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Social Support Strategies in Online Forums Among Adult Offspring of Parents with Harmful Alcohol Use

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Abstract

We categorized communication strategies employed to exchange social support (type and person centeredness) in three online forums about harmfully-drinking parents. Data included discussion post replies over two months; n=1,644 units of analysis. Support type categories were identification, emotional, informational, network, and esteem. For person centeredness, most messages were moderate (expressed sympathy, provided distraction), followed by high (helped with feelings), and then low (minimized feelings). Adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents predominantly communicate self-interested forms of support in online forums. Based on principles of supportive communication, esteem support and high person centeredness may enhance social support in these settings.

Social Support Strategies in Online Forums Among Adult Offspring of Parents with Harmful Alcohol Use

Adults who grew up in homes in which a parent engaged in harmful alcohol use exhibit an increase in maladjustment (Straussner & Fewell, 2011), and are at risk for low self-esteem, anxiety disorders, and depression (Rangarajan & Kelly, 2006). There are multiple online groups for adult offspring who seek supportive resources. However, the conditions of growing up in a home with a harmfully-drinking¹ parent may make it difficult for adult offspring to communicate about feelings and concerns, and in turn, receive adequate support. Thus, the goal of this study was to examine online support boards for adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents to better understand the types of support that are provided and the degree of validation in the support received.

Families with parents engaging in harmful alcohol use

Growing up with a parent engaging in harmful alcohol use is challenging and often has negative consequences. For example, the likelihood of harmful substance use is approximately 70% higher among offspring of parents with harmful drinking than among other offspring (The Priory Center, 2006). Beyond the health risks, some offspring of harmfully-drinking parents experience a variety of personal and social ramifications, such as poor academic performance, and psychological distress (Johnson & Stone, 2009). When parents struggle with alcohol use they tend to neglect family obligations, become verbally and physically abusive, and withdraw from family relationships (Straussner & Fewell, 2011). These behaviors may create a communication climate that discourages openness, prevents the development of close relationships, and fosters interpersonal conflict (Johnson & Stone, 2009). Thus, the

stressor of growing up with a harmfully-drinking parent may lead offspring to struggle emotionally and communicate ineffectively (Harter & Taylor, 2000).

In addition, the stigmatization and denial that is often associated with parents' harmful drinking may make it difficult for offspring to seek support (Straussner & Fewell, 2011), even though support may be an important component of their own recovery. As children, offspring may not partake in typical childhood behaviors such as inviting friends to their home or involving parents in school activities, potentially leading to feelings of marginalization, embarrassment, and rejection (e.g., Keyes et al., 2010; King et al., 2007). In addition, families often avoid discussing parents' harmful drinking [author withheld] such that long-term well-being is negatively affected (Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). For example, topic avoidance may lead to loneliness, impulsivity, stress, and relational dissatisfaction (Afifi, Merrill, & Davis, 2014; Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

Examination of support types and person centeredness

Although supportive resources are available and frequently utilized by adult offspring of parents with harmful alcohol use (Humphreys et al., 2004), few studies have examined how adult offspring communicate support to one another. We considered the type of support and the person centeredness conveyed within the messages exchanged in online resources. To examine offspring's support, we used Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) social support category system, which has been used to identify and quantify forms of supportive communication (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2013). This system categorizes messages into five distinct types of support. *Informational support* consists of messages that are factual in nature, and contain advice or

knowledge for the recipient (e.g., “I have a great book I can loan you.”). *Emotional support* is communication that expresses concern or sympathy (e.g., “I am really sorry for your loss.”). *Esteem support* refers to communication meant to bolster and improve one’s self-worth or abilities (e.g., “You’re such a strong and optimistic person, I know you’ll make it through this.”). *Network support* is communication that brings the recipient closer to a network of people who have similar ideas or situations (e.g., “There’s a support group meeting this Thursday, you should go.”). Finally, *tangible support* is defined as providing physical aid or services to the recipient (e.g., “I can go by the store on my way home for you.”).

