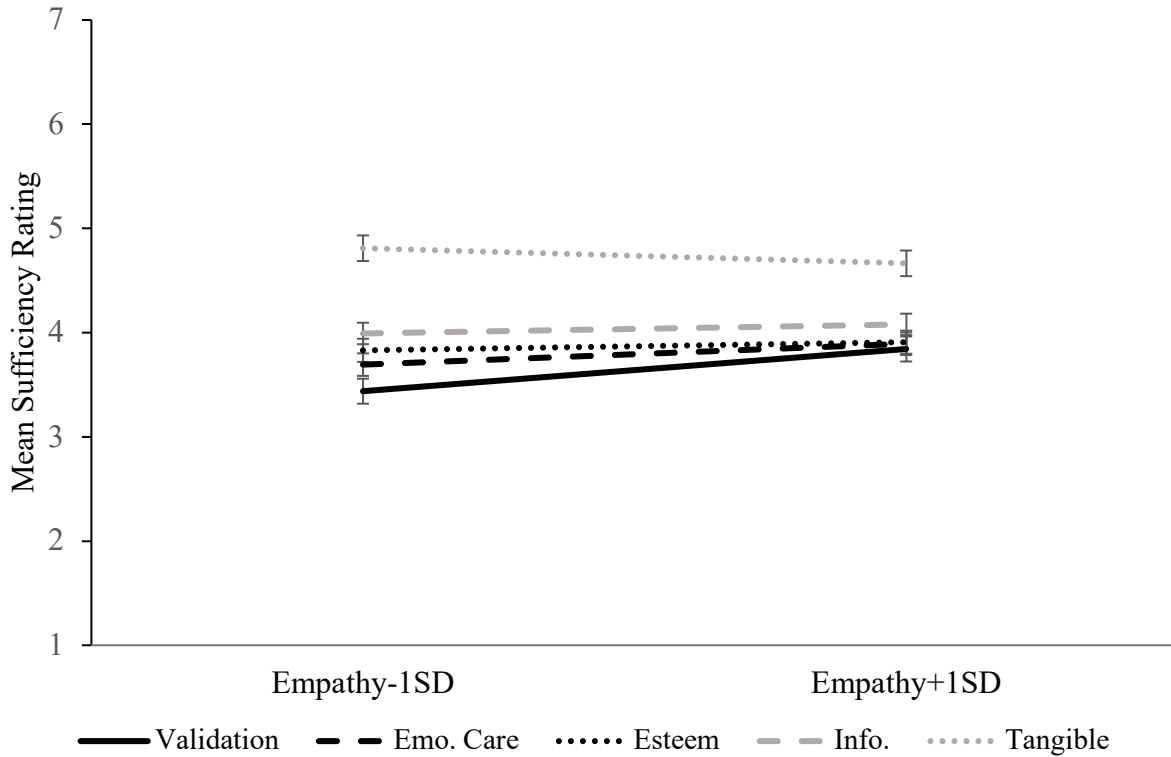
Personality Trait	Descriptive Statistics		Correlations with Key DVs			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Support Type	Effectiveness	Sufficiency	Effort
Empathy (IRI)	2.66	0.48	Validation	.05	.17*	.14*
			Emo. Care	.23**	.09	.19**
			Esteem	.24**	.04	.22**
			Informational	.17*	.04	.06
			Tangible	.27**	-.06	.14*
Agreeableness (BFI)	4.61	0.74	Validation	.04	-.05	-.33**
			Emo. Care	.23**	.02	-.32**
			Esteem	.24**	.05	-.33**
			Informational	.17*	-.01	-.26**
			Tangible	.27**	.13	-.33**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  level.

**Empathy.** Again, empathy moderated the relationship between support type and ratings of effectiveness ( $F(3.67, 711.44) = 4.076$ ,  $MSE = 0.66$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .021$ ), sufficiency ( $F(3.41, 657.33) = 3.062$ ,  $MSE = 0.76$ ,  $p = .022$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .016$ ), and effort ( $F(3.55, 685.81) = 4.087$ ,  $MSE = 0.28$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .021$ ). Each of these effects were further explored. Although empathy did not show a unique effect on the ratings of the effectiveness or effort of emotionally validating support messages, it did have a unique effect on ratings of sufficiency. Empathy was more strongly positively associated with the perceived sufficiency of emotional validation ( $r = .17$ ,  $p = .018$ ) than each other support type (all  $|r|s < .10$ , all  $ps > .05$ ), as detailed in Table 6 and shown in Figure 3. This finding suggests that higher empathy may attenuate the tendency to under value emotional validation relative to other types of support. However, this result should be interpreted with caution, as it was not found in Study 1.

**Figure 3**

*Mean Support Response Sufficiency as Moderated by Empathy*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

**Agreeableness.** A marginally significant interaction was found between participants' agreeableness and their ratings of the effectiveness of different support responses,  $F(3.67, 708.39) = 2.464$ ,  $MSE = 0.66$ ,  $p = .049$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .013$ . Further analyses suggest that agreeableness moderated ratings of the effectiveness of all support responses except emotional validation, indicating that validation may be unique compared to other types of support. However, this was not found in Study 1, so further exploration is necessary. Agreeableness did not interact with ratings of sufficiency or effort.

**Scenario-Specific Perceptions and Experiences.** As in Study 1, data on event negativity, event seriousness, experience of similar events, and experience of similar disclosure

situations were used to explore how different situational elements may impact support providers' ratings of the effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort of different support responses. Although there were some significant correlations (see Table 7), these variables did not show any consistent patterns; therefore, they were not explored further.

**Table 7**

*Scenario-Specific Perceptions and Experiences Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Scenario	Scenario-Specific Variable	Descriptive Statistics		Correlations with Support Response Ratings			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Support Type	Effectiveness	Sufficiency	Effort
Parental Divorce	Event Negativity	5.95	1.03	Validation	-.07	-.18*	-.18*
				Emo. Care	.12	-.07	-.18*
				Esteem	.18*	.09	-.18*
				Info.	.01	-.07	-.14
				Tangible	.28**	.11	-.15
	Event Seriousness	5.92	1.13	Validation	-.04	-.14	-.23**
				Emo. Care	.09	-.04	-.23**
				Esteem	.16	.04	-.24**
				Info.	.00	-.14	-.15
				Tangible	.18*	.08	-.18*
	Experience of Similar Events	3.16	2.30	Validation	.17	.00	.08
				Emo. Care	.00	.03	.14
				Esteem	.07	.04	.07
				Info.	.08	-.01	.10
				Tangible	.02	-.03	.09
	Experience of Similar Disclosure Situations	4.44	2.26	Validation	.01	.04	-.03
				Emo. Care	.14	.06	-.03
				Esteem	.07	.09	-.06
				Info.	.20*	.15	-.06
				Tangible	.07	.06	.01
Difficult Boss	Event Negativity	5.65	1.10	Validation	.08	-.04	-.23**
				Emo. Care	.20**	-.05	-.26**
				Esteem	.08	-.10	-.21**
				Info.	.30**	.16*	-.26**
				Tangible	.26**	.07	-.27**

