

# The roles of verbal person-centeredness, race, and sex in evaluations of emotional support messages parole and probation clients receive from agents

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## Reasons for Examining Quality of Supportive Communication in Agent-Client Relationships

Supervising agents are asked to interact with clients regularly to promote desistance from criminal activity. Research consistently shows that when agents communicate to build a strong, supportive relationships with their clients, clients are less likely to reoffend and tend to do better overall. Despite how central communication is to effective supervision and how important agent support is to clients, we still lack a clear understanding of what specific kinds of supportive messages clients find most helpful when they are struggling emotionally with the demands of supervision. Furthermore, there is evidence that people's race and gender identification may matter when it comes to these supportive interactions. This study was designed to provide more information about the types of [emotional support messages](#) clients find most helpful, with a specific focus on how racial identification (Black or White) and gender identification (male or female) might affect their preferences. Emotional support involves saying things to help ease a client's stress when they are struggling.

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## The Study

We analyzed data from an experiment conducted with 241 men and women under community supervision in Michigan who were classified as at medium or high risk for recidivism. Of these participants, 160 (66.4%) identified as men and 81 (33.6%) identified as women. There were 140 White clients (58.1%) and 101 Black clients (41.9%). Clients were read a series of emotional support messages about situations that can cause distress, such as difficulty in:

finding and maintaining employment, avoiding substances, and maintaining appropriate social networks. They were asked to imagine that an agent said these messages and then they reported how each message might make them feel if it came from a male or female agent.

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## Key Findings

We found that messages that **name, validate, and discuss the emotions clients are feeling and offer continuing support** were seen as more helpful than messages that **dismiss or criticize the emotions clients are experiencing**.

While there were some small differences between men and women and White and Black clients, *all clients preferred these types of messages*. It also didn't matter whether the agent providing the messages was male or female.

### Examples of messages that name, validate, and discuss clients' emotions:

<b>When a client experiences stress due to difficulty finding/maintaining employment...</b>	<b>"Of course you're worried about your job situation – it's a difficult situation for you to be in when you're trying to get back on your feet. Know that I'm here for you."</b>
<b>When a client experiences stress due to difficulty avoiding substances...</b>	<b>"It makes sense that you might feel a little lost and confused about how to live life without substances. Remember, I'm on your side."</b>
<b>When a client experiences stress due to difficulty maintaining appropriate social networks...</b>	<b>"Unfortunately, those people from your past who have criminal records can hurt your chances of staying out of trouble, and that is hard to accept. I can see why you'd be upset. I want the best for you."</b>

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## Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

**When clients are experiencing emotional distress, it helps to name, validate, and encourage discussion of their feelings, and to signal that you are there to support them.** This information can be utilized by probation and parole agents to respond when their clients are upset and struggling with the demands of supervision. Whether clients are men or women, White or Black, this type of support helps them to feel better and can, in turn, strengthen the agent-client relationship, which ultimately can decrease clients' risk of reoffending.

### Source:

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