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Responses to Outcome Disclosure:

People Asymmetrically Disclose or Hide Their Outcomes to Protect Others' Emotions

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All data, materials, code, and preregistrations are accessible here: **https://researchbox.org/4538**

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Abstract

This paper examines how what people disclose about their successes or failures depends on what others have disclosed. We propose that these decisions are guided less by self-focused motives and more by a concern for how one's words will affect the other person's emotions. Across nine studies (N = 8,229, including preregistered experiments, 2,216 self-written responses, and 473 real conversation dyads), we find that responders are consistently more likely to disclose matching outcomes (e.g., failures in response to failures) than non-matching ones (e.g., failures in response to successes), but with two asymmetries not predicted by prior theories. First, responders are more likely to disclose matching failures (failures in response to failures) than matching successes (successes in response to successes). Second, when experiencing non-matching outcomes, responders are more likely to disclose failures in response to successes than they are to disclose successes in response to failures. These patterns reflect other-focused attempts to comfort those who have failed and avoid exacerbating their distress. Beyond *whether* they disclosed, responders also adjusted *how* they disclosed, for instance, softening success disclosures in response to failures with consolation or apologies. These effects generalized across domains (e.g., health, career, financial), across relationships varying in closeness and status, and emerged in choices between pre-written responses, self-generated responses, and live conversations involving actual interpersonal disclosures. Disclosure decisions were moderated by factors such as liking and domain relevance. By demonstrating that responders' outcome disclosures are systematically shaped by concern for the well-being of others, this work reframes disclosure as an intended conversational tool for protecting others' emotions rather than managing self-presentation.

Keywords: Disclosure, Success, Failure, Interpersonal Emotion Regulation, Social Utility, Consolation, Empathy, Social Support, Reciprocity, Conversation.

Imagine that, at an academic conference, a colleague shares news of their recent journal rejection. You, too, have recently received a rejection. Do you disclose your failure, or keep quiet? Now imagine instead that your paper was accepted. Do you share this good news, or hold back? Such scenarios are ubiquitous, as people frequently face opportunities for outcome disclosure, such as sharing personal and professional successes and setbacks. These moments carry psychological significance. They influence how much empathy and support people feel, shape social comparisons, and affect the strength of our relationships (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Buunk et al., 1990; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Suls et al., 2002; Wood, 1989). As such, they offer a particularly meaningful context for understanding how people manage emotions and relationships through everyday communication.

Despite the frequency and importance of these situations, we know surprisingly little about how people decide what to reveal once someone else has already shared their experience. Most research has focused on *initiators*, examining when and why people spontaneously reveal or conceal outcomes (Berman et al., 2015; John et al., 2016; Brooks et al., 2019; Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2020). Yet in everyday life disclosures are rarely one-sided: they unfold interactively (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2018; Yeomans et al., 2022). Responsive disclosure decisions arise when individuals learn of others' outcomes and then choose whether and how to respond. These situations create psychological contexts that differ fundamentally from those governing spontaneous disclosure-initiation.

Existing theories suggest two broad possibilities for how people respond to others' outcome disclosures. Self-presentation accounts emphasize impression management: people brag or withhold successes and failures to manage how they are perceived by others (Baumeister, 1982; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; DePaulo et al., 1996). Reciprocity and accommodation theories predict symmetry: people mirror what others disclose, just as they converge in language and behavior (Miller & Kenny, 1986; Abel & Babel, 2017; Srivastava, Goldberg, Manian, & Potts, 2018). Neither perspective, however, fully accounts for the distinctive patterns of outcome disclosure we document here.

We propose an other-oriented account of responsive outcome disclosure: when deciding what to disclose, *responders* (i.e., those who respond to others' disclosures) are guided less by how their disclosure will affect themselves and more by how they anticipate it will affect others. Responders infer the emotional needs of their counterparts from the information their counterparts shared, and adjust their disclosure decisions based on the anticipated emotional consequences of different responses. This perspective predicts two novel asymmetries. First, while responders generally prefer to respond by disclosing matching outcomes (e.g., failures in response to failures), they will be more likely to do so for failure disclosures than success disclosures, because revealing a failure is seen as more emotionally supportive and capable of easing a counterpart's negative emotions, whereas revealing a success is anticipated to add little benefit to (and possibly deflate) the initiator's already positive state. Second, although the disclosure of non-matching outcomes is lower overall, responders are more likely to disclose failures in response to successes (i.e., being worse off) than to disclose successes in response to failures (i.e., being better off). This is because disclosing one's success in response to a failure disclosure is very likely to exacerbate the counterpart's pain from having failed, whereas disclosing a failure in response to the counterpart's success might evoke sympathy (and may also somewhat dampen their elation). We consistently document these asymmetries, stemming from other-focused disclosure motives, across nine studies (N = 8,229), including seven preregistered experiments, 2,216 self-written responses, and 473 live conversations.

Together, our results make several contributions. First, we establish that an evaluation of whether one's own disclosure will enhance or diminish the counterpart's emotional well-being often guides responders' decisions to disclose their outcomes. Our account builds on established research demonstrating that people are motivated to understand and respond to others' emotional states (Davis, 1983; Batson et al., 1991), actively attempt to regulate others' emotions (Zaki & Williams, 2013; Zaki, 2014; Netzer et al., 2015), and provide support based on perceived needs (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cutrona & Russell, 1990). To demonstrate this concern, we content-coded and directly measured responders' disclosure motives across studies; we consistently find that responders focus less on self-enhancement or self-protection, and more on managing the counterpart's emotions—attempting to make them feel better, or avoiding making them feel

worse. We also examined alternative motives, such as politeness, norm-following, and self- and relationship-focused reasons, and found that these accounts did not predict the asymmetries documented here. Thus, our framework emphasizes other-directed concern rather than the self-directed concerns more typically documented in research on initiators' spontaneous disclosure decisions.

Second, we examined responders' outcome disclosures across domains, relationships, and interaction contexts. Our studies included career outcomes (job applications, professional development opportunities), financial outcomes (bonuses, investments), and health outcomes. We tested relationships varying in closeness (acquaintances versus close friends) and status (peers, subordinates, supervisors), and examined interaction contexts ranging from brief encounters (e.g., run-ins at airports or coffee shops) to extended conversations (e.g., sit-down coffee, lunch, dinner). This breadth of evidence demonstrates that the asymmetries are not limited to any specific setting or relationship. Rather, they reflect a general interpersonal dynamic, establishing outcome disclosures as a systematic conversational strategy aimed at regulating others' emotional responses**.**

Third, we extended our analysis to examine *how* outcomes are disclosed. Our analyses of open-ended responses and real conversations revealed that responders adapt their communication style when responding to failures, often softening their disclosures with consolation, apologizing for sharing their own success, or delaying its revelation. These findings show that disclosure varies not only in whether information is exchanged but also in the emotional tone with which it is conveyed.

Finally, our research responds to recent calls to examine disclosure in more dynamic, interactive contexts (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2018; Yeomans et al., 2022). By combining preregistered controlled experiments, content-coded motives, and the analysis of naturalistic conversations, we provide a comprehensive account of responsive outcome disclosure as an other-focused practice. This multi-method approach provides converging evidence for the prevalence of asymmetric disclosure patterns in interactive settings that prior research has not documented.

The next section reviews existing literature on motives driving disclosure initiation and conversational exchange. Subsequently, we introduce our theoretical framework, which generates novel

predictions about asymmetries in responders' disclosures. Finally, we present the results of nine studies (six in the manuscript and three in the supplement) that support our framework, and that, taken together, advance our understanding of the motives and interpersonal dynamics that shape conversational exchanges.

Background and Related Literature

Extensive research has addressed the question of when and why people spontaneously *initiate* disclosures of successes and failures (Rudman, 1998; Reis et al., 2010; Liu & Lin, 2018; Chaudhry & Loewenstein, 2019; VanEpps et al., 2023; Carbone et al., 2024; Wald et al., 2024). This work reveals a rich set of motivations: people share their successes to create a positive impression, seek recognition, and enhance their status (Baumeister, 1982; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980), and they sometimes hide them to appear humble, maintain social harmony, or avoid seeming boastful (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Berman et al., 2015; Arnett & Sidanius, 2018). Conversely, people may disclose failures to seek help or support, signal responsiveness and authenticity, deflect responsibility, or obtain psychological and physiological benefits (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Graham et al., 2008; Caprariello & Reis, 2011; Becker & Martin, 1995; Pennebaker, 1993; Kowalski, 1999), but may hide or downplay failures to avoid negative evaluation, maintain positive impressions, or prevent others from using negative information against them (DePaulo et al., 1996; John et al., 2016; Brooks et al., 2019; Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2020; 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Prinsloo & Moon 2025).

