A qualitative analysis and evaluation of social support received after experiencing a broken marriage engagement and impacts on holistic health

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ABSTRACT

This study provides new insights into the role of social support in the largely unexplored field of broken marriage engagements and an individual's wellbeing. The study extends the optimal matching theory (OMT) and the research surrounding helpful, unhelpful, and mixed social support. It uses constant comparison to examine the social support messages individuals received after telling others their engagement ended, as described in 43, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Six types of helpful support messengers, six types of unhelpful support messengers, and four mixed messenger types were found. Receiver-centric messengers were found to be more helpful than messengers who centered on their own feelings and needs, sometimes to the detriment of the receiver's own wellbeing. Being present, thoughtful, and intentional with words, can have a positive impact on a person's holistic health, regardless of whether the relationship is a weak-tie or strong-tie. Using study findings, the *broken engagement message stoplight* is proposed, detailing messages that are generally helpful to a person's overall wellbeing, messages that should likely be avoided, and messages that should be said cautiously when interacting with someone experiencing a broken engagement.

Introduction

Newly engaged couples are often eager to share their news with friends, family, and even widely on social media. The support that a couple receives from their loved ones has been found to be a predictor of romantic relationship stability (Lewis, 1973; Parks & Adelman, 1983). However, if one person, or the couple, then decides not to marry, the social ramifications of breaking an engagement can feel devastating, leading to significant distress and emotional and cognitive effects (Seraj, et al., 2021; van der Watt et al., 2023). Social support messages received (i.e., receipt of support reported [Uchino et al., 2011] in response to personal news) are when an everyday layperson makes it their goal to alleviate someone else's distress, enhance their self-esteem, facilitate coping, or help problem solve (Burleson & Holmstrom, 2008). Comforting a person in distress is considered a primary form of communication competence (Burleson & Holmstrom, 2008) and it can be impactful.

A previous study of newlyweds by Messersmith et al. (2015) explained that "stress from wedding and marriage preparation can have significant effects on one's mental and physical health" (p. 2). Messersmith et al. (2015) asked newlyweds about who they felt provided social support to them during the engagement and whether they found that support

helpful or unhelpful; however, the study did not examine influences of social support surrounding engaged couples who then decided not to wed or the specific support messages they received from family, friends, and acquaintances and how that impacted their health and wellbeing. Previous research has acknowledged an association between social support and health (House et al., 1988) and psychological wellbeing (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 1995).

The terms "health" and "wellbeing" often overlap, for example, in the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of "health": "A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1948). This paper agrees with Schramme's (2023) holistic interpretation of the WHO definition, "where health is a state of exhaustive well-being, including all relevant dimensions of its constitutive elements" (p. 6) and Schramme's use of both terms synonymously.

When it comes to wellbeing, a person experiencing a broken engagement is likely to feel negative health effects from this undesirable relationship loss, which is undeniably a significant life event (Sbarra & Borelli, 2019). Similarly, being widowed or experiencing a divorce are widely accepted as challenging transitions that have negative implications for psychological health (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). Previous research suggests that spouses are primary support providers for many situations and that spousal support can help buffer negative effects of stress (Messersmith et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2010). In contrast, the loss of a spouse as a key support person can create a support deficiency (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1983). It follows, then, that a broken engagement would likely cause a significant need for helpful social support messages from friends, family, and acquaintances during this life transition to avoid or lessen the potential negative health effects, and evidence demonstrates that having a strong social support network can help people deal with the negative emotions and health effects from loss and breakups (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015; Tran et al., 2023).

This exploratory, qualitative study seeks to extend the relationship dissolution literature by increasing understanding of broken marriage engagements in two primary ways: First, the study details exemplar messages received by study participants in response to telling others that their engagement ended by describing/labeling how well the messages/messengers matched with participants' social support needs. Second, it proposes general message strategies generated from the study to guide any layperson who wants to provide helpful social support to someone experiencing a broken engagement to better match their need and help them heal.

Gaining a better understanding of the helpful and unhelpful messages people receive after their engagement ends could assist family, friends, and acquaintances in improving the support messages they offer (Goldsmith, 2004) and decrease risk of emotional, mental, or physical health consequences a person may experience from the breakup. Similar to discussing miscarriages, menopause, or mental health more frequently in everyday talk, normalizing broken marriage engagement conversations by laypersons could reduce stigma surrounding dissolution to help individuals cope and heal faster (Tran et al., 2023). In the long term, this could result in fewer couples entering ill-fitting marriages because one or both individuals find the prospect of calling off a wedding and then telling people debilitating, potentially resulting in fewer divorces and unhealthy marriages.

Broken engagements

Researchers have spent decades examining factors that may contribute to various marriage outcomes (Amato & Previti, 2003; Gottman & Silver, 2015; Kitson et al., 1985; Scott et al., 2013); however, the engagement period is often overlooked (Messersmith et al., 2015; Monk et al., 2020; Stow, 2016), despite being a significant transition between dating and marriage (Nissinen & Paul, 2000). Furthermore, although the wedding industry boasted that 2022 boomed with 2.2 million weddings in the United States (Pandey, 2021), seemingly no hard data exists surrounding broken engagements. Multiple study participants shared that even close friends were unaware of their broken engagement until they told them that they were being interviewed for this study.

Breaking an engagement, or uncoupling, usually occurs slowly in private before becoming increasingly public (Vaughan, 1986). Only two recent studies are specific to broken engagements. In her dissertation, Stow (2016) surveyed 109 people and focused on different pairs of dialectical tension. The second study included 30 qualitative interviews focused on understanding how calling off an engagement and wedding unfolds as a social process, but did not closely examine the social support messages received (Monk et al., 2020).

Optimal matching model and social support

Social support research has been conducted actively since the 1970s (Fisher, 2010), examining "the assistance that people provide to others when helping them cope with life changes and situational demands" (Xu & Burleson, 2001, p. 535). The optimal matching theory (OMT), often better known as the "matching hypothesis," suggests that support is enhanced when it is matched with the need (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Whether a person perceives support to be helpful, unhelpful, or mixed, depends on whether the support needed by the receiver matches the support offered (Messersmith et al., 2015).

Positive health impacts of good/helpful social support have been widely studied (Afifi et al., 2013; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Ki & Jang, 2018; Sprecher et al., 1992). In a large-scale review of social support literature, Wright (2016) concluded that decades of research studies indicate that interpersonal social support provides substantial benefits to physical health and psychological wellbeing. For example, past research illustrates that cancer patients in treatment who needed and received support experienced less distress than patients who needed support, but did not receive it (Merluzzi et al., 2016). Similarly, research has shown that the provision of social support reduced depression, anxiety, irritability, and loneliness, while improving sleep quality for quarantined individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grey et al., 2020).