We also considered the degree of person centeredness in the messages exchanged online by adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents. The person centeredness framework provides a guide for examining the degree of validation in a supportive message by considering high, moderate, and low levels (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). Person centeredness is distinct from other typologies of support because it focuses on *how* the *Highly person-centered* messages explicitly recognize the other’s feelings, help the person to articulate and elaborate reasons for those feelings, and situate those feelings in a broader context (e.g., “I’m sorry things didn’t work out the way you expected them to.”). *Moderately person-centered* messages acknowledge the recipient’s feelings by expressing sympathy or distracting attention from the situation (e.g., “It’s probably for the best. Let’s go to the movies to take your mind off of it for a while.”). *Low person-centered* messages disregard, ignore, or minimize the recipient’s feelings (e.g., “I don’t know why you’re so upset, this isn’t that big of a deal.”). Though low levels of person centeredness appear dismissive in nature,

the framework argues that this may be an intended form of support, and thus requires consideration. Notably, higher levels of person-centered support messages contribute to personal and relational well-being (Burleson, 2003; Wills & Fegan, 2001).

Present Study

This study examined the types of social support that adult children of harmfully-drinking parents provide in the context of online support groups, focusing on categories of support and description of degree of person centeredness. Findings from this study will be useful to family members and providers working with adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents as well as to the adult offspring themselves. Our results will help bring attention to the nature of supportive messages in online forums and highlight forms of support that may better serve the coping needs of adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents.

Method

Data Collection Procedure

Three online forums were selected for analysis: www.soberrecovery.com; www.cyberrecovery.net; and www.12stepforums.net. They were selected based on the variation in site set-up and structure and because they afforded public access to member posts. More specifically, the [12stepforums.net](http://www.12stepforums.net) was unique due to the focus on 12-steps; [soberrecovery.com](http://www.soberrecovery.com) was unique because it included a moderator; and [cyberrecovery.net](http://www.cyberrecovery.net) was intended generally to provide connection and support without a 12-step focus or moderator.

All posts were extracted from forums within each website labeled “Adult Children of Alcoholics.” Thus, site users self-identified as being adult offspring of a harmfully-

drinking parent. Websites all shared a similar purpose in providing an outlet for adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents to “share thoughts, feelings, and questions with others who have had similar experiences.” Though references were occasionally made regarding their own recovery, members’ posts were focused on actively seeking support as a result of being an adult offspring of a harmfully-drinking parent. All subscribed to an asynchronous platform, where messages were not exchanged in real-time. Messages on discussion boards were posted using an anonymous screen name; thus, persons posting were completely anonymous without any means of identification. Even so, for this study, screen names were removed prior to analysis.

Data included discussion strings that consisted of an original post and all replies to the post during a two-month period. Post activity during the data collection period was as follows: 12stepforums.net had 252 original posts with a mean of 3.04 (SD = 2.86) replies to a post; soberrecovery.com had 410 original posts and $M = 2.53$ (SD = 2.33) replies; and cyberrecovery.net had 151 posts and $M = 2.96$ (SD = 2.95) replies. Data analyzed in this study were from replies and not original posts. Each reply in the discussion string was treated as a unit of analysis, with a total of 1,644 units of analysis included in the sample. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to study initiation.

Coding Procedures

Two independent coders were trained to evaluate all of the messages in terms of (a) the type of support provided, and (b) the degree of person centeredness in the message. As a starting point, each coder read through all of the messages and responses to familiarize themselves with the data. Then, the coders were trained to

apply each of the coding schemes for the support typology and person centeredness to the data. The coding schemes were applied separately, such that coders first evaluated all of the messages in the data set in terms of the type of support that was provided, and then rated all of the messages in the data set in terms of person centeredness. Both coders provided ratings for every unit of analysis. The data set was divided into five sets, each consisting of 20 percent of the total responses in the data set. The coders met with the lead author after completing coding for each set of responses to check for reliability and resolve disagreements. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and the lead author cast the deciding vote in cases where consensus could not be reached.