These dynamics may change in responsive contexts where individuals first learn about another person's outcomes. In such cases, the motives driving spontaneous disclosure may be modified or overridden by concerns about how one's response is expected to affect the other person. Prior research on reciprocity has largely examined the exchange of everyday personal information (e.g., facts, opinions, attitudes, or preferences). This extensive body of research demonstrates that people tend to reciprocate disclosures, often responding to others' revelations with disclosures of their own (Cozby, 1972; Taylor & Hinds, 1985; Miller & Kenny, 1986; Derlega et al., 1973; Jones & Archer, 1976; Petty & Mirels, 1981; Dindia, 2002). Reciprocal disclosure has been shown to foster connection, intimacy, liking, and trust formation, important functions in promoting affiliation and relationship building (Reis & Shaver, 1988;

Laurenceau et al., 1998; Sprecher et al., 2013; Sprecher, 2023). Research on conversational convergence (e.g., Kim et al., 2011) and linguistic accommodation (e.g., Giles et al., 1991; Gregory & Webster, 1996) provides additional insight into responsive behaviors. People naturally mirror the language patterns of conversation partners across dimensions like speaking rate (Pardo et al., 2013), sentence structure (Branigan et al., 2000), utterance length and pauses (Bilous & Krauss, 1988), and even bodily movements (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). This convergence is often motivated by desires to reduce social distance and signal affiliation (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Giles & Coupland, 1991; Giles & Ogay, 2007), suggesting that reciprocal behaviors are intended to serve important relational functions in fostering affiliation and belonging (Srivastava et al., 2018).

Outcome disclosures are a particularly consequential form of self-disclosure within reciprocal exchanges: successes and failures carry strong emotional valences, create immediate opportunities for social comparison, have direct implications for status perceptions, and hold clear connections to self-worth and competence (Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Tesser, 1988; Buunk et al., 1990; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Suls et al., 2002; Gibson et al., 2018). When people disclose these outcomes, they implicitly convey information about their emotional state, vulnerabilities, and potential needs (Graham et al., 2008; Bruk et al., 2018). Existing theories would predict symmetric patterns for responsive disclosure: people should be equally likely to respond to successes with successes and to failures with failures. Yet the emotionally charged nature of outcome disclosures may activate additional psychological mechanisms, such as empathic concern for others' well-being and the resulting desire to manage the counterpart's emotions, which operate beyond basic reciprocity mechanisms.

We propose that responsive outcome disclosures are shaped not only by reciprocity principles, but also by this sensitivity to the counterpart's outcome and anticipated emotional state. Our proposed other-focused account suggests that when others disclose personal outcomes, responders may be guided less by concerns about managing their own image and more by concern for the other person's anticipated emotional experience. Responsive outcome disclosure, therefore, represents a distinctive form of

conversational convergence, one attuned to the perceived emotional and relational implications of successes and failures.

Our framework also builds on research on interpersonal emotion regulation as a form of social support, which shows that people often aim to improve others' emotional states (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Niven et al., 2009; Zaki & Williams, 2013). For instance, individuals frequently try to ease others' distress or amplify their positive feelings through empathic, supportive, and prosocial behaviors (Thoits, 1996; Batson, 2011; Zaki & Williams, 2013). We extend this work by conceptualizing disclosure as an intended interpersonal strategy for regulating others' emotions. By integrating insights from self-presentation, reciprocity, social comparison, and emotion regulation literatures, our account offers a more complete understanding of how people manage the interpersonal consequences of success and failure disclosures.

Theory and Research Hypotheses

We propose that responsive disclosure decisions are guided by an evaluation of whether responding by disclosing one's own outcome will enhance or diminish the emotional well-being of the initiator, that is, the individual who initially disclosed their personal outcome. Responders select disclosure strategies intended to maximize positive emotional impact and minimize emotional harm to the initiator. This other-focused account is particularly appropriate for reciprocal disclosure contexts because responders already know what happened to the initiator (because the initiator disclosed it) and already know what happened to themselves (because it happened). Thus, both parties have likely already experienced initial emotional reactions to their own outcomes, and responders have additionally already experienced emotional reactions to the outcomes of initiators. What responders' disclosure decisions fundamentally affect, then, is how learning about the responder's outcome will make initiators feel. This framework reflects both responders' sensitivity to others' outcomes and their tendency to attempt to regulate others' emotions (Zaki, 2014). Combined with the insight from research on social preferences that people strongly dislike disadvantageous inequality, and usually prefer equal outcomes to unequal ones (Loewenstein et al., 1989; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999), this other-focused perspective provides the foundation for our predictions.

In outcome disclosure contexts, initiators' disclosures provide cues about both the valence of their experience and their likely emotional state, which allows responders to anticipate how their own disclosure will be received by initiators (Worthy et al., 1969; Lemay & Clark, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2017; Bruk et al., 2018). When these cues suggest the initiator may be emotionally affected by the responder's disclosure choice, responders become more attentive to the potential interpersonal consequences of different responses. Prior research shows that such cues can elicit empathic concern, which orients responders toward helping behaviors (Coke et al., 1978; Batson et al., 1997; Goetz et al., 2010; Ministero et al., 2018). We suggest that responsive disclosures and non-disclosures function as intentional conversational tools for providing comfort or avoiding harm. Responders adjust what they share based on how they anticipate their response will affect the initiator's emotional state. In this way, outcome disclosure becomes a form of intended affect regulation and social support, enacted through conversational choices that are sensitive to the initiator's perceived emotional needs (see Niven et al., 2009; House & Kahn, 1985).

Disclosing Matching Outcomes More than Non-Matching Outcomes

A first baseline prediction follows directly from prior research on reciprocity and conversational convergence. Extensive work on self-disclosure and convergence shows that people tend to respond in kind to others' revelations, often sharing information of similar intimacy, valence, or personal relevance (Cozby, 1972; Miller & Kenny, 1986; Sprecher et al., 2013). This reciprocal matching is commonly understood to function as a form of social coordination: it reduces social distance, fosters rapport, and signals affiliation (Giles & Coupland, 1991; Srivastava et al., 2018). Applied to outcome disclosure, this logic implies that responders should generally disclose their outcomes when these match the valence of the initiator's disclosure. Sharing a success after hearing a success, or sharing a failure after hearing a failure, maintains conversational symmetry and supports a sense of mutual understanding, whereas highlighting outcome disparities may be seen as socially costly.

Reciprocity and convergence principles thus suggest a straightforward baseline prediction: responders will be more inclined to disclose matching rather than non-matching outcomes.

Hypothesis 1*. Responders will be more likely to disclose matching than non-matching outcomes.*

Specifically:

a) *Responders who experience a failure will be more likely to disclose that failure when the initiator has disclosed a failure rather than a success.*

b) *Responders who experience a success will be more likely to disclose that success when the initiator has disclosed a success rather than a failure.*

Matching Disclosure Asymmetry: Disclosing Matching Failures More than Matching Successes

If responders are concerned about how their disclosure will affect initiators, research on social preferences (i.e., how people respond hedonically to outcomes to both themselves and others) predicts that the disclosure of matching outcomes will be stronger for matching negative than for matching positive outcomes. This stream of research reveals that people react negatively not only to disadvantageous unequal outcomes (being "one down") but also to advantageous ones (being "one up"), though the latter response is notably weaker (Loewenstein et al., 1989; Messick & Sentis, 1979; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Tricomi et al., 2010).

Applied to other-focused responsive disclosure contexts, if the initiator divulges a negative outcome and the responder fails to reciprocate with their own negative outcome, this will leave the initiator one down—a state people find particularly aversive. Therefore, to the extent that responders care about the initiator's feelings, responders should be powerfully motivated to reciprocate with their own negative outcome, to remove the initiator's negative emotions of being potentially one down. If the initiator discloses a positive outcome, on the other hand, the responder's disclosure of their own positive outcome adds little emotional benefit, and may even potentially deflate the initiator's glee about a positive experience. So, a strong prediction from the idea that responders care about initiators' emotional well-being, and the social preference literature on distaste for disadvantageous differences, is that negative disclosures should be reciprocated more often than positive disclosures.

