

How Outward Bound co-instructor relationships create a context for emotional support during stressful course situations

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Abstract

Youth program leaders may experience considerable stress when they encounter emotionally demanding situations in their work. This stress can negatively affect their well-being or interfere with their ability to provide meaningful experiences for youth. Using Outward Bound (OB) youth expedition courses as a context, this study examined how co-instructors provided emotional support to instructors during stressful situations. Qualitative analysis of 31 OB instructor interviews showed co-instructors used three strategies: allowing instructors to momentarily exit the situation, validating instructors' emotions, and reframing negative situations. In addition, certain relationship factors facilitated the provision of support: building holistic relationships, establishing open communication patterns, and conveying commitment. The findings suggest that these factors increased instructors' perception of support availability, which facilitated them receiving support. This study makes a strong case for the value of co-worker relationships as a source of support for individuals in occupations where they experience emotionally stressful work situations.

KEYWORDS

emotional support, experiential education, interpersonal emotion regulation, social support, stress

1 | INTRODUCTION

Youth program leaders may experience considerable stress as they encounter challenging situations and the demands of their role (Larson & Walker, 2010; McGovern, 2019; White et al., 2020). These leaders are often asked to simultaneously provide a physically and emotionally safe space and present youth with challenging and engaging activities that promote the development of critical cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Too much stress can affect leaders' well-being and may result in them being less effective at creating the conditions for youth's meaningful learning. Research suggests myriad ways instructors might cope with the emotional stressors of their job, including distracting themselves or altering their personal outlook (Carver, 1997; Gross, 1998). In addition, people tend to rely on social support from others during experiences of stress (Cohen, 2004; Thoits, 1995) and empirical studies have demonstrated the positive effects of social support on stress reduction (Lepore et al., 1993). Some research suggests that pairing leaders allows them to be able to share and process the emotions that arise as a result of working with youth through challenging situations (Smith et al., 2016). It is important to examine the ways co-instructors might provide emotional support to instructors to help them manage and reduce the stress they experience in their work.

1.1 | Outward Bound (OB) as a context to study stress and support

Outdoor expedition programs such as OB provide an apt context to understand both stress and the advantages of co-instructor social support. First, OB instructors experience stress due to the naturally unpredictable and sometimes unsafe conditions inherent to being "on course" in the wilderness for an extended period of time, and the volatility of adolescent emotions, behavior, and relationships (McGovern, in press). OB expeditionary courses are designed for students to learn through overcoming intensive team-based challenges while being subject to the demands of wilderness survival (Walsh & Golins, 1976). Instructors receive extensive training and preparation for their role in facilitating these experiences. However, instructors have the ultimate responsibility to support student learning and simultaneously manage risks to safety. These demands have been shown to create instructor stress (McGovern, in press).

Second, OB uses a co-instructor model to avert risks to safety and to provide staff development and training. Assigning two instructors allows for, in the case of emergency, one instructor being able to go for help while the other stays with the group. It also provides a supported mentoring structure within which instructors develop their expertise. Over several months, OB instructors typically move through roles of intern/apprentice, assistant, and lead. Throughout, they are paired with a more experienced instructor who guides them in setting and achieving professional goals as they gradually take on additional course responsibilities. Instructor pairings are shuffled for each course, providing all instructors the potential to benefit from exposure to multiple models and experiences with a variety of leadership approaches and skills. Often, the pair strives for equity in sharing the daily duties, tasks, lessons, and decision-making to the extent that students are often not able to distinguish which of the instructors is the lead and which is the assistant. In this study, interviews were conducted with both lead and assistant instructors. However, in their narratives, instructors did not always specify whether the anecdote they shared was from their time as an assistant or lead instructor. For clarity, throughout this manuscript *instructor* refers to the individual telling their story from their own perspective in the interview, and *co-instructor* refers to their counterpart in the instructor pair, regardless of rank.

Research suggests that OB co-instructors, through their shared work, develop relationships that are conducive to the provision of support (Field, 2014; Vernon, 2011). However, little is known about what strategies co-instructors use to provide emotional support on course or what contributes to the success of their efforts. The present qualitative study used OB as a context to examine support given by co-instructors to instructors at two levels. First, the situational level includes the ways the co-instructor supports the instructor to regulate their

emotions in response to stress in the moment. Second, the relational level includes the ways the co-instructor invests in the relationship to convey that they are an available source of social support.

1.2 | Situational level: Regulating emotions during stressful situations

When faced with a stressful situation, individuals may employ a variety of strategies to monitor, evaluate, and modify their own emotions or they may engage the help of others to support their emotion regulation. Gross' (1998) process model of emotion regulation identified component strategies individuals use, including redirecting their attention to something more pleasant, reappraising a situation as more positive, and suppressing their emotional response. OB instructors likely apply some of these strategies in response to the stress they experience on course so that they can deal with the stressful situation, and ultimately, fulfill their role expectation to provide a successful course experience for youth.

Interpersonal emotional regulation examines the ways individuals engage with others to apply Gross' strategies (Zaki & Craig Williams, 2013). Interpersonal strategies can inform our understanding of the dynamic processes of how OB co-instructors help to regulate instructors' emotions during stressful situations. According to Niven (2017), an interpersonal emotion regulation interaction is regulatory (employed to maintain focus on a goal), has an affective target (focused on altering an emotion), is deliberate (conscious and purposeful), and has a social target (focused on a particular individual who is centered in a social context). In this study, I focused on situations that met these criteria as the unit of analysis. I collected OB instructors' narratives of situations where their stress was to the point where it was interfering with their ability to perform their role, and they relied on support from their co-instructor to be able to reduce their negative emotions and resume leading the course. This study explores what interpersonal emotion regulation strategies co-instructors use to help instructors effectively deal with stressful situations.