Conversely, the literature shows that poor or unhelpful social support can cause negative outcomes, such as longer rumination and reinforcement of a person's negative self-view (Afifi et al., 2013; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999), higher levels of depression, and anxiety from less satisfying emotional support (Slevin et al., 1996). Additionally, inappropriate responses to those with mental health problems were found to make problems worse by frustrating, frightening, or provoking (Kreps, 2017). Disconfirming messages can also increase anxiety and distance from the support giver (McLaren et al., 2011). Research has shown that when

people do not receive their expected levels of intimacy from interpersonal communication, it can increase their levels of anxiety (Guerrero et al., 2000). An additional interpersonal communication challenge for broken engagements is that individuals need to tell many people, from strangers at a catering company, to acquaintances at work, to loved ones, resulting in responding support messages.

This study extends the robust social support literature by examining whether people who have experienced broken engagements felt helped by the provision of social support. With this for context, and the knowledge that little scholarly research exists about what support messages are received after a person experiences a broken engagement and which of those messages are helpful to their healing and holistic health, this study asked the following research questions:

RQ1: What social support messages did people who experienced broken marriage engagements describe as unhelpful after telling others their engagement ended?
RQ2: What social support messages did people who experienced broken marriage engagements describe as helpful after telling others their engagement ended?
RQ3: What social support messages were mixed—described as both helpful and/or unhelpful—by people who experienced broken marriage engagement?

Materials and Methods

Participants

Participant criteria included: i) being 21 years of age or older (ensuring all participants could legally give consent to marry in all 50 states), ii) living in the United States (i.e., more likely to give free consent, not an arranged marriage, etc.,), iii) being fluent in English, and iv) having experienced a broken marriage engagement. Participants were recruited through email and social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.) in late summer and early fall of 2021 and were part of a purposive sample that was followed up with snowball recommendations for additional participants. Data from the 43 eligible participants who completed the survey, provided contact information, and were interviewed were used. One man had three broken engagements and two women each had two, for a total of 47 broken engagements. One participant was previously married and widowed before age 20. Two participants were sisters, and a mother and daughter were both interviewed. Participants were offered no incentives.

The mean age of participants was 38.8 at the time of the survey, and the average age at the time of the broken engagement was approximately 26.6 (SD 5.28). Of the 43 participants, 81.4% were female (n=35) and 88% were White (n=38), 5% were Black (n=2), 5% Asian (n=2), and 2% Spanish/Hispanic/Latino (n=1). Approximately 79% (n=34) of participants identified as heterosexual, with 16% identifying as bisexual (n=7), and 5% identifying as gay/lesbian (n=2). Approximately 40% of participants had a household income of more than $150,000 ($n$=17), while 21% ($n$=9) had a household income of $100,000 to $149,999, 10% of participants (n=4) had a household income of $80,000 to $99,999, 14% ($n$=6) had between $50,000 and $79,999 annual household income, 5% (n=2) had a household income of $30,000 to $49,999, 7% ($n$=3) had between 10,000 and $29,999, and 2% made less than $10,000 ($n$=1). This was a highly educated sample with 5% (n=2) having at least some college, 35% (n=17) holding a bache-

lor's degree, 37% (n=16) having a master's degree and approximately 19% (n=8) holding a doctoral or professional degree. When asked who ended the engagement, 48.8% (n=21) said they ended it, 32.6% (n=14) said that their partner ended it, and 18.6% (n=8) said it was mutual.

To obtain the widest range of profiles, no restrictions were placed on when a participant needed to experience the broken engagement. Sixty percent (n=36) of participants had a scheduled wedding date. More than a quarter (28%) of the study participants (n=13) indicated their engagement ended in the past five years, 28% (n=13) indicated their engagement ended between 5 and 10 years ago, 43% (n=20) suggested the engagement ended between 10-24 years ago, and one person ended their engagement in 1969 (SD 8.95). The most current breakup had a wedding scheduled within months of their interview.

Procedures

IRB approval from George Mason University was received for both the survey and the interview guide. Interviews were scheduled via email and took place on Zoom (camera optional) with the record and transcribe features turned on. The survey asked for general demographic information, including sex, religion, frequency of attending religious services, annual household income, race, sexual identity, age, and education level. It also asked who ended the relationship and how many months before the wedding ceremony was the engagement broken.

Interview questions were semi-structured and asked participants about their relationships and how they ended, experiences in telling others about getting engaged and breaking off the engagement, and helpful and unhelpful comments they recalled in response to sharing their breakup. Consent was verbally asked for at the start of each interview. Interviews lasted an average of 66 minutes each, for a total of 47.2 hours. Interviews were fully transcribed by the author, resulting in 2,009 double-spaced pages of transcription; the text from the social support discussions was approximately 60 pages. The author reviewed the transcripts for accuracy, replaced all names with pseudonyms, and masked any identifying factors to promote confidentiality.

Data analysis

Several methods of qualitative analysis were used to examine the survey and interview data. First, all social support comments were pulled from the transcripts, placed into a separate Word document, printed, cut out by comment, and spread out on a large table. Using a deductive approach and constant comparison method, comments were coded and sorted into categories of whether the participant found them to be helpful or unhelpful, aligning with previous literature (Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Wanzer & Czapla, 2022). As numerous comments were unexpectedly considered both helpful and unhelpful, a third category of "mixed" comments was created, similar to what Iannarino et al., (2017) did when examining the social support experiences of young cancer survivors. Then, using an inductive process, the first ten comments within the categories of helpful, unhelpful, and mixed were reviewed line by line using in vivo and open coding (Charmaz, 2006). After the first ten comments in each category were coded, it was reviewed using constant comparison methods. Then, data from the remaining 33 interviews were reviewed and coded.

Then all comments were reviewed again and coded with additional descriptives. Next, using ongoing axial coding, constant comparison methods, and sensemaking, the comments were

sorted into themes and sub-themes for helpful, unhelpful, and mixed categories, using verbatim labels when possible. Recoding and manually sorting comments continued until the patterns worked to clearly conceptualize the theme. Themes needed to appear in three or more interviews to be included. A codebook was created, including category labels, themes and subthemes, descriptions, and exemplars. Finally, the transcripts were reviewed by the author one more time to confirm the context and meaning of the various comments, and then the interview notes were reviewed with the specific themes in mind to ensure that nothing was missed.

Results

Research question 1: unhelpful social support

This study found six types of unhelpful social support themes, or messengers (Table 1): a "Pollyanna," a "pusher," a "rug sweeper," a "judger," a "pity partier," and a "bungler." A person could be multiple messenger types (i.e., a Pollyanna and a bungler).