	Event Seriousness	5.14	1.26	Validation	.09	-.09	-.21**
				Emo. Care	.14*	-.06	-.16*
				Esteem	-.01	-.15*	-.11
				Info.	.18*	.08	-.15*
				Tangible	.12	-.02	-.20**
Experience of Similar Events	3.67	2.03	Validation	.20**	.08	.08	
			Emo. Care	.08	.03	.17*	
			Esteem	.13	.04	.15*	
			Info.	-.02	-.13	.13	
			Tangible	-.01	-.09	.11	
Experience of Similar Disclosure Situations	4.10	2.04	Validation	.20**	.07	-.08	
			Emo. Care	.25**	.10	-.01	
			Esteem	.07	.03	.04	
			Info.	.15*	-.05	-.02	
			Tangible	.11	.00	-.05	
Disappointing Grades	Event Negativity	5.51	1.29	Validation	-.21**	-.22**	-.06
				Emo. Care	.03	-.06	-.16*
				Esteem	.15*	.06	-.20**
				Info.	-.02	-.09	-.12
				Tangible	.24**	.04	-.19
Event Seriousness	5.53	1.72	Validation	-.13	-.15*	-.05	
			Emo. Care	.07	-.08	-.16*	
			Esteem	.17*	.04	-.17*	
			Info.	-.05	-.10	-.10	
			Tangible	.20**	-.01	-.11	
Experience of Similar Events	5.45	1.71	Validation	-.04	-.13	-.09	
			Emo. Care	.13	.02	-.15*	
			Esteem	.21**	.06	-.21**	
			Info.	.05	.03	-.13	
			Tangible	.30**	.02	.01	
Experience of Similar Disclosure Situations	5.45	1.71	Validation	-.10	-.13	-.08	
			Emo. Care	.16*	.08	-.22	
			Esteem	.18*	.03	-.25	
			Info.	.07	-.02	-.16	
			Tangible	.13	.00	-.10	

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  level.

## Discussion

Study 2 offered a conceptual replication of Study 1, providing further support for my predictions. After collapsing across manipulation conditions that did not significantly differ from



one another, I found that support providers perceive emotionally validating support messages as being significantly less effective than all other types of messages in this study. Support providers also rated emotional validation as less effortful and sufficient than action-facilitating support types (i.e., informational and tangible support), but not nurturant support types (i.e., emotional care and esteem support). Unlike Study 1, the exploratory findings from Study 2 indicate that these perceptions may be linked to support providers' empathy, but further research is necessary to better understand this effect and why it was not found in Study 1. Additional exploratory analyses suggest that support providers' perceptions of emotional validation do not appear to be linked to certain individual differences (i.e., agreeableness, negative emotionality, and self-esteem), aspects of the situation (i.e., event negativity and event seriousness), or the support providers' past experiences (i.e., experience of similar events or disclosure situations).

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The present work provides some preliminary evidence that support providers tend to devalue emotional validation relative to other types of social support. Two initial exploratory studies found that support providers perceived emotional validation to be less helpful to support seekers than action-facilitating support (i.e., informational and tangible support) and, to a lesser extent, other types of nurturant support (i.e., emotional care and esteem support). This suggests that support providers may tend to devalue emotional validation, particularly relative to messages that are aimed at directly addressing a support seeker's stressor, and this may be one reason why they often fail to provide adequate emotional validation during support interactions.

### **Implications and Contributions**

Past research on social support has found that people are often dissatisfied with the support they receive (High & Steuber, 2014; Xu & Burleson, 2001), and this dissatisfaction may stem from receiving support that does not effectively convey a deep understanding of the support seeker and their perspective (Cutrona, 1990; Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Brock & Lawrence, 2009; Reis et al., 2004). However, this body of work has largely focused on the perceptions of the support seeker, rather than the support provider, leaving a gap in the literature as to *why* support providers often fail to give this kind of support (for a notable exception, see Marigold et al., 2014). By focusing on the unique perspective of support providers, the current research aimed to fill this gap.

The present work adds to a small but growing body of literature suggesting that support providers may be particularly likely to overvalue action-facilitating support and undervalue emotional validation and other types of nurturant support (McLaren & High, 2019; Xu & Burleson, 2001). The theorized self-regulatory framework offers a novel way to interpret these

robust findings by proposing that support providers' devaluation of emotional validation may stem from support providers' conflation of the goal to help the support seeker cope and their goal of making the support seeker feel better in the moment, which may be impacting the means (i.e., support messages) they select to pursue their helping goals. In other words, if support providers' evaluations of the effectiveness of different types of support messages are influenced by the extent to which it is perceived to make the support seeker feel better now, emotional validation (i.e., messages focused on inviting the support seeker to explore, express, and understand their negative emotions) may be perceived as less effective because this type of support does not aim to immediately reduce the receiver's stressor or distress.

Although the current studies provide evidence that emotionally validating messages are perceived by support providers to be less effective, sufficient, and effortful compared to messages containing other types of support, these studies did not directly test the proposed goal-conflation mechanism. Future research on social support would benefit from directly testing false goal alignment by manipulating support provider's helping goals. Taking the role of support provider, participants could be given instructions that either explicitly align these two goals (e.g., "your goal is to help the support seeker cope by making them feel better right now"), or that more closely align the goal of helping the support seeker cope and the means of emotional validation (e.g., "your goal is to help the support seeker cope by making them feel understood"). If it is found that support providers show further devaluation when the goal to make the support recipient feel better now is especially salient, this finding would support the proposed goal conflation mechanism.