Beyond inequality aversion, this asymmetry is further reinforced by the fact that failure disclosures signal greater emotional need than success disclosures: when someone shares a personal outcome, they convey not only its valence (i.e., whether it is positive or negative), but also their emotional state and degree of vulnerability (Worthy et al., 1969; Murray et al., 2006; Lemay & Clark, 2015; McCarthy et al.,

2017; Bruk et al., 2018). These cues may be explicit, for example, through expressed pride or disappointment, or may be inferred from the context. Failure disclosures, in particular, are often interpreted as implicit signals of emotional need and requests for support, consoling, and reassurance (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001; Graham et al., 2008; Bastian et al., 2014). Responders may view a disclosure of a matching failure as a way to provide this support. By revealing that they too have failed, responders may signal solidarity, normalize the experience, and attempt to reduce what they anticipate to be the initiator's feelings of isolation or inadequacy. Moreover, because negative outcomes tend to elicit stronger and more enduring emotional responses than positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001; Ito et al., 1998; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Pietri et al., 2013), responders may feel a heightened sense of urgency to help the initiator recover from a negative affective state (Taylor, 1991).

Based on these considerations, we predict that responders will exhibit a heightened proclivity to disclose matching failures compared to matching successes, reflecting the belief that such disclosures are more likely to improve the initiator's emotional state:

> ***Hypothesis 2: Responders*** *will be more likely to disclose matching failures (failures in response to failures) than matching successes (successes in response to successes).*

Non-Matching Disclosures: Failure Disclosures in Response to Success Disclosures Are More Likely Than Success Disclosures in Response to Failure Disclosures

Responders will not always have matching outcomes to disclose. For example, a student who received an A will not be able to reciprocate the negative disclosure of a fellow student who received a D in the same class—at least not within the same domain[1]. Although there may be some impetus to disclose *something* when another person does so (a major focus of prior research), as noted in Hypothesis 1, responders are generally hesitant to disclose experiences that emotionally contrast with those shared by others. What patterns emerge for these potentially non-matching disclosure situations? Our theoretical framework predicts a second asymmetry: responders should be more willing to reveal failures in response

[1] We explore cross-domain disclosures in Study 3.

to initiators' successes than to disclose successes in response to initiators' failures. This prediction stems from the anticipated emotional impact of each disclosure type.

Disclosing success after another's failure introduces upward comparison, which responders may anticipate will intensify the initiator's distress (of experiencing the negative outcome) by triggering envy, inferiority, or dejection (Scinta & Gable, 2005; Swallow & Kuiper, 1988; Brigham et al., 1997; Boecker et al., 2022). To preserve the initiator's emotional well-being, responders should be strongly motivated to withhold such information.

In contrast, disclosing a negative outcome following the initiator's positive disclosure should be perceived as relatively less threatening and therefore less likely to be actively avoided, even though it could potentially elicit some guilt or discomfort from downward comparison in the initiator. Research on social preferences suggests that people respond less negatively to being one up than to being one down (Loewenstein et al., 1989; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). Responders may therefore anticipate that disclosing their failure may dampen but not devastate the initiator's positive state, making such disclosures more acceptable than disclosing a success in response to failure disclosures.

Based on these considerations, we expect a second, albeit less pronounced, asymmetry:

> ***Hypothesis 3****: For non-matching outcomes, responders will be more likely to disclose a failure in response to an initiator's success disclosure, than to disclose a success in response to an initiator's failure disclosure.*

Our predictions are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Responders' Predicted Likelihood of Disclosure, Depending on Outcome Differentials of Initiators and Responders.

	Responder: Success	Responder: Failure
Initiator: Success	High disclosure	Low disclosure
Initiator: Failure	Very low disclosure	Very high disclosure

Note. The 2×2 matrix shows four possible outcome pairings between an initiator and a responder. The top left and bottom right cells represent matching outcomes, while the bottom left and top right cells represent non-matching outcomes, along with the predicted relative likelihood of the responder's disclosure. Asymmetries are expected: responders are especially likely to disclose matching failures in response to failures than matching successes in response to successes, and more likely to disclose non-matching successes in response to failures than non-matching failures in response to successes.

Moderators of the Asymmetries

We identify two factors that provide process evidence for our other-focused mechanism through moderation: the extent to which the responder likes the counterpart and the perceived relevance of the responder's outcome. If responders' disclosure decisions are indeed guided by consideration of the counterpart's feelings, then factors that change its relevance should systematically moderate the patterns predicted by our asymmetry hypotheses.

Liking of the Counterpart. Our other-focused account posits that disclosure asymmetries arise because responders anticipate the emotional reactions of their disclosures on the initiator—and care about it. When responders like the initiator, failure disclosure should be more likely to elicit empathic concern in the responder, as positive interpersonal feelings amplify empathic responding (Batson et al., 1997). When liking is high, responders should be more motivated to use their disclosure to hopefully provide comfort to those who fail (increasing matching failure disclosure), and avoid disclosures seen as further harming someone who is already suffering (decreasing disclosure of successes following initiator failure).

In contrast, when liking is low, responders should be less motivated to manage the initiator's emotions. Prior research shows that when people dislike someone, they are more tolerant, or even prefer, advantageous inequality (i.e., being better off), and less tolerant of disadvantageous inequality (i.e., being worse off; Loewenstein et al., 1989). This means responders should care less about the initiator's emotional well-being, and whether their disclosure leaves the initiator one down or deflates their success. Under low

liking, therefore, we expect the other-focused concerns that drive responsive disclosure to weaken, attenuating both asymmetries.

Perceived Relevance of Outcomes. A critical test of our other-focused account concerns whether disclosure depends on how supportive to the initiator responders expect the disclosure to be. Research on social support shows that support effectiveness depends on its fit with the demands of the stressor. For example, emotional comfort is most effective for uncontrollable events and instrumental aid is most effective for controllable problems (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Similarly, work on responsiveness emphasizes that support is most beneficial when it conveys understanding, validation, and care that fit the recipient's specific needs (Reis & Gable, 2015; Gable et al., 2004).

If responders are motivated to provide emotional support through their disclosure, then the effects we predict should be strongest when responders' experience is directly relevant to the initiator's situation. Therefore, disclosures from the same domain as the initiator's outcome (e.g., both career-related) should feel more directly supportive, validating the initiator's specific experience. In contrast, cross-domain disclosures may feel less helpful or even distracting. If other-focused concerns drive these patterns, then disclosure asymmetries should be robust within domains but attenuated when responders' outcomes are in different domains.

This prediction distinguishes our account from alternatives that would predict similar patterns regardless of domain relevance. First, if the asymmetry in matching disclosure were driven by broad emotional needs consistent with "misery loves company" (Gray et al., 2011), or a general preference to disclose negative information, domain relevance should have minimal impact, as any same-valence outcome should suffice for emotional solidarity or preference fulfillment. Our other-focused account, however, predicts that responders evaluate the contextual appropriateness and supportiveness of their disclosure. A financial setback disclosed in response to a health failure may feel less supportive or relevant than a matching health concern, or even compound the initiator's disappointment by introducing additional negative information. By testing whether domain relevance moderates the asymmetries, we can distinguish other-focused motives from competing explanations.

How Outcomes Are Disclosed, Not Just Whether They Are Disclosed

Our framework further suggests that disclosure is not merely a binary choice but also involves *how* people respond. Because disclosure is guided by other-focused concerns, responders may adapt not only their likelihood to disclose, but also the *content, tone, framing, and timing* of their response based on its anticipated effect on the initiator.

Several streams of research supports this view. Work on social support and comforting demonstrates that people routinely adjust message content to provide validation, reassurance, and acknowledgment when others experience distress (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Burleson, 2003; Reis et al., 2010). Research on politeness and face management shows that speakers soften potentially threatening information through hedging, apologies, or indirectness to avoid interpersonal harm (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Together, these literatures suggest that communicators frequently tailor not only *whether* they share information, but also *how* and *when* they do so.