Pollyanna

A Pollyanna message giver is toxically cheerful and optimistic. The Pollyanna has probably not thought deeply about what to say or does not want to encounter distressing emotions or substance. This is the most frequently reported unhelpful message type, yet it can also be one of the most benign message types. This is because some of these messages, like platitudes (e.g., "There are more fish in the sea.") are easier for the receiver to ignore because they understand that a person feels the need to say something to them. Offering encouraging messages, such as "Congratulations" and "I'm proud of you," are commonly viewed as feeling heard and helpful. It becomes Pollyanna-like when it extends into toxic positivity. For example, when Jeff described ending his engagement the day of the rehearsal dinner, he recalled that family and friends provided him with Pollyanna messaging as he tried to process his decision:

> The annoying thing of I can't believe they said that was "Don't you worry. It'll happen. It'll happen. You'll fall in love. Don't worry." And what I had to tell people was "I don't know if it will." And actually, I have to be at ease with that to make this decision.

Pollyanna messengers likely believe that they are helping by placating and offering optimism during a negative or uncomfortable time. Even though receivers often know the Pollyanna wants to help, the efforts fall flat because their emotions are dismissed.

Hearing from a Pollyanna was also frustrating to Elana, who eventually found the courage to end her abusive relationship with a cheating fiancé months before her wedding:

> Something that I heard a lot afterwards that was very frustrating for me was "Oh you're young, and you're beautiful. So you'll be fine." And I heard that one a lot. And that was really annoying because it doesn't matter who you are, how kind you are, how beautiful you are, nothing, none of that matters. If someone wants to be a complete piece of shit to you, they are going to do it.... Like for all those years, I was trying to be my best self in the hopes that that would help him love me and treat me better, and that mindset was wrong…. I used to buy into that, and I did that, for years, so when people said that to me—they didn't mean it like that, I know that—but that's when it hit.

Like Jeff, Elana labeled the support as "annoying," and she experienced a toll on her emotional health. Instead of empathy, they were offered false reassurances, especially in the days, weeks, and months after the broken engagement, when emotions may have felt the most raw. Seldom intentional, this kind of communication can still alienate receivers and leave them feeling more disconnected or even wanting to shut down (Princing, 2021).

Pusher

Other unhelpful messages come from pushers, who also may have had caring intentions, but did not respect healthy boundaries and who sought control. A pusher tries to instigate some control and rushes a person's breakup processing in two ways, first, by pushing the receiver in another direction (i.e., away from the ex-partner faster, toward what the pusher wants), likely sooner than the receiver wants or before they have processed the changes. For example, after being with her partner for five years, including living together, once Holly's engagement ended, her sister became a pusher:

Table 1. Unhelpful social support messengers.

Pollyanna	Extends cheer, encouragement, and/or optimism into toxic positivity. Negative emotions are dismissed, and individuals are offered false reassurances and placating instead of empathy.
Pusher	Tries to instigate some control and rush a person by pushing the receiver into something they may not want, are not ready for, or have not processed.
Rug sweeper	Does not want to discuss anything regarding the situation and may also think the topic should be avoided completely.
Judger	Shares a disapproving point of view with the receiver and may not care if the receiver is negatively impacted by their words, including criticisms, attacks, and/or questions of judgment. This may come at any time and may or may not be based in fact.
Pity partier	Holds heightened emotions about a situation in which they are not a main character and they are more focused on themselves than the receiver. Overly emotional, heavy pitying, the desire for drama, and/or the busybody mindset may be demonstrated to the receiver, instead of empathy.
Bungler	Makes an unintentional careless, thoughtless, or inconsiderate mistake involving the receiver and their ex-partner based on personal preference, neglecting the receiver's own needs.

My sister was trying to insist that I come and live with her and kind of trying to rush my processing, if that makes sense. She is just like, "You cannot be in his presence. You have to leave. You have to," like, you know, "You can't talk to him anymore. All you're doing is hurting yourself." And that felt very much like this is my relationship that's falling apart, and I don't want to be rushed with it. Like, I don't want you to be mad that it's taking me longer to exit out of it than you would like.… It's a complicated and hard thing to let go of and kind of pressuring people to not talk to them, to not live with them, to not go through that kind of messy process at their own pace. It makes it so you feel very controlled. And you also feel like I'm going to lose my support network if I don't do what they want me to do. And I'm already losing one support person, and I can't handle losing another.

In Holly's situation, her fiancé was her primary support person. Losing him was stressful and hard enough without added pushing from her support network, consistent with previous research (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1983; Sullivan et al., 2010).

Alternatively, a pusher rushes the receiver to start another relationship, get over their feelings, or date more, rushing the process and prodding the receiver into something they may not want, are not ready for, or have not accepted. For example, Caitlin's friends also became pushers. Her relationship of five years ended when her fiancé broke off their engagement so he could marry his boss on Caitlin's previously scheduled wedding day. She needed help in dealing with the intense emotional pain, distress, and feelings of risk, not pushing:

The push to get back into a relationship or to date was like the furthest thing from my mind, and that was not helpful. They wanted to introduce me to people. And at the time, a lot of my friends were coupling up, and they were like, "Well, you just you need to find somebody else. You need to move on because clearly, he's moved on." And I just, [pause] I wasn't. I wasn't, and I didn't want to take the risk. I was like it hurts so bad, why would I? Why would I want to do that again?

Caitlin found the pushing she received to only compound her pain.

Whether pressing in another direction or for another relationship, a pusher delays healing by not helping the receiver with their immediate needs or allowing the receiver to feel heard or understood.

Rug sweeper

At the other end of the negative social support continuum from the pusher is a rug sweeper who avoids any discussions. For example, Keith's parents did not want to discuss his broken engagement. However, considering Keith's fiancée—a woman he dated in college—ended their relationship over the telephone while he was deployed to a war zone, he thought it would have been healthy to talk about it with his parents:

When it first happened, they [parents] didn't talk about it very much. I think maybe they felt uncomfortable talking about it. They thought it was like taboo, or something.… I think it would have been healthy to talk about it with my parents.

A rug sweeper is actively choosing not to discuss the situation, in contrast to a person who avoids prying or does not know the receiver or situation well. They might be uncomfortable discussing emotion and the situation, believe the topic is taboo, and/or are embarrassed, behaving as though it never happened, even if the individual would find it helpful and healthy to discuss.

Judger

A judger expresses disapproval through their interpersonal comments. The judger seeks to share their opinion and may even want the receiver to do something or change their behavior. For example, Missy felt the disapproval of her best friend after her fiancé unexpectedly broke their engagement less than two weeks before their wedding:

I do remember that my best friend said to me, "You know, we're planning on coming in, but if we come in this weekend, it's not just moping, whatever, time." And so I felt like there was a judgment as to how I was allowed to grieve.