1.3 | Relational level: Creating conditions that facilitate support

Caring relationships can provide social support that helps individuals cope with stress and negative emotions. Social support has been defined as an individuals' belief that they are loved, valued, and their well-being is cared about as part of a social network of mutual obligation (Cobb, 1976). Research has demonstrated that social support can directly and indirectly reduce adverse health effects from exposure to workplace stress (Van Doef & Maes, 1998; Viswesvaran et al., 1999). Not only does the receipt of social support lead to a reduction of workplace stress, but the perception that support is available appears to also reduce stress (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). The present study seeks to illuminate processes by which social support helps OB instructors manage stress created by their job.

While on course, OB instructors are not in frequent or direct contact with their family and friends and therefore may conceive their co-instructor as a potential source of social support. Social support usually occurs through a combination of emotional, informational, tangible, and belonging support (Uchino, 2004). This study is focused on the dimension of emotional support, which is often experienced as expressions of empathy, love, care, and concern and is thought to be beneficial because it conveys acceptance and bolsters self-esteem (Wills, 1985). Examples of emotional support from co-workers in other work settings include expressing interest and concern, listening to private feelings, and conveying acceptance (Miner et al., 2012). Employees who experience emotional support from co-workers report less job stress and better job satisfaction compared to employees who face poor workgroup cohesion or social support (Ducharme & Martin, 2000; Miner et al., 2012; Sloan, 2012). Though the OB course environment and student group dynamics can lead an instructor to experience stress, a strong relationship with their co-instructor that conveys acceptance, value, and care may help the instructor to feel supported through

problem situations. This study will explore how instructors' relationships with their co-instructor contribute to instructors' perception of their co-instructor as a source of social support on course.

1.4 | Current study

The goal of this study was to examine how instructors relied on their co-instructor for emotional support during stressful course experiences. The strategy for this study was to analyze OB instructors' narrative accounts of intensely stressful situations to understand how their co-instructor responded with emotional support. This study focused on two primary research questions:

- (1) What emotional support strategies from co-instructors do instructors find valuable for managing stressful situations on course?
- (2) How do relationship factors affect whether and how instructors seek help from their co-instructor?

By examining the emotion support strategies instructors received within the context of their relationships with co-instructors on course, this study sought to contribute a nuanced understanding of how instructors manage the stress experienced on course during their work with youth. As this analysis is drawn from instructors' lived experience, it may be directly helpful to practitioners who encounter stress in their work with youth.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Overview of design and procedures

The current analysis draws on interviews conducted with OB instructors as part of a larger study examining OB instructor expertise. Thirty-one instructors from two OB schools in the United States were recruited who had led a course with adolescents in the past 4 months. The first site employed approximately 150 instructors who led courses that ranged from 5 to 60 days. The second site employed approximately 25–30 instructors who typically led 5- to 20-day courses. Course activities for groups of 5–15 students included backpacking, hiking, rock climbing, canoeing, high- and low-ropes courses, and at the first site, skiing, and dog-sledding.

OB managerial staff at each site shared recruitment fliers provided by the research team with instructors interested in the study who met the selection criteria. Following the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board (IRB 17401) approved procedures, a research team member presented information about the study to each participant before they gave written informed consent. All participants completed an online demographic questionnaire before being interviewed by a member of the research team either in-person during site visits or via phone/video conference. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Members of the research team checked transcripts for accuracy, selected pseudonyms for each instructor, and de-identified data for analysis.

2.2 | Participant sample

The sample of 31 participants included 21 instructors from the first site and 10 from the second. Table 1 contains demographic characteristics, which are broadly consistent with the demographics of the instructor base at the sites and with past studies of field instructors, reflecting a lack of racial and ethnic diversity (Kirk & O'Connell, 2012; Marchand et al., 2009). As seen in Table 1, instructors were mostly White (94%) and mostly in their 20s (74%).

TABLE 1 Participant demographics

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Female	17	55
Median years of experience (range)	8 (1–50)	
Median age (range)	27 (23–74)	
Race		
Asian/Indian	1	3
Black/African American	1	3
White–Non-Hispanic	29	94
Total	31	

Note: There was one outlier case, a 74-year-old instructor with 50 years of experience.

2.3 | Interview protocol

The goal of the interviews was to obtain detailed, situated descriptions of the emotional support instructors received from their co-instructor, including contextual details about the instructor's stress at the time and their relationship with their co-instructor. The interview protocol was based on pilot interviews with instructors and was informed by an instructor focus group (for a full description of the measure, see McGovern, 2019). Interviews contained structured open-ended questions and probes which interviewers were trained to use to gather full, descriptive narratives from instructors.

At the start of each interview, research team members built trust and rapport with instructors by asking about their most enjoyable course experiences. Next, instructors were asked what caused stress for them on course and what emotions were associated with their experiences of stress. Findings about the sources of instructor stress have been reported elsewhere (McGovern, in press). Interviewers then asked instructors to recall and describe a situation where (a) the stress was enough that it became difficult to function and (b) their co-instructor helped in some way to manage their feelings of stress. These prompts ensured that the narratives would be focused on aspects pertinent to the research questions. Using semi-structured, open-ended questions, interviewers probed instructors to provide a detailed account of the situation and follow-up. Questions to explore the situation level included: *In this situation, how did your co-instructor help you to manage your feelings of stress, not just solve the problem? What was effective about what they did? Why was it helpful?* Questions to explore the relational level included: *What made it harder or easier for you to get help from your co-instructor in this situation? What are your thoughts on how co-instructors can best communicate and help each other with feelings of stress?* Responses provided nuanced contextual details that were essential to understanding the emotional support instructors received from co-instructors during stressful course experiences.