Not only would directly testing this proposed mechanism shed light on how support providers' helping goals influence the support messages they offer to those in need, but it would

also help researchers identify which goals are most influential in this process. I propose that it is the goal of helping a support seeker feel better in the moment that may be leading support providers to prioritize action-facilitating support messages over emotional validation and other types of nurturant support. However, an alternative explanation for these findings is that providing action-facilitating support is more strongly associated with feeling like a competent support provider because these types of messages propel the support interaction in a more proactive direction. For example, emotionally validating support invites the support seeker to explore their negative thoughts and feelings, meaning that the content of the support interaction is being driven primarily by the support seeker. By contrast, offering advice or tangible resources might be more strongly associated with feeling competent and agentic in support provision because support providers are adding new ideas to the interaction in pursuit of a helpful solution. This possibility should be explored in future work.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

#### **Methodological Limitations**

The present work had some important methodological limitations that should be addressed in future studies. For one, the support responses used in this study sometimes failed to capture just one type of support. For example, all responses tended to begin with a phrase expressing condolences (e.g., “I’m so sorry to hear about your parents”) or surprise (e.g., “I can’t believe your boss is such a hothead”) about the distressing event, both of which subtly communicate that the discloser’s negative feelings are valid. This issue was most pronounced in tangible support responses, which tended to express not only the support provider’s willingness to sacrifice their personal resources to address the issue, but also their care and concern for the support seeker. In other words, these responses may have reflected key elements of different

action-facilitating and nurturant support types, leading them to be perceived as more optimal means to their helping goals than other messages that more effectively captured just one type of support. This overlap may be one reason why tangible support was consistently rated as being the most effective, effortful, and sufficient by support providers.

One possibility is that support providers may believe that seekers' desire to feel validated must be addressed prior to offering alternative nurturant or action-facilitating messages. That is, support providers may perceive other types of support as less effective if they are not combined with emotional validation. Future work would benefit from the development of more "pure" stimuli that effectively depicts just one type of support, which would allow researchers to better disentangle how these different types of support are perceived by support providers.

Although creating responses that uniquely capture just one type of support is important for disentangling how support providers perceive different types of social support, it does not offer an ecologically valid account of what support provision typically looks like, nor does it allow us to draw conclusions about how these perceptions influence real-world support provision. When taking the role of support provider, people may offer a combination of several types of support based on a number of different individual, relational, and situational factors (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). The present work allows us to speculate about the real-world implications of support provider's support perceptions, but further research is required to understand the impact of devaluation effects found in the present studies on how people spontaneously generate support messages.

Not only is it important to understand the real-world implications of these perceptions for support providers, but it is also critical to understand how these effects play out in dyadic support interactions and how everyday support provision can be improved. The present work was based

on past research suggesting that support seekers generally feel under-benefitted in nurturant support (McLaren & High, 2019; Xu & Burleson, 2001), and that support seekers may perceive emotional validation as a particularly critical element of effective support (Benitez et al., 2022). However, this research was designed to exclusively explore the perceptions of support providers; therefore, it did not offer a direct comparison of these perceptions to those of support seekers. Employing dyadic study designs, such as those used by Marigold and colleagues (2014) which examined actual support exchanges, would also allow future research to explore how training people to prioritize offering emotional validation could improve the quality of everyday support interactions. While past work has shown that skills in emotional validation can be trained to improve empathic communication in a medical setting (Linton et al., 2017), research has yet to explore the effects of similar interventions on improving support provision more broadly. Given the benefits associated with receiving effective social support (Feeney & Collins, 2015; MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011; Uchino, 2009; Cohen, 2004; Matsunaga, 2011), using the current and past research on social support to inform the development of training techniques to improve the quality of support provision in everyday support interactions is a critical area for future research.

### **Surprising Correlations Among Measures**

The current research yielded some surprising relationships between the key dependent variables (i.e., effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort) that I believe warrant follow-up exploration. Study 1 showed that ratings of the degree of effort associated with providing a certain type of support response were typically negatively correlated with ratings of the sufficiency of the same type of response (see Table 2). In other words, the more effortful support is, the less participants felt that it would be “enough” to appropriately help the support seeker. In Study 2, I added items

to the effort measure to account for how uncomfortable a support provider would feel if they were to offer a given support message. After adding these items, the counterintuitive negative correlation between effort and sufficiency was strengthened, such that every type of support response showed a significant small to moderate correlation between effort and sufficiency (see Table 5). Moreover, Study 2 showed negative correlations between response effort and effectiveness, such that the more effortful a response was, the less it was perceived to effectively help the support seeker.

I can only speculate why these effects occurred. Perhaps when people exert more effort towards constructing a support message, they evaluate the quality of that response more harshly. Support providers may expect that highly effortful responses should inherently be more helpful, thus “raising the bar” with which they compare the support they provide, leading them to see more effortful responses as less sufficient. Alternatively, people’s perceptions of support may be influenced by how they feel after providing it. Since offering effortful support can drain one’s mental resources, support providers may perceive that emotional exhaustion to be an indicator of poorer support provision. It is also not out of the realm of possibility that the sample, consisting entirely of undergraduate students, showed an effect that is not generalizable and that this effect would not replicate in other populations. Ultimately, it is unknown why these two studies found that ratings of response effort were negatively correlated with ratings of sufficiency (and, to a lesser extent, effectiveness), but this perplexing relationship certainly warrants further research.

### **The Role of Gender**

Although some caution must be applied in interpreting gender differences given that men made up a relatively small percentage of the samples (i.e., 15.7% in Study 1; 19.5% in Study 2), there was an interesting gender difference observed in both studies. Across all types of support,

men gave significantly higher ratings of effort compared to women, suggesting that men perceive the act of providing social support to be more taxing than women. Further, Study 2 showed that men gave lower ratings of effectiveness relative to women, though this effect was not significant in Study 1. Together, these findings suggest that men may not only perceive support provision as more costly to themselves, but they may also perceive it to be less beneficial to others. Future research should explore whether these perceptions of the costs and benefits of offering social support may have implications for support providers who are men, namely a decreased likelihood that they would take on a support providing role.

This work adds to a significant body of literature suggesting that men may be less skilled at providing social support compared to women (i.e., the Skill Deficit Hypothesis; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Past work has found that men tend to produce less sensitive and comforting support messages (Burleson, 1982; Hale et al., 1997; Samter, 2002), even after accounting for the support seeker's gender, controllability of the problem, and the level of effort the support seeker had previously exhausted towards resolving their problem (MacGeorge et al., 2003). If men are indeed less skilled support providers, attempting to provide social support could be a much more daunting task, which may have contributed to the Study 1 and 2 finding that men rated all types of support as being more effortful compared to women. Similarly, men's skill deficit may lead them to have fewer interactions in which they feel they have effectively provided support. Over time, this differential experience may contribute to a general perception that social support is less effective, which could be one reason why men rated support messages as less effective compared to women in Study 2.

While previous research offers robust support for the Skill Deficit Hypothesis (Burleson, 1982; Hale et al., 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999; Samter, 2002; MacGeorge et al., 2003), little



work has explored the source of these gender differences. One aim of future research could be to better understand how these differences have developed (i.e., whether they are a result of gendered social norms and socialization, unique developmental experiences, differential processing, etc.) and how interventions may be able to improve support provision in more casual social settings, particularly for men and other groups who may be less skilled support providers.

