

What's the Most (and Least) Helpful Thing to Text a Friend Before Their Audition?

Description

A few months ago, a friend of mine was preparing to interview for a new job. She prepped diligently, doing mock interviews, until finally, the day arrived.

And as she was on her way to the interview, she received a short text from a former supervisor which read: "Really pulling for you! Don't worry, just be yourself. You'll do great!"

Which of course is a really nice thing to hear from one of your mentors. But it ended up backfiring, ratcheting up her nerves and the pressure she felt to do well.

Along these lines, I've often struggled with the quandary of what to text my kids or my wife, before important moments. Should I simply say "good luck?" Give them some simple last-minute advice? Tell them I love them no matter what? Ask them what they'd like to do for dinner? Or tell them I found a really gross half-eaten Clif Bar in their shorts when I was doing laundry?

Different texts, different results?

A [team of researchers](#) recruited 75 couples, ages 18-30, who had been dating for at least 3 months.

Two thirds of the couples were randomly assigned to one of two texting conditions – the **supportive text group** and the **mundane text group**. The remaining third were the **control group** and did no texting during the study.

When couples arrived at the lab, they were split up into separate rooms.

The male participant received instructions about two text messages they would be asked to send their significant other during the study, and then sat quietly and kept busy by completing a few surveys.

Meanwhile, the female participant was hooked up to a blood pressure and heart rate monitoring device, which allowed the researchers to gauge her stress level at various points throughout the experiment.

They were also asked to keep their phone out, in order to read the text messages that the experimenter would be sending them during the study. They were also told that they were free to read any texts from their partner as well – but that they should not respond.

A baseline measurement

The female participants then sat quietly for a few minutes while the researchers established a baseline

reading of their heart rate and blood pressure.

The first text

After completing the baseline measurement, the participants also completed a few surveys – during which time, they received a text from their significant other.

Participants in the **supportive text group** received a message that said: “Don’t worry. It’s just a psych study. You’ll be fine :-)”

Those in the **mundane text group** got a text saying: “It’s cold in here.”

A second text

Then, the women were given 4 minutes to prepare an impromptu speech that would be delivered on camera in front of an evaluator.

During their preparation, they received a second text, which either said “You could talk about how hard working you are” (**supportive group**) or “I’m filling out surveys” (**mundane group**).

And then, a bit of pressure

When their prep time was up, the speech evaluator came into the room, turned on a big video camera, and then it was go time.

In an effort to induce some nerves and pressure, the evaluator maintained a “stoic facial expression” throughout the speech. And when they stopped talking, the evaluator told them to keep going.

Once the participants had spoken for 3 minutes, they were then asked to count backwards from 2372 by 13 as fast as possible. To increase pressure on this task, the evaluator told the participants to go faster, or indicated that they were making too many mistakes.

A final measurement

After finishing the stressful speaking/math task, the participants then sat quietly for a few minutes so the researchers could take one last set of heart rate and blood pressure readings.

Stress levels

Before the study began, the researchers hypothesized that the two groups which received texts from their partners, would be less stressed than the group which received no texts.

But that's not quite how things worked out.

As it turns out, only *one* of the texting groups had a diminished stress response during the study. And it's not the group you'd think.

Even though they reported feeling significantly higher levels of support than participants in the other groups, the **supportive text group** experienced a stress response (i.e. an increase in heart rate and blood pressure) that was essentially the same as the group that didn't get any texts.

Meanwhile, the participants who got those random, boring texts, had the lowest increase in blood pressure of the three groups¹.

What...?

Why would mundane, seemingly meaningless texts help participants stay calmer than more "supportive" texts?

Why would boring be better?

The researchers note that the supportive texts may have inadvertently increased participants' pressure, by implying that it was important to do well on the task.

Furthermore, receiving unsolicited "help" out of the blue may have suggested to the participants that their significant other was concerned that they weren't up to the task and needed help, unintentionally undermining their confidence.

There's also the possibility that simply reminding participants about the stressful task caused them to stress about it more, while the boring texts managed to a) subtly distract the participant from the pressure, and b) remind the participant that they have a support network around them, while c) providing an implicit "hey, no matter what happens, life will go on, and we can grab a chalupa after this is over" type of reassurance, without actually saying those words.

Limitations

This exploratory study has some important limitations, of course, in that the messages were all from boyfriend to girlfriend, and there very well could be gender differences in how male participants might respond if the roles were reversed.

Not to mention the fact that getting a text from a significant other could feel different than receiving the same exact message from a family member or friend.

Takeaways

At the end of the day, I'm still not sure if I know exactly what the best pre-exam, pre-performance, or pre-interview text message might be, but it does seem like sending a text before a stressful event could be a helpful thing. As long as we avoid unsolicited advice or implicitly add pressure to the situation by mentioning it and amplifying it in their mind.

So maybe it really is the random, boring, everyday stuff, like a picture of the washed and dried and lint-y Clif Bar, or a simple smiley face emoji, that is the best way to show loved ones our support and help take the pressure down a notch?

A question...

I suspect that knowing what has worked (and not worked) for others could help all of us get better at saying the right thing at the right time.

To that end, what are some of the **most** and **least** helpful messages you've received from well-intentioned loved ones before big moments in your life? (please share below!)

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