2.4 | Data analysis

Constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2014) were used in multiple, iterative stages to conduct an interpretive analysis focused on each research question. The analytic procedures were designed for use with narrative data, and to systematically identify repeated themes and describe processes across participants (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Charmaz, 2014). The goal of the analysis was to develop a grounded theory based on instructor's accounts, though existing theory and research did partly inform the interpretation of results (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The author was assisted by one additional coder who contributed to data

analysis, and the main project's principal investigator who reviewed the findings. Analysis for each research question followed a similar analytical procedure.

Initial coding involved the two coders independently identifying emergent themes within the data, based on phrases, words, and concepts that appeared across multiple interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In keeping with the constant comparative approach (Charmaz, 2014), coders met to discuss the codes they had generated through inductive analysis, and then returned to the interviews to confirm that the codes adequately reflected the data. Several iterative rounds of initial coding yielded a working codebook of the most salient codes, each with a label, working definition, and several examples from the data. At this stage, examples of situational level codes included expressing concern, listening, and providing perspective. Examples of relational level codes included proactive communication, familiarity, and shared course vision.

Coders then used the working codebook to systematically code all 31 instructors' holistic narratives of co-instructor emotional support during highly stressful situations. Coding was recorded using NVivo11, a widely used qualitative data management program. Coders independently applied the codes to the transcripts, then met to discuss discrepancies and come to a consensus on isolated quotes (Hill et al., 2005). Then, NVivo11 data sorts were used to display all of the quotes for a given code. Coders reviewed these sorts to ensure that there was support for the code's conceptual definition across multiple instructors and that codes were distinct from each other (i.e., testing for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout these discussions, as new data and nuances were encountered, the codebook was revised and updated. For instance, the familiarity code in the relational level expanded to include co-instructors' efforts to build a relationship with the instructor and was renamed holistic relationships.

The author then examined the theoretical dimensions of the data in each code by using thematic maps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These maps explored relationships between codes and helped to define and refine the meaning of each code. Theoretical analysis across the findings at both the situational and relational level led to propositions about the link between instructors' relationship with their co-instructor and the use of emotional support strategies. It is important to recognize that the purpose of the methods used in this study was to generate theory, not test it. The literature was used to further explain the findings of this exploratory research, not to generate hypotheses that were systematically tested.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Co-instructors' emotional support and regulation strategies during stressful situations

Through analysis of instructors' narratives of specific stressful situations, I identified three common emotional support strategies instructors received from their co-instructors: (1) stepping up to lead the group so that instructors could step back to manage their stress, (2) listening to instructors and validating their emotions, and (3) helping instructors to reframe the stressful situation.

3.1.1 | Co-instructors provided time and space for instructors to cope

More than two-thirds of instructors reported that it was helpful when co-instructors offered to or voluntarily took leadership of the situation or group, allowing the instructor to step away and address their stress. This strategy supported instructors by providing them mental space to do their own emotion-focused coping.

These instructors used the time to “decompress from the day,” “take the time to not think about students,” “take care of personal things,” or “do whatever [I] needed to do to feel human.” Mai felt the impact of having the time to regroup when her co-instructor encouraged her to take a break:

It was very helpful.... I remember taking the five minutes, and I had a small breakdown. Then I was like, “Okay, cool. I can do this.” I just needed to take that time away because I was just too far in it trying to do so much.

Having a few minutes to herself to express her emotions allowed Mai to move forward and into a more productive mental space.

Instructors recognized the need to be proactive to reduce the likelihood of a stressful situation arising. One way to prevent stress was to create “time and space” for each other to step away during course. Ariel was adamant about “creating intentional time to give your co-instructor and yourself a break because twenty two days with no break is not gonna be healthy for anyone.” Some instructors built it into a schedule; Genevieve set a standard to “switch off nights” where one instructor was “more off” and the other was “more on.” Ariel realized partway through a course with her co-instructor that “we could’ve done more to stop and support one another.” They began to be “very intentional about it after that. We gave each other thirty minutes in the tent either in the morning or at night and respected that space.” Instructors often created reciprocal agreements with their co-instructor, what Robin called “ebbing and flowing... When you need some time, you go take it, I’ll take care of things. When I need some time, you take care of things.” This reciprocity established a structure for instructors to be able to step away as needed when stressful situations arose.

3.1.2 | Co-instructors validated instructors' emotions and stress response

Instructors appreciated when their co-instructor listened to them as they talked through their emotions and reassured them that their feelings were valid. Lucas said, “Just listening, really, is huge. Listening to me process some things and listening in a nonjudgmental way.” Mai said, “By being an active listener, it allowed for feeling supported and feeling valued and heard.” Jari’s co-instructor was “a great listener and [was] able to talk that whole experience out and understand.”

Co-instructors also affirmed instructors’ experience as stressful, often in an expression of empathy for what the instructor was feeling. Chloe said her co-instructor was “very respectful of my experience, even though it was really different from his at the time. Just like, ‘Oh, okay. That’s real.’ ... I think he modeled a lot of compassion.” When Jordan approached his co-instructor about feeling tired, he said his co-instructor “completely understood that and there wasn’t any judgment.” After James faced a situation where two students who were refusing to move began yelling at him, his co-instructor helped to relieve his stress by saying, “That looks really hard, you didn’t deserve that.”