Support typology coding. We developed a coding scheme based on Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) five support categories of informational, emotional, esteem, network, and tangible support. Following the initial review of the data, the coders indicated that the tangible support category was almost nonexistent in the messages, which is consistent with findings from other studies that examined online support messages (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999). Consequently, we removed the tangible support category from the coding scheme prior to the assignment of codes.

Many responses did not express concern for the emotion and/or feelings of the person providing the original post, but instead shifted the discussion to share stories about one's own similar experiences and problems. We refer to this strategy as *identification*. The use of identification occurred so frequently that we updated the code list again, adding a category of identification. The final coding scheme used for the analysis consisted of informational, emotional, esteem, network, and identification

support. We also added a miscellaneous category to be used for posts or responses that contained no supportive content. After making adjustments to the coding scheme to fit the data, inter-coder reliability for the support typology was $k = .77$.

Person centeredness coding. Person centeredness was coded in terms of high, medium, and low levels of person centeredness in the messages. Inter-coder reliability for levels of person centeredness was $k = .95$.

Results

Types of Social Support

Regarding types of support messages that adult offspring use in the provision of support in online forums on parental alcohol use, results indicated that identification was the most frequent type of support (51.64%), followed by emotional support (23.13%), informational support (13.38%), network support (5.47%), and esteem support (2.55%). The miscellaneous category contained 3.83% of responses.

Identification support. In just over one-half of responses, users provided their own narrative to express how they could relate to, or identify with, another's story. Identification support appeared to be normative in the online community, and users frequently expressed gratitude to those who were willing to share their own stories and experiences. For example, in response to a post about having trust issues, one user wrote, "I also have this issue. I even create issues because I think the person really isn't telling me the truth." In another situation, a user responded to a complaint about not being able to get a handle on finances by saying, "I know I do this same thing at times. I complain about my lack of money how it's going to be a quiet one etc...then sometimes I realize and think...hang on...its because you just spent all your money on flights to

Asia next year....” Finally, an individual acknowledged similarities in parental frustration by providing an example from their own life, “I have the same problem. My mom is a frickin RN for crying out loud and she lives from paycheck to paycheck, always complaining about money (then going out and spending \$100 for a haircut every month).”

Emotional support. Emotional support was used in about one-quarter of messages. It typically focused on the feelings of another member and considered those feelings by making recommendations and providing encouragement. Providing emotional support through acknowledgement of another’s feelings can be seen in the following post, “Thank you for sharing. It is hard when you have your own situation that you struggle with and you have others that appear to be in a better place with their situation and they complain to you.” One user expressed sympathy and inquired further about another member’s feelings, “That must be a huge burden to carry with you each day. Are you able to let your husband or even one friend in on what you are feeling?” In a further example of emotional support, a user offered sympathy followed by reassurance regarding a member’s situation, “So glad you have jumped in and decided to share, so sorry for all you are going through, glad you have decided to get out of that situation. Best of luck to you.”

Informational support. In the online message boards, informational support was demonstrated by recommending a book, telling someone about another support site, and even posting a “how to” article. One user recommended inspirational readings, “It’s hard to live in the ‘now’. Do you have any motivational speaker stuff? I started with Tony Robbins...then read Ekart Tol power of now. There are lots of stuff out there.” In

contrast, some users pointed the other forum members to resources from the alcohol use support literature. One member suggested, “The ACA [Adult Children of Alcoholics] Big Red Book (The ACA counterpart to the AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] Big Book) and the Yellow Workbook can be found at this link.” Another user noted, “Today I downloaded an Emotional Freedom Technique manual. I am hoping that this will help with this sensation,” as a way of encouraging others to check out the same resource.

Network support. Users in the message boards pointed to the online community in the forums themselves as a form of network support. Beyond online message boards, users also encouraged their peers on the message boards to attend other types of support groups to gain help and insight regarding their experiences. One member invited another forum user to join a particular online group, taking into consideration their level of comfort and anonymity, “If you ever want a meeting, please come to the online meetings (and use a different name if you don’t want us to know it’s you).” One user virtually embraced another in to the online forum community, encouraging them to continue working on themselves, “You are so very welcome here and we are here for you to help you on this journey of self discovery and to even better improve your life after all the work you have done so far....”

