

Pouring Out and Pouring In

What Grief Teaches About Supportive Communication

Marcy Fetzer, PhD, SHRM-SCP

Leadership Communication Ecology

On September 3, 2013, my cousin, Braydon Ellsworth Nielsen, was killed in a tragic bicycling accident near St. George, Utah. He was thirty-six years old. In the grief that followed, I found myself drawn to a concept I had learned from S. Michael Wilcox, the image of “pouring out” and “pouring in” when interacting with others. Those words offered a way to understand what people do when pain becomes too difficult to carry alone, and what others may offer in response.

There are times in life when people need to pour out what they have been carrying. They may need to talk through pain, cry through shock, repeat the story, ask questions that have no clear answers, and give voice to emotions that feel too heavy to hold inside. Pouring out is not a failure of strength or composure. It is part of how people grieve, heal, and begin to make meaning after loss, conflict, disappointment, or relational injury.

These moments are profoundly communicative. When someone pours out, the next response can either create space for healing or quietly close the conversation. A listener may feel uncomfortable and try to explain the pain away, offer advice too quickly, compare the loss to their own experience, or move the conversation toward a less painful subject. Such responses are often well intended, but they can leave the person who is hurting feeling unheard or alone.

A more engaged response pours in. It does not rush the person toward closure or attempt to solve what cannot be solved. Instead, it offers steadiness, compassion, patience, and presence. To pour in is to communicate, verbally and nonverbally, that another person’s pain is worthy of attention and that the relationship can bear the weight of honest expression.

This understanding of pouring in aligns closely with scholarship on supportive communication, which examines how people use messages, interactions, and relationships to provide support in everyday life. Supportive responses are not merely the result of good intentions; they are communicative acts that may either sustain or weaken connection. Comforting communication, in particular, reminds us that responses grounded in empathy, sensitivity, and person-centered care are more likely to be experienced as helpful because they attend not only to the event being described, but also to the meaning of that event for the person who is speaking.

As I grieved Braydon, I came to see that he had spent much of his life pouring into other people. He offered support, kindness, goodness, enthusiasm, encouragement, and love. His presence carried a sincerity that made others feel noticed and strengthened. Because of him, I wanted to be better. I wanted to pay forward his goodness, his light, his determination, his positive attitude, and his love for others.

Braydon was a member of the Southern Utah Triathlon Club, and he was known for encouraging people to keep going. He often came in last place during races, but his placement was never the central meaning of those moments. People were not cheering only for an athletic outcome; they were cheering for his perseverance, his heart, and the joy he brought with him. When he was unable to finish Ironman St. George 70.3 because of bike issues, he did not allow that disappointment to define the experience. Instead, he signed up for Boise 70.3 just four weeks later and completed it.

Braydon was also a father of four beautiful children, a husband to an amazing wife, an ICU charge nurse, and a life flight nurse at Dixie Regional Medical Center. His life was marked by service, courage, care, and encouragement. He did not simply speak support; he embodied it in the ways he worked, loved, served, and continued forward.

At his funeral, I witnessed one of the most powerful examples of pouring in that I have ever experienced. Life flight teams, the life flight helicopter, and more than one hundred bicyclists came to honor him. Their presence communicated what words alone could not. They showed us that Braydon mattered, that we were not alone, that they grieved with us, and that they remembered him too. As they poured out their love for Braydon, they also poured love into those of us who were grieving.

That experience has stayed with me as a lesson in communication. When people are hurting, they are often not asking others to solve the pain. More often, they are asking others to remain present with them inside it. They are asking, sometimes indirectly, whether they can be heard, whether the weight of what they are sharing can be held, and whether honesty will be met with care rather than discomfort or withdrawal.

This is true in grief, and it is also true in conflict. In many conflicts, the surface issue is only part of what is being communicated. Beneath the stated disagreement may be a need for recognition, respect, safety, accountability, or repair. When someone says, “I felt dismissed in that meeting,” “I do not think you heard what I was trying to say,” “I felt alone when that happened,” or “I am still hurt by the way you spoke to me,” that person may be pouring out. The response that follows becomes consequential.