Missy was grieving her pain and the unhelpful social support on top of that just made her feel judged instead of supported.

Similarly, Samantha felt judgment from her mentors, which left her questioning if she made a mistake and ruined her future. Samantha recalled:

And she said, "You know, my husband wasn't everything that I wanted when we got married, but we got married. And it worked out great. And we have four kids. And we're happy. Like are you sure that you don't want to continue with that relationship because you know he misses you and da da da." I had these two—they were women in their 50s and 60s [and] I'm in my early 20s—telling me, basically, "You made a mistake. This is a good guy that you let go."

Samantha also felt judged by people she trusted. However, a judger likely does not care if the receiver's wellbeing is negatively impacted because a judger's focus is to criticize, attack, and/or question someone's decision at any point and in any form, from immediately after the broken engagement to years later, whether in a conversation, email, or letter.

Pity partier

While the judger is direct, a pity partier is overly emotional and less rational. In some cases, the healthy reality in front of the pity partier may be overshadowed because the pity partier is being overly emotional, with feelings of shame, worry, or embarrassment. In other situations, heavy pitying, the desire for drama, and/or the busybody mindset may be demonstrated to the receiver, instead of empathy. A pity partier has direct conversation with the receiver, compared to a gossip who may be talking about the receiver behind their back.

Helen discovered the pity partier in her life after her fiancé ended their engagement and she told people about it:

The pity versus empathy, like, that was the key. Like, you can be with me and my sadness, and be there for me, but when your reaction is like that pity or you're embarrassed for me, you know, like, how are you dealing? "Oh, I mean

this must be really hard telling everybody, you know, how are you doing that?" Oh yes, it is. It was made harder by your comments.

The pity partier expresses heightened emotions about a situation in which they are not the main character, and they are more focused on themselves than the receiver. This is why Helen suggests the tone and being in the moment with that person matters in being emotionally helpful, consistent with OMT and previous research (Messersmith et al., 2015). This is more noticeable and frustrating to the receiver in the early stages after the broken engagement and may become annoying or laughable in later stages.

Bungler

The comments of a pity partier may sometimes be intentional, unaware, or self-serving; however, a bungler's actions are not intentional. A bungler makes unintentionally careless, thoughtless, or inconsiderate mistakes involving both the person on the receiving end of their intended support and the receiver's ex-partner.

After five years together post college, Jill broke off her engagement. She then moved in with her platonic friend, James, who became a bungler:

> Bill, my ex, dropped off tulips that we planted together that fall. And he just, I don't even know, he had like something else of mine to drop off, and he was like, "Oh, I figured you deserved these tulips because you planted them" or something. And I, much like this [crying], just like lost it. And I was like James [roommate], I never want to see those tulips again! Get them out of here. And he's like "Don't worry. It's taken care of. You'll never see those tulips again." Well, he didn't take care of it. He just left them in the garage. So, on Monday, I walked out, and they were in the garage. And I was so mad at James.

Bungers can cause additional negative emotions for a person experiencing a broken engagement, like Jill, because a bungler is often misguided or makes decisions based on their personal preference, neglecting the receiver's preferences, needs, or comfort.

In summary, participants encountered six primary types of unhelpful social support messengers that made coping with their broken engagement more challenging: the Pollyanna, the pusher, the rug sweeper, the judger, the pity partier, and the bungler. In contrast, participants also offered examples of help-ful support that they found more comforting and that more positively impacted their overall wellbeing, discussed in the next section.

Research question 2: helpful social support

Six helpful social support messenger types were found in this study (Table 2): a "listener," a "friend on deck," a "sage," a "doer," a "stalwart friend," and a "club member."

Listener

A listener is willing to offer their undivided attention to the individual experiencing a broken engagement, so that if they want or need to process what happened, vent their feelings, or just feel heard, they have an audience with their wellbeing in mind. The listener usually offers encouragement and validation of the person's feelings with supportive comments like, "I'm proud of you," or "That takes courage" as they hear about the engagement ending. For example, Ashley recognized positives of feeling heard, recalling:

> I heard a lot of "Congratulations." Because I think people know that if an engagement is broken, there is a good reason and you're better off. So I think a lot of people were, like, kind of, you know, "Hey, focus on the positive."

A listener might serve various supporting roles, depending on whether the person experiencing the broken engagement needs to be validated, given reassurance, or something else that offers support for the feelings the person is expressing in that moment. Ashley experienced more validation from her listeners who wanted to focus on her having a good reason to not move forward with the wedding.

As another example, Mary appreciated the offers to listen: "One thing that multiple people said that made me feel better was 'If you just need to call and cry and rant, I'll just listen.' It helped that people gave me permission just to be broken." In contrast, Anilesa, who had a difficult childhood, lacked close friends beyond her fiancé. He broke up with her after having sex with a man and acknowledging he was gay. She wanted someone to listen to her:

> I think if somebody would have just kind of taken me aside and listened. Like just heard me out or asked me what was going on, or what was wrong, or just validated me. Like for me, because I think, you know, that's what I

Table 2. Helpful social support messengers.

Listener	Willing to listen and offer undivided attention to the receiver to process, vent, or just feel heard. May offer encouraging words.
Sage	A good listener who also provides comforting words, messages, direction, and/or wisdom.
Friend on deck	Recognizes the need for space and conveys that they are available but does not create pressure for the receiver to respond.
Doer	Takes specific, tangible actions to help the receiver, often after seeing a need and without being formally asked.
Stalwart friend	Offers emotional support and opportunities to be distracted from the situation at different points and be in someone's company. There are three primary periods a stalwart friend can have the largest helpful impact: i) immediately after the engagement is broken; ii) in the months to follow when the receiver may be feeling lonely or at a loss, and iii) depending on whether a wedding date was set and how far out it was from the breakup, ensuring the person spends the wedding date feeling loved and supported.
Club member	Has experienced something almost identical to the receiver and offers reassurance.

was craving the most was for somebody to just listen, because everything that was going on—it was way too much for me to keep inside of me.

Anilesa recognized her emotional struggle from the breakup and how that struggle was only compounded by not having someone available to listen to her.

A listener's main role is to just be there, often in the hours, days, and weeks after the breakup, to let the person feel heard, supported, and validated so that their emotional state is positively impacted.

Friend on deck

In addition to a listener, a person who makes known their willingness to listen and be there for someone, while also giving space, is helpful. A friend on deck is usually a friend, family member, or acquaintance who recognizes that not everyone experiencing a broken engagement may be ready or wanting to talk and may seek space for a period. Like a baseball player waiting to bat, a friend on deck is there, ready, and willing to help when needed.