Instructors described feeling heard, seen, and supported when their co-instructor was receptive to their feelings. Mai explained how a validating response from her co-instructor helped her:

I want to just feel okay, what I’m doing is okay. Maybe I’m making mistakes but it’s still okay. I tend when I’m stressed to be down on myself. To feel like I’m heard and supported is really critical and really helpful.

Many instructors described their co-instructor as being intuitive and sensitive to their emotions and needs; Beth said, “being able to pick up on people’s emotions and state of mind is kind of part of the job description.” Instructors described their co-instructor “could sense it,” was “pretty intuitive and had a pretty good feel for how I

was doing,” “saw some physical indicators or non-verbals that there may be stress present,” “could just tell that maybe I was overwhelmed or stressed out,” or “just knew.” This sensitivity made instructors feel seen and heard by their co-instructor.

3.1.3 | Co-instructors reframed the situation in a positive light

A final set of powerful strategies for instructors experiencing stress was for their co-instructor to prompt the instructor to reinterpret the situation in a positive light. OB co-instructors helped instructors to reframe their experiences by modeling a calm approach, interrupting tunnel vision, and offering a positive perspective of a challenging situation, sometimes with humor.

Instructors recounted several examples of their co-instructor approaching a stressful situation with a calm, level head, modeling a manner that reflected skillful regulation of their emotions. Seeing their co-instructor have a more serene outlook often helped the instructor to quell their own emotional stress response. Justin was “very jumpy and jittery” and his co-instructor “responded in a way that did not reflect any of my demeanor. She was very calm, and it was very grounding for me.” Rupert’s co-instructor “role-modeled a really effective, calming presence. Although he was probably feeling some of the stress from the situation, he didn’t let that show.” Instructors appreciated the effect their co-instructor’s calming presence had on them. Lucas said that seeing how calm and positive his co-instructor was helped him “make a switch” and calm down. Mai commented that practicing breathing techniques with her co-instructor when they noticed one of them was stressed out “was really grounding.”

Co-instructors were also effective at counteracting instructors’ tunnel vision or insular perspectives that accompanied their stress response. When Erika’s co-instructor asked her, “What do you need help with right now?” she found it effective because it “allowed an open question ... I had to think about what I’m doing, like, how am I right now?” Michael shared how his co-instructor helped him to reappraise his feelings in the moment. When he checked in with his co-instructor:

It gets me out of the situation. It gets me like a step back from the problem and by separating from it I can then be more present and more in tune with, “Okay now what’s actually happening? Is there actually anything to be worried about? Okay probably not,” and I can calm down and breathe.

Instructors reported that co-instructors would sometimes help them to counter their emotional response by pointing out that the situation was not as bad as it seemed. In some instances, co-instructors reassured the instructor that they and the students were safe: “You’re doing fine, we’re still fine, they’re still fine,” or that “I’m a part of this too, and we’re going to be okay. Everybody’s all right,” or “We’re all safe, and we’re still going to be able to make a good experience out of this.” Other times, co-instructors helped instructors to see the situation in a new light or with a fresh perspective. Paul’s co-instructor was able to diffuse the tension of a potentially dangerous encounter. A black bear had visited half a dozen students’ solo campsites before any of the students blew their whistles to notify the instructors. Paul said his co-instructor helped him:

to go from, “Oh my God half my group was almost just devoured by a bear,” to really seeing the sort of fun aspect of this thing. Because that’s hilarious and the kids loved it. They were super-stoked about it and they were all fine.

His co-instructor’s approach helped him to “step out of the whole situation, and remember that it’s all kind of wildly funny, how crazy it gets out there sometimes.” When Rebecca’s co-instructor used humor to “lighten the situation a little bit and help put things in perspective,” she said, “his easy going lightheartedness was what

I needed to lift some of the weight I was feeling.” Paul shared that “humor—and being able to laugh at whatever it is that’s happening—is a hugely important coping mechanism for me.” He attributed this to the “mental, physiological, and soulful benefits” of laughter.

The emotional support strategies instructors received from their co-instructors—time away, emotion validation, and reframing—helped instructors return to a stable and functional place where they were able to better support student development. Co-instructors were attuned to instructors’ emotions and engaged them in conversation or activities that facilitated expression, diffusion, or processing of their emotions so that they could return to their purposeful work.

3.2 | Relationship factors that facilitated support

There were three relationship factors that instructors reported made them more likely to access help from their co-instructor: when they had a close relationship that went beyond working together, had developed patterns of open and honest communication especially about their emotions, and when the instructor perceived that the co-instructor was committed to them and the goals of the course.

3.2.1 | Holistic relationships: “Being humans together”

Instructors reported that having a holistic relationship with their co-instructor made it easier for them to ask for help. These relationships were perceived as mutual and reflected a broad knowledge of each other’s work and personal lives. In addition to being familiar with their co-instructor’s sensibilities for their work with youth, instructors stated that it made a difference to know about their co-instructor’s life outside of OB, and for their co-instructor to know things about their personal life and background. Lucas said it was important to him to have a relationship where his co-instructor was his “friend, co-worker, and collaborator.”