### **The Role of Personality**

Lastly, given the exploratory nature of this work, I tried to broadly account for a variety of individual and situational factors that may influence support providers' perceptions of different types of support. The methodology offered some insight as to which factors may be key moderators or important control variables, but it did not allow us to explore these effects in detail. While the situational variables included in these studies did not appear to have significant consistent effects, the moderating role of certain personality traits may be an interesting avenue for follow-up research.

One such trait was provider empathy, as measured by their self-report IRI scores (Davis, 1980). Empathy was found to interact with support type on ratings of response effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort. Across both studies, only one of these interactions suggested an effect of empathy on ratings of emotional validation that were unlike the effect of empathy on ratings of other types of support. Specifically, empathy uniquely interacted with validation on ratings of response sufficiency in Study 2, such that when people were lower (vs. higher) in empathy, they tended to rate emotionally validating support messages as less sufficient. However, effects were more consistently distinct for ratings of other types of support, particularly tangible support. Indeed, in both studies, people higher (vs. lower) in empathy tended to rate tangible support messages as significantly less effective and less sufficient, while empathy was not a significant

moderator of ratings of other types of support. Follow-up research is necessary to understand (a) why people lower (vs. higher) in empathy rated emotional validation as less sufficient in Study 2, and (b) why empathy might have such a unique influence on support providers' perceptions of tangible support. Further, these findings might have implications for interventions designed to improve support provision. Past work indicates that empathy can be induced to have a powerful impact on people's perceptions (Batson et al., 1997; Davis et al., 2017). Perhaps similar empathy manipulations could reduce support providers' devaluation of emotional validation, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will provide this critical element of social support.

These studies also showed that agreeableness, as measured by self-report BFI-2-S scores (Soto & John, 2017), moderated perceptions of the effectiveness of certain support responses. Study 2 found that effectiveness ratings of all support types except for emotional validation were significantly moderated by agreeableness such that participants higher in agreeableness tended to rate all support messages except for emotional validation as being more effective compared to those lower in agreeableness; however, Study 1 did not show this effect. Further research is required to draw conclusions about the role of agreeableness in support providers' perceptions of different types of social support, and why this unique effect was found in Study 2 but not Study 1.

## **CONCLUSION**

Receiving effective social support is of tremendous value to individual well-being, yet people often feel that the support they receive is unhelpful and communicates a poor understanding of their personal needs and desires. For this reason, it is critical to understand how support providers approach the important task of providing effective social support. The present research offers valuable insight into how support providers' perceptions of different types of social support may be paving the way for less effective support provision. Two studies provided preliminary evidence that support providers may be prone to undervaluing emotional validation relative to other types of social support. This error may be one reason why people often fail to provide adequate emotional validation during support interactions.

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## Appendix A

Scenarios and support responses used in Studies 1 and 2.

### Instructions

In this study, you will be presented with descriptions of three different scenarios in which a hypothetical close friend discloses a negative experience. You will then be asked to respond to questions assessing five different possible support responses to each of those scenarios. Please read the disclosure scenarios and support responses carefully.

### Parental Divorce

You have noticed that your friend has seemed sad over the last few days, so you ask them what's wrong and they say the following:

Honestly, things are really rough right now. I just found out that my parents are getting a divorce and I can't believe it. They have been married longer than I have even been alive, and I always thought they would be together forever. I'm just so confused, they seemed happy. I visited them a couple of months ago and they seemed to be getting along as well as ever, but I guess that was all just a show. Apparently, they just don't love each other anymore. My dad has already started moving his stuff to a friend's house while he tries to find a new apartment, and it sounds like my mom hasn't really left her room in a few days. I just can't believe this is happening – it's really over for them.

## *Support Responses*

### **Emotional Validation**

I am so sorry to hear about your parents, you must be really struggling right now. I can't even imagine what you are going through, you have every right to feel blindsided and disheartened. Divorces are really difficult, and I am sorry that this was thrown at you so unexpectedly.

### **Emotional Care Support**

I am so sorry to hear about your parents. I just want to let you know that I am always here for you if you need someone to listen to you. I want to help you through this as best as I can!

### **Esteem Support**

I'm so sorry to hear about your parents. I hope you know that this isn't your fault at all, and that you have a whole network of people that would jump at the opportunity to help you in any way that they can. You have survived every problem that you have ever faced, and I am sure that with your strength and resilience, you will get through this!

### **Informational Support**

I can't believe the news about your parents! I was wondering if it might help to talk to them about how you are feeling. They might think that because you are an adult you won't be as affected by something like a divorce, so talking might help them understand the impact that this is having on you. At the end of the day, it's important that they know how you are feeling about all of this.

### **Tangible Support**

I can't believe the news about your parents! Is there anything that I can do to make your life a little bit easier right now? I am free for lunch sometime this week, and I would love to buy you a meal from your favourite restaurant. I imagine that your dad is expecting you to help him move,

so if you would like I am happy to take a day off work to help you guys out! I just want to do anything I can to make this a little bit easier on you.

### Difficult Boss

Your friend has been unusually quiet recently, so you think something may be wrong. You ask them whether everything is okay, and they respond with the following:

Work just really sucks and I don't know how much longer I can do this. My new boss is the worst – he is inconsiderate, condescending, and rude to everyone in the office. Yesterday, I accidentally wrote the wrong date on a form and he screamed at me in front of everyone. I looked like a total idiot; it was so embarrassing! I used to really love working there because everyone was so friendly and helpful, but now it seems like the boss' bad attitude is spreading and creating a miserable environment. I know everyone can feel exhausted by work sometimes, but right now I am just feeling really drained.

### *Support Responses*

#### **Emotional Validation**

I am so sorry to hear that your new boss is so hot-headed and unpredictable. It would be very upsetting to be yelled at in front of your coworkers, especially for something as minor as an incorrect date. A negative work environment can cause a lot of unnecessary stress, and I understand your frustration.



### **Emotional Care Support**

I am sorry to hear that you are struggling at work. I just want to let you know that I am always here for you if you need to vent out your frustration about your boss to someone. I want to help you feel better in any way that I can!

### **Esteem Support**

I'm sorry that you are struggling at work. I'm sure your coworkers are feeling the same way and would want to help you feel better about this in any way that they can. You are a hard worker and a valuable employee, and it won't be long before your boss realizes how lucky he is lucky to have someone like you at the office!

### **Informational Support**

I can't believe the new boss is such a hothead! It might help to talk to HR about his behaviour and how it is impacting the office. They might not have any idea that he is creating such a stressful environment and anything you say will be confidential. Even just talking to your coworkers about how you are feeling might help because discussing the issue is the first step to creating positive changes in the office.