For example, Lucy's friends shared that they were on deck to support her when she was ready. She described it as "Space, but also letting that person know I'm right here on deck, like I'm here for you. And not your relationship. I'm here to support you, whatever that means to you." Lucy's recollection demonstrates that positive support that is in tune with the receiver's needs is valuable to feeling supported, coping, and moving forward. A friend on deck conveys sentiments that they are available when the person is ready, signified by thinking-of-you cards and such, but they do not create any pressure to respond.

Sage

When a person is ready to share and process more thoughtfully, doing so with a sage can be helpful. A sage is a good listener. In addition, a sage may also provide comforting words, messages, direction, and/or wisdom. For example, Rihanna found a sage in her longtime therapist, to whom she told everything. She said:

There was stuff that I was keeping away from them [Rihanna's family], because I didn't want them to see her [ex] differently…. I never told them because I didn't want them to judge. But my counselor, I told her every single thing and so she had a full picture of it, and when she said, "I'm proud of you," I was like, you know, I felt good. I felt like I made the right decision for myself.

Rihanna demonstrates that the right support message from someone focused on them is powerful in healing.

Although a listener might be particularly helpful in the immediate aftermath of the breakup for sharing or venting, a sage is more likely to be of assistance after the initial roller coaster of feelings has passed and is a person who is better able to focus on healing and reflection, sometimes even as a counselor or in another professional role.

Doer

A doer takes specific, tangible actions to help the receiver, often after seeing a need, and occasionally without being formally asked to help lessen the stress. For example, Ashley's co-workers sent food to her house. She said, "This happened [the split] when I came home from work on like a Friday…. On Monday, I was

not ready to face the world yet, so I told my boss…. And they actually had a pizza delivered to my house."

Similarly, after Lucy broke it off, her roommate stepped in to help:

When we broke it off, she [roommate] told all of our sorority sisters, so I didn't have to tell them. She told them all, and she said, "If you have a question, you ask ME," and then the next time I saw everyone, everyone knew, but we didn't talk about it, and that was really very helpful.

In contrast to a person who says, "Let me know if you need something," doers for both Ashley and Lucy acted without their explicit asking as a form of instrumental social support. Depending on the relationship with the person, examples of this might include calling relatives or wedding contractors with the news about the relationship dissolution, dropping off food, and/or packing moving boxes. A doer's assistance is often most helpful in the immediate aftermath of the breakup through the coming days and weeks, depending on needs. Regardless of the doer's tasks, they always put the receiver's wellbeing first to help them in healing and moving forward.

Stalwart friend

While doers are taking tangible action, a stalwart friend offers emotional support and opportunities to be distracted from the situation, such as going somewhere and not being alone. Three periods were found when a stalwart friend can have the largest helpful impact. The first is immediately after the engagement is broken. For example, Ashley needed a stalwart friend the night her fiancé ended their engagement:

He [her ex-fiancé] had, like, written out kind of in a letter format that he then read to me. And he said that he did that because he didn't think he would be able to cohesively get through it all without writing it down. So then, of course, I was very upset, and I was like, "Okay, I just need to not be around you." So I left. I called one of my really good friends. She was at work, but it was near the end of her workday. And so, she ended up just leaving like an hour early from work. We met up at the bar. I very distinctly remember going to the bar and going to the bartender like, "I need to eat my feelings!" He's like, "What are your feelings?" "My feelings are nachos." "Do your feelings have meat on them?" "Yes." "Are your feelings beef or chicken?" "Chicken." So I ate some nachos. Had a few beers. I vented to a close friend.

In Ashley's experience, even a weak tie, in this case, a bartender, can provide helpful and memorable support.

The second period when a stalwart friend can have a large impact is in the months to follow when the receiver may be feeling lonely or at a loss. For example, Mary said her friend told her:

You need to get some friends. You're going to be in D.C. You're going to commit to this life, and we're going to get you rooted and stuff. And you need to be giving to other people. So, I got really involved in volunteering and really busy at work and made friends and sort of decided like no man was going to tell me that I was going to leave D.C.

With the support of her stalwart friend, Mary was able to get out of the house, volunteer, and remake her life.

Similarly, when Molly's wedding was called off, she reflected on the support she received immediately after the engagement ended and then the support received months later:

> I think what has been the most helpful is, it's been four or five months now, and it's helpful when people reach out and they say, "Hey, how are you doing?" Just like reaching out kind of unexpectedly. The first week or two, everyone was kind of constantly reaching out and then, it got quiet for a little bit, and that was really kind of like an "Oh, shit" moment. People are like, I don't want to sound pretentious, but it was like my quote, un-quote "moment" was up of having that support.

Good support matters even months after the breakup because a person might still be processing the former relationship and their new reality.

In addition to right after the breakup, and in the months following, the third period when a stalwart friend can have the largest impact is on the cancelled wedding date, if a date was set, and depending on how many weeks or months it was from the relationship dissolution. A stalwart friend can ensure the person spends their cancelled wedding date feeling loved and supported. For example, Trudy, who met her millionaire ex at work and dated him for more than six years, expressed sentiments similar to Molly about her wedding chapter being closed for those around her:

> My eight closest friends really went above and beyond to make sure that the [wedding] day and that day was…. it almost felt like a birthday. The only time it got hard was when I would look at the clock and think, like, "Oh, I would be doing this right now." So as long as I didn't look at the time, I was okay. But it's so funny, since the wedding date has passed, it's kind of like the chapter's closed for everyone else. It's kind of like "Okay, it's been six months," like, "You're fine." And I don't know. It goes in waves. I don't know how long it takes. But I'm not, like, over it yet. My wedding dress was shipped to me. It arrived on Friday, so I'm still dealing with crap.

The timing of support and the breakup matters. In his review of bereavement literature, Jacobson (1986) found that the question of timing cannot be ignored when providing social support. This is consistent with the three periods after a broken engagement; whether immediately after, months later, or on the cancelled wedding date, stalwart friends who have a wanted presence and are there for the person make a positive difference in helping that individual heal.

Club member

The last helpful messenger is that of the club member who may be a friend, family member, or acquaintance and who can provide peer social support because they experienced something almost identical to the receiver and persevered. For example, during a work dinner, Ashley learned that she was not alone or a "weirdo" for having a broken engagement, thanks to a club member:

> And then the CEO of the company, at the time, I went out to dinner with four people, including her, and mentioned how, like, I had recently broken an engagement, and she goes, "Welcome to the club." And I ended up finding out that a lot of people have been through this. So, I don't know if it felt good, but it felt kind of like okay, you know. This is not a unique situation. I'm not some weirdo. Like, a lot of people have been through this.

As Ashley learned, sometimes, it is just validating and emotionally helpful to hear from a club member because they offer comfort and a healthy reassurance that everything will work out and, sometimes, be even better. Club members are empathetic because they have experienced the same situation. Even though some people say, "I know what you mean," they are not truly a club member if they have not gone through it (i.e., divorce is not the same as a broken marriage engagement).

