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Perceived Effectiveness of Grief Comforting Messages

Moderated by Closeness

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Moderated by Closeness

by

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Dedication

To Lisa, who has been like a second mother and who first inspired my desire to write.
And to her amazing cats Herb and Cootie. Thank you for the butterscotch candies, and
thank you for opening your door to me, both figuratively and literally.

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Perceived Effectiveness of Grief Comforting Messages

Moderated by Closeness

Jessica Amy Knapp, PhD

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Rene Dailey

As helpful as social support can be, the reality is that some attempts to offer support are more helpful than others. In trying to be supportive, we can make things better, but we can also make things worse (Brashers et al., 2004; Burleson & Samter, 1985; Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). In everyday situations, simply bringing up a sensitive topic may cause negative emotions for a conversational partner or remind them of a topic that they are trying not to think about. In addition, it is possible to say something that makes a person feel worse about the way they are handling a delicate situation.

This dissertation applies Burleson and Samter's (1985) social support framework, a model of Verbal Person Centeredness (VPC), to the context of grief. This dissertation examines what types of grief support are most effective, and looks at whether, in some instances, more sophisticated messages are not the most comforting. This dissertation will examine whether closeness operates as a moderator, making moderately sophisticated messages of support more effective than highly sophisticated ones in some situations,

such as instances in which the person offering support is less close to the bereaved. It is hypothesized that this will happen due to threats to the bereaved's sense of independence or autonomy (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Hence, in some instances, it may be more helpful for people offering support to use moderately sophisticated messages.

Although experimental data from this dissertation did not support an interaction between closeness of target and helper and perceived effectiveness of support message, data from open-ended questions did suggest that individuals prefer moderately sophisticated messages from less close others (e.g., coworkers). Other themes from open-ended questions provide additional details about the type of support people in grief might desire.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Background and Rationale	6
Grief and Social Support: Theoretical Allies	9
Grief	10
What Emotions Are the Bereaved Likely to Feel?	15
Social Support	17
Introducing Moderators	22
Relational Closeness	24
Politeness Theory and Face	25
Hypotheses and Research Questions	28
Potential Control Variable: Sex Differences.....	32
Overview of Current Study	33
Chapter 3: Method	36
Participants.....	36
Procedures.....	37
Hypothetical Scenario: Experiment	38
Hypothetical Scenario: Open-ended Responses	42
Experiences of Grief: Open-ended Responses.....	42
Coding of Open-Ended Responses	43
Message Sophistication (H1 and H2)	43
Face Threat (H3).....	45
Chapter 4: Results	47
Analysis of Experimental Data (H1).....	47
Controlling for Sex	53

Responses to the Hypothetical Scenario (H2 and H3).....	53
Qualitative Analysis (RQ1-RQ3).....	57
<i>Condolences</i>	58
Desire Not To Talk	60
Distraction	61
Religion	62
Presence	63
Comfort	63
Reminiscing	64
Overview of Best Friend Versus Coworker Findings.....	64
Support for Those Who Have Experienced Grief.....	65
Conundrum Of Comforting.....	67
Understanding	67
Social And Relational Costs	68
Difference In Desired Support From Close Friends And Casual Acquaintances	69
Chapter 5: Discussion	70
Findings from the Experimental Data	71
Sex Differences	72
Findings from the Open-Ended Questions (H2— H3)	73
Main Thematic Qualitative Findings (RQ1—RQ3)	75
Chapter 6: Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions	86
Conclusion	92
Appendix A.....	94
Sample Recruitment Text	94
Research on Grief and Communication	94
Appendix B	95
Consent Form.....	95

Appendix C	99
Codebook	99
Verbal Person Centeredness	101
Politeness Theory, Brown & Levinson, 1978	101
Instructions.....	102
Coding Item 1	103
References.....	106

List of Tables

3.1 Demographics	36
4.1 Perceived Effectiveness of Comforting Messages, Moderated by Closeness.....	48
4.2 Mean Perceived Effectiveness, Moderated by Closeness, of Messages Chosen to Represent Each VPC Category	52
4.3 Coworkers—VPC Levels Observed vs. Expected	55
4.4 Best Friends—VPC Levels Observed vs. Expected	56
4.5 Occurrence of Negative Face	57

Chapter 1: Introduction

When someone is grieving, it is natural for others to want to comfort that person. However, many times, we feel at a loss for what to say. Or, we may not know the appropriate thing to say. Bowlby (1980) writes, “ ... not only is [loss] painful to experience but it is also painful to witness, if only because we are so impotent to help” (p. 7). As Bowlby points, out, we cannot return the lost loved one to the bereaved, but we can offer comforting words. When in this position, some people may not have the social skills to respond in the appropriate way. Some may take a chance and say the wrong thing. Others may say nothing, not wanting to risk saying the wrong thing. As communication scholars, this scenario provides an important opportunity for us to examine what makes for an effective comforting message targeted toward someone in grief. Each year, approximately 2.5 million people in the United States die with, on average, four people grieving their loss (Shear, 2012). This means, that in the U.S. alone, there are approximately 10 million people grieving in any given year. So we have a large population of people experiencing what has a great potential to be awkward and difficult communication. As communication scholars, it is our role to examine: 1) how this communication is currently being handled, and 2) whether there are ways in which it can be handled more effectively. This dissertation will examine how we can communicatively help those people who are going through the process of grief.

In the field of communication, the process of figuratively reaching out and offering assistance to someone in need is known as social support (Burleson 1985;

Goldsmith, 2004). Social support is an essential component of satisfying interpersonal relationships (Goldsmith, 2004). We expect those with whom we are close to be able to offer us support when we face a challenge (Goldsmith, 2004). Good social support can improve our lives in a myriad of ways. Not only is effectively communicated support perceived as better at producing helpful outcomes (Burleson, 1985; Burleson & Samter, 1985), effective social support is also linked to longer life, lower cardiovascular reactivity to a stressor, reduced incidence of disease, better illness recovery, and better coping with chronic illness (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Cohen, 2004; Franks, Wendorf, & Gonzalez, 2004; Lepore, Allen, & Evans, 1993; Leslie, Stein, & Rotheran-Borus, 2002). In both emotional and physical terms, good social support is associated with good health. Social support also makes us feel better about our relationships with the people who are offering support (Goldsmith, 2004). In a variety of ways, good social support improves our quality of life.

As helpful as social support can be, the reality is that some attempts to offer support are more helpful than others. In trying to be supportive, we can make things better, but we can also make things worse (Brashers et al., 2004; Burleson & Samter, 1985; Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Suls, Green, Rose, Lounsburn, & Gordon, 1997). In everyday situations, simply bringing up a sensitive topic may cause negative emotions for a conversational partner or remind them of a topic that they are trying not to think about. In addition, it is possible to say something that makes a person feel worse about the way they are handling a delicate situation. For example, by

asking a friend how they are handling their breakup, you may intend to offer support by checking in on their general emotional state, but as a result of your question, you may remind your friend of the sad event (which they might be trying to avoid thinking about), and your question will likely offer little social support. Or, you may have a friend who is trying to lose 10 pounds, and in an effort to be supportive, you say something like, “But you have such a pretty face.” Your intent is to tell your friend that she is so pretty, the few extra pounds do not matter. What she hears is that she is so heavy—heavier than she had even realized—that her body is unattractive and she should instead focus on the attractiveness of her face. These potential complications with social support will be addressed in greater detail later in this dissertation; but in sum, it is important to note that social support is a type of social interaction that involves potential risk for both the speaker and receiver of the message.

This dissertation will apply Burleson and Samter’s (1985) social support framework, a model of Verbal Person Centeredness, to the context of grief. This research will examine what types of grief support are most effective and will look at whether, in some instances, more sophisticated messages are not the most comforting. Burleson (1985) writes that the best social support is that which is person-centered (i.e., focused on the person who needs the support). For Burleson, the more sophisticated a message becomes, the better it is at offering support. This dissertation will examine whether closeness operates as a moderator, making moderately sophisticated messages of support more effective than highly sophisticated ones in some situations, such as instances in

which the person offering support is less close to the bereaved. It is hypothesized that this will happen due to threats to the bereaved's sense of independence or autonomy and threats to the supporter's autonomy and need to be socially accepted (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Hence, in some instances, it may be more helpful for people offering support to use moderately sophisticated messages. For example, a person in grief may not want a highly sophisticated message from a coworker or neighbor, someone with whom they are acquainted but do not have a close, intimate friendship. There are times when it is conceivable that "I'm sorry to hear about your loss," is all we would want to hear.

Burleson's model was originally created to address daily stressors (Burleson, 1985; Burleson & Samter, 1985). In recent years, his work has been extended to carry over the model to acute stress, such as grief. This dissertation will expand on that development. In addition, in work with Bodie and other colleagues (Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Bodie, Jones, & Burleson, 2012; Rack, et al., 2008), Burleson began examining the possibility that there might be moderators that affect sophistication as an absolute determinant of effectiveness of comforting message. This dissertation will also extend upon those theoretical developments by examining the potential moderator of relational closeness.

It is important for communication professionals to study whether comforting attempts are making people feel better and which messages are helping the most. This is the context in which Burleson developed his VPC framework. This dissertation will continue Burleson's focus on effectiveness, examining closeness as a moderator, looking

for instances in which medium-level sophistication is more effective than higher-level sophistication. Grief provides a particularly illustrative context for such a study.

Chapter 2: Background and Rationale

Attempting to comfort the bereaved is a context in which many of us seem to be acutely aware of the possibility of making things worse. Sometimes, people err on the side of not saying anything for fear of bringing up painful feelings or creating an awkward situation. This is unfortunate because people in grief are often looking for comfort (Shear, 2012). Even the presence of a friend who does not know what to say is cited by the bereaved as something that would be helpful (Shear, 2012). Communication scholars could help people who are trying to comfort the bereaved feel less awkward and apprehensive about offering comfort by providing simple guidelines or tips for what might be appropriate to say in what types of grief situations. Ultimately, this could assuage the grief of the bereaved.

Communication scholars are in a unique position to be able to help with such recommendations for effective messages to deliver to those in grief. Studying communication in the context of personal relationships is what interpersonal communication scholars do, and there is a vast body of literature related to effectiveness of communication. Many scholars in our field have addressed the effectiveness of social support, most notably Burleson and his colleagues (Bodie et al., 2008; Bodie et al., 2011; Bodie et al., 2012; Burleson, 1985; Burleson & Samter; 1985; Rack et al., 2008). This dissertation will use the foundation of their work on support effectiveness and expand on it to offer new theoretical insights. Obviously, more effective comforting messages

cannot completely remove a person's grief or take away every negative emotion that they are experiencing. Yet, perhaps learning what types of grief support are most effective can help people feel like they are saying, or conversely being told, something that is helpful, and therefore lessen the severity of negative emotions being experienced.

Previously, there has not been much research on the intersection of the communication of social support and grief. This is perhaps surprising because the area would seem a natural overlap of two fields of research: communication knowledge could help inform better effectiveness and ability to comfort. Many studies have addressed general communication in the context of grief and death. From this work we have learned that adolescents sometimes have different struggles with grief than adults, including self-image and relationship struggles (Balk & Corr, 2001). In addition, intrusive thoughts following the loss of a child continued to affect mothers at least 18 months after their child's death and were more disruptive to mothers who felt that they could not talk to others about the death—whether it was because they felt the death was stigmatized, potential sources of support were too worried about their own children to be supportive (in the case of cancer support groups), others were too traumatized by the same death to offer support to the mother, or the mothers did not have people around them to offer help (Lepore, Silver, Wortman, & Wayment, 1996). Further, of people facing a terminal diagnosis, about a third will talk openly about death plans, about a third will have limited discussion of these plans, and about a third will not talk about their death plans at all (Hinton, 1981). Also, people may avoid discussing a terminal diagnosis but do so while

being very open about general conversation about the disease (Caughlin, Mikucki-Enyart, Middleton, Stone, & Brown, 2013). The knowledge acquired about communication and death throughout recent decades has taught us much, but unfortunately, we still know very little about the quality of social support within this context.

Other communication literature has examined the intersection between health communication and social support. These studies tell us that cancer patients prefer a combination of empathy expression and acknowledgement/recognition in supportive messages (Han, et al., 2011). For example, in couples in which the wife has breast cancer, the association between topic avoidance and relationship satisfaction was moderated by reason for avoidance (Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010). Communicating concern for a spouse's health can be seen as a control attempt if not done carefully, especially when the spouse must remind their partner about changes to everyday behavior (Goldsmith et al., 2006). All of these studies have examined the role of effectiveness in social support—how it helps in times of stress or illness and how it may be lacking in other ways. However, it is not until recently that researchers have begun specifically examining the intersection between communicating social support and grief. As such, there are only a handful of studies related to the topic (Bodie et al., 2011; Bodie et al., 2012; Rack et al., 2008). Before exploring these specific studies in depth, however, it is necessary to first examine some of the basics of the foundational literature in the grief field.

GRIEF AND SOCIAL SUPPORT: THEORETICAL ALLIES

The grief literature agrees with the social support literature in a couple of helpful ways that will aide this dissertation in combining the past findings from the two fields. First, grief literature tells us that the primary goal of many initial interactions with a bereaved person is to help them feel better, to offer them support (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008). In addition, grief literature conceptualizes support as a transactional encounter, something that happens as a communicative event (Dyregrov & Dyregrov). This overlaps nicely with the work of communication social support, especially the perspectives of Burleson and Goldsmith (Burleson 2009; Goldsmith 2004). Another important finding from grief literature is that grief can vary in intensity (Dyregrov & Dyregrov). As helpers, we cannot assume that a person is at a certain level of grief because of the type of loss they have experienced or because of how recently the loss has happened. Similarly with social support, we cannot assume that we know how a person is feeling because we understand their situation or are familiar with what events have happened to them; we must also take into account the feedback they give to us as part of our communicative exchange.

For decades, Burleson and other communication researchers have examined the communication of social support within the context of everyday stressors. By studying social support in the context of grief, this dissertation is able to add to the recent literature that extends communication social support literature into an acute distress context (Bodie et al., 2011; Bodie et al., 2012; Rack et al., 2008). Previous work has mostly examined everyday stresses like division of labor in the household. With grief, communication

researchers are able to study a stressor that is ongoing for a period of months (Shear, 2012). This characteristic will bring additional depth to the current theoretical findings on social support, adding to the work on grief that Burleson and his colleagues had begun in the past several years (Bodie et al., 2011; Bodie et al., 2012; Rack et al., 2008). In addition, because the stress of grief is pervasive and ongoing, participants can be asked questions about a current stress without evoking a hypothetical situation or asking for memories of a past stress. Before we can completely understand what the two theoretical areas have in common, we must first examine each area—grief and social support—separately.

