Utilizing the Television Series Chasing Life to Develop a Deeper Understanding about the Complexities of Providing Social Support

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GREAT IDEA FOR TEACHING

Utilizing the Television Series *Chasing Life* to Develop a Deeper Understanding about the Complexities of Providing Social Support

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Abstract
Teaching students to think critically about social support and to apply it to their personal and professional lives can be challenging. This activity facilitates deeper learning about the communication processes involved with social support as well as the implications of social support. Instructors are given specific scenes from a recent television series; the scenes depict some complexities of providing social support. These scenes prompt a lively discussion as well as a critical reflection about what makes social support effective and the consequences of ineffective social support for coping, identity, and relational closeness. Instructors are provided with a lesson plan (that can be utilized for one 75-minute class period or for two class periods) and materials which facilitate this critical reflection and discussion.

Courses
Health Communication and Interpersonal Communication

Objectives
- To increase knowledge about the coordination of problem appraisal and the influence that this coordination, or lack of coordination has on evaluating a social support's attempts as well as the recipient's subsequent coping.
- To increase people's understanding about the ways in which social-support attempts can influence the identity of the person who is receiving the social support.
- To increase awareness that social-support attempts communicate messages about relational closeness.

Introduction and Rationale

Utilizing media, such as film and television, in the classroom can be a great way to engage students and to explain abstract theoretical concepts (Dawkins, 2010; Thompson-Hayes & Moore, 2012). In the television series *Chasing Life*, the lead character (who is in her 20s) has

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cancer; she is the recipient of numerous social-support attempts with varying quality levels as well as effects on her coping.

Social support is complex and involves the coordination of problem appraisal (task); identity affirmation and challenges (identity); and power, influence, closeness, and involvement (relationship; Goldsmith, 2004). Effective social support is talk where support providers and recipients define the problem in the same way, where the support recipient's various identities are validated, and where the support provided indicates closeness and solidarity (Goldsmith, 2004). The social-support attempts communicate what the provider thinks about the recipient in terms of whether the recipient is good at his/her various roles/hats worn in life as well as indicating the relationship's level of closeness (Goldsmith, 2004).

Description of the Activity

This activity could be conducted in one 75-minute class period by reducing the number of clips shown and limiting the discussion, or the exercise could be done utilizing two 75-minute class periods. To reach the full benefits of the activity, it will ideally be done over two class periods. The activity involves having students watch video clips from the series *Chasing Life*; while watching the clips, students take notes on specific components of Goldsmith's (2004) theory of social support. Following each clip, students discuss the components involved with that social-support interaction; then, at the conclusion of the activity, students reflect on their own social-support interactions and apply the concepts to their experiences.

Video Clips

The television series *Chasing Life* is available on Amazon Prime. The television series follows a young woman throughout her cancer journey, from diagnosis through treatment. The instructor should show clips from episode 11 of season 1. The following clips should be shown during this activity. The concepts demonstrated by each clip are described.

1. Identity and closeness in social support are represented by a scene between April and her best friend (4:39-5:58). April tells her best friend that she is feeling lost by not being at work and that she has lost a part of herself. (Her identity as a working professional in her 20s is being challenged.) When April's friend shares about a dilemma she is having in her life, April immediately offers to help (to help herself feel useful, a part of her identity). April's friend, however, says that she does not want her "cancer friend" to be burdened. April's friend eventually sees that April needs to do this task, and this realization that April is still capable of helping her friendbrings them closer.

2. A scene between April and her grandparents (10:40-12:17) demonstrates problem appraisal, identity, and closeness. April's grandfather insists that April play chess despite the fact that she is feeling dizzy and weak. Her grandfather's definition of a good cancer survivor and identification of the problem(s) for which April needs support are different from and incompatible with April'sdefinition of the problem (problem appraisal). After this interaction, April questions her identity as a good granddaughter and a good cancer survivor. Additionally, the lack of insight which the grandparents display about April's situation and feelings leave April feeling distant from her grandparents.

3. Closeness is demonstrated by a scene between April and her sister (12:21-13:40). April talks with her sister about her hair falling out and her feelings about loosing her hair. Her sister's emotional support in this scene brings them closer together.
4. April's interaction with her uncle is a good example of identity and closeness (26:36-27:09). She talks with her uncle about feeling bad even though the chemotherapy is done. She feels like a failure because she is not leaping from bed and full of energy. Her uncle's response validates and normalizes her feelings and experiences with chemotherapy. Additionally, he helps her to repair the damage her grandparents did to her identity and assures her that she is a good cancer patient and survivor. This effective support brings April and her uncle closer together and assists April with her coping.
5. April receives effective support from her cancer friend (35:18-38:18), and this scene demonstrates identity and closeness. Her cancer friend helps to affirm her identity as a good cancer patient, and his social support indicates that he sees himself as similar to her and that he is here for her in a way that her family and friends cannot be.