Applied to outcome disclosure, an other-focused account implies that responders will strategically shape their messages based on their beliefs about how they expect their disclosure to be received emotionally. First, because an initiator's failure signals emotional vulnerability, consoling language should be common in responsive disclosures, particularly when other forms of emotional consolation—such as disclosing a matching failure—are unavailable to responders.

Second, when responders experience a non-matching success, disclosure may be perceived as carrying heightened emotional risk. Responders may believe that sharing their positive outcome could make the initiator feel worse about having failed. While disclosure will be lower in this case (as predicted by Hypothesis 3), we expect that when responders do choose to disclose, they may engage in other communication strategies aimed at reducing the initiator's anticipated emotional cost. These strategies may include pairing a success disclosure with offers of repair or help and the use of apologetic language, engaging in subtle forms of deception—such as omitting or downplaying their outcome—or delaying disclosure by first offering support before sharing their experience. These approaches allow responders to manage perceived emotional risk through both message content and timing.

When responders experience a non-matching negative outcome, disclosure may pose a different interpersonal concern. Sharing a failure in response to another's success may be expected to dampen the celebratory tone of the interaction or shift attention away from the initiator's achievement. In anticipation of this, responders may choose to delay disclosure to preserve the initiator's positive moment. Therefore, disclosure of a negative outcome may be delayed when it follows the disclosure of a positive one compared to when it follows the disclosure of a negative one.

Although these patterns were not preregistered, they follow directly from the logic of our framework, and they extend this logic beyond disclosure likelihood to how disclosures are shaped. They highlight an additional dimension of responsive outcome disclosure to provide a richer account of how other-focused considerations shape conversational behavior: not only whether people choose to share information, but how they tailor the content and timing of their messages to manage the anticipated emotional consequences for initiators.

Overview of the Empirical Studies

Nine studies (total $N = 8,229$) test our theoretical framework. Study 1 examines asymmetries in responders' disclosure decisions using health outcomes, and includes a control condition in which the counterpart did not disclose an outcome. Study 2 provides process evidence for our other-focused account by manipulating liking: if empathic concern drives the asymmetries, they should be stronger when responders care more about the initiator's anticipated emotional state. Two supplemental studies (see Supplements 3 and 4) explore these patterns across different relationship types, varying in closeness and relative status (peer, upward, and downward). Study 3 provides additional process evidence by varying domain relevance: the hypothesized effects should be reduced when responders' outcomes feel less supportive to the initiator. One additional supplemental study (see Supplement 5) directly measures the proposed mechanism. Study 4 analyzes self-generated responses in responses to investment outcome disclosures, and Study 5 does the same with responses to professional outcome disclosures, enabling the assessment of whether responses reflect other-focused considerations. Study 6 employs a live interaction paradigm in which participants disclosed real, experienced outcomes.

Data Transparency and Open Science Practices

Table I in Supplement 1 provides an overview of all studies. Across studies, we targeted a sample size of at least 100 participants per between-subjects condition. We increased the sample size to at least 150 participants per condition for our moderation studies to achieve adequate power for testing interactions. For all studies, we set the desired sample size before data collection and analyzed the data once the target sample size was achieved. On CloudResearch, participants had to be approved by the platform, located in the United States, at least 18 years old, and have an approval rate of 95%. On Prolific Academic, participants had to be located in the United States, the U.K., or Canada, be fluent in English, and have an approval rate of 95% or 99%. Participants were compensated at or above platform norms, with payment amounts set based on the median completion time of each study. We disclose all conditions, manipulations, measures, and exclusions. Participants in all studies provided demographic information about their age, gender, education, and income. All the effects hold controlling for participants' gender, and gender does not moderate the effects.[2]

Study 1: Disclosure Asymmetries in Health Outcomes

Study 1 provided an initial test of our predictions in the domain of health outcomes. Participants learned whether they had received positive or negative health news, then encountered a counterpart who either disclosed positive health news, disclosed negative health news, or disclosed no outcome (control). This design allowed us to examine matching versus non-matching disclosure patterns, test the two predicted asymmetries, and establish a baseline disclosure rate in the absence of counterpart disclosure.

Method

Participants. We recruited 900 participants from Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 42.98, SD_{age} = 13.11, 39.4% male, 59.0% female, 1.6% other/prefer not to say).

[2] We only looked at the participants' gender, since the initiator in the scenarios was a gender-neutral "Alex." In Study 6 responders did not know the gender of the person they were paired with. The analyses for gender are posted on ResearchBox.

Design and Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (responders' outcome: positive vs. negative) × 3 (initiator Alex's disclosure: positive vs. negative vs. no outcome) between-subjects design. This study was preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/qa47jg.pdf.

Participants imagined recently completing a free wellness assessment offered by their workplace through a popular health app. This assessment included a biological age test, which compares an individual's biological age to their chronological age based on health markers and lifestyle factors. In the positive outcome condition, participants learned that their biological age was seven years younger than their chronological age, suggesting excellent health. In the negative outcome condition, their biological age was seven years older, suggesting the potential benefit of a lifestyle change.

Participants were then told they were having coffee with Alex, a friend and colleague at their company. Depending on the outcome condition, Alex either disclosed a positive test result (biological age younger than chronological), a negative test result (biological age older than chronological), or mentioned considering the test but did not disclose whether they had taken it, nor the outcome (control). Open-ended comprehension checks, which asked participants about the test results and the content of Alex's disclosure, ensured that participants correctly understood both their own and Alex's health outcomes.

The main dependent measure in this study was an 'allocation task' in which participants, in their role as responder, distributed 100 points between (a) a non-disclosure response that acknowledged Alex's statement without mentioning their own outcome (e.g., "Alex, that's amazing! You must be doing something right with your health and fitness.") and (b) a disclosure response that additionally mentioned their own biological age test result (e.g., "…I actually just got my results back too - my biological age came back as younger than my actual age!"). The percentage allocated to the disclosure message served as the dependent variable. This method enabled participants to express varying degrees of willingness to disclose in a conversational context rather than forcing a binary choice.

Results

Participants' likelihood to disclose their outcome is presented in Figure 2. Means, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals are shown in Table 1.

Figure 2: Responders' Disclosure Rates by Condition in Study 1. Error Bars: 95% CIs.

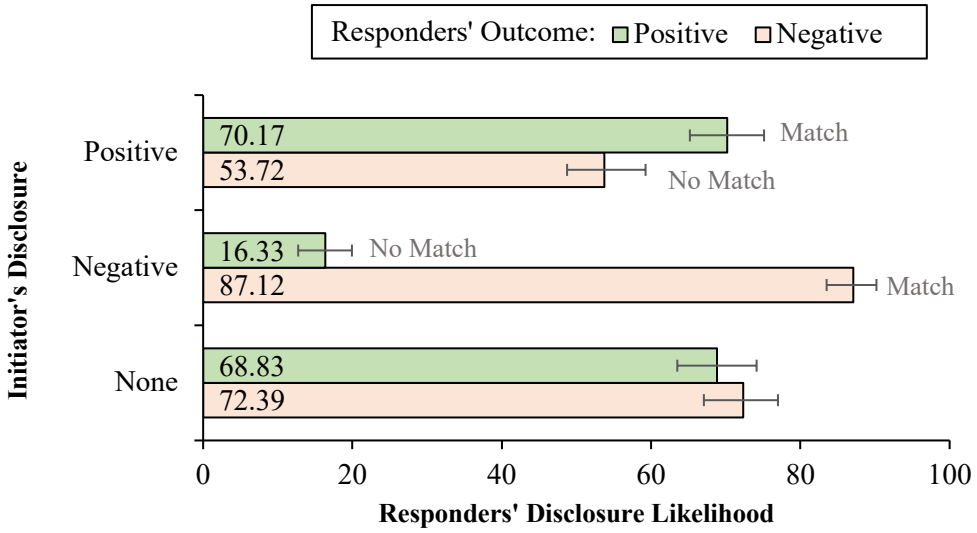

Table 1: Responders' Disclosure Rates by Condition. *M* (SD), [95% CI].

	Responder: Positive Outcome	Responder: Negative Outcome
Initiator: Positive Outcome	70.17 (31.05), [65.16, 75.18]	53.72 (34.54), [48.13, 59.31]
Initiator: Negative Outcome	16.33 (22.57), [12.70, 19.96]	87.12 (19.41), [84.02, 90.22]
Initiator: No Outcome	68.83 (32.64), [63.47, 74.19]	72.39 (29.01), [67.74, 77.04]

A 2 (responder outcome: positive, negative) × 3 (initiator Alex's disclosure: positive, negative, no outcome) between-subjects ANOVA on disclosure revealed a significant main effect of the responders' outcome, $F(1, 894) = 101.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.102$, a significant main effect of the initiator's disclosure, $F(2, 894) = 32.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.068$, and their predicted interaction, $F(2, 894) = 191.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.300$.