Esteem support. Esteem support was typically used to provide encouragement and reinforcement for one another on the message boards. In particular, users provided esteem support in response to individuals who were self-critical or putting themselves down. In response to a member who said they felt silly about their enthusiasm towards an accomplishment, another user wrote, “You are sooo not being silly. That is just fantastic and a wonderful step forward for you. Well done.” Another example of esteem

support is one user's words of encouragement regarding another's note of progress in coping with their lack of confidence, "It sounds like you are doing great work!" In a further example, a user attempted to lessen the pressure one member felt and reminded them that they were making progress by being present in the online forums, "Try not to be too hard on yourself. You are here now where there is help. As we say in NA [Narcotics Anonymous]: "Give yourself a break!"

Person centeredness

To examine the degree of validation in supportive messages we assessed high (helped with feelings), moderate (expressed sympathy, provided distraction), and low (minimized feelings) person centeredness. Results for person centeredness revealed that 23.40% of responses were high in person centeredness, 63.85% were moderate, and 12.75% were low.

High person centeredness. Online users offered highly person-centered support through encouragement and acceptance, for example, attention to the needs of the other user and reinforcement to persevere during the holidays, "I will think of you during the holiday. This too shall pass. Try to just focus on you and what you need as much as possible, anyway. Be nice to yourself and forgive yourself for feeling the way you do. It is ok." In another message, a user attempted to reassure a fellow member about their progress and circumstances with their partner by taking the time to express empathy, "This is a very positive development for you and I am glad. One of the sad things in a situation like yours is seeing how much someone you love can drag you down financially. It's a painful dichotomy to see." Finally, a user acknowledged the difficulty of the other's situation and made a recommendation for ways in which they

could receive additional support, "This can be so scary and I am sorry. I want to help, not frighten you more, but I'm sure you want to know realistically what to expect. You can write more here if you want, and you can send me private messages if you like. I will pray for you and your mom today. God bless."

Moderate person centeredness. About two-thirds of responses in the message boards were categorized as moderately person-centered. The online users acknowledged the problems of other users, but addressed them through their own experience rather than direct support. For example, one user acknowledged another's parental circumstances and then went on to discuss their own experience with their father and what impact that had on them, "Whatever the case with your father, you have been affected by the alcohol - just because he wasn't drinking doesn't mean his history didn't influence the type of father he was. My dad is now in recovery - years after I left home. He's such a different man, yet I find myself still stuck in the aftermath of his alcoholism." In another example, an individual noted how they could relate to another's family story by then referencing the issues they personally experienced growing up with a harmfully-drinking parent, "So I do think we went through much of the same things that other children of alcoholics experienced. The secrets, the shame, and the confusion are much of the same issues. Teachers having to call our mom to see if it was OK for our dad to pick us up from school...Not normal." This excerpt exemplifies moderate person centeredness with the user mentioning how they can relate to the other's story but then changing the topic of conversation to their own experience and feelings towards it: "I can so relate to your story, I remember being told children are to be seen and not heard. I am still a lost child."

Low person centeredness. Although low person centeredness was relatively rare in the message boards, some users responded in ways that provided minimal support or even challenged the other person's feelings. One user curtly posted a response to another's post that discussed a desire to control or anticipate the actions of others, "The only thing you have any sort of say in is yourself. The rest of it...how I am going to act or think or say...totally out of your control sorry." Another post confronted a user on their personal reflection, commenting on their ability to work on themselves, "I see you have acknowledged [childhood issues], you have even worked on it, but have you hit your ACoA bottom??? It appears you may have now." Instead of expressing support for the familial issues experienced around the holidays, one user abruptly suggested that another member simply remove themselves from the situation, "Well, why spend the holidays with people who torment you?"

Discussion

This study examined the types of support that adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents provided to their peers in online groups and the degree of person centeredness in their messages. Results indicated that identification was the most frequently used type of support in the discussion boards and that adult offspring typically provided moderately person-centered messages. Thus, these adult offspring mainly used online forums to receive and provide support by expressing sympathy and sharing stories about their own similar experiences and problems, as well as solutions they have found that work for them.