Knowing each other on a personal level made instructors more comfortable approaching their co-instructor to ask for help managing their feelings of stress. In many cases, a close friendship allowed instructors to be more willing to be vulnerable sharing their feelings with their co-instructor. Jacob explained: “Having that baseline understanding of each other goes a long way [in] not needing to justify needing help or being able to ask for it.” Familiarity also made it easier for co-instructors to recognize that the instructor was stressed and respond effectively. Evelyn felt that “I didn’t really need to say too much because we were already kind of close.” Her co-instructor understood where she was coming from because they “were more comfortable with each other and also were friends.” Similarly, Jacob said “we knew each other well enough that she knew what would make me laugh, and she knew that that was an effective way to make me feel better. So just referencing previous experience that we had together and using that to put me in a better mood.”

Instructors built their relationships primarily through conversations where they talked “about personal issues,” “what was going on with their life,” “things that weren’t all work-related.” They had “heart-to-heart” or “really authentic, genuine conversation.” Beth called it “being humans together.” Lucas likened the efforts of his instructor trio (occasionally, more than two instructors are assigned to a course due to the needs of the group) to get to know each other to “almost like we’re having our own Outward Bound expedition just as a group of three, learning how to work together and problem-solving together.”

Analysis of instructors’ accounts of what made it harder to ask for help showed that the lack of a pre-existing relationship between co-instructors could present a challenge. Chloe reported that it “took a lot of explaining about each other’s lives to even know where we’re coming from, what we got going on outside of Outward Bound.” Rebecca explained that it can be hard work to build a partnership and form trust, and that sometimes you do not realize that you have not “totally felt each other out” until you’re faced with a situation where you need to rely on

each other. James shared an example of how he was affected by a co-instructor who did not engage in personal conversations. James described his co-instructor as having “a hard time talking about herself. She would only want to talk about work.” This led to James feeling like he “couldn’t talk about something that was stressing me out” because he “didn’t feel like I was going to get the support I needed from her.” Building a sense of connection with a co-instructor helps to create a safe space for conversations about stress.

3.2.2 | Patterns of open and honest communication: “The more you talk, the more comfortable you are with talking”

Having established patterns of open and honest communication contributed to instructors feeling comfortable asking for help. Instructors characterized open and honest communication as being sincere and direct, including instructors and co-instructors sharing how they were feeling; being forthright in giving and receiving feedback; and creating opportunities for candid discussion. Establishing norms and routines for communication created a culture of emotional transparency where discussing feelings of stress was welcome and natural. Mai expressed how open and honest communication with her co-instructor made a difference for her:

Being able to really rely on one another, being able to talk out our feelings, all of our fears, all of the things that we are doing well even though it felt like maybe we weren't doing anything well at the time. Being able to be there for one another and to be accountable for one another, our emotions as well as our development and progress, to be active mirrors or sounding boards, whether that's emotionally or technically or educationally.

An instructor's co-instructor is often the only other adult that an instructor will interact with during the course. As such, instructors found it important to establish regular spaces to “vocalize all of our thoughts and feelings with each other.” Open communication led instructors to feel supported and not isolated; Sage described the power of knowing she could share her feelings with her co-instructor:

I think just having someone that is honest and that you feel like you can be honest with was the most important and most helpful thing. Just that you can voice the concerning emotions and/or thoughts with at least one person out there with you.

Instructors appreciated being able to approach their co-instructor when something important came up or to share information. Frequent communication created norms between instructors that encouraged sharing. For Jari, knowing that he and his co-instructor would have a nightly check-in allowed him to push through the day's stress: “Just knowing that that was coming, that we were about to talk about the way that it made us feel, made it a lot easier to get through it.”

Instructor pairs established patterns for communication even before the courses began. They typically met during the week before the course to have a structured conversation to discuss their leadership styles, their visions for the course, how they would make decisions, and other topics to preempt issues that might arise on course. One topic they discussed was stress—what creates stress for them, what they look like when they are stressed, and what the co-instructor could do if they noticed the instructor is stressed. These pre-course meetings provided a solid foundation for later proactive communication; Brynn found it helpful to “have a language that we already discussed using.” Andrew said that “Front-loading is helpful, having those consistencies and telling you that I'm going to tell you that I'm stressed so that way you know.” During pre-course planning, instructors often considered how they would check in with each other during the course. Chloe recommended “it is a good idea to structure it into your day,” and she emphasized that instructors should go beyond structuring in time for feedback about the

course to include “time to talk about your well-being... Because you can't do anything if you're not aware of what the other person's dealing with.”

Once on course, many instructors worked to establish patterns of proactive communication by checking in frequently throughout the day and during scheduled nightly check-ins. Instructors described their communication with their co-instructor as “constant,” and that they were “always checking in.” These check-ins helped to establish a “general foundation of trust and open communication” between the instructor pair. Jacob explained how daily check-ins made him confident that his co-instructor would be available for discussions of stress:

You and your instructor are in your tent every night having a conversation about how the day went and sharing feedback. And that practice of doing that over and over again builds a relationship that makes it easier for you to have conversations when you are really stressed out.

Cameron echoed this: “the more you talk, the more comfortable you are with talking and bringing stuff up.” Establishing the expectation of check-ins created a dynamic between instructors that helped them to feel safe to share their feelings, especially in times of stress.

If the instructor pair did not fall into a habit of regularly talking honestly with each other, it could be detrimental to their course experience. Margaret cautioned that “if you don't take the time together to get on the same page and help each other out, then you can very much be working separately, and as I call it the two-headed-staff-monster.” Beth recognized that on one course, which “started off on a pretty rough foot,” that she and her co-instructor did not “establish that space for us to ‘Phew!’ together, to decompress, and give feedback and talk through events.” She said this led to the absence of a “safe learning environment for ourselves as instructors.” Jacob commented, “I think the relationships that I have seen where people don't necessarily have a great relationship, and can't deal with stress, is when they haven't practiced that openness with one another.” Evelyn noticed that when she let concerns with her co-instructor “bottle up rather than expressing it to them initially” that emotions would build up and might build resentment. Aware of this pattern, Evelyn had “been really intentional about being very transparent.”