### **Tangible Support**

I can't believe your new boss is such a hothead! Is there anything that I can do to make your life a little bit easier right now? I know lunch breaks are probably the last thing on your mind, but if you are available sometime this week, I would love to brighten your day by buying you your favourite meal. I just want to do anything I can to make this a little bit easier on you.

## Disappointing Grades

In recent weeks, you have noticed that your friend has been looking increasingly drained. You ask them if they are doing okay, and they respond with the following:

School is really stressful right now, and I don't know how much more I can take. No matter how hard I try in my classes, I can't seem to get above a 75% on anything. Meanwhile, I know people who seem to barely try in school who have a 90% average, it just feels so unfair! Maybe I don't have what it takes to be in university. For my last exam, I studied for a week, fell behind in all of my other classes, and still only ended up with a 72%. I am so frustrated and exhausted, and nothing I do is good enough. I am trying really hard to make sure that I have balance and am taking time for myself, but it seems impossible. I am starting to really wonder if I deserve to be here, because it seems like everyone is so much smarter and more well-adjusted than I am.

## *Support Responses*

### **Emotional Validation**

I am sorry to hear about how frustrating school has been for you lately! You must be feeling so drained and worried about your classes. I know that this kind of thing can really make you feel like you aren't as smart as the other students, which can make studying so much harder. I understand how you are feeling right now and how difficult it is to face continuous disappointment in your grades.

### **Emotional Care Support**

I am sorry to hear about how frustrating school has been for you lately! I just want to let you know that I have experienced the same thing and I am always here for you if you need someone to talk to. I want to help you get through this term in any way that I can!

### **Esteem Support**

I'm so sorry to hear how frustrating school has been for you lately! You are such a smart and hard-working person, please don't let this difficult term make you feel like you aren't good enough. I bet your friends in your classes that are probably feeling the exact same way. You have faced tough courses in the past and you have always made it through them, so I know that you will get through this term as well!

### **Informational Support**

Struggling with school can be very difficult. Have you made sure that you are taking enough breaks from studying? I know that often students can overwork themselves when they want to improve their grades, and a lot of research suggests that doing this can actually be worse for learning. It's important to have reasonable expectations and to avoid being too hard on yourself.

### **Tangible Support**

Struggling with school can be very difficult. Is there anything I could do to help you at all? I know that I have taken some of your current classes in past terms and I finished those courses with good grades, would you like some free tutoring? I want to do anything I can to help you feel a little less stressed.

## Appendix B

Materials used to measure scenario-specific perceptions and experiences in both studies. All items were presented in random order.

### Scenario Specific Perceptions

How ... do you think this event is?

- negative
- serious

Rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

### Scenario Specific Experiences

To what extent have you experienced ... similar to the one described?

- an event
- a disclosure situation

Rated on a scale from 1 (*I have never experienced anything like this*) to 7 (*I have experienced something extremely similar to this*).

## Appendix C

Materials used to measure support response perceptions in Study 1. All items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) and were presented in random order.

If I provide this support to my friend...

### Effectiveness

- my friend will find it helpful
- my friend will feel better about the situation
- my friend will feel supported
- I will feel like I am providing good support
- I will feel like I am saying exactly what my friend wants to hear
- I will feel like a helpful person
- I believe my friend will be more likely to come to me in the future when they need support
- my friend will appreciate my help
- my friend will seek support from others because I am not giving them what they need (reverse-coded)

### Sufficiency

- my friend will wish I had said more (reverse-coded)
- I will feel like I am not saying enough (reverse-coded)
- I will feel like I am not saying the right thing (reverse-coded)

## Effort

- it will take a lot of effort
- I will feel like I am using a lot of mental and emotional energy

## Appendix D

Materials used to measure personality variables in both studies. Scales and scale items were presented in random order.

### Empathy

#### *Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980)*

The following statements inquire about your thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations. For each item, indicate how well it describes you by choosing the appropriate number on the scale.

#### *Perspective Taking Subscale*

- I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the “other guy’s” point of view (reverse-coded)
- I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision
- I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective
- if I’m sure I’m right about something, I don’t waste much time listening to other people’s arguments
- I believe there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both
- when I’m upset at someone, I usually try to “put myself in their shoes” for a while
- before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place

#### *Empathic Concern Subscale*

- I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me

- sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems (reverse-coded)
- when I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them
- other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal (reverse-coded)
- when I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them (reverse-coded)
- I am often quite touched by things that I see happen
- I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person

*Personal Distress Subscale*

- in emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease
- I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation
- when I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm (reverse-coded)
- being in a tense emotional situation scares me
- I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies (reverse-coded)
- I tend to lose control during emergencies
- When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces

Rated on a scale from 1 (*does not describe me well*) to 5 (*describes me very well*).

Agreeableness

*Big Five Inventory – 2 – Short Form (Soto & John, 2017)*

Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.



I am someone who...

- is compassionate, has a soft heart
- is sometimes rude to others (reverse-coded)
- assumes the best about people
- can be cold and uncaring (reverse-coded)
- is respectful, treats others with respect
- tends to find fault with others (reverse-coded)

Rated on a scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*).

### Negative Emotionality

*Big Five Inventory – 2 – Short Form (Soto & John, 2017)*

Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

I am someone who...

- worries a lot
- tends to feel depressed, blue
- is emotionally stable, not easily upset (reverse-coded)
- is relaxed, handles stress well (reverse-coded)
- feels secure, comfortable with self (reverse-coded)
- is temperamental, gets emotional easily

Rated on a scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*).

Self-Esteem

*Single item*

To what extent do you consider yourself to be someone with high self-esteem?

Rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

## Appendix E

Results of analyses exploring between-scenario differences in participants' perceptions of different types of social support for both studies.

Three one-way (support type: emotional validation vs. emotional care support vs. esteem support vs. informational support vs. tangible support) repeated-measures analysis of variance (two-tailed) were conducted in each study to explore the effect of support type on ratings of effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort within each scenario. These scenario-specific analyses were conducted not only to guide development of materials for future studies, but also to explore if patterns replicated across scenarios. Across all three scenarios in both studies, patterns were generally consistent with results of the aggregate analyses, with emotional validation consistently being rated relatively low in effectiveness, sufficiency, and effort relative to most other types of social support.