Lecture

Give a lecture on Goldsmith's theory of social support (Goldsmith, 2004). Specifically, you should cover the task, identity, and relational implications of enacted social support. The lecture should last about 20 minutes.

Procedure

1. Give a brief lecture on Goldsmith's theory of social support (15 minutes), specifically focusing on the task, identity, and relational implications of social support. If you are incorporating an entire unit on social support, you could assign students to read a portion of Goldsmith's (2004) work and/or a chapter on social support in a health-communication textbook (Lederman, Kreps, & Roberto, 2017).
2. Introduce the television series, the main character, and the episode of the show you will be watching. The television series focuses on April who is in her 20s and has leukemia, and follows her throughout her cancer experience. In this episode, April is undergoing her first round of chemotherapy at the hospital, and she is being hospitalized during the treatment (2 minutes).
3. Prompt students to look for instances of social support that demonstrate a lack of problem-appraisal coordination, challenges to identity, and threats to relational closeness. Give examples for each concept in order to facilitate this process for students. Have students take notes about these three elements as they watch the episode (5-10 minutes).
4. Show brief clips of the episode. (The total for the 5 clips will account for about 30 minutes of class time.) In the following section, I have included specific scenes to show during this activity as well as indicated how each scene demonstrates the concepts.
5. After each clip, stop and engage in a discussion about the social-support concepts that are present in the example. (Discuss each clip for about 10 minutes.).
6. After watching all the clips, have students engage in a class discussion about the concept in terms of their own social-support experiences (10-20 minutes, depending upon whether this activity is spread over one or two class periods). Have students reflect on these questions, and then, engage in a class discussion:

    a. In what ways have the support which you received lacked problem-appraisal coordination, threatened your identity, and/or decreased closeness with the support provider?

    b. How has the support you have given potentially influenced the recipient's identity and/or decreased closeness?

    c. Based upon this discussion and activity, how will you provide social support to friends or family in the future?

Debriefing

This activity is designed to help students identify some complexities for providing social support in an illness context. Students are able to move beyond labeling the support as emotional support or informational support, and look more specifically at what went well and/or what went wrong in a given "troubles-talk" scenario (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 43). This episode of *Chasing Life* does an excellent job of representing some problems for providing social support, and the episode and characters, overall, are easily relatable to students. The character in the show has similar struggles that people who are in their 20s and in college may experience (outside the cancer experience specifically); for example, she is worried about her relationship with her boyfriend and keeping her job. On the surface, the interactions in the episode are easy to label as effective or ineffective, and as instructors push students to think about why these interactions are supportive or non-supportive, deeper learning occurs. Further, the discussion that follows while analyzing the clips prompts students to think critically about their own experiences receiving social support as well as providing social support. Students move from hearing about concepts in a lecture and reading about them to being able to apply them in actual "troubles talk" to being able to apply these concepts to their everyday lives and illness experiences. Students demonstrate deeper insight about the effect of social support on coping as well as relationships following this activity.

Students who have relevant experiences with cancer may want to share during this discussion and may have insights that are valuable for the entire class. Encourage students who have experienced cancer themselves and/or have family or friends who have had cancer to share their experiences. It is important that you create a supportive classroom environment that is conducive to sharing one's healthcare experiences prior to this disclosure. Further, it is important that you validate and encourage empathic listening among the class as students share their experiences. The instructor should direct the conversation back to the issues of problem appraisal, identity, and relational closeness after students share, helping the class to see the connections between the experience(s) shared and these concepts.

Appraisal

Initially when presented to students, social-support concepts may seem like common sense, and students may think of providing social support in simplistic terms. For example, students may think about the difference between providing informational support and emotional support; they may easily comprehend that emotional support is more difficult to effectively provide to a support recipient. This activity and the emphasis on Goldsmith's (2004) theory of social support help students to focus more on the complexities with social-support provision, the communication process involved, and the consequences of communication for coping and relational outcomes. Students who take health-communication courses may come from a variety

of backgrounds, nursing, health sciences, pre-med, as well as communication, and will benefit greatly from focusing on communication processes. Students majoring or minoring in communication studies will also appreciate delving into more of the complexities involved with social support, beyond the simple categorizations for the types of social support. This activity helps students to translate the knowledge gained from reading and lectures to their everyday lives as well as to grasp the importance and value of communication research in the area of social support.

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