The Provision of Support

One implication of the finding that identification was a main support strategy is that there is a broad sense of understanding and shared experience among adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents. This study gives compelling evidence that there may be features of the adult offspring's experience that make identification a common type of support. One explanation is that identification is a minimally sophisticated form of support because it focuses on the self instead of the target; thus, it might reflect their level of social skill (Walther & Boyd, 2002). Another possibility is that by turning the focus onto themselves adult offspring fulfill a need for attention that was underserved growing up in a home with a harmfully-drinking parent. Adult offspring often referred to a lack of communication in their families growing up and the awkward silences that existed surrounding the harmfully-drinking parent. Perhaps the online forum is seen more as an outlet for expressing their own voice rather than responding to the needs of others, similar to that of twelve step groups, where sharing one's story is an important component of recovery [author withheld]. These supportive messages involving identification seem to take the focus off the other person and back to the individual.

In contrast, emotional support messages, contained in about one-quarter of messages analyzed, demonstrate the concern adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents have for one another's feelings and their ability to communicate empathy. Emotional support appears contradictory to the more self-interested supportive responses found in the identification category. The number of emotional support messages suggests that adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents believe it is important to include emotional concern when addressing the hardships of others. The online forum may be one of the few outlets where adult offspring of harmfully-drinking

parents receive compassion from those who can relate. Other family members and friends may not fully understand the problems experienced from growing up in a home where harmful alcohol use is present (Shaw et al., 2000). In addition, the discouragement of communication and the frequent conflict often present in families of a harmfully-drinking parent may produce an environment where individuals avoid expressing concern and suppress negative feelings (Johnson & Stone, 2009). Therefore, the online message boards provide an outlet for adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents to find unity and emotionally support one another.

Informational and network support played a smaller but meaningful role in online support, and often functioned together in a shared support goal. The online community provides a vital network of support, and within these networks, adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents are privy to a vast amount of informational resources, including experiences, insights, and recommendations (Walther & Boyd, 2002). More needs to be done to inform individuals who are not participating in these online networks about the potential support resources available to them through this medium.

Much of the esteem support was used in response to self-criticism, which is consistent with earlier findings regarding self-esteem issues among many adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents. Research suggests that self-deprecation is often a result of growing up in a home with a harmfully-drinking parent (Johnson & Stone, 2009) and that low self-esteem is a common characteristic of offspring (Rangarajan & Kelly, 2006). Given that some adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents struggle with self-esteem, finding reliable sources of esteem support is important for their well-being. That this type of support was the least frequent to occur in the message boards

suggests that online support groups may not fulfill this need for adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents. Increasing esteem support is an important strategy for helping adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents feel confident about themselves and their relationships; thus, other sources of esteem support should be sought outside of online support groups or more effort should be made to introduce esteem support to existing online groups. One way to do this is to have moderators emphasize the importance of self-esteem through periodical posts. Moderators may do this using quotes or bringing in literature that aids in improving or reflecting on self-esteem. Alternatively, moderators could integrate monthly posts that encourage discussion of the ways in which online members work to enhance their own self-esteem as a form of experiential learning that may benefit all members.

For person centeredness, moderate responses appeared most frequently in the online forums. That is, offspring of harmfully-drinking parents acknowledged and sympathized with others' feelings, but limited their supportive messages to socially normative overtures of care, and tended to focus on how the other's dilemma related to their own experiences. The higher frequency of moderate person-centered messages may stem from features of the online environment and from adult offspring's communication skills. It may be difficult to provide highly person-centered support in anonymous Internet message boards because users lack sufficient information about others to construct messages that reflect personal understanding (Vilhauer, 2014). Consequently, individuals rely on norms for socially appropriate messages of support. In addition, offspring may lack sufficient communication skills to provide more sophisticated support as a result of their upbringing in a family affected by alcohol use

(Johnson & Stone, 2009). Additional research is needed to assess offspring's ability to provide effective and appropriate support in various face-to-face and anonymous contexts, as well as the possible intersection between identification support and moderate person centeredness.

