**Providing Emotional Support**

Can you recall a time when you were emotionally distraught? Perhaps someone close to you died unexpectedly, or a romantic partner dumped you, or someone you trusted betrayed you, or a supervisor treated you unfairly. If so, you probably appreciated the emotional support you received from some friends and family members (Photo 8.1). You can also probably recall times when you’ve comforted others when they were feeling distressed. Comforting is helping others feel better about themselves, their behaviour, or their situation by creating a safe space to express their thoughts and feelings. Comforting also helps those doing the comforting by improving self-esteem and their relationship with the person being comforted (Burleson, 2002). Many people believe that women expect, need, and provide more emotional support than men. However, a growing body of research suggests that both men and women value emotional support from their partners in a variety of relationships, including same-sex friendships, opposite-sex friendships, romantic relationships, and sibling relationships (Burleson, 2003). Providing emotional support is also generally valued across cultural and co-cultural groups.

**Comforting Guidelines**

The following guidelines can help you succeed when providing emotional support.

1. Clarify supportive intentions. When people are experiencing emotional turmoil, they may have trouble trusting the motives of those wanting to help. You can clarify your supportive intentions by openly stating that your goal is to help. Notice how David does this:

DAVID: (noticing Paul sitting in his cubicle with his head in his lap and his hands over his head) Paul, is everything OK?

PAUL: (sitting up and looking miserable) Yeah, I’m fine.

DAVID: Paul, we’ve been working together for five years and I care about you. You’re one of the best technicians in this company. If something is going on, I’d like to help, even if all I can do is listen. So, what’s up?

2. Buffer potential face threats. Face is the perception we want others to have of our worth (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Positive face needs are the desires we have to be appreciated, liked, and valued. Negative face needs are the desires we have to be independent and self-sufficient. The very act of providing comfort can threaten your partner’s face needs. So effective comforting messages must be buffered to address the other person’s positive and negative face needs. When David says to Paul, “You’re one of the best technicians in this company,” he attends to Paul’s positive face need to be valued. When David says, all he “can do is listen,” he attends to Paul’s negative face need for independence.

3. Use other-centred messages. Other-centred messages encourage those feeling emotional distress to talk about what happened and how they feel about it. These messages can come in the form of questions or prods (e.g., uh-huh, wow, I see, go on, tell me more) encouraging others to elaborate. Other-centred messages are the most highly valued type of comforting message among most cultural and co-cultural groups (Burleson, 2003).

4. Reframe the situation. We might reframe the situation by offering ideas, observations, information, or explanations that help our partner understand the situation in a different light. For example, imagine that Travis returns from class and tells his friend Abe, “Well, I’m flunking calculus. It doesn’t matter how much I study. I just can’t get it. I might as well just drop out of school before I flunk out completely. I can ask for a full-time schedule at work and not torture myself with school anymore.” To reframe the situation, Abe might remind Travis that he has been putting in many hours of overtime at work and ask Travis if he thinks the heavy work schedule might be cutting into his study time. Or he might suggest that Travis seek help at the tutoring centre, a resource many of their mutual friends found helpful. In each case, Abe has provided new observations and information to help Travis reframe the situation.

5. Give advice. In some cases, we may comfort by giving advice—presenting relevant suggestions for resolving a problem or situation. We should only give advice, however, after our supportive intentions have been understood, we have attended to our partner’s face needs, and we have sustained an other-centred conversation for some time. Even then, we should ask permission before offering advice and acknowledge that this advice is only one suggestion and it’s OK if they choose not to follow it.

**Managing Privacy and Disclosure**

As we discussed in Chapter 7, people in relationships experience dialectical tensions, one of which is the tension between openness and closedness. When we want more openness, we disclose confidential information and feelings. When we want more closedness, we manage privacy to limit what others know about us.

**Communication privacy management theory** describes the decision-making process we go through as we choose whether or not to disclose confidential information about ourselves (self-disclosure) or about others (other-disclosure) (Petronio, 2013). Suppose Jim tells Mark that he wet the bed until he was 12 years old (self-disclosure), but had never told anyone because he didn’t want to be teased. If Mark later tells a friend that Jim was once a bed wetter, Mark is also disclosing, but he is disclosing Jim’s private information, not his own (other-disclosure). Like Jim, you can choose whether to reveal or conceal personal information to your partner. Then either of you can choose to reveal that sensitive information to others or maintain it within the privacy of your relationship.

If your partner has your permission to share some of your personal information, then disclosing it to others is unlikely to affect your relationship. However, if you have not given your partner permission to disclose certain information and you expect it to remain between the two of you, then **disclosure** is likely to damage your relationship (Photo 8.2). So, when Jim hears that Mark told a mutual friend that Jim is a former bed wetter, he may feel embarrassed, hurt, and betrayed if he believes Mark breached his confidentiality.

Controlling who has access to your personal information is becoming more complicated with our ever-increasing use of technology and social media. For example, Web providers like Google routinely track our searches. And, according to a recent article published in the *New York Times*, a “bug” in Apple software allowed people to access photos stored on personal cell phones (Bilton, 2012). Similarly, when we post something to a Facebook page, that comment or image can quickly become viral when a friend decides to comment on it or tag it for another network of friends to see. For example, Darius posted an album of New Year’s Eve party photos to Facebook. Gretchen then tagged a photo of Ellen and Darius dancing on a table at the party. When Ellen saw it, she sent a private message asking Darius to remove it because she was on the job market and knows that potential employers look at what people post on their social networking sites. In addition, information posted on the Web has no expiration date. So, before you post, you should consider whether the information is something you are comfortable sharing not only with your friends and your friends’ friends, but also to potential employers and strangers today and in the future.

Effective communicators choose to disclose or withhold information and feelings based on their relational motive, the situation, and a careful risk–benefit analysis. One of the most important criteria we use to decide whether to disclose information or keep it private is the risk–benefit analysis. That is, we weigh the advantages we might gain by disclosing or maintaining private information against the disadvantages of doing so. Common benefits of disclosing include building the relationship, coping with stress, and emotional or psychological catharsis. Common benefits of maintaining privacy include control and independence. The risks of disclosing include loss of control, vulnerability, and embarrassment. Risks of maintaining privacy include social isolation and being misunderstood.