Preference for Disclosure of Matching Over Non-Matching Outcomes. Responders were significantly more likely to disclose their outcome when it matched the valence of the initiator's disclosure than when it did not, supporting Hypothesis 1. This matching preference was evident for both positive and negative responder outcomes. When responders experienced a negative outcome, they were

more likely to disclose it following a negative outcome disclosure by the initiator, than following a positive outcome disclosure (M = 87.12 vs. 53.72), $F(1, 894) = 102.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.103$ (Hypothesis 1a). Similarly, when responders experienced a positive outcome, they were more likely to disclose it following a positive than a negative disclosure by the initiator (M = 70.17 vs. 16.33), $F(1, 894) = 265.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.229$ (Hypothesis 1b).

Asymmetries Within Matching Outcomes. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, responders were more likely to disclose matching negative outcomes (negative following negative) than matching positive outcomes (positive following positive; M = 87.12 vs. 70.17), $F(1, 894) = 26.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.029$ (Hypothesis 2).

Asymmetries Within Non-Matching Outcomes. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, when outcomes did not match, responders were more likely to disclose a negative outcome in response to a positive disclosure than to disclose a positive outcome in response to a negative disclosure (M = 53.72 vs. 16.33), $F(1, 894) = 127.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.125$.

Comparisons to Non-Responsive Disclosure. For negative outcomes, responders were *more* likely to disclose their negative outcome following an initiator's disclosure of a negative outcome than no outcome (M = 72.39 vs. 87.12), $F(1, 894) = 20.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.022$. By contrast, responders were *less* likely to disclose their own negative outcome following an initiator's disclosure of a positive outcome than no outcome (M = 72.39 vs. 53.72), $F(1, 894) = 31.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.034$.

For positive outcomes, a different pattern emerged. Responders' disclosure of a positive outcome did not differ whether it followed the initiator's disclosure of a positive outcome or no outcome (M = 70.17 vs. 68.83), $F(1, 894) = 0.161$, $p = 0.688$, $\eta^2 < 0.001$. However, responders' disclosure of a positive outcome was significantly lower when it followed the initiator's disclosure of a negative outcome than no outcome (M = 68.83 vs. 16.33), $F(1, 894) = 248.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.217$.

Together, these results indicate that matching disclosures exceeded non-responsive disclosures only for negative outcomes, whereas non-matching disclosures fell below non-responsive disclosures for

both valences, especially for positive outcomes shared in response to negative ones ($\eta^2 = 0.217$ vs. $\eta^2 = 0.034$).

Positive and Negative Non-Responsive Disclosure. Finally, within the non-responsive baseline conditions, responders disclosed negative and positive outcomes at similar rates ($M = 72.39$ vs. $M = 68.83$), $F(1, 894) = 1.145$, $p = .285$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$, 95% CI = [0, 0.010][3]. This suggests that the asymmetries observed in responsive contexts are unlikely to reflect a general preference for disclosing negative over positive outcomes. Instead, they appear to emerge specifically within responsive contexts, where the initiator's disclosure influences the responder's motivations to disclose in response.

Discussion

Study 1 provided initial support for our theoretical framework. Responders were more likely to share outcomes that matched the valence of the initiator's disclosure than those that did not. However, consistent with Hypothesis 2, matching negative outcomes were disclosed more frequently than matching positive ones, and consistent with Hypothesis 3, in non-matching contexts, responders were more willing to disclose negative outcomes in response to positive ones than positive outcomes in response to negative ones. We also compared responsive disclosures to non-responsive disclosures. Results showed that negative outcomes were disclosed more frequently following an initiator's negative disclosure than when initiators shared no outcome. In contrast, non-matching outcomes—both positive outcomes following negative ones, and negative outcomes following positive ones—were shared less frequently than positive or negative outcomes shared at baseline, with the largest reduction observed for non-matching positive outcomes. Together, these findings suggest that disclosure decisions are not only shaped by reciprocity or

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[3] This comparison was not preregistered, but we conducted the analysis in response to a reviewer comment. We used this calculator to obtain the 95% CI around the effect size: https://effect-size-calculator.herokuapp.com/#partial-eta-squared-fixed-effects. A sensitivity power analysis (G*Power; $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $N = 900$, 2 groups, numerator df = 1) indicated that the study had 80% power to detect effects of approximately $f = .09$ (corresponding to $\eta^2_p \approx .009$) or larger. Thus, any true effect—if present at all—is likely no larger than a small effect. We also note that this comparison reverses in direction in Study 5.

conversational norms, but also by sensitivity to how one's disclosure is anticipated to affect the other person.

Study 2: Testing Other-Focused Concern by Manipulating Interpersonal Liking

Study 2 had three primary goals. First, it tested whether the disclosure patterns observed in the health domain (Study 1) would replicate in a job-related domain. Second, it provided process evidence for our other-focused account. If disclosure decisions are guided by concern for the initiator's emotional state, then, as laid out above, the observed asymmetries should be stronger in high-liking than low-liking conditions. Third, to obtain direct evidence of these mechanisms, we asked participants to report their motives for disclosure, which allowed us to assess whether concerns for the initiator's emotional state spontaneously emerged in these explanations.

Method

We recruited 812 participants on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 36.41, SD_{age} = 11.91; 50.1% male, 49.4% female, 0.5% 'other/prefer not to say'). The study employed a 2 (responders' outcome: success vs. failure) x 2 (initiator discloses: success vs. failure) x 2 (liking: high versus low) between-subjects design.

We used a job application scenario in which participants imagined receiving a rejection or an offer for a prestigious job after traveling to Silicon Valley for an interview. Having learned about their outcome, participants encountered an acquaintance, Alex, at the airport. Following Loewenstein et al. (1989), in the high-liking condition, participants remembered Alex positively ("You had good feelings toward him."); in the low-liking condition, they remembered him as unlikable ("The contact you had did not make you like him."). This manipulation was designed to shift participants' affective impressions of the conversation partner and their concern for their counterpart's emotional experience. During the interaction, the initiator spontaneously shared that they had applied for a job, and had either received (1) an offer (success), or (2) rejection (failure), between-subjects.

Participants (i.e., responders) distributed 100 points between a non-disclosure response ("Alex, I'm happy to hear that!" or "Alex, I'm sorry to hear that.") and a disclosure response that included their own

outcome ("… I actually just found out that I was [also] given an offer," or "… I actually just found out that I was [also] not given an offer"). The percentage allocated to the disclosure response served as the dependent variable.

To provide more context and provide a more direct process test our theory, participants explained their allocation decisions in an open-ended text response. Two independent coders, blind to condition and hypotheses, content-analyzed the responses for references to motives. They coded whether participants expressed a desire to make the initiator feel better (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.906$) or avoid hurting the initiator (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.912$). As a secondary analysis, the coders also noted whether participants referenced the impact of their disclosure on themselves (e.g., avoiding ridicule, avoiding being seen as a braggart or mean) or on the relationship (e.g., bonding, preserving connection).

Results

We first examined whether disclosure patterns varied as a function of interpersonal liking. A 2 (responders' outcome: success vs. failure) x 2 (initiator discloses: success vs. failure) x 2 (liking: high vs. low) between-subjects ANOVA on responders' disclosure likelihood revealed a significant three-way interaction[4]: $F(1, 804) = 26.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .032$, indicating disclosure depended jointly on outcome configuration and how much responders liked the initiator (see Figure 3 and Table 2). We therefore examined high-liking and low-liking contexts separately.

[4] The three-way ANOVA analysis also yielded a significant main effect of Alex' outcome disclosure ($F(1, 804) = 5.46$, $p = .020$, $\eta^2_p = .007$), a main effect of responders' outcome ($F(1, 804) = 9.56$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = 0.012$), a main effect of liking ($F(1, 804) = 22.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.027$), and significant two-way interactions of responders' outcome and liking ($F(1, 804) = 5.70$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2_p = 0.007$), responders' outcome and Alex's outcome ($F(1, 804) = 247.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.236$). There was no two-way interaction of Alex' outcome and liking ($F(1, 804) = 1.834$, $p = .176$, $\eta^2_p = 0.002$).