GRIEF

For Bowlby (1980), the entire process of coming to terms with a loss is what we call mourning. Grief is a term used to distinguish those moments within the process of mourning when someone is having distress. Until the 1960s, much work on the study of grief was housed within the larger study of depression and anxiety (Bowlby, 1980). One of the earliest scientific works to address grief is Darwin's study of emotion in humans (Darwin, 1872/2009). In this volume, Darwin examines facial expressions and musculature movements related to grief in adults and children to see what is similar and what is different between humans in grief at various stages of life. This objective, descriptive characterization is typical for much of the first century of the study of grief (Darwin, 1872/2009). In more recent years, there has been some controversy over just how grief is defined, and over whether grief is a normal, emotional response to losing a

loved one (Engel, 1995). Some researchers note that the presence of negative emotions and a negative state of mind lead to the need to classify grief as abnormal or disease-like (Wilkinson, 2000). Others see the frequent occurrence and opportunity for intervention as reasons for classifying it as a normal part of our lives (Kissane, Bloch, McKenzie, McDowall, & Nitzan, 1998). This dissertation will take the position that grief is a normal, healthy emotional response to loss.

Before expanding on the reasoning related to grief, it is first important to define some basic terms related to grief. Shear (2012) has provided a useful overview of the terms most relevant in a discussion of death and grief. First, and most importantly, we must determine a working definition for just what grief is. When someone we know is lost to us, usually through death, we go through a process called bereavement, which is the pure experience of having lost someone close. Grief is the emotional response that a person has to bereavement; mourning is the process by which we incorporate the loss of a loved one into our everyday reality. Importantly, grief can vary in emotional intensity over time, and it involves a range of emotions that often vary based upon the specific person experiencing grief. Grief can be an individualized process. It is also an experience that can be characterized by yearning and sadness. Grief can include pain, temporary depression, a sense of loss, and re-examination of identity. Depending on the circumstances of the loss, a person may feel guilt, bitterness, or anger about behavior that lead to the person's death. Grief is also characterized by the appearance of intrusive thoughts about the loved one whom we have lost:

The cognitive hallmark of acute grief is recurrent intrusive thoughts and memories of the deceased ... as is the case during transitions into a new love relationship, the intrusive thoughts are often welcomed, rather than resisted. Details of the lost relationship are reviewed and considered, and over time, positive memories predominate in recalling a deceased loved one (Shear, 2012, p. 10).

In 1996, Lepore et al. found that intrusive thoughts correlated with depression symptoms for mothers who had lost children. They also found a negative relationship between intrusive thoughts and talking about a child's death. Perhaps those who are more preoccupied with grief are less open to receiving support.

In addition to these negative emotions, Shear (2012) tells us that grief can be a phase that is punctuated by positive emotion. In fact, as early as a month from the death, people in grief will experience positive, daily emotions as frequently as negative, daily emotions. Also, while it is true that sleeping and eating behaviors may change during a grief process, all but seven percent of people will mostly complete the acute grief process and transition into what is known as integrated grief—a phase in which a permanent response is crafted to the loss—within a period of two months. So although grief may be a difficult, acute stressor, it is also a temporary and normal part of the mourning process for the vast majority of people who experience it.

The bereaved may have experiences that seem abnormal but are, in fact, fairly common for anyone who has recently experienced loss (Bowlby, 1980). For example,

many widows and widowers are prone to a kind of “magical thinking” shortly after the death of a spouse, so much so, that prominent author Joan Didion (2005) named her book about her experience with grief “The Year of Magical Thinking.” In one study, 66 percent of widows and 47 percent of widowers described having such experiences (Rees, 1971). This magical thinking consists of having such vivid dreams of the deceased spouse that you would swear they had visited and spoke to you in your sleep. Or, hearing a creak on the stairs and feeling certain that it is their spirit visiting to deliver a message. Some psychologists might call this magical thinking a form of delusion, but because it happens to so many during the grief process, and because it passes as the bereaved process and accept the loss, Bowlby (1980) and others consider it a normal part of grieving.

In the process of grieving, people go through several fairly predictable stages (Bowlby, 1980). The most commonly known stages are the hard-defined states set out by Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) in the late 1960s: denial, anger, loss, sadness, and acceptance. Although these stages tend to be stereotypically associated with grief recovery, most scholars today prefer a pared down version of grief stages (Bohannon, 1990; Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Lev, Munro, & McCorkle, 1993; Rashotte, Fothergill-Bourbonnais, & Chamberlain, 1997; Romanoff, 1998). Developed by Rando (1993), these newer stages have distilled grief processing into three general periods: avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation. During avoidance, the bereaved is working to accept the reality of their loss. In confrontation, the bereaved experiences the emotions that the loss inspires—sadness, anger, etc. Finally, during accommodation, the bereaved begins

the task of reestablishing their life without the deceased, redefining roles and finding new relationships to replace their loss. The looser structure defined by Rando allows more room for people to stall in one particular emotion, go back and forth between two, skip over one, etc., and have that all be in the name of normal grieving. Background information on stages of grief provides useful context on why participants might be more or less upset at certain points of their grief process, but stages of grief will not be specifically analyzed in this dissertation.

People will reach out for social support and will need social support for many reasons when they are bereaved. They are in a time of great distress. In many cases, they have lost a person who was an integral part of their daily lives, and they need to learn how to carry out their daily routines and activities without that person. Other times, the bereaved need help processing the emotions they feel, or just want someone to listen to them describe what they are feeling. If we classify grief as neurotic or a sickness, it too easily becomes something that experts should manage, a condition to be treated by therapy, possibly even medicated. Therapy can be a great resource for people in bereavement, and there is no shame in anyone reaching out for counseling or medication; recognizing that grief is a normal event that happens to all of us at some point or points in life gives us greater range to allow ourselves to craft healthy and normal conversational responses to the bereaved in need. Already we marginalize those in grief because we feel awkward about how to respond to their distress. Labeling them “unwell” will only further this trend of removing them from the warmth of comfortable conversation.

WHAT EMOTIONS ARE THE BEREAVED LIKELY TO FEEL?

In one of his classic three volumes on attachment, Bowlby (1980) helps us understand many of the emotions that the bereaved are likely to experience. For Bowlby, one of the first major emotions that the bereaved will feel is almost a lack of emotion, or what he calls numbing. After the loss of a close loved one, people feel “stunned and in varying degrees unable to accept the news” (Bowlby, 1980, p. 86). In this phase, the bereaved may also feel tense, and their calm numb may be broken at unexpected moments by emotional outbursts. Some people have described breaking into anger, others breaking into panic.

Within a few hours or a few days after the initial loss, the bereaved may move into anger. At this point, the bereaved is beginning to register the finality of the death, but only in moments. Psychologists speculate that this momentary acceptance is what leads the bereaved to react with anger. Along with the anger, the bereaved will often experience insomnia, preoccupation with thoughts of the lost one, and sometimes even a sense that the deceased is actually present. This is the stage at which magical thinking is most likely to occur. At this point, the bereaved may be vacillating between two mindsets: one that accepts the loss and is trying to come to terms with the immense pain related to that, another that cannot comprehend the loss and is still hopelessly searching and yearning for their loved one to come back.

Anger is a natural part of the grieving process at this point. Just imagine all of the frustration and emotional confusion the bereaved is experiencing. It is also not uncommon for the bereaved to lash out at those who try to comfort them (Bowlby, 1980).

Anger becomes problematic if it extends much further into the grieving process. For, as Bowlby points out, most psychologists will say, it is not healthy to stay mad at someone who is no longer in our lives and certainly not at someone who is no longer alive.

Overwhelmed by the blow he has received, one of the first impulses of the bereaved is to appeal to others for help—to help regain the person lost. The would-be comforter who responds to this appeal may, however, see the situation differently. To him it may be clear that hope of reunion is a chimera and that to encourage it would be unrealistic, even dishonest. And so, instead of behaving as is wished, he seems to the bereaved to do the opposite and is resented accordingly. No wonder his role is a thankless one (p. 92).

Another emotional state that Bowlby describes is one of pining and searching—a mostly conscious questioning of how and why the loss happened (Bowlby, 1980). This component of grief processing can also involve a strong component of anger; the bereaved might attack anyone they believe is responsible for the death, including the deceased (Bowlby). Gradually, the bereaved will move into acceptance of the loss, and along with the acceptance, they will begin to dismiss old patterns of action and thought for new ones—new patterns that acknowledge the reality of life without the deceased (Bowlby). This process of developing new patterns and accepting the death is what Bowlby calls reorganization. (In terms of Rando's [1993] formal stages, this would be akin to accommodation). Reorganization involves a process of redefinition of the self.

For example, the bereaved is no longer a spouse but is now a widow or widower. For some bereaved, this stage is where plans to remarry emerge if it was a spouse who died; for others, this is a time of marked loneliness because they have finally realized their new situation in life (Bowlby, 1980).

Generally, people experience different levels of emotional distress at different points of grieving. This factor could possibly have an effect on the perceived effectiveness of social support. As Bowlby points out, an angry target might resent even being contacted by a helper. As such, it seems reasonable to recognize the possibility of more emotional targets not being as receptive to social support messages. The literature on grief adds to our understanding of people's behavior, helping put their responses to social support into a theoretical context.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Supportive messages are those that “have the goal of alleviating or lessening the emotional distress experienced by others” (Burlison et al., 1994, p. 136). Supportive messages are created by a “helper” and are aimed at a “target” (Burlison & Samter, 1985). (This terminology will be used throughout this dissertation.) Social support has a great potential to lessen the stress that we feel in our lives. It can lead to both physical and emotional benefits (Goldsmith, 2004; Seeman, 1996; Suls, 1982). People who are satisfied with their social support are happier in life and even face less physical and mental illness, and vice versa. A study by Kroenke and her colleagues (2006) found support for the idea that breast cancer patients who were socially isolated at time of

diagnosis had a 66 percent increased risk of mortality. A Swedish study of 736 men found smoking and lack of social support to be the two leading risk factors for coronary heart disease among middle-aged men (Orth-Gomer, Rosengren, & Wilhelmsen, 1993). Older women with strong social ties are less likely to show signs of dementia than those who do not have strong social ties (Crooks, Lubben, Petitti, Little, & Chiu, 2007). LePore et al. (1993) found that in the instance of an acute stressor (in their case, reactions to the stress of giving a public speech), the mere presence of a friend could lower the physical effects of the stress. These results suggest that merely the presence of a silent friend, even one who might not be able to think of anything to say, could potentially be read as effectively supportive during times of distress. People with low-stress lifestyles even report fewer upper-respiratory infections, or common colds, if they have more friends (Hamrick, Cohen, & Rodriguez, 2002). Beyond just our physical lives, social support can help people manage information and emotions in many ways.

Brashers et al. (2004) argued that social support from others helps us manage uncertainty by assisting with information seeking and avoiding, providing instrumental support, facilitating skill development, giving acceptance or validation, allowing ventilation, and encouraging perspective shifts. For Brashers et al., social support can help us arrive at the level of uncertainty we desire. Our friends might give us advice or help us reframe a situation until we find the right story to suit the level of uncertainty with which we are most comfortable. For example, during a breakup, your then partner might say, “It’s not you; it’s me.” This can be a confusing statement, so you call your

best friend for help deciphering what your now ex-partner meant. The friend reframes the comment as your ex needing some time to work on him- or herself before being a good partner for anyone: “Maybe someday in the future it could work out for you two, but he just doesn’t have it in him to be a good boyfriend right now.” This new perspective on the matter could be surprisingly helpful, and in at least this case, your friend has done a great job of providing you with effective social support. Despite the obvious help that social support can be, it does not always operate in a straightforward positive manner.

We seem to take great comfort in receiving strong social support, although we do not always like being made aware of receiving that support. Wethington and Kessler (1986) found that knowledge of having available social support is more powerful at buffering the effects of stress than is actual social support. Thus, it is more important for people to feel as though they have support ready for them to access than it is for that support to actually be enacted when it comes time to rely upon it. Another interesting study found that people who perceive receiving social support were actually more depressed the following day; whereas, people who received social support from their partners but did not perceive that they had been given support (i.e., their partners had been supportive in a subtle way), felt less anxious, less stressed, and less depressed the following days (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). This study indicates that social support might be most effective when it is least obvious. For example, if one spouse is having a stressful week at work, the other spouse might provide support by cleaning the house and making dinner every night that week—but not draw attention to these actions.

One possible explanation for the increased effectiveness of lower-profile support is that overt social support requires mentioning the stressor in a way that reminds the target of their stress. If the problem is not consciously on the target's mind, but the helper brings it up in order to offer support, the sum total of the support may not outweigh the stress of bringing the stress into the target's conscious mind.

In sum, the relationship between providing and receiving social support is not always straightforward and simple. This circuitous manner in which social support is woven into our day-to-day lives is one reason why researchers must be careful in designing studies that attempt to measure social support effects. Burleson has approached the study of social support with an eye toward effectiveness. His work examines which types of messages are most helpful. This focus led Burleson to develop his 9-item scale of person-centeredness. Burleson's scale is developed from one created by Applegate (1978), and it is a hierarchical measure based upon message sophistication. Comforting messages are scored for the level to which they acknowledge the perspective of the target and elaborate upon and grant legitimacy to the feelings and perspective of the target (Burleson & Samter, 1985). Burleson and Samter theorize that messages that are more centered on the target's personal perspective will be perceived as more sophisticated. Less sophisticated strategies might tell the target how they should feel while more sophisticated ones will empathize with their feelings or even allow for the target to have a range of feelings and feel whatever they want in their own time (Burleson & Samter). This crucial factor of Burleson's social support hierarchy is known as Verbal

Person Centeredness (VPC) (Burlison & Samter, 1985). Person-centered messages are those that “explicitly [acknowledge] and elaborate on the feelings of the other” (Burlison & Samter, p. 120). People think of themselves as individuals, and their own psychological lives become especially salient during times of crisis (Burlison & Samter). Thus, appealing to that individuality is perceived as more sophisticated messaging and can make for a more successful comforting attempt.

In their 1985 study, Burlison and Samter provide examples of support messages related to a breakup. For this dissertation’s purposes, better samples would be messages related to death and grief. An example of a low person-centered message would be, “You shouldn’t be so upset that your grandpa died. After all, he was old, and you should have expected it.” This message denies the stress and upset of the target and minimizes his or her feelings. A mid-level message offering support after a death would be something like “Wow, I’m sorry to hear that your aunt died. I went through a similar thing last year.” This message acknowledges that the target is upset, although only allows for a certain level of emotion on the part of the target, and the message is still instructing the target how they should feel to some extent. An example of a high person-centered message would be: “I know it must hurt. I know you must be feeling a lot of pain and anger right now. And that’s OK, ‘cause grieving is hard, and no one can put a timeline on your grief.” In contrast to the lower-level and mid-level messages, this message is not judgmental and does not minimize the feelings of the target. It acknowledges their upset and allows for them to feel their pain in their own time. Further, it is focused on the target

and not on the helper's interpretation of the events. Burleson and Samter say that these higher-level messages "reflect a greater degree of complexity in thinking about people, social situations, and the process of communication" (p. 104). When they call these messages "better" support, they mean that they are more effective in reducing the target's emotional distress.