### Study 1

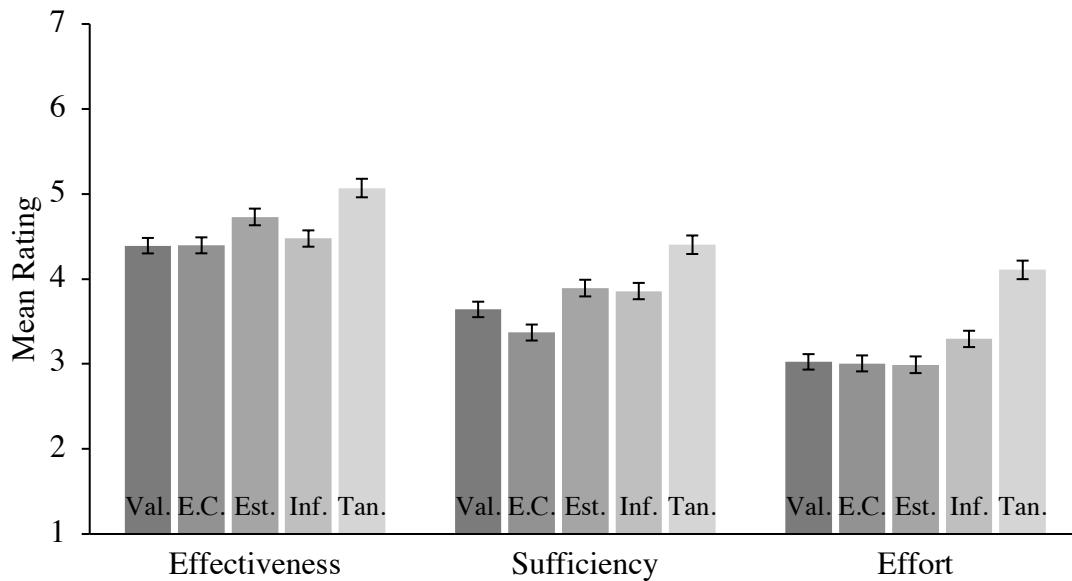
#### *Parental Divorce*

There were significant main effects of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(3.75, 816.88) = 17.60, MSE = 1.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .075$ ), sufficiency ( $F(3.78, 823.58) = 22.26, MSE = 1.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .093$ ), and effort ( $F(3.18, 692.46) = 46.37, MSE = 1.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .175$ ). Specifically, participants reported that (a) emotionally validating support responses ( $M = 4.39, SD = 1.08$ ) were significantly less effective than esteem ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.03; p < .001$ ) and tangible ( $M = 5.07, SD = 1.30; p < .001$ ) support responses, (b) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.64, SD = 1.35$ ) were significantly less sufficient than tangible support

responses ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and (c) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) were significantly less effortful than informational ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ;  $p = .011$ ) and tangible ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ;  $p < .001$ ) support responses (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Parental Divorce Scenario DV Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

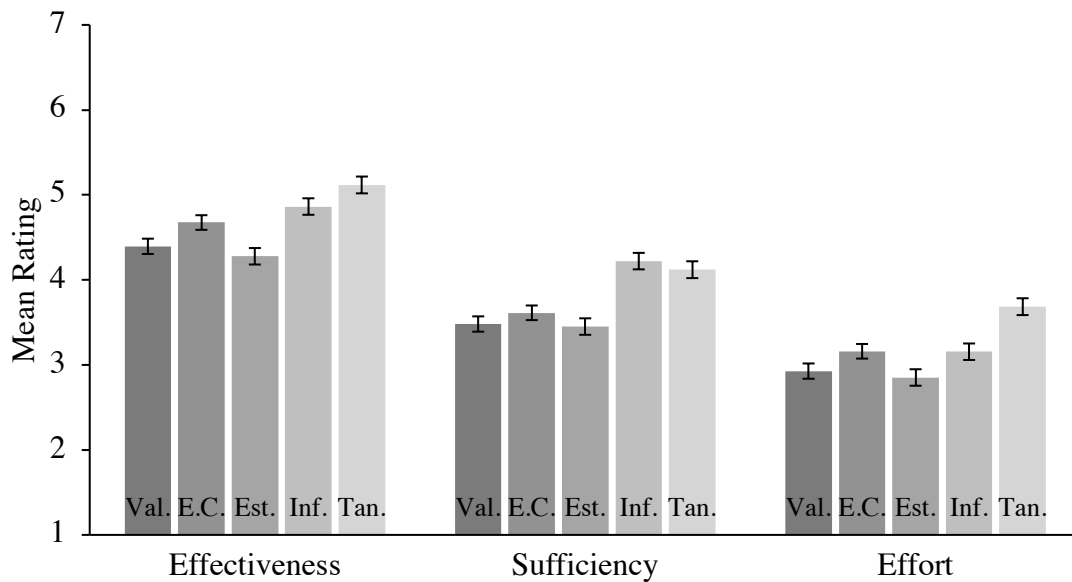
### *Difficult Boss*

There were significant main effects of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(3.71, 808.62) = 25.99$ ,  $MSE = 1.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .107$ ), sufficiency ( $F(3.85, 839.06) = 20.36$ ,  $MSE = 1.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .085$ ), and effort ( $F(3.62, 789.75) = 28.76$ ,  $MSE = 0.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .117$ ). Specifically, participants reported that (a) emotionally validating support responses ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) were significantly less effective than emotional care ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ;  $p = .021$ ), informational ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and tangible ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ;  $p < .001$ ) support responses, (b) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) were

significantly less sufficient than informational ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and tangible support responses ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and (c) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) were significantly less effortful than tangible ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ;  $p < .001$ ) support responses (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Difficult Boss Scenario DV Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