Figure 3: Study 2: Responders' Disclosure Likelihood Under High and Low Liking. Error Bars: 95% CIs.

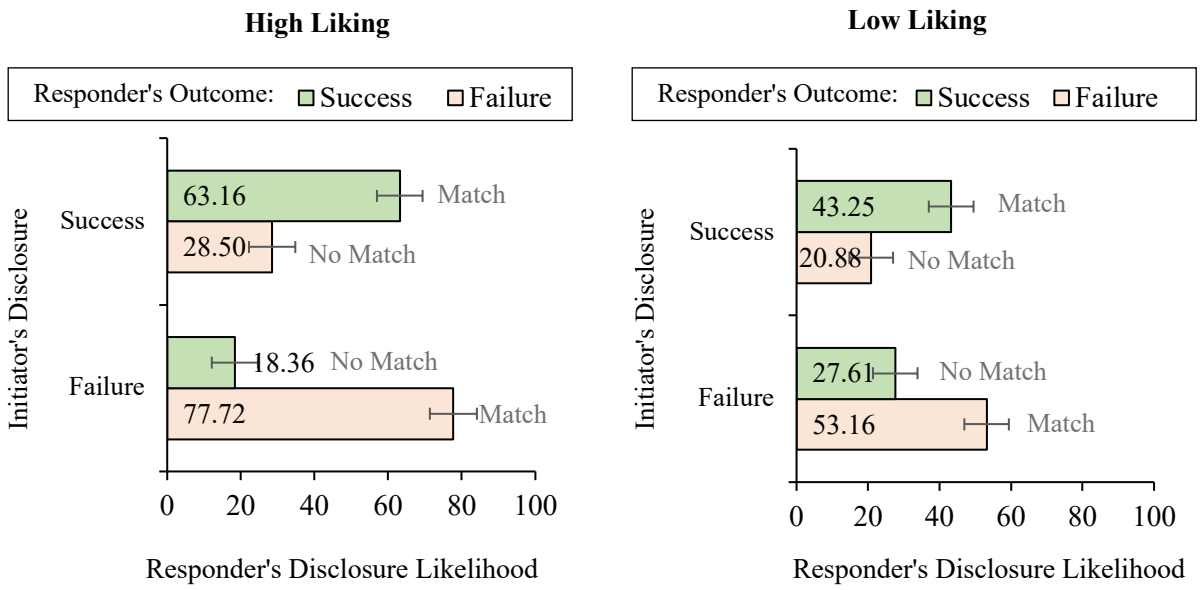


Table 2: Responders' Disclosure Likelihood Under High and Low Liking in Study 2. *M* (SD), [95% CI].

	Responder: Success	Responder: Failure
High Liking		
Initiator: Success	63.16 (33.87), [56.54, 69.77]	28.50 (32.62), [22.06, 34.93]
Initiator: Failure	18.36 (25.13), [13.37, 23.35]	77.72 (28.42), [71.99, 83.45]
Low Liking		
Initiator: Success	43.25 (36.86), [35.97, 50.52]	20.88 (29.28), [15.13, 26.63]
Initiator: Failure	27.61 (32.47), [21.36, 33.87]	53.16 (36.17), [46.05, 60.26]

Disclosure Under High Liking. In high-liking conditions, we observed the full pattern of predicted disclosure preferences. A 2× 2 ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of responders' outcome ($F(1, 397) = 16.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.040$), no significant main effect of the initiator Alex's outcome: $F(1, 397) = .54$, $p = .464$, $\eta^2_p = 0.001$, and, critically, a significant interaction, $F(1, 397) = 241.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.379$.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, responders were more likely to disclose their outcome when it matched the initiators' than when it did not. This preference emerged for both failures and successes.

Responders who experienced a failure were significantly more likely to disclose their outcome following the initiator's disclosure of a failure than a success (M = 77.72 vs. 28.50), $F(1, 397) = 130.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.248$. Similarly, responders who experienced a success were significantly more likely to disclose their outcome following the initiator's disclosure of a success than a failure (M = 63.16 vs. 18.36), $F(1, 397) = 111.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.219$.

We also observed both predicted asymmetries. First, responders were more likely to disclose failures in response to failures than successes in response to successes (M = 77.72 vs. 63.16), $F(1, 397) = 11.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.028$ (Hypothesis 2). Second, we also observed an asymmetry in the disclosure of non-matching outcomes. Responders were significantly more likely to disclose failures in response to successes than successes in response to failures (M = 28.50 vs. 18.36), $F(1, 397) = 5.64$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = 0.014$ (Hypothesis 3).

Disclosure Under Low Liking. Under low liking, a 2x2 ANOVA revealed a main effect of the initiator Alex's outcome, $F(1, 407) = 6.22$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2_p = 0.015$, no main effect of participant's outcome, $F(1, 407) = .23$, $p = .634$, $\eta^2_p = 0.001$, and a significant interaction, $F(1, 407) = 51.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.112$.

As in the high liking condition, responders showed a preference to disclose their outcome when it matched the initiators', in line with general reciprocity, which should not be affected by the liking manipulation. When responders failed, they were significantly more likely to disclose this outcome following the initiator's disclosure of a failure than of a success (M = 53.16 vs. 20.88), $F(1, 407) = 46.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.102$). When responders succeeded, they were significantly more likely to disclose this outcome following the initiator's disclosure of a success than of a failure (M = 43.25 vs. 27.61), $F(1, 407) = 11.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.026$.

Importantly, however, the asymmetries were reduced under low liking, as indicated by the earlier three-way interaction ($F(1, 804) = 26.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .032$). When outcomes matched, the tendency to disclose matching failures more than matching successes persisted (M = 53.16 vs. 43.25), $F(1, 407) = 4.40$, $p = .037$, $\eta^2 = 0.011$, but it was weaker compared to the high-liking condition ($\eta^2 = 0.011$ vs. $\eta^2 = 0.028$). When outcomes did not match, the asymmetry disappeared entirely: responders were even directionally

less likely to disclose failures in response to successes than they were to disclose successes in response to failures ($M = 20.88$ vs. $M = 27.61$), $F(1, 407) = 2.06$, $p = .152$, $\eta^2 = 0.005$. These patterns reflect an attenuation of the disclosure asymmetries under low liking, consistent with our other-focused account.

Open Responses. To understand the motivations behind responders' disclosure decisions (Hypotheses 2b and 3b), we content-analyzed their open-ended explanations to examine other-focused motives: improving the emotional state and making the initiator feel better (helping) and avoiding decreasing the initiator's emotional state by making them feel worse (avoiding harm). We also exploratorily examined the desire to hurt the initiator.

Table 3 summarizes the frequency with which responders spontaneously mentioned each motive across outcome configurations and liking conditions, with darker hues indicating higher prevalence.

Table 3: Frequency of Self-Reported Reasons in the Open-Ended Responses of Study 2.

Condition		Reason Listed by Responder		
Outcomes	Liking	Desire to help	Desire to avoid harm	Desire to hurt
I. succeeds R. succeeds	High	0.0%	4.9%	1.0%
	Low	0.0%	1.0%	13.9%
	Total	0.0%	2.9%	7.4%
I. succeeds R. fails	High	0.0%	29.7%	0.0%
	Low	0.0%	2.9%	0.0%
	Total	0.0%	16.3%	0.0%
I. fails R. succeeds	High	10.0%	69.0%	0.0%
	Low	0.9%	49.1%	16.0%
	Total	5.3%	58.7%	8.3%
I. fails R. fails	High	55.7%	2.1%	3.9%
	Low	21.6%	2.0%	3.9%
	Total	38.2%	2.0%	3.0%
Overall	High	16.0%	26.4%	0.7%
	Low	5.6%	14.1%	8.5%
	Total	10.7%	20.2%	4.7%

Note. The colors represent prevalence, from low (lighter colors) to high (darker colors). Colors darken with prevalence.

