

Hello, my name is Meara Faw, and I'm an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Colorado State University. I teach and do research on social support, or how we communicate with people when they're having a difficult time. And so, I'm happy to share some thoughts from my own research and teaching about how you can help other people when you have conversations with them in your community.

A big question that many of us have is how can we best help other people when they experience challenges. In particular when people are facing a lot of uncertainty or when they're scared about the future, where they're going to live, what's going to happen with their career, how will they sort of connect with friends and family during difficult times. It can be hard to know the right things to say and the best ways to show other people that we care about them and that they are connected in a broader community. How we go about communicating with other people when they experience challenges is by providing what we call social support. Social support includes all of the things that we do and say to try and help one another during difficult times. Of course, this is an idea and a term that we're all familiar with. We all know what it feels like to have somebody who is supportive of us. They are our allies. They are our friends and our cheerleaders. They are people who are there for us. So we all intuitively know what it means to be in a supportive relationship or to be a part of a supportive community. But when it comes to offering social support to others, it can be challenging, so it is important to recognize that social support involves a lot of different behaviors.

Oftentimes when we think of social support, we're thinking about what we call emotional support. Emotional supports are acts that communicate to another person that we love them and that we care about them. When we think about sort of being there for someone, usually we're thinking about emotional support. We're thinking about the way that we let another person know that we are invested in them and that we want good things for their lives. But there are other types of support too. We can offer tangible support. Tangible support happens when we provide goods or services to another person in order to help sort of address a challenge that they're having. So you can imagine if you are sick with the flu and someone brings you chicken noodle soup, that chicken noodle soup is a tangible support. It's an actual thing that they give you to let you know that you are cared and valued. We can also offer informational support. Informational support can come in forms of advice or information, right, pamphlets or resources to try and help another person. We can also offer people esteem support. Esteem support happens where we sort of validate that that person is a good and worthwhile individual, worthy of respect and love even though they may be going through a difficult time. And then we can offer them network support. Network support involves connecting people with others who can help them. So, network support can look like, you know, not knowing the answer to a question but connecting that person with someone who does. So, these are all things that we can do to try and provide support for someone.

I'm in particular gonna focus on emotional support as something that's something that is essential when we are trying to help people who are dealing with challenges. Before I do that, though, I want to talk briefly about why social support matters. So, again, I think most of us intuitively know how important it is to be in supportive relationships, but the research is very conclusive in saying that support matters for lots of reasons. A big reason why social support matters is that it actually helps us be healthy people. When we feel support, it can lower our levels of stress. It can address feelings of uncertainty that we have, and as a result, we can feel sort of more empowered. We can feel more capable of addressing the issues that we experience in our lives, and this is good for our health. Social support is also really good

for our relationships. In fact, it's one of the key criteria that many of us have for a long-term, satisfying relationship with another person. And of course, those relationships are also good for us and good for our health. And then support matters because it is through communicating support and by being there for one another that we build strong resilient communities. Social support is the backbone of being able to address challenges as a community. When we communicate support effectively, we become more resilient, and we become a better place to live because of that.

When it comes to support, I mentioned that we're gonna focus on emotional support, and that's because the research is really clear: that when people experience challenges, it's really important that we address or respond to their emotions when we offer support. Even in situations where we want to offer information, or we want to connect people with sort of a network connection that might be able to address their problem, or we want to sort of give them a tangible thing to help address their issues, research says that if we want to do that and do that well, we need to address their emotions as well. In fact, the research is really conclusive that if we don't respond to people's emotions, it actually may make it harder for them to understand and accept the other types of support that we offer. And so when people are experiencing extreme emotions and when they indicate that they might want to talk about those, it's in our best interest as somebody who is trying to help them to encourage them to talk about those things.