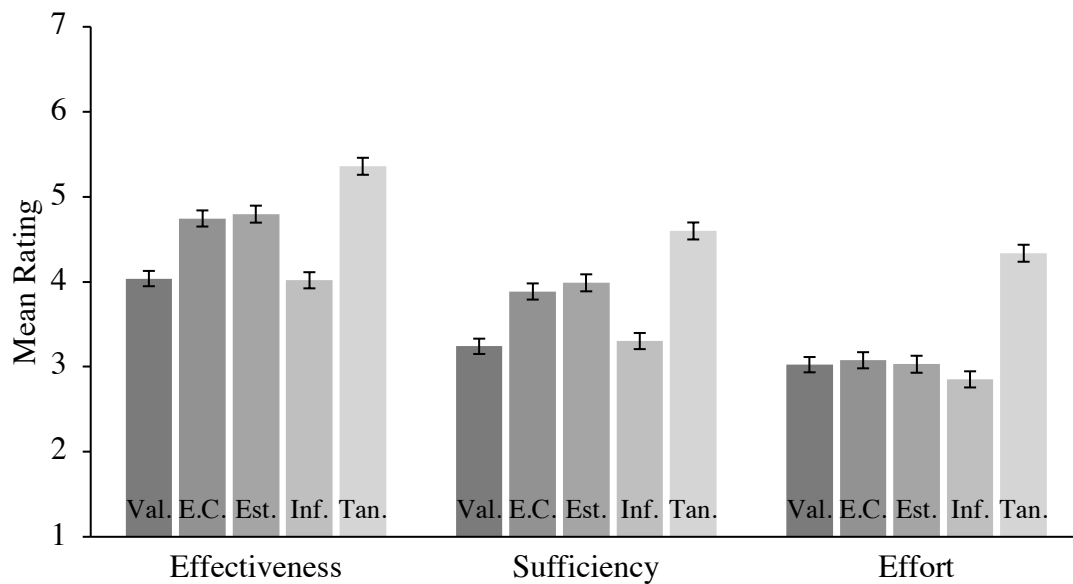
### *Disappointing Grades*

There were significant main effects of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(3.60, 787.90) = 65.97$ ,  $MSE = 1.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .232$ ), sufficiency ( $F(3.75, 821.68) = 51.03$ ,  $MSE = 1.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .189$ ), and effort  $F(3.06, 670.97) = 77.64$ ,  $MSE = 1.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .262$ ). Specifically, participants reported that (a) emotionally validating support responses ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) were significantly less effective than emotional care ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ;  $p < .001$ ), esteem ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and tangible ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ;  $p < .001$ )

support responses, (b) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.24, SD = 1.34$ ) were significantly less sufficient than emotional care ( $M = 3.89, SD = 1.42; p < .001$ ), esteem ( $M = 3.99, SD = 1.48; p < .001$ ), and tangible ( $M = 4.60, SD = 1.48; p < .001$ ) support responses, and (c) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.03, SD = 1.64$ ) were significantly less effortful than tangible ( $M = 4.34, SD = 1.69; p < .001$ ) support responses (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Disappointing Grades Scenario DV Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

## Study 2

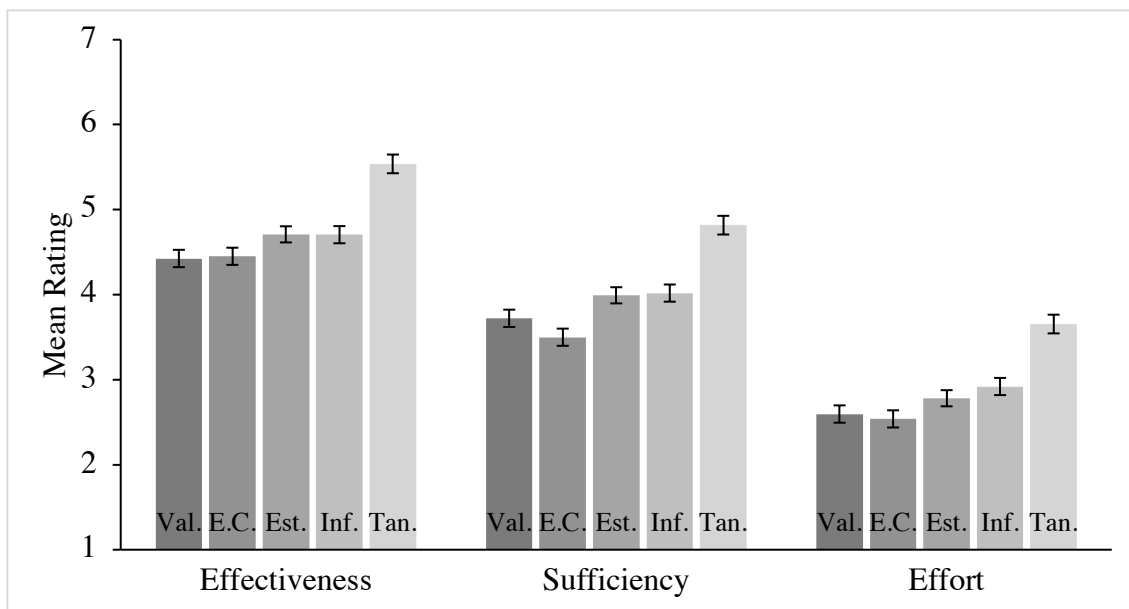
### *Parental Divorce*

There were significant main effects of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(3.88, 744.72) = 28.52, MSE = 1.43, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .129$ ), sufficiency ( $F(3.73, 712.51) = 31.18, MSE = 1.64, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .140$ ), and effort ( $F(3.29, 631.89) = 43.97, MSE = 1.08, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .186$ ). Specifically, participants reported that (a) emotionally validating support responses ( $M = 4.43,$

$SD = 1.30$ ) were significantly less effective than tangible ( $M = 5.54, SD = 1.20; p < .001$ ) support responses, (b) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.72, SD = 1.49$ ) were significantly less sufficient than tangible support responses ( $M = 4.81, SD = 1.65; p < .001$ ), and (c) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 2.60, SD = 1.41$ ) were significantly less effortful than informational ( $M = 2.92, SD = 1.54; p = .001$ ) and tangible ( $M = 3.65, SD = 1.58; p < .001$ ) support responses (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Parental Divorce Scenario DV Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

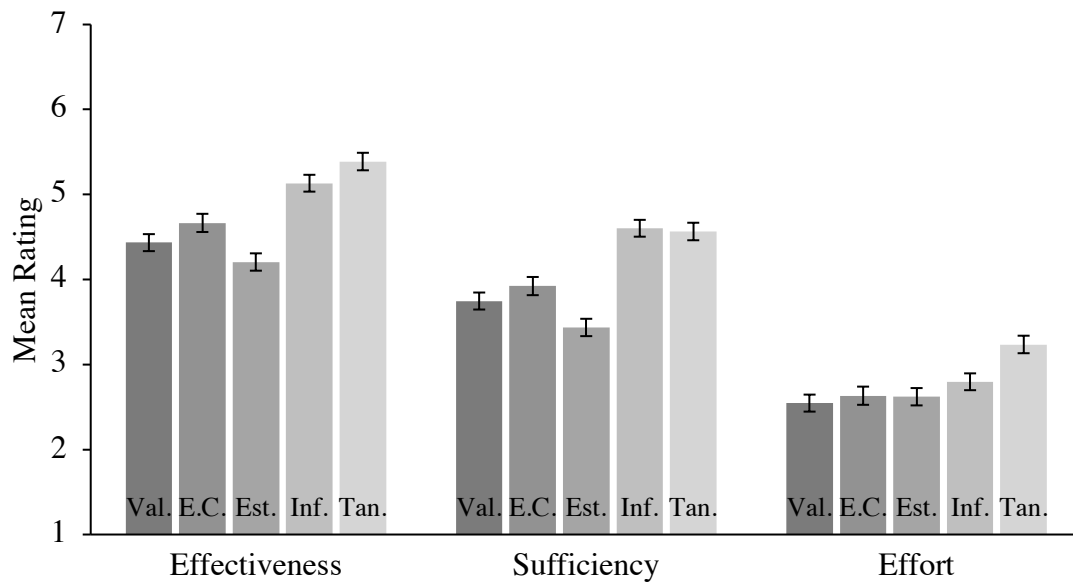
### *Difficult Boss*

There were significant main effects of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(3.69, 712.67) = 39.42, MSE = 1.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .170$ ), sufficiency ( $F(3.69, 711.24) = 35.41, MSE = 1.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .155$ ), and effort ( $F(3.65, 707.94) = 21.23, MSE = 0.78, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .099$ ). Specifically, participants reported that (a) emotionally validating support responses ( $M = 4.43,$