INTRODUCING MODERATORS

Burleson and his colleagues (Bodie et al., 2011; Rack et al., 2008) have recently acknowledged that there are some limitations on absolute VPC within the dual-processing theory as a determinant for the best social support in the grief context. In their research, Bodie et al. (2011) and Rack et al. (2008) have used cognitive complexity, degree of emotional upset, perceived severity of the problem, need for cognition, and select demographic and personal characteristics as moderators. Bodie et al. (2011) found a curvilinear relationship between degree of emotional upset and a target's ability to distinguish low VPC messages from high VPC messages. In other words, a person who was not very upset at all or who was highly upset was not discriminating about how sophisticated their support messages were, but a person at more moderate levels of emotional upset would distinguish more between levels of sophistication in attempts to console them. Bodie et al. also found that people with higher levels of cognitive complexity were more likely to distinguish between high VPC messages and low VPC messages. It is perhaps not surprising that more sophisticated communicators would be more skilled at deciphering level of sophistication in messages. In the Rack et al. (2008)

study, partial support was found for motivation to systematically process grief and situational factors. Women tended to distinguish level of message sophistication more carefully than did men. More specifically, women found support messages with a low level of VPC to be even less helpful than did men, and women also found support messages with a high level of VPC to be even more helpful than men did. This study also discovered an intriguing three-way interaction between gender, closeness to the deceased, and need for cognition. Men with high need for cognition evaluated supportive messages less positively than men with low need for cognition when grieving the death of someone who had been close. (Need for cognition refers to the extent to which a person enjoys the process of exerting cognitive effort). Yet, there was not a difference in message evaluation due to need for cognition when the men were less close to the deceased.

This dissertation will also examine the notion of closeness as a potential moderator between level of message sophistication and perception of the message's effectiveness but with one crucial difference. Rack et al. (2008) examined closeness in terms of the relationship between the support target and their relationship to the deceased. This dissertation examines the relationship between the support target and the support helper. Specifically, the level of VPC that a target finds most helpful and supportive during a time of grief may vary based upon how close that person is to the helper. At lower levels of closeness, middle levels of person centeredness should be perceived as most helpful. At higher levels of closeness, the highest levels of person centeredness

should be perceived as more helpful. Regardless of the level of closeness between the target and helper, low levels of VPC should be perceived as not very helpful.

RELATIONAL CLOSENESS

The conceptualization of closeness varies based upon the type of relationship—parent, spouse, child, etc., but several factors are consistently associated with those to whom we are closest: liking, spending time together, and perceived similarity (Vangelisti & Caughlin). Those people with whom we are closest are often also those with whom we share the most personal details of our lives. Closeness relates to a pattern of communication. A relationship cannot have closeness without trust and history. Therefore, the communication we have with a close person will likely be different than the communication we have with a non-close person. Importantly, the messages may be perceived differently based on how close the target feels about the helper. Due to a lack of developed history and trust, we are less sure of the response to our disclosures when we communicate with those to whom we are less close. Therefore, there is a greater threat of things not going the way we would want in an ideal social interaction. Possibly we could embarrass ourselves. Or maybe we could take up too much of someone's time and inconvenience that person. Also, as we become more comfortable with someone, the breadth and depth of our conversational topics will increase (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This trend should hold true for grief as much as it does any other conversational topic. People will more willingly share information about their loss with those whom they are more comfortable. Thus, the highest levels of VPC, which involve individually-tailored

messages that are often detailed and personal, should be perceived as most effective when coming from someone with whom the target of the message is already comfortable.

If this dissertation's general hypothesis that closeness between target and helper will moderate the relationship between message sophistication holds true, then the desired message should change based on to whom the participant is speaking. When we are close to someone, we spend more time with them, and we build more trust with them. As a result, we are likely to feel more comfortable in our communication with those to whom we are close. This comfort could potentially change the way we communicate, and more specifically, it could change the way we perceive messages of social support. To fully understand how these factors operate, I employ reasoning based on politeness theory and face.

POLITENESS THEORY AND FACE

Ervin Goffman (1967) was the first to write about the concept of face as our public persona. For Goffman, face is our best self that we put on when we venture out into the public world in an attempt to manage what other people think of us: "face is the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 5). Face is not exclusively related to the individual person; it exists within the flow of a particular interaction between people. Face is malleable and can be managed in order to create specific impressions in specific situations. People who are skilled at impression management may put on a slightly different face in every type of interaction. As a malleable, adjustable entity, face must

also be maintained and attended to. It is not a pre-existing factor of our personalities that can be left alone.

Two decades after Goffman first published on the concept of face, Brown and Levinson (1987) extended his work to talk about threats that can be made the concept of face. Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on Politeness Theory breaks the concept of face into two types: positive face and negative face. Positive face is the part of our public presentation that we manage as a response to our desire for connection to other people. Negative face is the part related to our need for autonomy. It can be challenging to manage both needs at the same time. Certain topics may lead to positive or negative face threats by attacking the self-image and/or autonomy of the person needing support (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As communicators, we are constantly juggling our own needs for positive and negative face, as well as trying to respect our conversational partners' needs for positive and negative face (Brown & Levinson). For Brown and Levinson, if a choice must be made regarding a conversational partner's face needs, respecting negative face is the more polite of the two options.

Brown and Levinson created an equation that illustrates how people decided which face threats are worth taking a chance on. According to Politeness Theory, a speaker will evaluate three elements before deciding the seriousness of a potential face threat. These elements are the degree of social imposition created by the act, the social distance between speaker and hearer, and the relative power of the hearer over the speaker (Holtgraves, 2002). Brown and Levinson represent these ideas in an equation:

$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$. This equation tells us that the weightiness of the threat equals the distance (D) between speaker and hearer (S, H) plus the relative power (P) of hearer over the speaker (H, S), plus the potential social imposition of the threat (R_x). Similarly to the hypotheses of this dissertation, the greater the distance between the people who are communicating with each other, the greater the potential face threat. Although cultural influences and power distance impact the intensity of the face threat, this research focuses on the social distance or relational closeness factor.

In the context of grief support, Politeness Theory would caution helpers to not say too much to a target. It is important not to threaten someone's sense of negative face and impose upon their autonomy by telling them how to grieve or coercing them into talking about a grief that they may not be comfortable discussing. Brown and Levinson (1987) might caution us to be aware that, even though Burleson has shown that higher levels of VPC are more helpful to people in grief, some of the highest levels might pose a threat to negative face if the helper does not know the target well enough to bring up the topic of their grief comfortably. In one sense, a high VPC message would involve a more detailed interaction with the target than a low VPC message. A high VPC message references the target's specific situation, mentions the stress that they are suffering, helps the target relate their feelings to the feelings of others, and allows them to elaborate on their feelings (Burleson & Samter, 1985). Any or all of these communication goals could potentially be perceived as an infringement on the free will of the target, especially if the target is not close to the helper who is providing the message. A person closer to the

target would know better what they could say without violating the target's sense of autonomy or would likely be perceived as having more right to say something by the target. Politeness Theory tells us that deferring to negative politeness is the most polite behavior in which we can engage (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In a theoretical sense, the ultimate negative polite behavior would be to leave the person alone and not say anything. Grief and social support literature, however, tells us that people do not like to be alone in times of acute stress (Lepore et al., 1993; Shear, 2012). Hence, as communicators, the trick becomes striking an artful balance between respecting negative face and offering the appropriate amount of support. Striking this balance is the reason that closeness becomes necessary as a moderator between VPC and perceived effectiveness of the support message.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From previous research from Burleson and Samter (1985), it has been established that higher sophistication is perceived as more effective social support. This general relationship is still expected. Yet, due to potential face threats in the grief context, this dissertation proposes that this association is moderated by the closeness of the relationship between the target and helper. If the target is not as close to the helper, there are greater potentials for face threats. The target may want comfort in their time of grief but not to the point at which they feel controlled, micromanaged, or feel compelled to have an in-depth conversation with those they do not know well. People who know the bereaved better are more likely to have a sense of where that line sits. In addition, any

suggestions related to reframing the grief or how to return to daily life without the deceased (which high VPC messages could contain by Burleson and Samter's standards), would feel less intrusive being delivered by someone to whom the target is closer.

Based on this reasoning, this dissertation hypothesizes the following:

H1: The relationship between message sophistication and perceived effectiveness of support will be moderated by closeness of relationship between target and helper, such that in closer relationships, higher levels of sophistication (VPC) will be perceived as most effective; in less close relationships, middle levels of sophistication (VPC) will be perceived as most effective; and in all relationships, low levels of sophistication (VPC) will be perceived as least effective.

When studying social support, the strength of using an experiment is that it allows researchers to isolate various effects of the messages (Burleson, 1994; Goldsmith, 2004). However, social support experiments also have inherent weaknesses. Many are conducted in a lab or over the internet, and in such cases, it can be difficult to recreate the conditions of a conversation as it would happen outside of the lab. Also, in many instances, social support researchers are asking participants to imagine themselves in a state of stress instead of actually recording conversations from people who have a need for social support at that moment (Bodie et al., 2011; Burleson & Samter, 1985; Rack et al, 2008). Also, these assessments can lack external validity (Brashers et al., 2004; Goldsmith et al., 2006). In order to maximize the benefits of both the experiment and asking questions of people who have been through a stressor, while minimizing the weaknesses of each

method, this dissertation will evaluate this dissertation in two ways: through an experiment and through the coding of open-ended questions.

Related to the assessment of H1, it is also predicted that individuals will report desiring high VPC messages from close relational partners but desiring moderate VPC messages from less close relational partners. Whereas H1 tests the interaction between VPC and closeness through an experiment using pre-determined messages, H2 explores how individuals openly report to what messages they would desire if they were to experience loss. In other words, even though the dissertation's experiment already provides hypothetical data on participants' preferences regarding effectiveness of various levels of VPC sophistication as moderated by interpersonal closeness, asking open-ended questions about the hypothetical scenario provides a space for the participants to share their thoughts in greater detail. Thus, the following hypotheses are added:

H2a: From best friends, individuals are more likely to report desiring high VPC messages than moderate VPC messages.

H2b: From coworkers, individuals are more likely to report desiring moderate VPC messages than high VPC messages.

Targets should feel the least infringement upon their autonomy when they receive a high VPC message and the person who offers support is closer to them. In one sense, a support message that is high in VPC obligates the target to the helper out of a sense of social appropriateness. When a person offers detailed, caring support regarding a loved one's death, what might feel natural and polite in response is to engage in conversation,

perhaps opening up and offering details about the death. In this way, a high VPC support message from someone to whom a target is not close could potentially lead a target to feel as though they are obligated to disclose details about his or her grief, just to show that they appreciate the helper's attempt at comforting. In this way, the helper could unintentionally violate the target's negative face. If the helper is close to the target, the target will be more likely open to disclosing details about whatever stress is necessitating a supportive conversation. If the target and helper are less close, the high VPC message and any interaction that results from it may feel unwanted. Any disclosure that is elicited after the high VPC message may feel seemingly forced or pulled from the target out of a sense of social politeness rather than offered freely and willingly. As such, when a target is less close to a helper, a high VPC support message could make the target feel more negative face threat. At medium levels of VPC, disclosure or more active discussion about the stressor will not be as necessary, and therefore, negative face threats should be lower.

As such, in exploring individuals' *desired* responses from best friends and coworkers, we would expect that messages of support would be more likely to entail negative face threat from friends than from coworkers. Individuals would not desire messages that would put them in a position of feeling they are obligated to discuss their loss in-depth with someone with whom they are not close. In contrast, individuals might desire messages from close friends that expect them to talk about their experiences in detail. Thus, the following hypothesis is added:

H3: Individuals' reports of desired comforting messages are more likely to have negative face threat when from a best friend than when from a coworker.

Several research questions will also be examined in order to understand more fully the type of comforting messages people have received and would like to receive when they experience grief. The quantitative analyses provide a foundation for learning what people would ideally prefer, but it is important to also obtain data on what messages people who have experienced grief did hear and what they think about those messages.

RQ1: What themes emerge from individuals' anticipated desires for comforting messages from more (i.e., best friends) and less close (i.e., coworkers) relational partners if they were to experience the loss of a loved one?

RQ2: What themes emerge from individuals' reports of comforting messages in their experiences of grief from close relational partners and casual acquaintances?

RQ3: Are there differences in what individuals desire in comforting messages from close relational partners and casual acquaintances?

POTENTIAL CONTROL VARIABLE: SEX DIFFERENCES

Sex differences may be seen in the data because men are far more likely to remarry than women. In studies of bereaved widows, women remarry at rates of about one in four or one in five (Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Marris, 1958). And these are studies of women widowed under the age of 45, and under the age of 56, respectively. Women choose not to remarry after the death of a spouse for several stated reasons: fear

of conflict between the new spouse and their children; worry about suffering through the loss of another spouse; and believing they could never experience sexual intimacy with another partner (Bowlby, 1980). In contrast, a year after the loss, half of widowers are likely to be remarried or on the path to doing so (Bowlby). And a majority of these remarriages are rated as satisfactory (Bowlby). Given the noteworthy difference in the way widows and widowers process loss, it will be prudent for this study to use sex differences as a control variable. Previous research has found some differences.

In general, research shows us that men and women process the loss of a spouse quite differently, but in terms of processing the perceived effectiveness of social support, researchers have so far only found subtle distinctions between the sexes. Both men and women tend to rate more highly person-centered comforting messages as more effective (Rack, et al., 2008). However, women prefer messages with high VPC slightly more than do men (Rack, et al.). In addition, men find messages with low VPC more effective than women do (Rack, et al.). Rack et al. hypothesize that women are more sophisticated communicators and thus are able to distinguish more sharply in their evaluations of grief comforting messages. If this trend holds true for this dissertation's research as well, the findings should show that women are more discriminating about the support messages that they receive.

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT STUDY

In order to assess the proposed hypothesis and research questions, this dissertation will question participants about the effectiveness of comforting messages in three ways.

Participants will first take part in an online experiment in which they are prompted with a hypothetical scenario. Each participant will be asked to imagine that they have recently lost a parent and then run into someone that they know. They will either run into an acquaintance from high school (i.e., low closeness), their roommate (i.e., moderate closeness), or their best friend (i.e., high closeness). After reading this prompt, the participant was randomly assigned one of nine comforting messages, which vary from low to high VPC. Participants will be asked to rate the effectiveness of the message they received.

In a second technique, participants will be asked a series of open-ended questions about a similar hypothetical scenario. All participants were asked to report what messages they would prefer to receive if they experienced a loss through open-ended responses. To compare levels of closeness, participants were asked to report desired messages from a best friend (i.e., higher closeness) and desired messages from a co-worker (i.e., lower closeness).

Third, participants will be asked about any grief they may have experienced within the past year. When dealing with acute stress like grief, it becomes more important to work with participants who actually understand the emotions and cognitions that come with the distress, too. For many people, the normal process of grief takes at least a year to process (Bowlby, 1980). Therefore, those who have experienced loss within the past year should still have fresh thoughts and memories of the loss. These participants were asked

open-ended questions about what messages they had hoped to receive from close relational partners and casual acquaintances.

The use of hypothetical scenarios encourages participants to imagine themselves in the place of the person in distress, as in the use of hypothetical scenarios employed in previous research. In several social support studies, participants are asked to evaluate the effectiveness of hypothetical support messages, either in singular instances or by ranking messages in relation to each other (Bodie et al., 2008; Bodie et al., 2012; Burleson & Samter, 1985). Throughout his research on the efficacy of social support, Burleson and his colleagues have assessed comforting strategies mostly through ratings of pre-scripted messages or through asking participants to imagine themselves in hypothetical scenarios. The Burleson and Samter (1985) study design is comprehensive, and shows us that in imaging a hypothetical scenario, even participants who have not lived through such an event can sympathize and place themselves in that situation. Bodie et al. (2001) have a recently updated list of comforting messages that are specifically target toward people in grief. A selection of these messages will be used for this dissertation.