So when we provide support, what can we say in order to do that and do that well? How can we provide good support? What might that look like? Well, in order to provide good support, again, we want to make sure that we are addressing the emotions that another person has when those emotions are something they want to talk about. And ways we can do that include taking steps to acknowledge their emotions. This can come in a very, sort of simple statement of saying something like "I see that you're upset" or "I can tell that this is causing you a lot of stress." Simple statements to acknowledge the emotions that the other person is feeling can be really important. A next step we can take is we can legitimize those emotions. So we can go beyond acknowledging those emotions to letting the other person know that their feelings are justified, that it is okay that they are upset or stressed. Right, we can let them know this is a normal reaction they're having. So, "I know that you are upset and that's okay. That's a really reasonable response to the experience you're going through." That's what legitimizing someone's emotions looks like. We can also elaborate on those emotions by saying things like "I would be really angry if I were in your shoes" or "you know, it's totally understandable that you would feel stress, there's a lot of uncertainty that's coming in this situation." By elaborating on those emotions, we're sort of further highlighting for that other person that what they're feeling is okay, and we're helping them feel understood. And then one of the last things we can do is we can work on trying to provide them with a perspective, right. Try to help them think about their problem in a new way, or try and think about their emotions or their reactions to that problem in a new way. "I understand that you're stressed out, that's a really normal feeling. I would feel that way too." "Are there things you think you could do that might help you be able to deal with that stress?" That's a simple statement that I just talked through that goes through those stages of acknowledging, legitimizing, elaborating, and providing perspectives to a problem.

When providing support, it's important to remember that in addition to some of these things, it's usually a good idea to ask people questions. "Is this something you want to walk about?" "How is that making you feel?" And when we ask those questions, we should be prepared to listen and listen well, something I know you're going to learn about in these training materials. And we should also work to create sort of

a respectful space for conversation where people do feel comfortable opening up if there are things they want to talk about. In creating that space for conversation, I want to take a minute and address some of the things we should work to not do in our supportive interactions. So if that list I just went through is all the things we should try and do, here are some things we should not do. So what are the things that I should be careful of avoiding when I'm providing support to another person? Well one thing that we want to be careful that we don't do is to minimize the other person's feelings or their situations. "Oh, it's not that big a deal, everything's gonna be just fine." That's a very normal statement or a very normal thing to say in response to someone dealing with a challenge, but when we say something like that what we're ultimately telling that person is that their feelings aren't justified and they need to get over it. That's not a very supportive thing to say so we want to make sure we're not minimizing their feelings or the problem that they have. Along those same lines, we also want to be careful that we're not condemning them. We want to be careful that we're not saying things like "oh, you shouldn't feel that way" or "oh, it's not a big deal," a minimization, "I don't know why you're so upset," a condemnation. Again, these are things that I think we actually say more than maybe we care to admit and they're not very supportive for people who are going through a challenge.

We want to make sure that we try and avoid platitudes. These are sort of those general, you know, phrases or sayings that we have in our culture that end up feeling oftentimes very empty for other people, so saying things like "everything's going to be alright." We may mean well when we say it, but it can ultimately feel pretty empty in terms of the comfort that it provides. So you want to make sure that we stay away from saying things that sort of everybody says in response to a challenge, those often end up feeling pretty hollow. We also want to make sure that we don't judge the other person and we don't blame them for their situation. "Oh, you're upset that you lost your job, well maybe you should have worked harder." Not a terribly supportive thing to say. So making sure that we're steering clear of judgements or blaming is really important. And ultimately another thing we want to be really careful of is we want to be careful not to rush to a solution. It can feel really counterintuitive and it can actually feel counterproductive to take the time to talk with another person about how they're feeling in a response to a situation. Because of that, it's really common for us to dive in straightaway and offer the advice or information that we think will solve their problem or to just provide them with a tangible service that we think will make things go away. While it's not a bad thing to offer those types of support, when we rush into that without first addressing someone's emotions, we can make them feel disrespected and undervalued. So it's really important that we create space to address the emotional reactions another person is having, to do some of that elaborating, legitimizing, acknowledging, and perspective taking, and then offering the solution if they're in a place where they're ready to hear it. So we want to make sure we don't rush things too much.

Overall, if you can keep these ideas in mind you should be able to have pretty successful, supportive conversations. I know it can be challenging to have sort of conversations with people who are feeling a lot of feelings and who are maybe overwhelmed by the challenges that they face, but I'm confident that you, in doing some of these things, can provide them with conversations and interactions that make them feel seen and valued and cared for. Thank you for the work that you are doing, and I hope that this information is helpful for you.