Desire to Help. Helping motives were most prevalent when responders experienced a failure, and initiators also failed (I. fails, R. fails). Overall, 38.2% of responders in this matching failure condition spontaneously mentioned a desire to help, significantly more than in any other condition, $\chi^2(1)$s > 64.76, *p*s < .001, Φs > 0.39). Helping motives were also influenced by liking. Responders in high-liking conditions were significantly more likely to report wanting to help than responders in low-liking conditions (16.0% vs. 5.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 812) = 22.79$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.168$. This difference was especially pronounced in the matching failure condition (55.7% vs. 21.6%, $\chi^2(1, N = 199) = 24.49$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.351$), where disclosure should be perceived as most impactful by responders. Overall, these results suggest that responders are motivated by concern for the initiator's emotional state, particularly when they like the initiator and experience a matching failure.

Desire to Avoid Harm. Harm-avoidance motives were most prevalent when responders experienced a success, but the initiator failed. In this condition, 58.7% of participants referenced avoiding harm—significantly more than in any other condition, $\chi^2(1)$s > 78.60, *ps* < .001, Φ*s* > 0.43; Table 3. As with helping, harm avoidance varied by liking. Responders in high-liking relationships mentioned harm avoidance more frequently than those in low-liking relationships (26.4% vs. 14.1%), $\chi^2(1, N = 812) = 19.12$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.153$. This pattern persisted in the context where responders succeeded, but initiators failed—where disclosure may be perceived as most harmful—with 69.0% of high-liking responders and 49.1% of low-liking responders referencing harm avoidance, $\chi^2(1, N = 206) = 8.44$, $p = .004$, $\Phi = 0.202$. These findings suggest that successes are often withheld from initiators who have failed and are liked, due to concerns of causing harm.

Interestingly, harm-avoidance motives also emerged, though less frequently (16.7%), when responders experienced a failure, and initiators succeeded. This is a context in which initiators might plausibly feel guilt from being better off, suggesting that guilt-related concerns may influence disclosure decisions.

Desire to Hurt. This motive was mentioned more frequently when responders disliked than liked the initiator (8.5% vs. 0.7%), $\chi^2(1, N = 812) = 27.45$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.184$. It was most prevalent for responders who reported disclosing their non-matching positive outcome to someone they disliked (16.0%). In such cases, responders may experience Schadenfreude (pleasure in another's misfortune; Cikara, 2015; Smith & van Dijk, 2018).

Alternative Processes. Thus far, our findings suggest that responders estimate the outcome-contingent emotional impact of their disclosure on initiators, leading to the observed asymmetries. However, responders' disclosure decisions may reflect additional self- or relationship-focused motives. For example, responders might worry that sharing successes could come across as boastful (Pfeffer et al., 2006; see also: Carlston & Shovar, 1983; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Scopelliti et al., 2015; Chaudhry & Loewenstein, 2019; vanEpps et al., 2023). This concern might be mitigated in cases where initiators disclose a success, relative to cases where initiators disclose a failure, since in the former case, the initiator's disclosure could be seen as providing a socially acceptable context for sharing. As such, responders might believe that disclosing a matching success permits status-seeking (e.g., Anderson et al., 2015; see also: Baumeister, 1982; Godfrey et al., 1986; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Jones & Pittman, 1982) without sacrificing perceived warmth, or running the risk of weakening social bonds (e.g., Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

Similarly, disclosing a matching failure may be judged as offering a way to bond with another person without experiencing the discomfort of being one down. In the absence of another person's failure disclosure, sharing one's own failure can have the downside of exposing vulnerabilities (Worthy et al., 1969; Lemay & Melville, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2017). If the other party has also failed, and disclosed it, this down-side can be avoided (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Omarzu, 2000; Murray et al., 2006; McCarthy et al., 2017).

In Supplement 2, we examined these motives in responders' open-ended explanations. Fear of appearing boastful and fear of ridicule showed up in some explanations, but they were mentioned far less frequently than considerations of initiators' feelings. Other motives, like bonding, were mentioned so

infrequently that they did not warrant further coding. Overall, given their low frequency, these motives appear to be secondary layers of responsive reasoning, contingent on an initial judgment about the emotional consequences of disclosure. In addition, it is unclear how these processes could explain the asymmetries.

Discussion

Study 2 provided process evidence for our other-focused account through moderation. When the initiator was disliked, the matching asymmetry decreased in effect size, and the non-matching asymmetry became non-significant. These shifts suggest that concern for the counterpart's emotional state plays a central role in disclosure behavior, and that this concern is influenced by interpersonal context. While other motives, such as impression management or relationship preservation, may also shape disclosures, the results highlight concern for the counterpart's emotional state as a primary driver of the observed asymmetries.

One open question is why, unlike the non-matching asymmetry, the matching asymmetry (matching failure > matching success) might have persisted under low liking, albeit in weakened form. One possibility is that low liking may reduce responders' willingness to engage at all. Indeed, disclosure was overall lower in low-liking relationships (as shown by the main effect of liking in the three-way interaction), suggesting that responders may be less invested in maintaining the conversation. This disengagement may suppress matching success disclosures, which appear to primarily serve relational or affiliative functions and may therefore feel unnecessary or performative when liking is low. In contrast, disclosure of better outcomes increased under low liking compared to high liking, consistent with the idea that responders feel less constrained by concerns about the initiator's feelings, and may be more comfortable asserting their own success. This pattern explains why the matching asymmetry persisted under low liking: although overall disclosure decreased when responders disliked the initiator, the relative ordering remained consistent. Even under low liking, matching failures were still disclosed more than matching successes, suggesting that the basic tendency to reciprocate failures more than successes operates even in the absence of strong positive feelings toward the initiator. However, the weakened effect size indicates that the other-focused motivation

that amplifies this asymmetry under high liking was indeed attenuated. The increase in better outcome disclosure under low liking further suggests that responders felt less constrained by concern for the initiator's feelings, consistent with an attenuation of other-focused concerns.

The open-ended responses offer additional insight into why the matching asymmetry diminished but did not fully disappear. When both parties succeeded, other-oriented motives were largely absent: responders rarely expressed harm avoidance (4.9% and 1.0%, respectively) and did not mention helping motives (0.0%). These findings suggest that reduced disclosure of matching successes is more consistent with interpersonal disengagement than with other-focused concerns. In contrast, increased disclosure of matching failures and decreased disclosure of non-matching successes were frequently accompanied by desires to help or avoid causing harm.

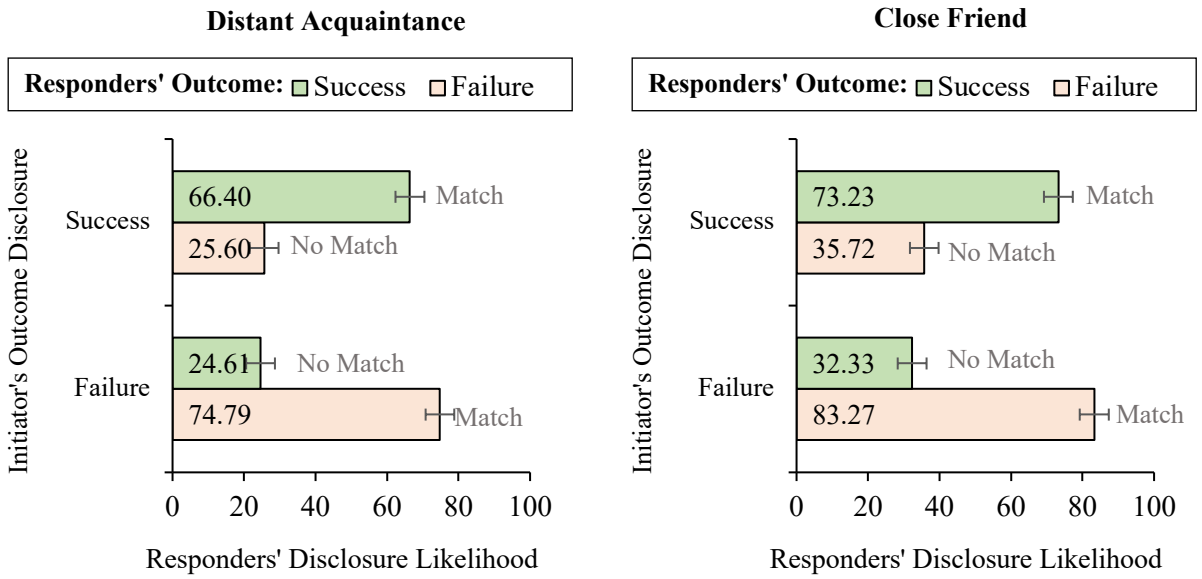
Supplemental Studies. Beyond liking, relationships often vary along additional dimensions, such as closeness or relative status. To examine the generalizability of our effects, we conducted two preregistered follow-up studies.