Thus, this dissertation employs experimental, hypothetical scenario, and memory-recall methods in order to triangulate how closeness impacts the effectiveness of grief support messages. Social support can be notoriously difficult to study. In a sense, there is no ideal way to design a social support study. Thus, the open-ended questions will allow this dissertation to access the strengths of both data-collection methods.

Chapter 3: Method

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 411 college students at a major Southwestern university responded to an online survey. Participants were recruited from communication classes and were all 18 years of age or older. Of the 411 respondents, 408 indicated a sex; approximately 81% of those respondents, or 333 participants, were female (see Table 3.1).

	Category	Number	Percent
Sex	Female	333	81
	Male	78	18.9
Ethnicity	White	246	59.8
	Hispanic	85	20.7
	Asian	41	9.9
	Black	12	2.9
	Other	27	6.6
Age Range		18–31	
Median Age		21	

Table 3.1: Demographics

Ages ranged from 18 to 31 with a median age of 21. Three participants did not report age. The majority of participants were white/Caucasian ($n = 246$; approximately 60%). Almost 21% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino ($n = 85$). Approximately 10% of participants indicated their ethnicity as Asian or Pacific Islander ($n = 41$). Just under 3% of dissertation participants were African American or Black ($n = 12$). The remaining 6.5% of participants who identified an ethnicity marked “other.”

Many of these participants wrote in that they were of mixed race background. Three participants did not report ethnicity.

Participants were asked if they had experienced loss in the past year. Of the 411 respondents, 135, or 32.8%, noted that they had experienced some type of grief—ranging from the loss of a parent to a boyfriend to a sorority sister. The most common type of loss experienced was loss of a grandparent ($n = 51$; experienced by approximately 38% of participants who had lost someone in the past year). Second most common was the loss of a friend, which was mentioned by 34 participants, approximately 25% of those who had been through grief in the past year. Only 7% ($n = 9$) discussed loss of a sibling, and only 4% ($n = 5$) discussed loss of a parent. One participant mentioned the loss of her boyfriend. These responses are not surprising given the median age (21) of survey participants. A total of 43 participants, or approximately 32%, mentioned a loss that fit into some type of other category, showing that the nature of loss experienced by participants was quite varied. Within this “other” category were losses that included aunts and uncles, cousins, distant family members such as second cousins, confirmation sponsors, godparents and godchildren, and even neighbors and family friends who had become emotionally integrated with the participant’s family.

PROCEDURES

Participants were recruited through a posting to the SONA research system, an online extra credit system used by the university’s communication department which connects students to studies they may complete for extra credit. See Appendix A for

examples of recruitment text, and see Appendix B for a sample consent form. The survey was administered using Qualtrics, which allows for secure, anonymous collection of data. The survey offered extra credit, at the discretion of each student's instructor, as an incentive for completion. The survey had three main sections: 1) the experimental manipulation with a hypothetical scenario, 2) questions eliciting messages based on a hypothetical scenario, and 3) questions eliciting messages from those who had experienced grief in the previous year.

HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO: EXPERIMENT

As the survey began, participants were asked to imagine they had just lost a parent. In this scenario, the participant runs into someone they know who has heard of his/her recent loss and offers some words of comfort. In the three conditions manipulating closeness, the person whom the participant hypothetically runs into differs: an acquaintance from high school (i.e., low closeness), a roommate (i.e., medium-closeness), best friend (i.e., high closeness). Participants were randomly assigned one of these three prompts through programming in Qualtrics.

Next, each participant was randomly given one of nine support messages representing varying degrees of sophistication in offering comfort to the bereaved. In the Burleson and Samter (1985) VPC Scale, these comments would reflect, low, medium, and high levels of personal-centered social support. Comments were taken from a previous use of the Bereavement Experiences Questionnaire (BEQ) developed by Bodie

et al. (1985, 2011). Three comments were pulled from the BEQ to fit each of Burleson and Samter's three VPC categories (Bodie et al, 2011; Burleson & Samter, 1985).

Low VPC

"It cannot be that bad."

"Do not take it so hard."

"I know what it's like."

Medium VPC

"You are being so strong."

"He/she is no longer in any pain."

"You have done a nice job of looking after everyone."

High VPC

"I am concerned about how you feel."

"We usually go to the movies on Fridays; why don't you come?"

"I am happy to stay with you if you'd like company."

The messages in the low category are listed as low VPC support because, for the most part, they invalidate the feelings of the bereaved person. Two of them: "It cannot be that bad," and "Do not take it so hard," even go so far as to tell the bereaved that their feelings of grief are too strong. Most people in distress want the exact opposite, to be able to process their feelings in their own way, on their own timeline (Burleson & Samter, 1985; Bodie et al., 2011; Shear, 2012). In the third message, "I know what it's like," the helper could be seen as making an attempt to empathize, but they are also assuming that

they understand all of the feelings of the bereaved and that they have been exactly where the bereaved person is. A person in distress, again, wants to be treated as though their feelings are individual and their own (Burlison & Samter, 1985).

The three selected medium VPC messages make an effort to be sensitive to the target's state of distress but do so in a largely general manner. The first medium message, "You are being so strong," compliments the target's handling of the grief but is not the most sophisticated social support because the message also implies to the bereaved that being strong is the right thing to do during their grieving process. A more sophisticated comforting message would help the target feel comfortable with any emotional state in which they might find themselves. "He/she is no longer in any pain," offers some comfort because it reminds the bereaved that their loved one's suffering is over. However, what this message fails to do is validate any emotions that the bereaved might be feeling. By strictly focusing on the positive side of the death, the helper may be trying to be uplifting, but without including other language that also recognizes the target's feelings, the helper runs the risk of belittling the target's emotional state. "You have done a nice job of looking after everyone," is perhaps the most sophisticated of the three medium VPC messages. The message does not explicitly validate the emotional state of the target, but offers a compliment that implies that, not only is the person handling the grief well, s/he is also serving as a good caretaker to others. Even without explicitly justifying their emotions, these words would likely make the bereaved feel personally attended to and

individually addressed, things people in distress appreciate from social support (Bodie et al, 2011; Rack et al, 2008).

High VPC messages focus on the individual needs of a specific person experiencing distress. They might also focus on task support, offering to help a target with a concrete need rather than support through words. The first high VPC message used in this dissertation reads, “We usually go to the movies on Fridays; why don’t you come?” This message offers sophisticated support because the helper is attempting to offer support covertly, getting the bereaved person out for a social engagement without the target even necessarily being aware that they are intentionally helping them. Often times, these covert acts of support are rated as the most helpful (Curtona, 1990). The second high VPC message used was “I am concerned about how you feel.” This message reflects the classic understanding of what Burleson and Samter (1985) discuss when they advocate for sophisticated support to focus on an individual person’s feelings. Here, the helper is opening up a conversation to talk about any and all feelings that a particular individual person experiencing grief might be having. The final high VPC message reads, “I am happy to stay with you if you’d like company.” This message, like the invite to the movies, hints at task support, but in this case, the support is more individualized, and hence, for Burleson and Samter, would be considered more sophisticated. The helper is offering to “just be there,” with the bereaved, something that many people in grief state that they find helpful (Shear, 2012). This message communicates to the target that the helper is focused on their needs, and it implies a certain level of patience. If the helper is

willing to stay with them for a time, that helper is probably not going to rush their grief. In addition, the message addresses negative face politeness because the target has an out to refuse the help in the phrase “if you’d like company” (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

The samples sizes for each of the nine messages ranged from 44 to 47. Participants then evaluated how effective their comforting message was, based upon their given scenario, using a five-point, Likert-type scale, with 1 being *Very Harmful* and 5 being *Very Helpful*.

HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO: OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

A second major section of the survey asked hypothetical questions about grief and comforting that all participants were able to answer. Participants were asked to again imagine that they had lost a parent. In this hypothetical scenario, they were asked to write in a comforting message that they would want to hear from their best friend. Then, they were asked to write in a comforting message that they would want to hear from a coworker. This data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative coding. More details on the coding process and coding results are below.

EXPERIENCES OF GRIEF: OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Next, participants were asked whether they had personally lost a loved in the past year. The 135 who answered “yes” to this question were asked a series of follow-up questions. These open-ended questions asked whom they had lost, what comforting messages they had received from close others, and what comforting messages they had received from casual acquaintances. Participants who had lost a loved one were also

asked if they expected a different kind of support from close loved ones versus casual acquaintances. Participants were provided with unlimited text-boxes to respond to all of these questions. This collection of data was analyzed using qualitative coding looking noteworthy themes that emerge upon close reading.

CODING OF OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Message Sophistication (H1 and H2)

The hypothetical, open-ended questions were categorized by the researcher and a trained coder. Message sophistication was classified using the VPC coding scheme from Bodie et al. (2011). Originally created as a 9-item scale (Burleson & Samter, 1985), the VPC scale has recently been compressed to three essential categories: low Verbal-Person Centeredness, medium Verbal-Person Centeredness, and high Verbal-Person Centeredness (Bodie et al., 2011). Messages are coded based on the extent to which they, among other things, empathize with the distressed other and provide “acknowledgement, elaboration, and legitimization” of the target’s situation (Burleson & Samter, 1985, p. 110). The measure rates the performance of the speaker (i.e., in this case helper). An example of a low-VPC strategy reads, “Speaker condemns feelings of other” (Burleson & Samter, p. 114). In a mid-VPC message the, “[s]peaker acknowledges the other’s feelings, but does not attempt to help the other understand why those feelings are being experienced or how to cope with them” (p. 114). Finally, the classification for a high-VPC scale item reads, “Speaker helps the other gain a perspective on his or her feelings

and attempts to help the other see these feelings in relation to a broader context or the feelings of others” (p. 114).

One trained coder, along with the dissertation’s investigator, rated collected messages on the VPC scale, each giving a separate rating for every recorded support message. The coder was trained in person in addition to being given a codebook (see Appendix C). The training manual briefly explained social support and VPC and the difference between low, medium, and high sophistication messages. Based on Burleson and Samter (1985), the manual also contained several examples of grief-related comforting messages in each of those three VPC contexts.

One initial meeting was set to establish knowledge of the concepts and terminology and to practice sample entries. After this meeting, the trained coder and lead researcher each coded 15 participants on our own and met a second time to assess our level of agreement. At a second meeting, coders found an agreement of kappa .79. These levels of agreement were sufficient for moving on to coding of the complete project, so the trained coder and lead researcher discussed the messages for disagreement and reason for disagreement. Then the remainder of the data was coded separately.

Final coding reliabilities, after all coding for the dissertation was complete, are as follows. For VPC in regards to close loved ones, reliability, using kappa, was .76; for VPC in regards to coworkers, reliability was .85. To resolve discrepancies between codes, the two coders met one additional time to discuss areas in they differed and came to agreement.

When rating for VPC, it was necessary for the coder and I to mark certain entries as “no code.” This option was needed because some of the participants paraphrased their answers to such an extent that it was not possible to accurately evaluate whether their desire was for a low, medium, or high VPC message; and because this dissertation is analyzing the effectiveness of grief comforting messages, entries without messages were not coded on the VPC scale. For example, one participant wrote of the type of support she would like from her best friend: “She wouldn't say anything. She would just let me cry” (46). The answer does provide an indication of what would serve as helpful support, but there is no message to be analyzed. Another wrote, “I don't think there is anything you can say” (106). The answer is not without information that could potentially be useful in future research about social support and grief, but there is no message to analyze for its sophistication. Three messages in each category—best friend and coworker—were left blank entirely. Overall, under the best friend category, 138 entries were marked as “no code.” Under coworker, 120 entries were marked “no code.” There was a 100% agreement on the entries marked as uncodable.

Face Threat (H3)

This dissertation assessed negative face threat through coding the open-ended responses regarding the two hypothetical questions about what type of comforting messages participants would desire from a best friend and from a coworker. As before with the VPC messages, the coding was done by one trained coder and the researcher. A coder was trained in Politeness Theory as a whole, as well as specifically instructed in

positive and negative face threat. The coder was trained in person and also given a coding manual (Appendix C.) The same coder was used for coding VPC presence and face threat, so both theories were covered in one coding manual. Each message was coded in terms of the presence (1) or absence (0) of negative face threat.

Using the same procedures as above, the initial round of coding had an inter-rater reliability of .84, again using kappa. With this sufficient reliability, we coded the remaining responses. The final reliabilities of the full dataset were .93 for close loved ones and .91 for coworkers.

Chapter 4: Results

ANALYSIS OF EXPERIMENTAL DATA (H1)

Three messages for each level of VPC were tested in order to avoid the potential bias of any one message. However, analyses showed that the three messages within each category were not rated as having equivalent effectiveness. See Table 4.1 for all the means by each level of closeness and overall. The three low VPC messages varied in perceived effectiveness, $F(2, 135) = 65.54, p < .001$, with a Tukey HSD post-hoc test showing that all three messages significantly differed from each other. The three moderate VPC messages also varied in effectiveness, $F(2, 134) = 154.53, p < .001$, with the Tukey HSD post-hoc test showing that all three messages significantly differed from each other. For high VPC messages, the ANOVA was significant, $F(2, 133) = 65.54, p < .001$, and the Tukey HSD post-hoc test showed that only “I am happy to stay with you if you’d like company” was more effective than the other two messages. These analyses thus show that the three messages within each level of VPC cannot be assumed to provide the same level of sophistication.

Message	Closeness	Mean Effectiveness	Std. Deviation	N
<i>Low VPC Messages</i>				
“It cannot be that bad.”				
	Acquaintance	1.42	.77	19
	Roommate	1.411	.87	17
	Best Friend	1.454	.67	11
	Total	1.43	.77	47
“Don’t take it so hard.”				
	Acquaintance	1.00	.00	14
	Roommate	1.00	.00	20
	Best Friend	1.00	.00	10
	Total	1.00	.00	44
“I know what it’s like.”				
	Acquaintance	2.21	.80	14
	Roommate	3.00	1.0	9
	Best Friend	2.54	.72	24
	Total	2.53	.83	47
<i>Medium VPC Messages</i>				
“You are being so strong.”				
	Acquaintance	1.00	.00	14
	Roommate	1.00	.00	13
	Best Friend	1.00	.00	18
	Total	1.00	.00	45
“He/She is no longer in any pain.”				
	Acquaintance	2.67	.65	12
	Roommate	3.31	.63	13
	Best Friend	3.10	1.0	21
	Total	3.04	.87	46
“You have done a nice job looking after everyone.”				
	Acquaintance	3.87	.64	15
	Roommate	3.20	.89	20
	Best Friend	3.27	.90	11
	Total	3.43	.86	46
<i>High VPC Messages</i>				
“I’m concerned about how you feel.”				
	Acquaintance	3.41	.73	22
	Roommate	3.00	.74	12
	Best Friend	3.30	.67	10
	Total	3.27	.73	44

Table 4.1 continued on next page

“We usually go to the movies on Fridays; why don’t you come?”

Acquaintance	3.13	.89	16
Roommate	2.60	1.3	10
Best Friend	2.95	.97	19
Total	2.93	1.0	45

“I am happy to stay with you if you’d like company.”