3.2.3 | Felt co-instructor commitment: “It feels tough to drown on your own”

Many instructors reported that it was easier to ask for help when their co-instructor assured them that they were committed to the success of the course and to supporting the instructor. Instructors who perceived a mutual obligation from their co-instructor to share the burdens of the course were more willing to access their help. Margaret said, “It feels tough to drown on your own so just constantly knowing you have a teammate right by your side is the big thing.”

Several instructors described their co-instructor's commitment as reciprocal and almost compulsory and absolute, due in part to lack of access to possible other sources of support while on course. Jacob explained:

One of the most meaningful things about the co-instructor relationship is just knowing that this other person unconditionally has your back. And knowing that they're gonna support you even if you're not at your best, and even if conditions are tough because they have to. It's not only their job and their role, but you need each other. You have to support one another because you're the only adults out there. You're the only people that can support one another in a meaningful way. ...There's never a question of whether or not this person is gonna be there if you need them.

The undeniability of being able to rely on their co-instructor helped instructors to feel supported and that they were not bearing the challenges of the course on their own. Eden benefitted when she and her co-instructor were

“able to rally together.” She described feeling reassured “That we’re in the same boat and we’re gonna get through it and be here for each other.” Lucas said, “That spirit of collaboration that you get with your co-instructor, that helps my stress, when I don’t feel like I have this problem alone.” Knowing that their co-instructor was dedicated and loyal made instructors feel more comfortable asking for help.

Co-instructors demonstrated their commitment through words and actions that reinforced a spirit of collaboration and reciprocity. For example, Cameron sent a strong message to his co-instructor at the start of the course by communicating, “Your problems will be my problems, and my problems will be your problems.” For James, it was about both he and his co-instructor being “in it together,” and a big part of his confidence in his co-instructor came from their discussions about “how much we love our jobs, how much we love this line of work, and knowing that she was committed and I was committed.”

The analysis also revealed that the lack of perceived commitment from a co-instructor could create barriers to seeking help, or worse, be a source of stress for instructors. In one situation, both of Sage’s two co-instructors had voiced wanting to leave the field early, and one did leave mid-course for personal reasons. Sage felt that she needed to take on the leadership of the course on her own, and said, “I didn’t feel supported anymore. The trust and the expectation that your co-instructor is going to be there for you always was broken and I didn’t feel like it was worth it to seek out support through them.” In another example, Beth felt that her relationship with her co-instructor “faltered” when she felt “like he was undermining me and not being a united front with me, and that made me more stressed out.” Beth doubted her co-instructor’s commitment to the goals of the course and questioned his availability as a source of support. This underscores the importance of commitment to instructors’ perceptions of the availability of support from their co-instructor.

Together, these relationship factors—getting to know each other holistically, building patterns of open and honest communication, and conveying commitment to the course and each other—led instructors to feel trust, safety, and support from their co-instructor. These factors enabled instructors to rely on their co-instructor for support in times of stress, as captured by Robin in her advice for having a successful course: “Not just viewing your co-instructor as your co-worker but viewing them with compassion, ‘This is a person I am out here with. They are my support system.’”

4 | DISCUSSION

When youth program leaders experience significant stress in their work, it can impact their well-being and the quality of the learning experience for youth. This exploratory study sought to understand how the negative effects of stress might be reduced by reliance on a co-worker. Using OB courses as a context, this study examined a likely source of support for instructors—their co-instructor. Findings from this study contribute to the research in two ways. First, they describe the multiple ways co-instructors provide necessary and effective emotional support for instructors during stressful situations on course. Second, the findings provide evidence of the importance of certain relationship factors to instructors’ perception of the availability of support. I conclude by proposing a theoretical model that shows how the relationship factors contribute to the instructor’s perception of available support, which in turn, facilitates the instructor receiving support from their co-instructor during stressful situations. The findings from this study suggest that co-worker support has the potential to reduce stress for workers in a wide range of fields whose jobs require emotional labor.

4.1 | Situation-level strategies supported instructors’ emotion regulation during stress

This study identified three ways in which co-instructors initiated emotional support for instructors during stressful situations: providing time and space, validating emotions and stress response, and reframing stressful situations.

For each of these strategies, co-instructors supported instructors to regulate their emotional response to a situation so that they were able to regain control and agency and maintain the goal of being an effective instructor for youth. This deliberate, goal-focused support constitutes interpersonal emotion regulation (Niven, 2017).

OB instructors' role requires that they be constantly attentive to student safety and learning (McGovern, in press). Therefore, occasional time away from the group was especially important for managing stress. The practice of mentally "switching off" or distancing oneself from the job in a physical and mental sense has been shown to promote recovery and reduce emotional exhaustion (Sonnentag et al., 2010). In this study, co-instructors were often proactive in making time and space available to instructors throughout the course, helping to ensure the right conditions to relieve instructor stress.

Similar to past research, emotion validation by co-instructors conveyed acceptance and understanding of the instructor's emotional experience (Linehan, 1997) and provided comfort (Lahey & Orehek, 2011). Co-instructors, because of their own OB experiences on the current and previous courses, were able to empathize with the instructor's feelings and reassure the instructor that their response was warranted. Co-instructors also provided an important role in intuiting instructors' emotions and reflecting them back to the instructor. This form of validation led to instructors' feeling heard and attended to during stressful situations.

