Trait Self-Efficacy as a Moderator of Esteem Support Message Effects in the Parole/Probation Agent-Client Relationship

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

People under community supervision can experience many potential threats to their sense of self. Experiences like difficulty in finding and maintaining employment, avoiding substance use, and building and maintaining appropriate social networks can lead to discouragement and worry about not having what it takes to effectively complete supervision. This loss of self-esteem can hamper clients' efforts to complete the requirements of their supervision.

Importantly, supervising agents can serve as a source of support for clients who are experiencing loss of self-esteem; furthermore, research consistently shows that when agents communicate to build strong, supportive relationships with their clients, clients are less likely to reoffend and tend to do better overall. However, we lack a clear understanding of the kinds of supportive messages that best help clients whose self-esteem is under threat. This experimental study examines the types of esteem support messages clients prefer to receive from their agents when their sense of self is shaken during community supervision. We also considered whether clients' overall self-efficacy, or belief in their abilities, might influence how they think about agents' esteem support messages.

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The Study

We analyzed data from an experiment conducted with 278 men and women under community supervision in Michigan who were classified as at medium or high risk for recidivism. Clients were read a series of esteem support messages in response to situations that can cause loss

of self-esteem during supervision, including difficulty in: finding and maintaining employment, avoiding substances, and maintaining appropriate social networks. Clients were asked to imagine that an agent said these messages and then they reported how each message might make them feel about themselves. We also assessed clients' overall self-efficacy.

Key Findings

We found that **messages that acknowledge clients' efforts and focus on their strengths were seen as more helpful than messages that minimize or deny clients' experience of self-esteem loss.**

While there were some small differences due to clients' overall self-efficacy, *all clients preferred these types of messages.*

Examples of effective esteem support messages:

When a client experiences self-esteem threat due to difficulty finding/maintaining employment...	**"I'm proud of the work you're doing to find and keep a job. You have what it takes to keep working hard."**
When a client experiences self-esteem threat due to difficulty avoiding substances...	**"You've made it through a lot battling substance misuse, and you're doing a great job by staying on the right track"**
When a client experiences self-esteem threat due to difficulty maintaining appropriate social networks...	**"You have the ability to make new friends to help you stay out of trouble. I don't want you to lose what you've worked hard for in staying out of trouble so far."**

Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

When clients are experiencing a loss of self-esteem, it helps to recognize their efforts and explicitly discuss their strengths rather than to dismiss their concerns. This information can be utilized by probation and parole agents to respond when their clients are doubting themselves and struggling with the demands of supervision. Esteem support can help clients to feel better and can strengthen the agent-client relationship, which ultimately can decrease clients' risk of reoffending.

Source:

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