Acquaintance	3.58	.90	12
Roommate	4.41	.62	17
Best Friend	3.94	.56	17
Total	4.02	.75	46

Overall

Acquaintance	2.49	1.35	138
Roommate	2.50	1.38	131
Best Friend	2.57	1.21	141
Total	2.52	1.28	410

Table 4.1 (continued): Perceived Effectiveness of Comforting Messages, Moderated by Closeness

Given these findings, one message from each category was chosen based on what would be most theoretically representative of that level of person-centeredness—low, medium, and high person-centeredness. Two messages in particular were avoided: “It cannot be that bad” (low VPC) and “You are being so strong” (moderate VPC) were each rated a 1 on a scale of 1 to 5, with a standard deviation of 0. In other words, every person who received these two messages, regardless of the prompt they received, rated the message as “very harmful.” (Explanations for this are addressed in the Discussion.) For a low person-centered message, I analyzed the phrase, “It cannot be that bad,” which was relatively low in effectiveness ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .77$). Implied in this message is a slight sense that the helper is trying to cheer up the target, but overall, the helper is

whitewashing the feelings of the target and negating their grief, not allowing them to feel, and completely devaluing their individual experience with the stressor. To assess medium person-centered support, this dissertation evaluated the message, “He/She is no longer in any pain” ($M = 3.04, SD = .87$). This message considers that the target might be worried about the suffering of the deceased and attempts to free the target from any stress associated with those concerns; however, the message makes no attempts to consider the unique feelings of the individual person in grief. The message contains supportive elements, but more could be done, according to the Burleson and Samter (1985) scale. For high person-centered support, this dissertation analyzed the message, “I am happy to stay with you if you would like company” ($M = 4.02, SD = .75$). This message is the only one analyzed in which the helper gives the target a choice. The helper is offering to support the target in the way in which they would like to be supported. The helper is also not telling the target how to feel or how to grieve; the helper is simply offering to stay around if it would be a comfort. Bodie et al.’s (2011) research supports these assertions about these three phrases.

H1 stated that the relationship between message sophistication and perceived effectiveness of support would be moderated by closeness of relationship between target and helper, such that in closer relationships, higher levels of sophistication (VPC) would be perceived as most effective; in less close relationships, middle levels of sophistication (VPC) would be perceived as most effective; and in all relationships, low levels of sophistication (VPC) would be perceived as least effective. A 3 (low, moderate, high

VPC) X 3 (acquaintance, roommate, best friend) ANOVA was used to analyze H1. The main effect for VPC was significant, $F(2, 130) = 122.19, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .65$. A Tukey HSD post hoc test showed that all three messages were significantly different in effectiveness ($M_{\text{low}} = 1.43, SE = .12, M_{\text{mod}} = 3.02, SE = .12, M_{\text{high}} = 3.98, SE = .12$). The main effect for closeness was also significant, $F(2, 130) = 4.26, p = .016$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. The Tukey HSD post hoc test showed that messages from acquaintances were less effective ($M = 2.56, SE = .12$) than from both roommates ($M = 3.04, SE = .11$) and best friends ($M = 2.83, SE = .12$). The interaction of VPC and closeness, however, was not significant, $F(4, 130) = 1.38, p = .246$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Based on a hypothetical scenario, participants in this study showed that perceived effectiveness of the level of VPC in grief support messages did not differ based upon how close they were to the person offering them support. Thus, the overall, larger premise of H1 was not supported by the data.

Message	Closeness Manipulation	Mean	Std. Error
Low VPC			
“It cannot be that bad.”			
	Acquaintance	1.42	.18
	Roommate	1.41	.19
	Best Friend	1.46	.24
Medium VPC			
“He/she is no longer in any pain.”			
	Acquaintance	2.67	.23
	Roommate	3.31	.22
	Best Friend	3.10	.17
High VPC			
“I’m happy to stay with you if you’d like company.”			
	Acquaintance	3.58	.23
	Roommate	4.41	.19
	Best Friend	3.94	.19

Table 4.2: Mean Perceived Effectiveness, Moderated by Closeness, of Messages Chosen to Represent Each VPC Category

An interesting trend, however, can be gleaned from the means for each message. There were essentially no differences in the ratings of the low VPC message by closeness ($M_{low} = 1.42$, $SE = .18$, $M_{mod} = 1.41$, $SE = .19$, $M_{high} = 1.46$, $SE = .24$). It is important to note that these are still ranking between a 1 and a 2 on the Likert-type scale, meaning that participants rate them as “very harmful” to “harmful” (see Table 4.3). However, if a high or medium VPC message came from a casual acquaintance, people rated it lower than if it came from a roommate or best friend. The medium VPC message was rated with a mean effectiveness of approximately 2.67 ($SE = .23$) by participants who received the acquaintance prompt. Those who received the roommate prompt rated it with a mean

effectiveness of approximately 3.31 ($SE = .17$), and those who received the best friend prompt rated it with a mean effectiveness of approximately 3.10 ($SE = .22$). Similar results were found for the high VPC message; participants who received the acquaintance prompt rated the message with a mean effectiveness of 3.58 ($SE = .23$), those receiving the roommate prompting rated it with a mean effectiveness of 4.41 ($SE = .19$), and those receiving it from a best friend rated it with a mean effectiveness of 3.94 ($SE = .19$). The overall conclusion from this is that the participants perceived the messages as similarly ineffective if from an acquaintance, but differences might emerge in moderate or high person-centered messages.

CONTROLLING FOR SEX

Because men tend to rate supportive messages as more effective than women in general, the analyses were re-conducted with sex as a control. Although sex was significant, $F(1, 128) = 4.03, p = .047, \eta^2 = .03$, with men rating the messages as more effective ($M = 3.04, SE = .14$) than women ($M = 2.72, SE = .08$), the interaction remained non-significant, $F(4, 128) = 1.22, p = .304, \eta^2 = .04$. However, it should be noted that due to the lower percentage of male participants, there were no males in the low VPC message and medium closeness (roommate) category.

RESPONSES TO THE HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO (H2 AND H3)

To assess H2, responses to two open-ended questions were coded for VPC and negative face threat:

- *Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your best friend to say in order to comfort you?*
- *Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your coworker to say in order to comfort you?*

To assess whether the coded, open-ended data showed support for H2, the idea that people at medium or low levels of closeness would prefer medium VPC support messages, while people at higher levels of closeness would prefer higher VPC support messages, I ran chi-square goodness-of-fit tests, which compare observed frequencies and what would be expected by chance. (Chi-square test of independence could not be used due to the repeated measures nature of the data—participants completed both questions pertaining to best friends and coworkers. As such, these were analyzed separately.)

First, let us examine results for VPC coded data as it relates to the type of support people would like from coworkers. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test was significant regarding preferences of VPC from co-workers, $\chi^2(2) = 78.69, p < .001$. Based upon the number of participants reporting codable responses regarding messages from coworkers (see Table 4.5), one would statistically expect 33.3% ($n = 67.7$) to fall within each of the low, medium, and high categories. However, the low category had 58.7 fewer people in it than would be expected ($n = 9$). The medium category contained 38.3 more people than statistically expected ($n = 106$), and the high contained 20.3 ($n = 88$) more people than expected. The results are not surprising for low VPC; we would expect that very few people would desire low-level support. High support is the most sophisticated support,

and was somewhat desired by the current study’s participants. However, if Burleson and Samter’s (1985) conclusions were upheld, we should see high VPC remain the most popular. Instead, we see medium VPC are more popular than high, meaning that the participants preferred medium VPC messages most when discussing grief with coworkers.

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Low VPC	9	67.7	-58.7
Medium VPC	106	67.7	38.3
High VPC	88	67.7	20.3
Total	203		

Table 4.3: Coworkers—VPC Levels Observed vs. Expected

For best friends, again 33.3% ($n = 67.7$ participants should fall into each category of VPC—low, medium, and high—based on random chance. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test for best friends was also significant, $\chi^2 (2) = 125.03, p < .001$. As with the coworkers, very few participants here are interested in low messages. Not surprisingly, 63.7 fewer workers than would be expected ($n = 4$) fall into that category in their answer (see Table 4.6). For medium VPC, the goodness-of-fit test shows us that answers are just about where they would expect to be by chance; only 2.7 fewer participants than would have been statistically expected requested medium VPC social support from their best friend. It is in high VPC that we see the interesting results. High VPC support seems to be what participants would prefer from their best friends, with the chi-square goodness-

of-fit test reporting that 66.3 more people ($n = 134$) selecting the category than would be expected to statistically.

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Low VPC	4	67.7	-63.7
Medium VPC	65	67.7	-2.7
High VPC	134	67.7	66.3
Total	203		

Table 4.4: Best Friends—VPC Levels Observed vs. Expected

Between the chi-square goodness-of-fit results from best friends and those from coworkers, we can see that participants had a tendency to prefer medium VPC results from coworkers, people with whom they have low closeness, and high VPC results from best friends, people with whom they have high closeness. As was predicted in this dissertation’s main hypotheses, no group desired low VPC social support. Although the experimental data of this dissertation did not support H1, quantitative coding of the open-ended data does support H2: participants preferred medium VPC support from coworkers (i.e., assumed to have lower closeness) and high level support from best friends (i.e., those to whom they were really close).

H3 proposed that individuals’ reports of desired comforting messages are more likely to have negative face threat when from a best friend than when from a coworker. This was again assessed with chi-square goodness-of-fit tests. For co-workers, the expected frequency was 101.5 if face threat occurred by chance. The chi-square test was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 44.46, p < .001$, showing that negative face threat occurred less often

than chance. Only a quarter of messages exhibited negative face threat ($n = 54$, 26.6%; see Table 4.7). Similarly, in the analysis of best friends, $\chi^2 (1) = 124.54$, $p < .001$, negative face threat occurred significantly less often than chance with only 10.8% ($n = 22$) exhibiting negative face threat. A comparison of these percentages and residuals suggests that negative face threat occurs less often in preferred messages from best friends than co-workers. Thus, these analyses do not provide support for H3.

	No Negative Face	Negative Face
# Coded for Best Friend	181	22
# Coded for Coworker	149	54

Table 4.5: Occurrence of Negative Face

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS (RQ1-RQ3)

In addition to the above quantitative results, a series of results based on qualitative analyses emerged from this dissertation in addressing RQs1–3. Participants’ answers were analyzed qualitatively for the emergence of noteworthy themes using a general content analysis in a style called “theming the data” (Saldana, 2009). In this first read, I looked for repeating themes, metaphors and analogies, transitions or shifts in topics, similarities and differences of participant expressions, and theoretical issues suggested by the data (Saldana, 2009). Once those themes elements were identified, issues that did not seem essential to understanding the content of the data were eliminated and distilled down the emergent themes in a code list that represented the essential nature of what was said in the participant responses to these questions. Simultaneous coding was allowed.

Hypothetical Scenario—Best Friends Versus Coworkers: Beyond Condolences

Responses to the hypothetical scenario were assessed separately from responses by participants who had experienced grief in the past year. The hypothetical data analyzed stemmed from the same two questions as coded for H2 and H3:

- *Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your best friend to say in order to comfort you?*
- *Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your coworker to say in order to comfort you?*

Condolences

Participants touched upon a couple of similar themes in their answers to the various open-ended questions, but by in large, the qualitative analysis showed that participants desired different types of support, or at least different levels of support, from best friends and coworkers. For example, in answer to questions about both best friends and coworkers, many participants mentioned that they would like to hear general condolences. From best friends, 49 participants (about 12%) mentioned wanting to hear “I’m sorry,” or something similar. From coworkers, 165 participants (about 40%) said that they would appreciate a general condolence. Although this gesture is appreciated from both groups, clearly it is more popular among those imagining support from coworkers. Also, from best friends, most targets want more than just condolences. The participants mentioned a desire to hear, “I’m sorry,” but often times wanted the friend to continue and offer additional support. For example: “ ... please let me know if there is

anything that I can do for you” (333). From coworkers, participants largely desired the condolences and nothing more.

Here is an example of an entry from a participant writing what they would like their best friend to say: “I am so sorry. I miss them too. I am here for you no matter what, if you need anything at all. You're a part of my family too” (8). Here, the hypothetical helper offers unconditional support and even goes on to offer their family as a substitute family to the bereaved. Such personal offers of assistance would likely not be desired from a coworker. In fact, most of the imagined offers of condolences from coworkers simply read: “I’m sorry for your loss” (380) or something similarly brief. From best friends, participants desire support that is specifically directed at them. One entry reads: "I'm so sorry for your loss, BFF. If there is anything at all ... I mean it, ANYTHING, I want you to know that I am here for you and will be your shoulder to cry on. Things like this happen ... but God knows it was their time to meet him in heaven" (13). (Emphasis in original.) In offering this support, the participant’s BFF, or Best Friend Forever, clearly knows that this young woman is likely to cry in such a situation and will feel comforted by having someone physically with her in emotional times. The best friend is also aware that the bereaved is religious and that framing the loss in terms of God’s plan and the family’s eventual reunion in the afterlife would be a comfort to the bereaved. Details at this level of intimacy would probably not be shared in a typical coworker relationship.

Desire Not To Talk

Another theme that is similar on the surface but different in detailed application is a desire not to talk. For both questions, a subset of respondents expressed a desire not to discuss the loss. Based upon who was doing the comforting, their reasoning for not talking was very different. For best friends, four participants (fewer than 1%) requested not talking about the loss. If the comforting came from best friends, participants often said that they would rather sit in silence or have physical support because they found it more comforting than words. One participant wrote, “I wouldn't want them to say anything. I would rather that they were there for me, physically, like they were by my side while I dealt with it. Sometimes no words are better than saying something” (9). Another participant noted that her best friend would, “... know not to say anything and just let me vent and cry” (24). Also, these numbers suggest that the idea of not discussing the loss at all is unpopular. Most participants would like to have the grief acknowledged in some way.

If the comforting came from coworkers, participants expressed a sense that any attempt to offer comfort would seem inadequate or inappropriate due to the lack of closeness in the relationship. In total, 32 participants (about 8%) stated that they would not want to discuss the loss with coworkers, for the most part answering the question by saying the type of support they would want from coworkers would be “nothing” (42) or “not much” (3). When asked what type of support she would want from a best friend, one respondent commented: “Not to say much at all. Just be there with me and cry with me. I

don't think there's anything you can say. I hate the word 'sorry' about situations like that. And I think non verbal actions like hugs, and small sentimental gifts say more" (50).

Areas in which participants had near complete agreement in what they would want from best friends and coworkers include physical support and distraction. For physical support, regardless of the source, participants predicted that a simple hug or shoulder to cry on would be helpful during bereavement. One participant wrote that, from coworkers, she would "... appreciate a card, a hug and some kind words" (131). However, physical support was not a popular response overall: only 5 people (about 1%) reported that they would prefer physical support from best friends, and only 3 (about .75%) reported that they would seek physical support from coworkers. These low numbers might suggest that hugging is risky as grief support for a coworker. One participant summed up well the potentially mixed feelings some people might have about receiving physical support in a professional environment: "I like to get hugs when I am sad and someone to talk it through. I would feel way more comfortable to do this with my partner or my close friends" (164).