One possible response is to defend, correct, explain, counterattack, or minimize. A listener might say, “That is not what I meant,” “You are taking it too personally,” “I already apologized,” or “I do not know why you are still upset about this.” These responses may emerge from a desire to clarify intent or protect oneself from blame. However, they often shift attention away from the speaker’s experience and back onto the listener’s intentions. In doing so, they may intensify the conflict rather than relieve it.

A more engaged response slows the exchange down enough to preserve connection. It might sound like, “I can hear that this really hurt you,” “I want to understand what that moment felt like from your perspective,” “I did not realize that was the impact, and I want to listen,” or “I may remember the situation differently, but I do not want to dismiss what you experienced.” Such responses do not require the listener to surrender their own perspective. Rather, they create room for the other person’s experience before moving toward explanation, problem solving, or repair.

This distinction is central to emotional validation. Validation does not mean agreeing with every interpretation, approving every reaction, or accepting responsibility for everything another person feels. Validation means recognizing that the person’s emotional experience is real to them and worthy of care. It is a way of communicating that the other person’s pain has been received, even when the full meaning of the conflict still needs to be discussed.

Active-empathic listening offers another useful way to understand pouring in. Within listening scholarship, active-empathic listening is often described as involving sensing, processing, and responding. The listener first attends carefully to what is being communicated, then works to understand its meaning, and finally responds in a way that conveys that understanding. Pouring in requires each of these elements. It asks listeners to sense by giving attention rather than preparing a defense, to process by considering the emotional meaning beneath the words, and to respond in language that acknowledges both content and feeling.

For example, when someone says, “You never listen to me,” a defensive response might be, “That is not true. I listen all the time.” A pouring-in response might be, “It sounds like you have been feeling unheard, and I want to understand what I have been missing.” This response does not require agreement with the word “never.” Instead, it recognizes the emotional meaning underneath the statement.

Similarly, when someone says, “I cannot believe you said that in front of everyone,” a defensive response might be, “I was just joking.” A pouring-in response might be, “I can see how that embarrassed you, and I am sorry I put you in that position.” Rather than debating the intention behind the comment, this response acknowledges the impact of the speech turn.

When someone says, “I am so tired of being the only one who cares,” a defensive response might be, “That is unfair. I care too.” A pouring-in response might be, “You sound exhausted, and I want to understand where you have been feeling alone in this.” This kind of response keeps the conversation open long enough for the deeper concern to become clearer.

These moments matter because conflict is rarely only about the visible topic. Many conflicts also concern whether people feel seen, respected, safe, valued, and understood. When listeners respond only to the accusation, the conversation can become a contest over facts, intentions, or blame. When listeners respond to the hurt beneath the accusation, the conversation has a greater possibility of becoming a site of repair.

In this way, pouring in offers a meaningful lens for understanding conflict communication. It suggests that communication competence is not measured only by clarity, assertiveness, or the ability to solve problems. It is also measured by the capacity to remain relationally present when another person’s emotion is difficult, inconvenient, or painful to hear. It invites us to ask not only, “What should I say next?” but also, “What does this moment require of me as a listener?”

In conflict communication, we often focus on the words that cause harm: accusation, criticism, defensiveness, avoidance, and silence. Yet healing also happens through speech turns. A single response can become a turning point when it offers steadiness instead of discomfort, compassion instead of correction, and connection instead of distance. Sometimes the most powerful response is not an answer at all, but the willingness to stay present long enough for another person to feel less alone.

The last thing I heard from Braydon was a quote by Zig Ziglar: “You don’t have to be great to start, you have to start to be great.” Braydon then wrote about giving yourself a fighting chance, even when life is hard and even when the voices in your mind tell you that you cannot do it. His favorite saying was “Booyah,” and the way he lived gave that word meaning. He dreamed big dreams, inspired many people, and reminded me of the little engine that could because he continued forward even when the road was difficult. I will never forget him. Because of Braydon, I want to keep following my dreams, smile more often, and live life more fully. I want to pour into others the way he poured into us.

Love you, Cuz.