Reframing a situation and assigning new meaning to the emotions or their cause, also known as cognitive reappraisal, has been shown to be a highly effective emotion regulation strategy used by individuals and partners (Gross, 1998; Webb et al., 2012; W. C. Williams et al., 2018). In this study, co-instructors used reframing to enable the instructor to reconsider the events that led to their stress, helping to diminish the stress response. At times, co-instructors helped to provide a shift in thinking by interrupting an instructors' tunnel vision and prompting them to re-examine the situation. The use of humor and assurances that things were okay helped to replace instructors' negative emotions with hope and positivity.

Co-instructors' use of these interpersonal emotion regulation strategies during stressful course situations helped instructors return to a stable and functional place where they were able to better support student development on course. Importantly, though the findings above are all presented as coming from the co-instructor in support of the instructor, the data suggested that these actions were reciprocal, though not transactional. Some research has explored the dynamics of reciprocal emotion management among co-workers who hold similar positions within organizations as they manage the stress associated with their role (Lively, 2000).

Future research could explore how these emotional regulation strategies might be encouraged in other workplaces where workers are faced with intense situational stress. For instance, nurses or social workers might benefit from brief check-ins with each other to discuss stressful patient or client interactions, or from more frequent breaks during shifts to center themselves.

4.2 | Relationship-level strategies created a foundation for emotional support

In this study, three relationship factors were found to contribute to instructors feeling that emotional support was available from their co-instructor: building holistic relationships, establishing patterns of open and honest communication, and conveying a commitment to the instructor and the course. The resulting sense of interdependence around shared goals and mutual dependability with the co-instructor gave instructors a sense that their co-instructor would be accessible to provide support during highly stressful situations. Co-workers, especially in service industries, have been shown to create communities of coping to collectively deal with the emotional stress of their jobs (Korczynski, 2003).

Instructors reported that having a mutual and holistic relationship with their co-instructor meant that they could relate on a personal and emotional level. This study found that co-instructors built close relationships with instructors by intentionally spending time together on and off course getting to know each other. Research has shown that confiding in someone about personal experiences can foster close relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994),

and that co-workers build connections by involving themselves in each other's personal lives (McGuire, 2007). Sharing experiences with others increases affiliation and increases the likelihood of longer-term connections (Zaki & Craig Williams, 2013). This study also highlighted the importance of familiarity and closeness to co-instructors' ability to be responsive to a particular instructor in a particular situation. The more attuned a co-instructor is to an instructor's habits, beliefs, and emotions, the better able they may be to select an effective support strategy and employ it at an opportune time.

Second, this study suggested how establishing communication patterns with co-instructors created pathways for conversations about emotions. Findings indicated that patterns and norms like daily check-ins and debriefing sessions created a sense of structure in instructors' daily lives for processing emotions. Research shows that routines and habits of talking about a variety of issues can create opportunities to transition to talking about stress (Goldsmith, 2004). Findings suggest that regular conversations with their co-instructor about their course experiences created an environment where it was safe for instructors to be honest and vulnerable. Further, having a confidant with whom you can share worries and problems can buffer experiences of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Finally, this study found that co-instructors conveyed a commitment to the goals of the course and to the instructor, signaling to the instructor that they were a united front that would share the burdens of the course. In collaborative working relationships, colleagues risk being seen in a negative light by co-workers, which can affect their working relationship and willingness to cooperate (M. Williams, 2007). However, this study found that co-instructors reduced instructors' fear of judgment through consistent messaging that they were an equal partner in the work of leading the course. It was especially important when co-instructors offered instructors to step away from the group that instructors both did not fear that their co-instructor considered them incapable of doing the work and that the instructor believed the co-instructor could manage effectively on their own. Research has shown that help and information from co-workers are associated with a reduction in their colleagues' role ambiguity, conflict, and overload (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). In voicing their commitment to the instructor's and course success, co-instructors helped instructors to calibrate the stressors associated with their role.

Together, these three relationship factors conveyed that co-instructors were reliable, available, and empathic providers of social support on whom instructors could depend during stressful situations.

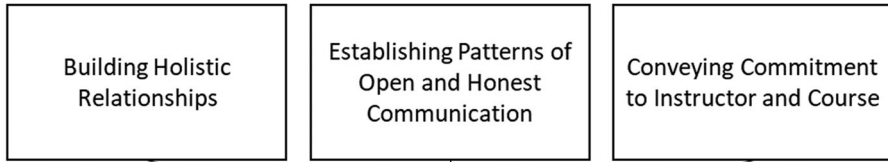
4.3 | The importance of the relationship context to receiving situational support

Based on these findings, I propose a theoretical model (Figure 1) that shows how active investment in the relationship by co-instructors shapes the situational provision of emotional support during times of stress. The top of the model represents the actions occurring at the relational level. A co-instructor's initial and ongoing investment in building holistic relationships, establishing open and honest communication patterns, and conveying their commitment contribute to the instructor's perception that social support is available. Individuals feel the presence of social support when they receive messages that they are cared for and loved, esteemed, and in a partnership held to mutual obligations (Cobb, 1976). The relationship factors presented above did exactly this—through their actions, co-instructors indicated to instructors that they could rely on their relationship during stressful experiences. In fact, this perception may reduce stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990), as with Jari who was relieved just to know that he could debrief the stresses of the day with his co-instructor when it was all done. Still, each of these factors contributed to instructors perceiving the availability of support from their co-instructor.