Distraction

As another, less risky option, participants noted that both friends and coworkers could offer social activities or interesting conversations to temporarily take their mind off of the loss. I labeled these types of support as distraction, because the primary goal of the helper seems to be to distract the target from their negative emotions. Ten participants (about 2.5%) expressed interest in being distracted by their best friend in some way,

including 2 who specifically mentioned a desire to get drunk or smoke. One young woman wrote, “I would want her to distract me and do activities with me” (187). Another said, “I would ... like for that person to distract me the most on a daily basis to not think or grieve so much ...” (233). And, one simply wished their best friend would advise, “Let’s go get drunk” (340). Five participants (about 1.25%) would have sought distraction from coworkers. One writes that they would like coworkers to “offer to take me to lunch and get my mind off the situation for a little” (174). Others had similar social activities in mind as short-term diversions from their grief. Apart from these few subjects, the majority of noteworthy themes raised by dissertation participants about hypothetical grief comfort from best friends or coworkers varied based upon who was offering the support. Let us first look at themes that emerged from the data in response to the question about hypothetical support from a best friend.

Religion

The largest theme to distinguish itself in the hypothetical question about support from a best friend as compared to coworkers was religion. While the theme was occasionally mentioned in answers to other questions, it was raised in far higher numbers in response to this question. Out of the 411 total answers to this question, 58 participants (about 14%) mentioned God, heaven, or some higher power. An additional 11 (about 2.75%) wrote about prayer in some way. One participant wrote that they wanted their best friend to, “Tell me God's gonna be there and he has a plan” (19). Another would find it comforting to hear about their deceased loved ones, “They are always with you. They

are protecting you always. You will be with them again” (110). Others expressed a desire to be pointed to helpful verses in the Bible (263). Dozens of participants stated a wish to hear that the loss of their loved one is part of a greater plan and that they will be reunited with their loved one(s) one day once they too have died.

Presence

A large amount of participants wrote that they would like their best friend to “just be there” during their time of grief. Merely the presence of a best friend was comforting to 70 (about 17%) of the dissertation’s participants. One wrote, “I’m here for you if you need anything. If you want to not say anything and just want to cry, I’ll be there, or if you want to talk about it, I’m here too. I know nothing I can say right now will make you feel better, but I love you so much” (361). This comment includes the word “here” or “there,” expressing that the friend is present for the bereaved, no fewer than 3 times. Others explain why they would like their friend to “just be there”: to make them feel less alone in the grief process; to help them through this tough time; or even to keep them active (366; 370; 371). Although some bereaved may enjoy the distraction of being able to immerse themselves in work and, therefore, think less about the loss, participants did not mention the joy or comfort of simply being in the presence of their coworkers.

Comfort

In what is perhaps an obvious finding, 32 participants (about 8%) stated that they would want “comfort” from their best friend; however, many mentioned comfort in the context of stating that they do not know if their friend could adequately comfort them in

their time of grief. A participant writes, “I think that my close friends would try to comfort me to the best of their abilities. I would want them to reassure me that I will be okay and to not lose hope in what I am doing at the time” (10). Another is more overtly pessimistic and says, “Truthfully, I don't know what they could say to comfort me. I feel it would be too intense for any words to help” (146).

Reminiscing

In cases in which the best friend knows the deceased well, 20 participants (about 5%) express a desire to reminisce about the deceased, or hear reminders about what a good life they had. For example, participant 63 writes, “I would want them to talk happy stories about my parents...” Others would find joy in being reminded that their parent was a good person: “I imagine I would want them to say that my parent was a great person and that they were extremely proud of me as a son. Obviously that my parent is in heaven and looking over all of us now” (278). In this case, the participant is comforted not only by hearing that his parent was a good person but also by being told that he had been a good son while he/she was alive. There seems to be ease of mind knowing that life was lived fully and well while it was lived.

Overview of Best Friend Versus Coworker Findings

Overall, participants seeking support from friends wanted comfort and an opportunity to reminisce about the deceased. Sometimes participants even sought comfort of a religious nature. Participants also stated that they would like for their best friend to just be there, offering silent support. In contrast, from coworkers, participants wanted

condolences, distraction, and sometimes no support at all. Condolences and distraction were not considered bad support from friends, but in general, participants wanted more emotionally involved strategies than just these from their close friends.

Support for Those Who Have Experienced Grief

Responses to three questions posed to those who had experienced grief in the past year ($n = 135$) were also assessed to understand differences in the comforting messages people received from best friends and casual acquaintances:

- *What type of support did you hope to find from close friends?*
- *What type of support did you hope to find from casual acquaintances?*
- *Is there a difference in the type of support you sought from close friends and casual acquaintances?*

In general, thirty-eight percent of participants, or 51 people, responded that they would want no support from casual acquaintances. Fourteen people (about 3.5%) indicated that they would want some type of short greeting or interaction, like a quick greeting or text message, “superficial things” (35). Twenty-four percent of participants, or 32 people, expressed that they would like simple condolences from a casual acquaintance, “a simple apology.” In general, expectations seem to be much lower for casual acquaintances than for close friends. Although, the potential for awkward interactions does still very much exist. In assessing the responses by those who

experienced grief regarding both close relational partners and casual acquaintances, several themes emerged.

Help with Tasks

One unique theme that emerged from the answers to this question was that 71 participants (about 51.5%) desired to be offered time off from work or help with their tasks at work from coworkers. Participant 1 wrote that she would like to hear, “I am so sorry for your loss, please let me know what I can do to help extra time off, or help with your work load.” Participant 3 echoed these same sentiments in her desired comforting message: “You should take some time off to be with your family.” In a similar vein, participant 275 wished for a bit of leniency at work in the event that her grief would lower her performance: “I would hope they would be understanding if I weren't performing at 100%.” There is an extent to which those in grief seem to want to be understood by those around them while they are in distress, but more than understood, they would also like to be interpreted in the best possible light. If they miss a day of work or do not perform to their normal abilities on a task, they would like people to attribute that drop in performance to their grief instead of to any internal character flaws. In total, 16 participants (about 12%) mentioned wanting understanding from their coworkers. Offering patience and compassion to our coworkers who are in times of grief is one way that we can help support those to whom we are not close.

Conundrum Of Comforting

Helpers are put in a difficult position by another theme that emerged from the data. Targets seek different types of comforting. While the desire to be comforted by close friends was fairly consistent, in just what form that comforting was to come was not. As a sample of how varied wants can be, participant #377 wanted consolation without having to say anything. Participant #378 wanted to talk about the situation with their close friends, and participant #379 wanted their support system to go to the funeral and just be there. There is a variety of expectations expressed here, and we can see, just from this section of three participants, that one cannot randomly guess exactly what a person in grief wants as support from their close loved ones. Even among those who want to discuss their grief, there are a wide variety of ways these targets envision ideal comfort. In one example of how contradictory comforting desires could be, participant 36 wanted to hear that everything would be ok, while participant 21 wanted to hear that her helper understood how incredibly hard her grief was going to be. Participant 108 wanted others to express interest in her loss, while participant 203 wanted to “move on.”

Understanding

Popular among the various themes was a sense that close friends would be better at understanding what each target was experiencing. For various reasons, whether it was because they knew the details of the situation better or because they knew the target better, 14 participants (about 10%) expressed that their closer friends would be able to

provide them with better understanding and better support than would casual acquaintances. One participant wrote, “close friends and family can really help heal the deep grief being experienced because of how intimate they are with the person suffering and their knowledge of the situation” (321). Another participant echoed this sentiment by saying, “Friends know you better and therefore should be able to give better support” (155). Participants trust those with whom they are closest to be able to give them the best help in their greatest time of need. But we also see, as before, the theme of high expectations being placed upon the helper.

Social And Relational Costs

Another theme that arose is that those who did not want support from casual acquaintances were worried about the potential social and relational costs of seeking help from acquaintances. Four participants mentioned that they did not want to explain the details of the death to another person in order to receive more support. Three of these participants were even concerned about the motivations of their casual acquaintances, fearing that the acquaintances only offered support out of curiosity, trying to learn more details about the death: “For casual acquaintances, I didn't want support because I felt like they would be more curious about the circumstances and it wouldn't help me with being supportive because since they didn't know about the circumstances, they wouldn't be able to offer much” (128). Another participant mentioned receiving “lectures” about “the theory of grief and vague topics” (43) from casual acquaintances.

One participant found herself telling casual acquaintances, not because she wanted to or desired their support, but because it became necessary in order for them to understand changes in her demeanor: “I sought support from close friends, and I only told casual acquaintances so that they would not question my melancholy behavior” (141). She may have received support as a consequence of her disclosure, but support was not her primary goal in revealing the information.

Difference In Desired Support From Close Friends And Casual Acquaintances

Finally, participants who experienced grief in the past year were asked directly: *Is there a difference in the type of support you sought from close friends and casual acquaintances?* Out of 135 participants who noted that they had experienced grief within the past year, 102 (about 76%) reported that they would want a different type of support from close friends than from casual acquaintances. An additional 9 (about 6.75%) reported that they wanted no support, with two specifically stating that they would like support in general but not from casual acquaintances. Only 17 respondents (about 13%) reported that they would want the same or approximately the same level of support from close friends and casual acquaintances. Many participants did not report reasons for their answers in this category. Instead, they simply answered with a “yes” or a “no.” With those who did provide reasons, several themes tended to emerge for why they would not want as much support from a casual acquaintance.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This dissertation examined the perceived effectiveness of social-support comforting messages in the context of an acute stressor, in this case, grief. This research extends previous theoretical work by Burleson and Samter (1985), Bodie et al. (2011), and Rack et al. (2008), by continuing the exploration of social support as it relates to distress and not just everyday stressors. In addition, this dissertation continues the work these researchers have done assessing the possible role of moderators in the relationship between message VPC and perceived effectiveness of social support. In order to further advance theory, this dissertation looks at a new moderator: level of closeness between the helper and target of support.

The overarching goal examined the relationship between perceived effectiveness and level of VPC, using closeness as moderator, through both an experiment and coding of open-ended questions. It was generally hypothesized that individuals would prefer high VPC messages from close relational partners but moderate VPC messages from less close others. Results from the experiment do not support the overall hypothesis that relational closeness between helper and target moderates the relationship between VPC and message effectiveness. Results from the other analyses, however, do lend partial support to the general hypothesis that individuals prefer less sophisticated messages from others they know less well.

FINDINGS FROM THE EXPERIMENTAL DATA

The experimental portion of this dissertation tested H1, which stated that the relationship between message sophistication and perceived effectiveness of support would be moderated by closeness of relationship between target and helper, such that in closer relationships, higher levels of sophistication (VPC) would be perceived as most effective; in less close relationships, middle levels of sophistication (VPC) would be perceived as most effective; and in all relationships, low levels of sophistication (VPC) would be perceived as least effective. The perceived effectiveness of the three categories of message sophistication were rated as significantly different, supporting Burleson and Samter's (19985) original VPC scale. Also, messages received from acquaintances were rated as less effective, regardless of the message's VPC category. However, there was not a significant interaction between VPC and closeness between target and helper. In the context of the hypothetical scenario, participants did not rate the perceived effectiveness of grief comforting messages at different levels of sophistication (VPC) based upon how close they were to the person offering support. Thus, H1 was not supported by the experimental data.

There are several possible reasons for the lack of interaction effect in the experimental data. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in grief, and then, were asked to imagine themselves in a very controlled conversation, in which the conversational partner and conversational content are predetermined for them. The

ratings of perceived effectiveness of the support messages within these circumstances are valid, but the circumstances are definitely more akin to a laboratory setting than a real-life conversation. Asking participants to rate pre-defined support messages in the context of an online survey might also have made the support effects too salient. Some support messages function better when targets are not aware of the support attempts (Bolger, 2000; Burlison, 1994; Goldsmith, 2004). This option was not possible with this survey design. Additional limitations are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Sex Differences

In the three representative messages that this dissertation analyzed (one from each VPC category), men rated all responses as having a significantly higher perceived effectiveness. As mentioned earlier, previous research also tells us that men recover more quickly when experiencing a death of a loved one (Bowlby, 1980). They are more likely to remarry, more likely to remarry satisfactorily, and more likely to rebuild their social network (Bowlby). Men may be reflecting an internal psychological process that is further along toward recovery. Also, while men and women speak in approximately equal amounts throughout the day, men are more likely to speak at and about work while women are more likely to speak at home and about relationships (Tannen, 1991). As the sex that communicates more about relationships, it is possible that women are more critical of the nuances in support messages. Perhaps men do not look for or perceive smaller flaws in the messages. It is important to note, however, that even though an effect for sex was seen, controlling for the differences in perception of message effectiveness by

sex did not change the results regarding the test of H1. Further, the sample consisted primarily of females (approximately 80%); thus, the findings are likely more representative of women's preferences for grief messages than men's.

FINDINGS FROM THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS (H2— H3)

The general hypothesis regarding preferences for VPC messages by closeness was also examined through coding of open-ended questions. Results from a chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed that participants preferred levels of VPC support in different proportions than would be expected if numbers were taken strictly by chance. When describing support desired from coworkers, medium VPC message were desired the most. VPC theory tells us that people should desire the most sophisticated support message (Burleson & Samter, 1985), and therefore, the most popular category should be high-VPC messages category. Instead, we see those who are less close to the helper tending to prefer medium-VPC messages more than high-VPC messages. When the same goodness-of-fit test was run for messages desired from best friends, participants favored high-VPC messages. In other words, participants who imagine themselves to be less close to a helper are more likely to prefer medium levels of VPC in their grief support messages, whereas participants who imagine themselves to be closer to their helpers are more likely to prefer high levels of VPC in their grief support messages. Thus, closeness between target and helper does appear to have a moderating effect. As predicted, regardless of the closeness of the helper and target, low VPC messages are unpopular.

H3 was also examined using coding of open-ended questions. In contrast to the hypothesis, more participants expressed negative face when describing desired support messages from coworkers than when describing desired support messages from best friends. There were 54 instances of negative face in coworker messages versus 22 in messages from best friends (see Table 4.5). A certain level of comforting seems to help smooth social relations by providing the bereaved temporary slack at work and demonstrating that even their superficial contacts can go through the social niceties of sympathizing with their difficult time in life, but too much support might be seen as a violation of personal freedom. Alternatively, perhaps participants were more concerned about protecting their autonomy in the presence of those to whom they were less close.

These results could provide one reason why participants tended to prefer medium levels of VPC from coworkers. Participants may have been worried about protecting their freedom to grieve in their own way and in their own time and not open up such a personal area of their life to coworkers anymore than is necessary for social appropriateness and general understanding. Another possible explanation for these numbers is that messages from coworkers showed face threat in the sheer fact that coworkers were willing to help. By offering to assist bereaved coworkers with tasks at work, helpers would be letting go of some of their autonomy, and therefore, willingly giving up some of their own negative face protection.

The qualitative results further suggest that even if the supportive actions from coworkers were helpful, some participants worried about the motivations of helpful

coworkers. Participants seemed to worry about their coworkers' reasons for discussing the death. When the helper is too unknown, the target seems to distrust their motives. Also, we see the standard social support tradeoff between how much effort a person in distress has to expend in order to receive satisfying support. Here, the target is calculating that they would have to explain what happened, and that would not make the support worthwhile. They would rather have support from people who are close enough that they happen to know the circumstances just from being in their inner circle. This way, they do not need to explain the circumstances of the death, and they do not have to question whether their motivations are related to wanting to find out about the death.