To summarize, the helpful themes included messengers who were a listener, a friend on deck, a sage, a doer, a stalwart friend, and a club member. Finally, in the next section, we will see that participants heard messages that were sometimes both helpful and unhelpful, or helpful to one participant, while unhelpful to another.

Research question 3: mixed social support

Mixed social support messages can be helpful to one receiver while unhelpful to another or can be a double-edged sword. How the message is interpreted by the receiver may depend on factors such as how long ago the broken engagement occurred, who ended the relationship and why, and the messenger's relationship with the receiver. The four mixed social support messenger types found in this study include a "Monday morning quarterback" a "prayer", an "apologist" and a "jokester." (Table 3).

Table 3. Mixed social support messengers.

Monday morning quarterback	Uses their position of hindsight to criticize and judge, despite likely having not commented to the receiver previously on the situation. There are three primary approaches of a Monday morning quarterback. First, judging the relationship (e.g., I never thought you two would last as a couple.); second, criticizing the ex-partner (e.g., They were a jerk; I never liked them.); or third, being a tattletale to the receiver about their ex's past indiscretions, shortcomings, etc., (e.g., I'm pretty sure they cheated on you at that party.).
Prayer	Believes in the power of prayer and healing and expresses their willingness to pray with concern, care, and empathy for an individual. Tone matters.
Apologizer	Offers some variation of "I'm sorry" to the receiver.
Jokester	Tells quips involving the situation that may or may not be found comical by the receiver.

Monday morning quarterback

A Monday morning quarterback uses their position of hindsight to criticize and remark, despite likely having not commented to the receiver previously about it (i.e., less "I told you so." and more "I knew it."). There are three primary approaches of a Monday morning quarterback. First is judging the relationship (e.g., "I never thought you two would last as a couple."). For example, Rebecca encountered Monday morning quarterbacks after she broke her engagement to a man she had been dating long-distance for years. As she recounted:

This is like a double-edged sword. I didn't always find it helpful to hear from people like "We didn't like him," or "We didn't think it was going to work," or like when my mom said that to me about, "Oh, I didn't think it was going to work because you didn't seem very excited to start planning." Like I didn't love hearing that. And at the same time, a piece of me, I think, felt validated, too, by it.

Rebecca clearly demonstrates the personal struggle and toll that stems from these mixed messages. She feels validated about her decision because other people noticed similar things, yet at the same time, they noticed these things but did not tell her—a true double-edged sword.

The second Monday morning quarterback approach involves criticizing the ex-partner (e.g., "They were a jerk." and "I never liked them."). For example, Ashley's friends verbally attacked her former partner:

So, a lot of it was kind of the "Oh, fuck that guy." And it was kind of, like, you know, remember, I was engaged to him. I don't want to hear that he's the worst guy ever because that reflects badly on my judgment. But he was an asshole in what he did. Like let's gang up on that.

Ashley needed to establish clear boundaries for her friends between attacking her former fiancé and criticizing what he did so that she would not feel worse about her own judgment.

The third Monday morning quarterback approach involves being a tattletale to the receiver about their ex's past indiscretions, shortcomings, etc. (e.g., "I'm pretty sure they cheated on you at that party."). For example, after Kristie broke off her engagement, she felt like a floodgate opened:

People would say, "Oh well, I never told you this, but you know, Erik did that," and I'm like, Really? That's not helpful. They kind of piled on, like oh, now the floodgate is open, and her eyes are open, and so now I'm just going to share everything that I saw. And then, it just would make me feel worse because then I thought I was really blind. They'd be like, "Oh well, now that you're no longer with him, I have to tell you about the time when I'm pretty sure he cheated on you," and it's, like, okay, thanks. Now I feel like even more of an idiot. I knew he was a bad guy. I didn't need you sharing it in every gory detail – that's not helpful.

This tattletale sharing only added to Kristie's stress. It made her feel like a naive person who did not see what others saw and made her feel like everyone thought she was foolish for missing it. This continued rumination is unhealthy and prevents moving forward.

A Monday morning quarterback may use one, two, or even all three of these messaging approaches (judging, criticizing the partner, and/or being a tattletale), and each approach could have an emotional toll on the receiver. This type of judgment and criticism contrasts with a person expressing a negative emotion about something the ex-partner did that contributed to the uncoupling (e.g., "You did not deserve to be treated like that by them."). Some receivers are more sensitive to criticism right after the breakup because their ex was a person they wanted to marry or because they were already doubting their own judgement, while others may find it slightly cathartic, particularly with infidelity or if they did not end it. However, this is also a double-edged sword, as expressing negative sentiments often leaves the receiver wondering why the Monday morning quarterback never told them before or why they then spent time with that person. All of this can cause frustration, confusion, and anguish, potentially cancelling out the health benefits of any feelings of validation.

Prayer

A prayer messenger can also be mixed; the tone and sincerity of a person offering prayers makes the type of support more distinguishable. For example, Helen's aunt offered her pitying prayers after her breakup, especially knowing that Helen's mom also experienced a broken engagement. Helen recalled:

"Oh, honey. Oh. I remember when this happened to your mom." My mom had a broken engagement. Her guy, like, wrote her a letter from Vietnam and was like, "We're done." She had to go to his house, like to his parents, and give the ring back. It was awful. I remember my aunt saying, "Well, you know, your mom was lucky, and she found somebody else, and God, I hope you do, too. I'll say prayers." You know, like it was some genetic thing.

For Helen, if someone tone conveys pity and feelings of distress or desperation, whether they are strong in faith, or not, their message is unhelpful. For a prayer messenger, the receiver's perception of their kindness and sincerity is what matters most.

Apologizer

An apologizer offers some variation of "I'm sorry" about the breakup to the receiver. As Helen said, "I do that too. It's such a hard thing, and so, I guess I understand when people say that." And Ashley said, "I was hearing 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' like almost kind of what I expect to hear." However, in other cases, only hearing "I'm sorry" was found to be unhelpful. For example, on top of feeling a loss when her fiancé ended their relationship, Mary felt like a failure who disappointed a lot of people:

It also helped when people were like "I'm sorry it didn't work out." It was very neutral. And I felt like it put the emphasis on the broken relationship. Not on me and not on him. Not like, "Oh, I'm sorry you two couldn't figure it out" or "I'm sorry you guys couldn't make it work" because we already felt like failures enough.

In Mary's situation, any apology without the right emphasis added to her grief because it made her feel like a failure who was disappointing everyone who wanted to see her married.