In this regard, perhaps supportive messages that are moderately person-centered also demonstrate identification support. Researchers should examine the way these support message frameworks may be conceptualized together, in an effort to better understand how individuals exchange support. Generally, studies have found support giving and support seeking to be positively related (Ko & Lewis, 2011; Rack, Burleson, Bodie, Holmstrom, & Servaty-Seib, 2008). One possible way of examining the reciprocal effect of support in this context is through sequential analysis, to see how support requests, or original posts, are related to support provided (Simons, Lathlean, & Squire, 2008).

The relatively limited use of low person centeredness messages in the online forums may be due to the fact that such messages may be perceived as hostile and inappropriate (Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006). Similarly, high person centeredness may be less apparent online because individuals lack personal knowledge of other users that would allow them to construct more sophisticated messages. Additionally, the weak-tie relationships among forum members may reduce the motivation to invest effort in forming more complex support messages. As noted earlier, conflict-laden families may make it difficult for children to develop socially appropriate communication skills (Kearns-Bodkins & Leonard, 2008; Schroeder & Kelley, 2008), thus, some adult

offspring of harmfully-drinking parents may lack the skill necessary to construct more effective messages.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study was characterized by several strengths. We had a relatively large sample size of messages coded for supportiveness, and the evaluation of supportiveness was theoretically-grounded. The study added to the existing support typology and extended its applicability to online contexts by considering the role of identification as a support technique. This study also provides guidance for families of harmfully-drinking parents and health providers working with these families. Given the benefits of high person centeredness (Burlison, 2003; Wills & Fegan, 2001) and the lack of high person centeredness present in the data, family members and practitioners could try to enact more high person centeredness messages when offering support to adult offspring. Similarly, the existence of disparaging or self-deprecating messages in the online forums point to the importance of bolstering adult offspring self-esteem to promote more resilience and, in turn, the ability to cope (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003; Rangarajan & Kelly, 2006). This study also highlights the benefits of online forums geared towards adult offspring. Based on the results of this study, the online setting appears to be a viable resource for conversing with those who share in experiences as well as a place to learn about alternative sources of support via the online member network.

A study limitation was the inability to assess how users perceived the support they received. Although coders evaluated the degree of person centeredness in the messages, the extent to which users found those messages to be supportive remains

unknown. In addition, given the nature of the data, we were unable to examine direct effects of how growing up with an alcohol using parent may have influenced adult offspring's ability to communicate support. Another limitation was the anonymous nature of the data, which made it impossible to draw conclusions about differences in support due to gender, race, ethnicity, age, or other personal characteristics. This also made it impossible to differentiate posts of individuals based on parents' alcohol-related diagnoses and severity.

Findings from this study point to fruitful avenues for future research on the provision of support and the communication behaviors of adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents. One is to further investigate the use of identification as a method of support. Of particular interest is whether identification is unique to this population, the online context, or is also used in face-to-face interactions. Thus, future research should examine the phenomenon of identification as a support category in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, research should consider the consequences to the support seeker of receiving identification messages in response to requests for support. Additional research is also needed to explore the extent to which online support groups for adult offspring provide information and support that facilitate coping with a drinking parent. As noted earlier, future research that examines the relationship between support seeking and support giving through methods such as sequential analysis would provide depth to the experience of support among adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents (Simons, Lathlean, & Squire, 2008). Furthermore, longitudinal investigations of adult offspring of harmfully-drinking parents who rely on online forums for support would provide useful insights into the instrumentality of online support groups for bolstering individual and

relational outcomes. In sum, this study suggests that adult offspring of drinking parents use online forums to receive and give support as well as offer one another workable solutions to life problems. However, findings also suggest that most messages exchanged were not highly person centered and those seeking greater validation of experiences are likely to need additional sources of support.

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Endnote

1 Per the recent memorandum on language and addiction and the efforts to change the perception of addiction, we replaced more traditional terms (e.g., children of alcoholics, alcoholic parents) with terms that focus more on the health behavior (harmful drinking).