MAIN THEMATIC QUALITATIVE FINDINGS (RQ1—RQ3)

Thematic analysis of qualitative data yielded several interesting themes. Participants looked to their helpers to offer the type of support one might typically expect: comforting, understanding, reminiscing about the deceased, and distraction from the loss. But at times, participants also demanded a lot from their helpers and could be unpredictable in their desires: sometimes wanting to talk, other times wanting to be left alone, and still other times wanting their helper to seek them out and ask questions. Participants were more likely to want to be left alone or not talk about the loss with their coworkers than with their best friends. They also often sought help with work or temporary patience from coworkers for not putting in their best work performance.

Additionally, participants appreciated general condolences regardless of whether their grief was real or hypothetical, and sometimes even regardless of who was offering

support. Although, for both real and hypothetical grief, more than double the number of participants desired general condolences from coworkers as they did from best friends. In the hypothetical category, 12% of participants sought condolences from their best friends, and 40% wished for condolences from coworkers. Among those who had experienced loss within the past year, only 24% desired condolences from casual acquaintances, whereas 51% of explicitly expressed desiring no support from casual acquaintances. Further, only 9% of those who hypothetically considered loss would not want support from coworkers. This data suggests that condolences are a relatively popular form of support overall and that they are especially popular as support from coworkers.

THE CHALLENGE OF OFFERING SUPPORT

The bereaved, however, often expected friends to perform impossible feats of communication: ask questions but not too many, be there but leave me alone, support me but let me be myself. Reading this data, it is easy to understand why many people approach communication with those in grief with trepidation. Often, helpers are wary of saying the wrong thing and making the target feel worse, but also, targets have a variety of desires and needs that can vary based upon the individual person and even their mood in the moment.

Expectations may be lower, in general, from coworkers, but participants still expressed a desire for assistance from them. Most common was that participants wanted coworkers to offer time off from work or help with tasks at work. Perhaps we place a

large burden on our loved ones when we are in times of distress. A trend that emerges through much of the qualitative data is that casual acquaintances may not have much ability to offer effective grief support, but their role is much less fraught with expectations, contradictory and unspoken needs, and potential consequences on a personally important relationship. Because coworker expectations are lower, good support would be seen as a nice surprise. In contrast, because best friends are expected to provide good support, they are in the difficult situation of only being able to meet expectations or disappoint.

This discussion of grief began by examining how apprehensive helpers can be to talk with those who are in the process of grief. Perhaps helpers are intuiting some of these unrealistic expectations when they do avoid conversations with the bereaved. Not that helpers should avoid the bereaved, but the bereaved may not make it any easier on their helpers. One participant wanted “support for days” (159). This desire is certainly understandable from someone going through grief, but it is also easy to imagine this amount of need becoming a source for stress for her helpers, especially if he/she does not have a large support network. Another participant had been “hoping [her support network] would be able to know exactly what to say, and normally they didn’t” (268). When we are in need, of course the fantasy is that someone will say just the right thing to make it all better. But helpers cannot know how to comfort if not directed in the right direction; and if the target is expecting the helper to take away the pain, the undue burden is being placed upon them. Still another wanted her friends to “find a way to make [her]

feel better” (#399). It is natural that in our time of need we would want those closest to us to have the answers or the best things to say to make us feel better. But given fluctuating moods, divergent wants of people experiencing grief, and different personalities, it is unrealistic to expect helpers to magically know the right thing to say. Yet, it seems that is exactly what we do when we are in grief.

We expect those who comfort us to just know how to make us feel better. In many cases, they are doing their best. Our closest loved ones are often the people who try the hardest to help us, and from them, we expect the most and sometimes are most disappointed. It is difficult to say whether these feelings reflect reasonable expectations of close friends and loved ones during times of distress or whether we are extending that magical thinking of grief onto our relationship with our social support network (Bowlby, 1980; Didion, 2005), fantasizing that they will be able to heal all of our ills.

The theory of Verbal Person Centeredness discusses how people can become consumed by increased egotism during times of distress (Burlison & Samter, 1985). The extra emotional intensity of their situation can lead them to focus more on their own needs. This self-focus seems to lead them to become more interested in their own negative face needs and less concerned with the positive face needs of others. In the qualitative data for this dissertation, targets expressed sentiments that show them expecting their helpers to perform what amounts to a nearly impossible balance between two diametrically opposed factors—letting them talk when they want to talk and just letting them sit there in silence when they want to sit in silence, or asking questions but

not too many questions—all without the target having to communicate these needs. One participant wrote, ““If I needed something, they would be there for me,” (#201). This participant’s confidence in her support network is uplifting to read but could also be a burden on them that might be unfair for her to expect. Is she asking for their support, or is she expecting them to anticipate her needs? And because the stakes are higher during the process of grief than in many other types of situations, the consequences for long-term relationships are potentially greater based upon the outcome of the conversation. It is no wonder that many people timidly approach talking to a person in grief, or avoid talking to them all together.

Also, many people express that they are looking for vague things like “understanding,” or “reassurance,” which would be hard for a helper to actualize in terms of a comforting conversation. And some even differ from the norm by saying that they do not want any support. Helpers are in a difficult position. We often talk about how hard it is to go through grief and how much support people in grief need, but it is very hard for those trying to support those in grief to know what to do—obviously not the same type of hard, but looking at this data, the confusion and apprehension felt by many helpers is understandable.

Differences Between Hypothetical And Real Grief Experiences

In general, themes from those who had experienced grief in the past year echoed the sentiments of those hypothetically imagining grief. However, one large area of

difference was in reference to religious themes. For the most part, people who experienced actual grief in the past year did not mention religion in their answers, but more than 16% of those imagining a hypothetical loss said something about religion, a higher power, or prayer. This difference could simply be due to a difference in the religious beliefs of the people who experienced grief versus those who did not. It could be a difference in what people wanted to hear versus what they actually did hear. Or there could be a difference in what people think will comfort them versus what they actually do find comforting. A further study to investigate this discrepancy would be of value.

OVERVIEW OF QUALITATIVE RESULTS

To summarize the major qualitative findings from this dissertation, simple condolences are safe and helpful in nearly all cases of grief. Close friends and other loved ones are put in a difficult position when someone experiences grief. We often approach a friend in grief with caution, or might avoid communication all together. This data would indicate that these are not unfounded instincts. Many times, close comforters are put into a no-win conversation. Of course, their presence is still desired and wanted, and even if they say the wrong thing, just being there is better than not (Shear, 2012). One way to be helpful that was most popular amongst participants was to break down the protective wall of negative face. From close friends, participants liked when the friend offered to be available for anything, anytime, day or night. In other words, the friend is almost temporarily giving up the mask associated with being an autonomous person, willing to

let the bereaved behind that “wall.” From coworkers, participants sought a similar breakdown of negative face, but this one had to do with tasks and boundaries in the office. Many wanted to hear their coworkers offer to give them time off or take on their responsibilities until they had time to grieve the loss. Although this dissertation focused on negative face threats to the target, greater insights could be achieved by assessing the face threats to both parties in these interactions. Finally, the role of religion as a source of comfort was difficult to discern because it was mentioned by those seeking help hypothetically, but was rarely mentioned by those who had experienced actual grief in the past year. Future work should examine this theme in greater detail.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES: MESSAGES THAT DID NOT TEST AS EXPECTED

Within the experimental data, certain phrases were not rated as expected. One such message was "We usually go to the movies on Fridays; why don't you come?," which is an example of covert task support (Bolger et al., 2000; Curtona, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004). These types of messages generally work as good social support because helpers are able to provide assistance to the target without the target being aware that they are being provided with support (Bolger et al., 2000; Curtona, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004). For example, a husband may help his wife during an extra busy week at work by cleaning up around the house more than he normally would but saying nothing about it. In such cases, the target receives the support without needing to have their attention drawn to the issue that is bringing them stress in the first place (Bolger et al., 2000;

Curtona, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004). So, if we go back to the example of the husband, his silent, secretive cleaning would be much more helpful than if he were to ask his wife everyday, “What can I do to help lessen your stress load?” Asking such a question might provide the wife an opportunity to ask for help and lessen her burden, but it would come at the cost of reminding her about her stress or adding stress in determining ways the husband could be helpful.

One reason why covert messages like “We usually go to the movies on Fridays; why don’t you come,” may not have been rated as highly in this dissertation is that the support did not live up to its intended covert function. In a real-life, non-survey conversation, a person could offer to take a bereaved person along to a regular movie date with friends, and the invitation might serve the end result of getting the person out of the house, exposing them to friends who care about them for a few hours, and getting their mind off of the grief through the entertainment of a film—all without having to mention that their motivation in doing so is to be supportive. In this way, the helper can support the target without the side effect of causing pain by mentioning the loss. Unfortunately, in this dissertation’s survey design, this effect did not work. Survey takers were aware of the motivations behind each of the proposed messages and had been prompted to imagine they were being comforted regarding their grief. Participants would not simply forget the context of the survey one question later. In the context of this dissertation, the question’s manipulative function would become obvious. Hence, lower scores for the support attempt are not surprising.

Other phrases were removed from quantitative analyses due to some anomalies in the data related to standard deviation and for the sake of parsimony. Two of the phrases: “It cannot be that bad,” and “You are being so strong,” were each rated a 1 on a scale of 1 to 5, with a standard deviation of 0. In other words, every person who received these two messages, regardless of the prompt they received, rated the message as “very harmful.” The phrases are from a respected, well-tested survey, and previous research has established that these phrases are associated with their respective VPC categories (Bodie et al., 2011). Hence, it seems unlikely that all participants would have the same reaction to the prompt, particularly the medium person-centered message (i.e., “You are being so strong”). Although a programming error was not found in examining the survey, these results should be taken with caution and be duplicated in future research.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The results from this dissertation add further support to the general VPC scale originally developed by Burleson and Samter (1985). More sophisticated comforting messages are perceived as more effective social support for people in stressful situations. This dissertation continues the work of Rack et al. (2008) and Bodie et al. (2011) by extending the VPC scale to acute distress, specifically grief, and shows that the VPC model does test well in a context of distress. Even though Burleson and Samter created their model for everyday stressors, it seems that the model accurately transfers to acute

stress. Due to this advancement in the theory, researchers can more confidently use the VPC scale to study an even larger range of supportive communication.

In addition, this dissertation continues the recent theoretical work of adding moderators to the VPC scale (Bodie et al., 2011; Rack et al., 2008). Others researchers have examined the effects of sex, personality, degree of emotional upset, or degree of message scrutiny, just to name a few (Bodie et al., 2012; Rack et al., 2008). In the specific instance of this dissertation, closeness between the social support helper and target was examined to see if it moderates the relationship between level of message VPC and perceived effectiveness of the message. This moderating relationship suggests that, when people are in states of distress and are comforted by others, the message is not the only factor that matters. People are also influenced by who delivers the message, and they prefer different types of messages based upon who is comforting them.

Practically, these results may help people offer more effective grief support to those who have lost a close loved one. Specifically, these results could help people differentiate whether it is important to say something different to a close friend or loved one who is in grief versus an acquaintance. More research should be done on this topic before concrete recommendations can be made, but early results indicate that most people appreciate general condolences. Those who are less close to the helper may want little more than condolences, except for maybe offers of task support that sometimes involve a temporary break down of negative face. For helpers who are closer to the target, the bereaved usually want more than just condolences, but just what they would like can vary

quite a bit from person to person, and determining what a certain individual in grief would like to hear in a particular moment may not be an easy task. What this dissertation's results do show us is that nearly all people would like some type of support from both casual acquaintances and close friends. Even if it feels awkward, an effort to say or do something should probably be made.

Chapter 6: Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

A past critique of the comforting research is that Burlison and his colleagues do not study people in acute distress (Wiseman & Schenck-Hamlin, 1981). The addition of grief as a context to the framework (i.e., this dissertation, Bodie et al., 2012; Rack, et al., 2008) provides an answer to these challenges and shows that the framework can apply to acute as well as everyday comforting situations. Another common critique of the comforting research is that the coding system lacks representational validity and empirical evidence (Wiseman & Schenck-Hamlin, 1981). Burlison and Samter (1985) address these critiques by having participants with the “most sophisticated” communication skills come into a lab and assess their framework. This does not completely answer the critiques because it does not tell us what is most effective for people in general and in real-life scenarios; it instead tells us what the best communicators rate the most effective in a laboratory setting. By asking for data from a cross-section of communication students, this dissertation’s data measures preferences of communicators with a range of skills, and not just “the best” communicators. Also, by combining methodologies—using an experiment and open-ended questions—this dissertation was able to paint a more comprehensive picture of the thoughts participants have about closeness and grief comforting message effectiveness. Not only are the Bodie et al. (2011) messages rated on a VPC scale, the data also offers comments that lead to novel themes and sometimes unexpected conclusions.

Using hypothetical scenarios allowed this dissertation to increase its sample size, opening the participation requirements to any communication student over 18. Thus, this dissertation has a robust 411 participants. In addition, the study received 135 participants who had experienced grief in the past year, nearly a third of total study participants. This number shows researchers can study grief without the worry about recruiting enough subjects. One factor that is important to keep in mind as we read the data from participants who did experience a death is that these are the people who chose to communicate about their loss. Participants wanted to share information about their grief. Shear (2012) tells us that, overall, people find it comforting to talk about their grief. Yet, it is possible that there is a significant difference between those who would choose to share about a loss and those who would rather not discuss it.

As is the case with all research, this study's methodology has some weaknesses. A limitation of the experiment is that it was based on a hypothetical scenario. Participants are forced to imagine themselves in this situation, and thus, this dissertation is not capturing responses only from people currently experiencing the type of distress. In regards to the open-ended questions, participants were asked to, once again, put themselves in a hypothetical situation, imagining what their emotions might be in an unknown scenario. Further, despite having a substantial portion having experienced loss in the past year, this project relied on the strength of those participants' memory. Memory can be faulty, and certain comforting attempts may have been more memorable than others. The less memorable comforting attempts deserve to be analyzed as well. In

addition, the survey design would have been stronger if it had asked participants who experienced actual grief how far away they were from their loss. This data would allow analysis of time since death as a control factor. Within the demographic data, participants were not asked about religious affiliation. This question would have been illuminating to the data, particularly given the extent to which religion became a theme within this dissertation. Finding a “perfect” methodology remains elusive to all research, but is a particular challenge for social support researchers (Burleson, 1994; Goldsmith, 2004). Future study should focus on ways to measure those comforting attempts that may not stand out as clearly definable “statements.”

Another possible limitation to this study is the choice of categorization for medium closeness. There were no significant differences found in the ratings for perceived effectiveness of message between roommate and best friend. This lack of results could be due to participants finding messages equally effective no matter where they come from. Or, the insignificant results could be related to a poor choice for the medium closeness category. Roommates may have been a complicated example to test, especially with college students. People’s relationships with their roommates can vary to a great extent. College students are often times very close with their roommates, and some may consider their roommates as close or closer than their best friends; and some students may even choose to live with their best friend. It is possible that the two category labels were not distinctive enough to separate medium and high closeness.