Numerous participants expressed that an apology is often a natural first reaction, so they expected it. And it was mostly positively accepted by receivers when it was said sincerely. However, for a person who needed to find strength to leave an abuser, apologizing may have them questioning or needing to justify their decision. They are not sorry that they found courage. Additionally, for some individuals with the added stress of worrying about disappointing loved ones, the words surrounding the "I'm sorry" may cause feelings of failure.

Jokester

The last mixed theme is the jokester. A jokester tells quips involving the broken engagement that may or may not be found comical by the receiver. As Samantha said:

> My brother is six years younger, so he was 18 when all this fell out. And he'd never been in a relationship, so he was just like, "Sorry it didn't work out. Can I buy you a new pair of shoes?"

Samantha's brother offered an innocent shoe joke at no one's expense that she found helpful because of its light-hearted, innocent tone.

In contrast, Missy said, "I think he [friend] thought he was joking, but he kept saying to me 'Well, you owe me a plane ticket.' And that was also extremely painful." This only added to her feelings of guilt and stress, especially because her fiancé ended their relationship. There is a difference between comedy and hurtful comments poorly disguised as jokes, and the difference matters. Furthermore, a person can laugh at a receiver's joke, but should not make their own joke without considering the receiver's current mood and long-term perspective first.

Analysis

This study extends previous research on the OMT (optimal matching theory) into the understudied area of broken marriage engagements. It further demonstrates OMT's value by suggesting that the 16 communication patterns which emerged regarding the helpful, unhelpful, and mixed social support received after a person tells another person that their marriage engagement ended are either optimal or mismatched. As this study found, just offering support is sometimes not enough to be helpful to a receiver's wellbeing; rather, communicated support must match the receiver's current need or it could be found unhelpful to them. This study's findings complement the plethora of previous social support research and should be considered a first step toward better understanding social support surrounding broken engagements and how support messages can impact a person's wellbeing during and after their transition to being unengaged.

Research question 1: unhelpful support

There were as many unhelpful messages described by participants as helpful messages, even more when including the unhelpfulness of many mixed messages. A recurring theme in interviews was participants acknowledging that it is hard to find the right words to say. Additionally, this study found that while occasionally people seem mean-spirited in their support, most are seldom intentionally unhelpful or hurtful in their words or actions to a person who recently experienced a broken engagement. Therefore, some good news from this study is that participants were often forgiving when someone was perceived to be attempting to be helpful but offered an unhelpful message. However, the bad news is that despite a person's good intentions, consistent with previous literature (Afifi et al., 2013; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), if the support is not helpful, it can add unwanted emotion or stress to someone who recently experienced a broken engagement. Furthermore, some participants are more likely to put distance between themselves and the unhelpful messenger for a period or indefinitely (McLaren et al., 2011). For example, Trudy said:

> The most hurtful bit of communication I received was one of my bridesmaids emailed me, and the subject line said like "I'm sure you're drowning…." And I thought that was not helpful. What I really responded to was the people who are like, "You're so brave...." But the people who are like, "Oh my gosh, I know you're just drowning. These are the darkest days of your life," I don't speak to that friend anymore.

Trudy's grateful response to people who expressed that she was brave while cutting out people who expressed unsupportive messages to her echoes a major tenet of OMT (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), i.e., that in helpful social support messaging, needed support should be matched by the offered support. Albrecht et al., (1994) also discussed unhelpful social support: "[S]ome attempts at support do more harm than good.... [E]ven when members of our network are trying to be helpful rather than critical or disagreeable, their support attempts may be unwelcome or inappropriate" (p. 432). Similarly, in a study of newlyweds and social support messages, participants recognized many of the unhelpful comments were not intended to be unhelpful and thought the message giver "believed their words and actions were useful and beneficial" (Messersmith et al., 2015, p. 271). Participants believing that the people talking to them think that they are being helpful, even when they are not helping, is a present theme in other social support research (Wanzer & Czapla, 2022).

As Alli said in her study interview, "People both want to know, but don't know how to know." With messengers likely knowing few breakup details and having little knowledge about broken engagements because these conversations have yet to be normalized, it is an added challenge to match the needed support.

Research question 2: helpful support

Despite the challenge of finding the right words or the inability to make things immediately better, messengers should first embrace the concept of "do no harm." To be helpful, a messenger should follow the recipient's lead, keep it brief—unless the recipient suggests otherwise—and be intentionally thoughtful in their messages. In retrospective interviews with married couples about helpful and unhelpful support received during the engagement period, Messersmith et al. (2015) concluded, "A provider is to be in tune with the support needed by the engaged individual, rather than simply offering what he or she deems most useful at any given moment," (p. 274). Being "in tune" is a consistent theme for support providers, whether the wedding happens or not.

In reviewing the helpful messengers, whether it is to listen,

be on deck, offer wisdom, help a person move forward, take someone out for a distraction, or share a personal experience to better help someone else understand their own, these types of helpful support messages were found to be "in tune" because they consistently put the receiver first and at the center of the message.

Furthermore, people appreciated the "doers" in their life. Having a doer during a challenging time means that the person does not need to opt-in or formally ask for tangible support—for example, the officemates sending their co-worker a pizza to lift her spirits. The other types of helpful messages, such as listening or remaining non-judgmental, can also help lift someone's mood and strengthen their wellbeing.

Research question 3: mixed messages

The Monday morning quarterback, prayer, apologizer, and jokester became the third category of mixed messages because they are sometimes helpful, but can often be unhelpful or considered a double-edged sword. Offering prayers in the wrong tone can be hurtful and distressing, but in the right tone can be managed and appreciated. A seemingly innocuous phrase like, "I'm sorry," might be helpful to one person, but can be unhelpful to a person who found the courage to leave an abusive partner or an alcoholic. Instead, treating "I'm sorry" as a fragment, and finishing the sentence by stating something like, "I'm sorry you're going through this right now" might be the safest initial response to best support a person's wellbeing. Mixed messages should be used cautiously to ensure they are most helpful to the receiver.

Health implications

Based on this study's findings, receiving helpful social support may be an important variable in reducing the negative health impacts of a broken engagement. Similar to other studies (Wanzer & Czapla, 2022; Messersmith et al., 2015), the provision of appropriate emotional support was important to study participants. Helpful social support benefits our physical health and psychological wellbeing (Wright, 2016), while individuals with lower levels of social support experience poorer psychological wellbeing, regardless of stress levels (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015).