$SD = 1.31$ ) were significantly less effective informational ( $M = 5.13, SD = 1.16; p < .001$ ) and tangible ( $M = 5.39, SD = 1.13; p < .001$ ) support responses, (b) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.49$ ) were significantly more sufficient than esteem support ( $M = 3.44, SD = 1.53; p = .037$ ), but less sufficient than informational ( $M = 4.60, SD = 1.38; p < .001$ ) and tangible support responses ( $M = 4.57, SD = 1.43; p < .001$ ), and (c) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 2.55, SD = 1.39$ ) were significantly less effortful than informational ( $M = 2.80, SD = 1.47; p = .016$ ) and tangible ( $M = 3.24, SD = 1.46; p < .001$ ) support responses (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

*Difficult Boss Scenario DV Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

### *Disappointing Grades*

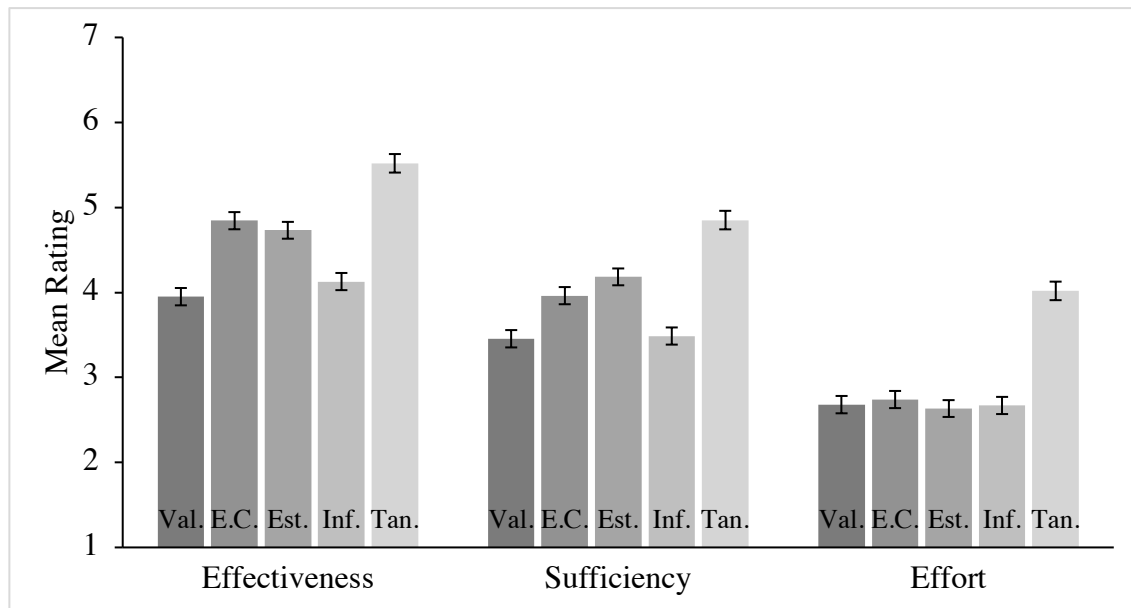
There were significant main effects of support type on ratings of response effectiveness ( $F(3.77, 731.07) = 53.72, MSE = 1.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .217$ ), sufficiency ( $F(3.84, 744.44) = 41.33,$



$MSE = 1.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .176$ ), and effort  $F(2.68, 516.76) = 75.22, MSE = 1.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .280$ ). Specifically, participants reported that (a) emotionally validating support responses ( $M = 3.95, SD = 1.43$ ) were significantly less effective than emotional care ( $M = 4.84, SD = 1.24; p < .001$ ), esteem ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.30; p < .001$ ), and tangible ( $M = 5.52, SD = 1.16; p < .001$ ) support responses, (b) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 3.45, SD = 1.53$ ) were significantly less sufficient than emotional care ( $M = 3.96, SD = 1.42; p < .001$ ), esteem ( $M = 4.18, SD = 1.41; p < .001$ ), and tangible ( $M = 4.85, SD = 1.52; p < .001$ ) support responses, and (c) emotionally validating responses ( $M = 2.68, SD = 1.42$ ) were significantly less effortful than tangible ( $M = 4.02, SD = 1.59; p < .001$ ) support responses (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9**

*Disappointing Grades Scenario DV Ratings by Support Type*



*Note.* Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error.

## Appendix F

Materials used to manipulate support providers' focus in Study 2. These were presented before reading each support response.

### Control

Please take a moment to read the following response to your friend.

### Perspective-Taking

Please take a moment to read the following response to your friend. As you read it, try to focus on how your friend feels about the event they have just disclosed to you and **imagine how they would feel while hearing this response.**

### Goal-Focus

Please take a moment to read the following response to your friend. As you read it, try to focus on what you could do to make your friend feel better about their situation. **Concentrate on being as helpful as possible.**

## Appendix G

Materials used to manipulate attention in Study 2. This was presented at the beginning of the study prior to reading any scenarios or support responses.

Recent research on decision making shows that choices are affected by context. Differences in how people feel, their previous knowledge and experience, and their environment can affect choices. To help us understand how people make decisions, we are interested in information about you. Specifically, we are interested in whether you actually take the time to read the instructions; if not, some results may not tell us very much about decision making in the real world. To show that you have read the instructions, please ignore the question below about how you are feeling and instead type in “I read the instructions”. You must answer this question correctly in order to participate in this study.

Please briefly describe how you are feeling right now:

[text box]

## Appendix H

Materials used to measure support response perceptions in Study 2. All items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

If I provide this support to my friend...

### Effectiveness

- my friend will find it helpful
- I will feel like I am providing good support
- my friend will appreciate my help
- I believe my friend will be more likely to come to me in the future when they need support

### Sufficiency

- my friend will wish I had said more (reverse-coded)
- I will feel like I am not saying enough (reverse coded)
- I will feel like I am not saying the right thing (reverse-coded)

### Effort

- it will take a lot of effort
- I will feel like I am using a lot of mental and emotional energy
- I will feel uncomfortable
- I will feel self-conscious
- I will feel awkward