In addition, college is a time in which students are transitioning into adulthood and independence, and roommates are there to witness that transition. College students rely on their roommates for a lot of support and are probably more involved with their roommates than at any other time in life when they will have roommates. Respondents may be sensing some of these factors as they rate various messages, and thus the ratings might not be different. For example, in the medium VPC category, “He/she is no longer in any pain,” was rated as approximately 4.41 by participants who were prompted by a roommate scenario and approximately 3.94 by participants who were prompted by a best friend scenario. In addition, participants who received the message, “I am happy to stay with you if you’d like company,” rated it as approximately 4.12 in effectiveness for both roommates and friends. Further, even if not a best friend, a roommate might be a better person to provide covert task support, a highly sophisticated style of social support (Curtona, 1990). When in distress, a person will probably expect more support from a person who is with them everyday.

As touched on previously, another limitation is that the three messages selected for each VPC level, intended as a sampling of messages to avoid bias of any one message, did not cohere together. As a general trend, lower quality messages (i.e., those that were less person-centered) were rated as less effective, although there were several messages that did not fit this general trend. The message “You have done a nice job looking after everyone” was meant to be a medium person-centered message because it focused on the feelings and concerns of the person in grief but also they were responsible

for taking care of other people. As a concerned helper delivering this message, you would risk the potential of putting pressure on the target to do still more caretaking. However, despite potential concerns with the message, survey respondents rated this message second highest of all 9 messages, with a mean of approximately 3.43.

The question should be raised about whether the experimental prompt is realistic. It is perhaps unlikely that a conversation would begin and develop in exactly the same manner, regardless of how close the two people in the conversation are to each other. As this dissertation's experiment is designed, acquaintances would hypothetically have the same comforting conversations with people as would best friends. In reality, these conversations would likely look very different. Setting up this type of situation was necessary in order to maximize internal validity.

In selecting one representative message from each VPC category provided certain advantages (e.g., more cleanly distinguishing the levels of person-centeredness), but also disadvantages such as lowering the sample size to about a third of the full sample, thereby reducing power, and increasing the potential of bias in interpretations of the sole message for each level of person-centeredness.

Responses to this dissertation may also be limited due to coming from an online survey. Participants were only provided with a certain amount of space in which to write answers. They may have felt less free to open up about their loss while typing into a form than they would have speaking to a person face-to-face. Some participants abbreviated answers or paraphrased support messages instead of typing full sentences. In-person

interviews may have recorded more complete answers and more detailed information from participants. Future research should examine closeness between target and helper as a moderator of message VPC and perceived effectiveness of support message using in-person interviews as a data-collection technique.

Answers to the open-ended questions are limited due to the survey asking for responses from both best friends and casual acquaintances. By asking the participants to look at differences, it is possible that differences were created or exaggerated. This effect may have been minimized because questions were programmed to appear one at a time in Qualtrics. In other words, participants would have seen the question about desired support from close loved ones without knowing that an additional question about acquaintances was to follow. But the effect is still possible.

As a technique for measuring negative face threat, researcher ratings of face threat perceived within a participant's message may not be the best way to note differences between categories. In future research, a better method to code for negative face threat might be to have participant note their own ratings of whether they perceive the threat. In addition, more differences between categories—best friends and coworkers—might be noted if face threat were measured in degrees instead of categorically.

Future study should examine positive face as it relates to grief comforting and social support. The bereaved may find it easier to share their grief with those whom they are closest because they do not feel the need to put on a happy, socially appropriate face. In contrast, it may feel like a violation of positive face to grieve in front of those that

targets to not know as well. Helpers may also feel pressure to offer comfort to the bereaved out of a positive-face driven social obligation. There are a wealth of opportunities for examining positive face as it applies to grief and social support, even using closeness between target and helper as a moderator. This line of research would be a logical next step from this dissertation.

CONCLUSION

Concrete outcomes of social support are difficult to measure. In attempting to measure perceived effectiveness of social support, this dissertation has attempted to employ the most appropriate methodology based on previous literature and the available population. Mixed results were found; the interaction effect from the experiment data did not support H1, but the analyses of the open-ended responses suggest that closeness between the target and helper matters. Future research should attempt to duplicate these open-ended results in experiment form. It is not surprising that the results are limited due to the difficulty of working in social support literature, but as social scientists, it is important to sometimes attempt to answer questions that are important but may be difficult to cleanly measure.

Overall, it is easy to see why people avoid grief support—the data from this dissertation shows that there are often difficult constraints put upon helper and that people can want different things from different people, or even want different things based upon their own person preferences. However, very few participants stated that they

would prefer to not talk about a loss at all. Most desired some type of comforting attempt. Yet, still, the idea that there is one perfect, right thing to do or to say in order to comfort those in distress remains elusive, perhaps because our goal in comforting is out of reach. We want to take away the pain, and that is impossible. No matter how effective the communication, the grief remains.

Appendix A

Sample Recruitment Text

Research on Grief and Communication

Would you like to help others learn the best ways to be supportive to those who are experiencing grief?

Sometimes, when someone when know is in pain, we struggle for the right thing to say. If you answered “Yes,” to the above questions, you can help UT researchers learn how our communication can be most helpful to people in times of grief.

This study is being conducted through The Communication Studies Department. Contact Jessica Knapp, Jessica_knapp@mail.utexas.edu, for more information.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older.

Recruitment Text Used on SONA

Abstract	Examines the type of support messages people most like to hear when they are experiencing grief.
Description	Short answer and multiple-choice questions about grief and communication. Study will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. For more information, please feel free to contact Jessica Knapp at jessica.knapp@gmail.com . Thank you!
Eligibility Requirements	Must be 18 or over

Appendix B

Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study about the way people communicate about grief.

Principal Investigator: Jessica Knapp
University of Texas, Austin, Communication Studies
jessica_knapp@mail.utexas.edu
Faculty Sponsor: Rene Dailey, Associate Professor, Communication Studies

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to learn about the way people communicate about grief. You have been asked to participate in this study because you have lost a parent in the past year and are over 18 years of age.

How many people will take part in this study?

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 100 people in this research study.

How long will your part in this study last?

Your initial participation in the study should take about 30 minutes. You will then be asked to record short online diary entries over the next two weeks. Following the diary completion, there will be one follow-up survey, which should take 5 minutes or less.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

Initially, you will be asked to answer several questions about your experience with grief. Then, over the next two weeks, you will be asked to record information about conversations you have about your loss. After this two-week period, you will be asked to fill out one last brief survey to wrap-up your research participation.

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You may not benefit personally from being in this research study. You may help add to our understanding about the way people communicate about grief. Also, some people who are experiencing grief find it helpful to talk about that grief.

What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?

There are minimal risks associated with this study. Communicating about emotional events in our lives can open us up to the potential of positive results, but it also has the potential to bring up challenging emotions. Contact information will be provided for grief counselors and hospice professionals should you desire to discuss your grief further with a trained professional.

How will your privacy be protected?

To protect your privacy, results will be assigned numbers and letters as a form of distinction but they will not be connected to names of participants. To help ensure your confidentiality, even though the data will be described in a research report, and may be presented at a conference or written up for publication your name will in no way be connected to the results.

What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?

You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?

There will be no costs for being in the study.

What if you are a University of Texas Student?

You may choose not to be in the study or to stop being in the study before it is over at any time. This will not affect your class standing or grades at University of Texas at Austin. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

What if you have questions about this study?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at (512) 471-6978 or by email to orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Title of Study: Communicating About Grief

Principal Investigator: Jessica Knapp, PhD Candidate, Communication Studies,
jessica_knapp@mail.utexas.edu

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date: _____

We may wish to present some of the results from this study at scientific conventions, as excerpts for publication, or as demonstrations in classrooms. Please sign below if you are willing to allow us to do so with your words.

I hereby give permission for the written text made for this research study to also be used for educational purposes.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

CODEBOOK

Grief and Comforting Codebook, June 2015

(Language regarding theoretical descriptions is borrowed from this dissertation.)

Background Information and Theories

Social Support

In the field of communication, the process of figuratively reaching out and offering assistance to someone in need is known as social support (Burlison 1985; Goldsmith, 2004). Social support is an essential component of satisfying interpersonal relationships (Goldsmith, 2004). We expect those with whom we are close to be able to offer us support when we face a challenge (Goldsmith, 2004). Good social support can improve our lives in a myriad of ways. Not only is effectively communicated support perceived as better at producing helpful outcomes (Burlison, 1985; Burlison & Samter, 1985), effective social support is also linked to longer life, lower cardiovascular reactivity to a stressor, reduced incidence of disease, better illness recovery, and better coping with chronic illness (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Cohen, 2004; Franks, Wendorf, & Gonzalez, 2004; Lepore, Allen, & Evans, 1993). In both emotional and physical terms, good social support is associated with good health. Social support also makes us feel better about our relationships with the people who are offering support (Goldsmith, 2004). In a variety of ways, good social support improves our quality of life.

As helpful as social support can be, the reality is that some attempts to offer support are more helpful than others. In trying to be supportive, we can make things better, but we can also make things worse (Brashers et al., 2004; Burleson & Samter, 1985; Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). In everyday situations, simply bringing up a sensitive topic may cause negative emotions for a conversational partner or remind them of a topic that they are trying not to think about. In addition, it is possible to say something that makes a person feel worse about the way they are handling a delicate situation. For example, by asking a friend how they are handling their breakup, you may intend to offer support by checking in on their general emotional state, but as a result of your question, you may remind your friend of the sad event (about which they might be trying to avoid thinking about), and your question will likely offer little social support.

VERBAL PERSON CENTEREDNESS

For Burleson, the more sophisticated a message becomes, the better it is at offering support. Within this theory, comforting messages are scored for the level to which they acknowledge the perspective of the target and elaborate upon and grant legitimacy to the feelings and perspective of the target. Burleson and Samter theorize that messages that are more centered on the target's personal perspective will be perceived as more sophisticated. Less sophisticated strategies might tell the target how they should feel while more sophisticated ones will empathize with their feelings or even allow for the target to have a range of feelings and feel whatever they want in their own time

(Burleson & Samter). This crucial factor of Burleson's social support hierarchy is known as Verbal Person Centeredness (VPC) (Burleson & Samter, 1985). Person-centered messages are those that "explicitly [acknowledge] and elaborate on the feelings of the other" (Burleson & Samter, p. 120). People think of themselves as individuals, and their own psychological lives become especially salient during times of crisis (Burleson & Samter). Thus, appealing to that individuality is perceived as more sophisticated messaging and can make for a more successful comforting attempt.

POLITENESS THEORY, BROWN & LEVINSON, 1978

Politeness Theory postulates that we all put on a "face" when we interact with other people. This face is the version of ourselves that we want the outside world to see. How we interact with other people and treat their "face" has a lot to do with how polite we are.

In Brown and Levinson's terminology, we would say that people have two essential face needs—those for positive face and those for negative face. This work will primarily work with negative face, but this codebook will explain both. (For many people, it helps to understand the terms if you simply think of "positive" and "negative" as being labels and do not try to associate actual positive characteristics with the one category and negative characteristics with the other. It has helped me, anyway.)

Positive face relates to a person's desire to be liked, appreciated, desired, wanted, etc., when they are in the public world. We do many things to increase the odds of this happening. We smile, are nice to other people, compliment them, dress in clean

and trendy clothes, keep up on current events that we can have conversations about. You could probably go on nearly forever finding ways that we work to be liked by other people. In addition, we are aware that other people have this same desire, so we interact in ways that are “polite” based upon this knowledge. If someone you don’t entirely like sits next to you in class, you wouldn’t turn to them and say, “Ew, move, I don’t like you!” And if you did, it would be considered terribly rude. When you go out on the weekend, you might try to think about all of the people who would also enjoy being included because you know it would make them feel good. When we break up with someone, the cliché line is “It’s not you; it’s me.” This is in deference to positive face, an attempt to make that person feel liked, even though they are being rejected, they are still likeable.

Negative face is connected to our ability to go about our daily lives without being imposed upon by other people. When you have to submit your will to someone else’s, your negative face has been violated. For example, if you are depending on a friend for a ride to class, and they are 30 minutes late, they have violated your negative face. They have now left you with no choice but to be late to class. We can be polite with negative face by asking people to do things instead of demanding, or giving them an out when we request favors. For example, you might say, “If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind closing the window?” This way, the person has the option of saying that it is too much trouble, even though they likely won’t. Or if you need help with a move, a polite request would be, “If you’re not doing anything on Saturday, I could use some help

moving boxes.” This request acknowledges that your friend might already have plans. Thus, you have deferred to their negative face. If you were to simply say something like, “Get me a glass of water,” you would not be acknowledging the hearer’s autonomy.

INSTRUCTIONS

CODING ITEM 1

Verbal Person Centeredness will be ranked on a 3-item scale. Both coders will identify comforting messages and rate them on a scale of low, medium, and high. Verbal Person Centeredness reflects the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, legitimize, or contextualize the feelings of another (Bodie et al., 2012)

Low VPC messages deny the other person’s individual feelings and perspective by failing to acknowledge them or criticizing them.

Medium VPC messages implicitly recognize the other’s feelings by trying to distract them from the situation or stressor, offering cliché feelings of sympathy, or giving non-feeling explanations of the situation

High VPC messages explicitly recognize and legitimize the other’s feelings by helping to articulate those feelings, elaborating on reasons why those feelings might be felt, and exploring on those feelings in a broader context (Bodie et al., 2012)

For this section, we will analyze two questions in the Excel document:

- Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your best friend to say in order to comfort you?

- Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your coworker to say in order to comfort you?

Our coding will first need to identify that a comforting message has been delivered, and then we will rate its level of VPC. To mark these messages, you may mark low, medium, high; l, m, h; or even something like 1, 2, 3; whatever works for you as you go through the process, as long as I can decipher your notations once I have the data. In addition, some coders find it easiest to mark for instances of a phrase and then go back and rate it. Others like to do both at once. You will find your own preferred style as you go.

The other major themes we will code for are Politeness and Face Threat

Please note issues of negative face in the margins of your data sets. Please just note when you see these; they do not need to be rated on a scale. Below are examples of **negative face threat**-related messages that you might see, specifically related to grief.

“Time will heal your loss”

“She/he is in a better place”

“I had an aunt die of lung cancer last year. It’s a super common disease. You will feel better in a month.”

“You shouldn’t be so upset that your grandfather died. After all, he was old.”

“Don’t take it so hard”

Please also make notation of instances that express **concern for negative face**, that are polite toward negative face. These instances do not need to be rated on any sort of scale, just made note of. (I don’t think there will necessarily be a scale of politeness.) Below are some examples of what a negatively polite comforting message might look

like. Examples of negatively polite phrases could be an indirect request or expressing concern about someone else's time. Below are some examples that apply directly to grief.

"I can't imagine what you are going through."

"I'm sure you will grieve in your own way, but if you want someone to be there for you, let me know."

"I am here if you need anything."

"Everyone grieves in their own time."

To analyze negative face, please examine the same questions as noted above:

- Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your best friend to say in order to comfort you?
- Hypothetically, if you were to lose a parent, what would you want your coworker to say in order to comfort you?

As you get started, please contact me if you have any questions. At some point, we should take a chunk of data and code it apart from each other without discussing the work with each other at all. However, during this initial training stage, it is perfectly fine for you to email me with questions, and for us to discuss how we are interpreting different phrases and terms that come up. There are always surprises that you cannot anticipate until you look at the data. Feel free to use your best judgment, and we can talk it out next time we meet, or email me when you run into a confusing entry.

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