The bottom of the model represents the actions occurring at the situational level as instructors encounter stress on course. Findings from this study showed that instructors' perceived social support from co-instructors facilitated co-instructors' provision of interpersonal emotional regulation strategies. Instructors trusted that their co-instructors were committed to the course, and therefore, they felt safe stepping away momentarily to address their emotions. Instructors felt connected to and close with their co-instructor, and

RELATIONAL LEVEL

(Ongoing Investment in the Relationship)



SITUATION LEVEL

(During experiences of heightened stress and emotion)

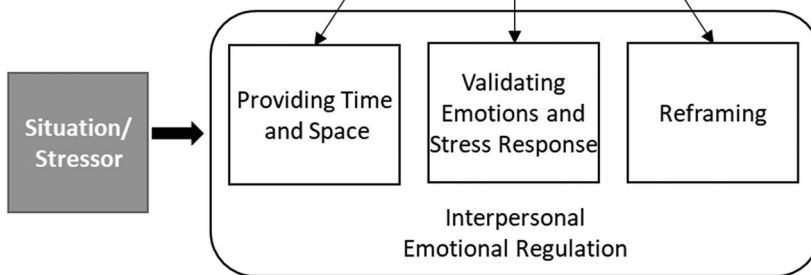


FIGURE 1 Model of social support and interpersonal emotion regulation between Outward Bound Instructors during stressful situations on course

therefore felt validated when they shared their emotions. Through their regular and frequent communication channels, instructors created shared meaning from course events with their co-instructor, leading them to be open to reframing troublesome situations in ways that relieved their stress. In this way, these interpersonal emotion regulation strategies drew on the investments co-instructors had made in their relationships with the instructor to provide effective support. The use of these strategies also likely creates a virtuous cycle that strengthens the relationship and thus enhances instructors' perception of available emotional support. Sharing emotions is effective in bringing a narrator and listener closer to one another (Rimé, 2009) and emotional investment fosters trusting relationships (Marroquín, 2011).

This model highlights the important role for co-instructors in supporting instructors to manage and reduce their experiences of stress on course. For OB instructors, who do not have access to their larger social support networks while they are in the wilderness with youth, the co-instructor can fulfill an

important social function. This study emphasizes the importance of co-instructor relationships to instructors receiving much-needed support on course.

4.4 | Implications for practice and research

This exploratory study advanced our understanding of the role co-instructors have in helping instructors to manage and dissipate stress-related emotions. Based on the findings presented here that emphasize the importance of relationships, administrators at OB, and other field-instructor-led programs may find value in assessing the opportunities for relationship-building they provide between instructors. The OB schools that participated in this study encourage informal off-course contact and community building between instructors, including providing onsite communal housing options for instructors. Future research might investigate how instructors use the time between courses to increase their social support networks with their co-workers. Research could also be conducted with instructor dyads to investigate how supportive relationships develop between instructors, as well as potential barriers to relationships such as power dynamics or experience levels. Dyadic research would also allow for an exploration of reciprocity of support in co-instructor relationships.

Because OB is a youth program with a unique context, it is useful to consider how the findings of this study may be relevant to instructors in more traditional afterschool and community programs. While few other programs require instructors to be engaged 24 hours a day or to endure harsh environmental conditions, many programs engage youth in challenging, project-based work that can lead to strong emotions for youth and adult program leaders. I would argue that any program that provides powerful positive developmental opportunities for youth, especially activities that involve youth overcoming complex challenges or team-based projects, can find implications from this study. For example, one transferable finding is the value in pairing instructors to lead groups of youth. I have shown how co-instructors can be sensitive and empathic to instructors during stressful situations. Access to another individual who has intimate knowledge of the burdens and stressors of the role, as well as a personal connection to the individual, could serve as a major source of support to instructors working with youth. A supportive co-instructor can also increase an instructor's social ties to the organization, thereby strengthening their commitment and reducing chances of turnover (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

This study also has implications for research on workplace stress and co-worker support in other fields that require intense or sustained emotional labor, such as teaching, social work, and nursing. Several studies across these fields have demonstrated that social support has an impact on co-workers' well-being and job satisfaction (Ducharme & Martin, 2000; El-Bassel et al., 1997; La Rocco & Jones, 1978; Sloan, 2012). However, very little research has been conducted to describe the forms emotional support takes among co-workers (cf. DiGiulio, 1995; Fenlason & Beehr, 1994; McGuire, 2007). Perhaps, for example, teachers' conversations in the hallway between classes or during lunch allow them to process emotions experienced during classroom teaching. We also have more to learn about how co-workers build relationships that they can draw on during stress at work, especially when the work conditions leave little time for socializing. How do workers in seemingly isolating roles proactively invest in relationships with co-workers to form mutually beneficial support networks? Research could investigate whether companionship, communication, and commitment hold as much value in other fields, or identify additional factors that foster support.

5 | CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to examine how co-instructors support instructors through the stress they experience on course and how relationships facilitate these acts of support. The results presented here demonstrate that co-instructors actively cultivate relationships that convey the availability of social support. During times of stress,

these high-functioning relationships provide a supportive context in which co-instructors employ interpersonal emotion regulation strategies to help the instructor to relieve negative emotions. In this study, instructors benefited from the social support and interpersonal emotion regulation their co-instructor provided, which helped address their stress so that they could return to leading an impactful course for youth. OB programs and other youth programs that embrace co-instructors as valuable sources of support for instructors may be able to prepare them more fully for this valuable role.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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