Support messengers should focus on the receiver's wellbeing and not make a receiver feel worse, cause them to ruminate longer, or delay their healing by offering unhelpful messages. The impacts of these unhelpful messages on participants' emotional health and general wellbeing spanned a wide range, from benign to painful. For example, a Pollyanna attempting to be helpful by saying "There's more fish in the sea," or a bungler who makes a mistake may not cause as much stress, anxiety, or rumination, or be viewed as negatively as a pity partier, pusher, or judger, who are more overt. Yet, these unhelpful comments are also viewed on a continuum because they could be made worse from other factors, such as timing of the breakup (i.e., yesterday vs. two months ago), who ended it, and why the relationship ended (i.e., mutual decision vs. infidelity). Therefore, unhelpful comments should be avoided and ideally replaced with more helpful comments that promote better coping and wellbeing.

This study's findings are also consistent with spouse bereavement research in that social support influences how one copes and how health stressors can be buffered (Walker et

al.,1977), and lower levels of perceived social support by the widowed, divorced and never married, relative to the married individuals, resulted in significantly poorer psychological health for the individual (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). Furthermore, strongly aligning with the helpful and unhelpful messenger categories found in this study, comforting social support research suggests that highly person-centered verbal strategies (i.e., helpful messages) are more effective and help reduce emotional distress, and low person-centered verbal strategies (i.e., unhelpful messages) may ignore someone's feelings, tell them what to do or feel, and criticize (Burleson & Holmstrom, 2008). Ultimately, when it comes to having a positive health impact on a person experiencing a broken engagement, whether a weak-tie stranger or a strong-tie family member (Wright & Miller, 2010), no individual should underestimate their power in being able to help another person heal by just being in the moment with them and offering helpful words.

Practical implications

One theme found among the unhelpful messages is that the messengers put themselves first, instead of the receiver. A contrasting theme found among helpful messages is that messengers put the receiver's comfort and wellbeing first. The helpful support matched the needs of the participant (Cutrona, 1990) and was conveyed from high person-centered messengers (Burleson & Holmstrom, 2008) who were willing to listen, provide wisdom, help when needed, or share their own broken engagement story.

When it was unhelpful, did not match the need, and, therefore, did not provide comfort or improve wellbeing, it was from low person-centered messengers (Burleson & Holmstrom, 2008). The person may have meant well, but missed the mark because they were more focused on themselves by being toxically positive, pushing the person before they were ready, sweeping the broken engagement under the rug as if it was taboo or never happened, expressing judgment, offering pity instead of empathy, or just bungling something. As a result, to match the need and provide greater emotional support, asking oneself before commenting, "Is this more about me or them?" can go a long way in not making someone feel worse and maybe even helping them better cope and heal from their breakup.

In response to these themes, applying insights from this study's 43 interviews, the *broken engagement messaging stop light* (Figure 1) offers a strong starting point for the general public to better match their support messages with the needs of someone they know experiencing a broken engagement to promote better resilience and coping. Included are messages that can generally support by focusing on the person's wellbeing and even offer empowerment (green light), should be used with caution (yellow light), and should mostly be avoided (red light).

With the necessity (sometimes urgent) for most individuals to broadly share that their marriage plans are no longer happening and the uneasiness many people seemingly feel in hearing and responding to this news, the stop light is a tool to help messengers be in the moment and in tune with what the receiver needs to hear. For the stoplight messages to have the greatest positive impact on a person's wellbeing, individuals also need to be thoughtful and consider their own relationship history with the receiver. For example, almost all participants appreciated hearing "I'm proud of you," but for the receiver who knew the messenger disapproved of their same-sex relationship, hearing that message resulted in negative health outcomes.
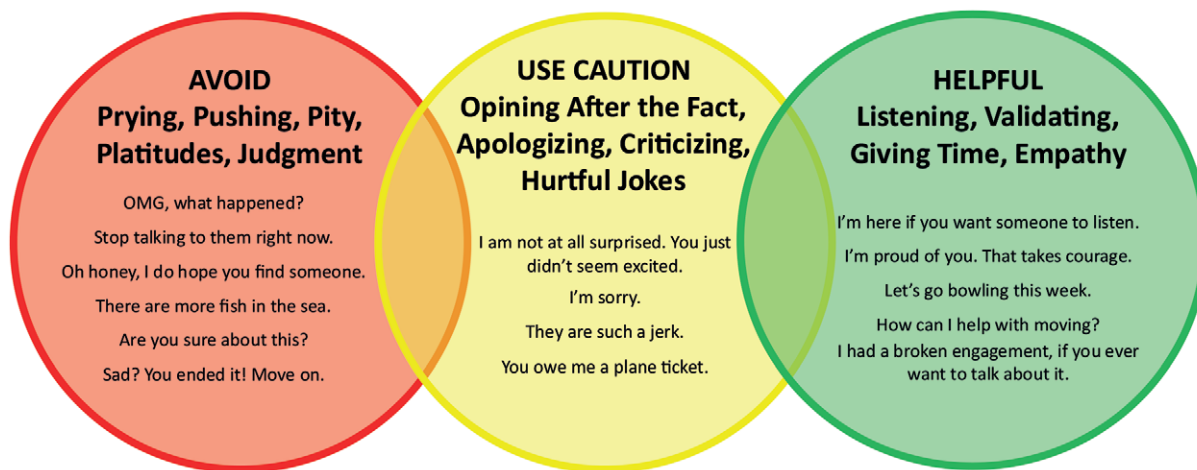
Figure 1. Broken engagement messaging stoplight.

Limitations

This exploratory study had several limitations, including interviews being one-sided, self-reported, and retrospective. Although the range in the age of participants presents unique insights, it does not offer generational, ethnic, racial, or other detailed analysis. Additionally, individuals willing to discuss their experience may have a different fortitude than those who are unwilling; many said they could discuss it because they are in such a happy place in life and/or because they wanted to help others. It is also unknown whether these results would be replicated outside the U.S., or if more men, individuals from historically marginalized communities, or individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+ were interviewed.

Future research

In addition to seeing if the identified limitations can be explored, future researchers may want to examine differences between generations in the role mental health plays in dissolution (beyond being an effect of it [Rhoades et al., 2011]), and how if left untreated or un/under resolved, it can negatively impact partners, relationships, and social networks. One of the primary breakup reasons study participants mentioned included mental health challenges experienced personally, by the partner, or both, and at least seven participants experienced suicide or suicide attempts or needed to address suicide within their relationship. Furthermore, examining specific health-related responses taken after the broken engagement, such as binge drinking, over/under eating, promiscuity, seeing a therapist, etc., would prove useful to lay people and healthcare professionals.

Conclusions

Broken marriage engagements are often a major life transition. This study suggests that helpful social support is an important variable in navigating this transition, lessening the downsides, and improving the wellbeing of a person experiencing a broken engagement. In contrast, unhelpful social support, even if not intentional, can result in negative health consequences. If friends, family, and acquaintances use the *broken engagement messaging*

stop light as a guide to better match their message to what a person experiencing a breakup needs to hear, it could result in positive health benefits for that individual as they look to the future.

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