Supplemental Study: Manipulating Relationship Closeness. This study, reported in Supplement 3 (N = 1,602, preregistration: https://aspredicted.org/kcgm-njw9.pdf), examined disclosure patterns in close versus distant (but still positive) relationships, based on a reviewer suggestion. Results replicated the effects observed in Studies 1 and 2: a preference for disclosing outcomes that match those of the initiators, as well as both asymmetries (all $ps < .001$, Figure 4).

We examined the impact of closeness because a reviewer suggested that it, rather than liking, might be responsible for the results of friendship in Study 2; this does not seem to be the case. Considering the issue logically, however, one could imagine that closeness might cut either way. On the one hand, one might be especially sensitive to the feelings of someone one is close to, which should amplify the asymmetries. But, on the other hand, one might imagine that people could be less concerned about the feelings of someone they are close to because they might worry less about the impact of the other person's feelings on the relationship.

There was also a main effect of closeness: disclosure was overall higher with close partners. Importantly, the three-way interaction between participant outcome, initiator outcome, and relationship closeness was not significant ($F(1, 1594) = 0.191$, $p = .662$, $\eta^2 < .001$, 95% CI = [0, 0.003][5]). In addition, a sensitivity power analysis (G*Power, $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $N = 1602$, 8 groups) indicated that the study had 80% power to detect interaction effects of approximately $f = .07$ or larger (corresponding to $\eta^2_p \approx .0049$). This suggests that any true moderation by closeness—if present at all—is likely very small.

Figure 4: Responders' Disclosure Likelihood When Initiator is a Distant Acquaintance Versus a Close Friend. Error Bars: 95% CIs.



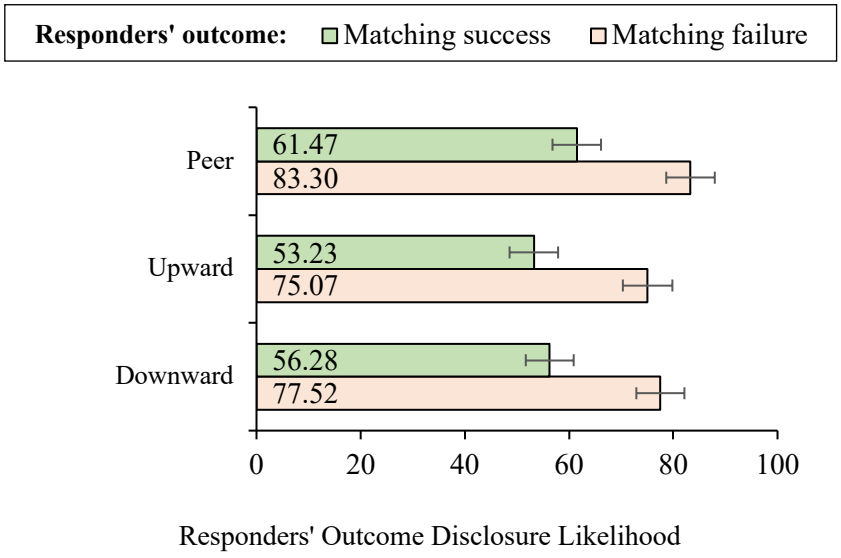
Supplemental Study: Manipulating Status. Responding to another reviewer suggestion, the second study, reported in Supplement 4 ($N = 901$, preregistration: https://aspredicted.org/grz9-n364.pdf), tested whether the relative status of the conversational partners moderates the observed patterns. It is possible that status could shift disclosure motives: responders might overwhelmingly disclose successes and hide failures when interacting with higher-status counterparts, or they may feel more comfortable disclosing

[5] We used this calculator to obtain the 95% CI around the effect size: https://effect-size-calculator.herokuapp.com/#partial-eta-squared-fixed-effects.

failures with peers or lower-status counterparts. This would be expected if impression management or status signaling were the primary drivers of disclosure. However, if our other-focused account holds, disclosure patterns should remain consistent across status levels, since other-focused considerations are active regardless of hierarchy.

In this study, participants were assigned either a matching success or a matching failure condition in a professional context (submitting a proposal to speak at an upcoming conference). Responders either succeeded and responded to a successful counterpart (Alex), or they failed and responded to an unsuccessful counterpart. Critically, Alex's relative status varied between subjects: Alex was a mentor (upward), a colleague (peer), or a mentee (downward).

Figure 5: Responders' Disclosure Likelihood of a Matching Success or Failure by Status Condition. Error Bars: 95% CIs.



As shown in Figure 5, the results revealed no interaction between status and outcome ($F(2, 895) = .011$, $p = .989$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$). Across all status conditions, participants consistently disclosed matching failures more than matching successes ($ps < .001$). A sensitivity power analysis (G*Power; $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $N = 901$, 6 groups, numerator df = 2) indicated that the study had 80% power to detect interaction

effects of approximately $f = .10$ or larger (corresponding to $\eta^2_p \approx .010$). Thus, any true moderation by status is likely no larger than a small effect.

Together, Study 2 and the Supplemental Studies demonstrate that the disclosure asymmetries are robust across diverse relational contexts. The consistency of these effects, with the exception of disclosure in low liking conditions, in which they were attenuated, suggests that responders are not merely managing impressions or relationships. If disclosure were driven primarily by concerns about preserving relationships or about making a good impression on others, we would expect stronger effects with more valuable relationships (e.g., closer ones) or systematic differences based on status. Instead, responders appear to adjust their disclosure based on other-focused concerns.

Notably, the relationships we examined were embedded in various interaction scenarios and outcome domains, further supporting the generalizability of our findings (see also Table I in Supplement 1). Interactions ranged from brief and incidental (e.g., running into the initiator at the airport in Study 2) to moderately social (e.g., meeting for coffee; closeness study) to more extended and intentional (e.g., a lunch conversation; status study). Likewise, the nature of outcomes varied, from medical test feedback (Study 1) to job application results (Study 2, closeness study), to a professional development opportunity (status study). The consistency of disclosure asymmetries suggests that concern for the other person plays a robust and consistent role in shaping responsive disclosure behavior.

Study 3: Testing Other-Focused Concern by Manipulating Domain Relevance

Study 3 examined domain relevance as a moderator of the matching disclosure asymmetry by manipulating whether responders' outcomes were in the same or different domain from the one disclosed by the initiator. In this study, the outcomes of responders and initiators were always of the same valence (both positive or both negative). This design allowed us to test whether the support provided by matching negative disclosures depends on domain relevance—that is, whether responders believe sharing any failure provides support, or whether support requires domain relevance.

Method

Participants. We recruited 801 participants from Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 43.64, SD = 14.17, 39.8% male, 59.1% female, 1.1% other/prefer not to say).

Design and Procedure. Study 3 employed a 2 (valence: both positive vs. both negative) × 2 (domain: same vs. different) between-subjects design and was preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/276q-cm3f.pdf.

Participants imagined recently receiving results from a biological age test offered through their workplace. In the positive outcome condition, their biological age was seven years younger than their actual age; in the negative outcome condition, it was seven years older. Participants were then told they were having coffee with Alex, a friend and colleague at their company. Alex disclosed an outcome that always matched the valence of participants' outcome (both positive or both negative, depending on the condition), but varied in domain: In the same-domain condition, Alex disclosed a biological age test result. In the different-domain condition, Alex disclosed an investment outcome (success or failure).

Participants then completed a disclosure allocation task by distributing 100 points between two responses: (a) a non-disclosure response that acknowledged Alex's outcome without mentioning their own outcome, and (b) a disclosure response that additionally mentioned their outcome. The points allocated to the disclosure response served as the dependent variable.

Results

We examined whether the domain moderated disclosure of same-valence outcomes. Specifically, we tested whether the matching asymmetry observed in prior studies would weaken or reverse in different-domain conditions. Disclosure likelihood by condition is shown in Figure 6; means, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals are reported in Table 4.

Figure 6: Responders' Disclosure Likelihood of a Similar Valence Positive or Negative Outcome by Domain in Study 3. Error Bars: 95% CIs.

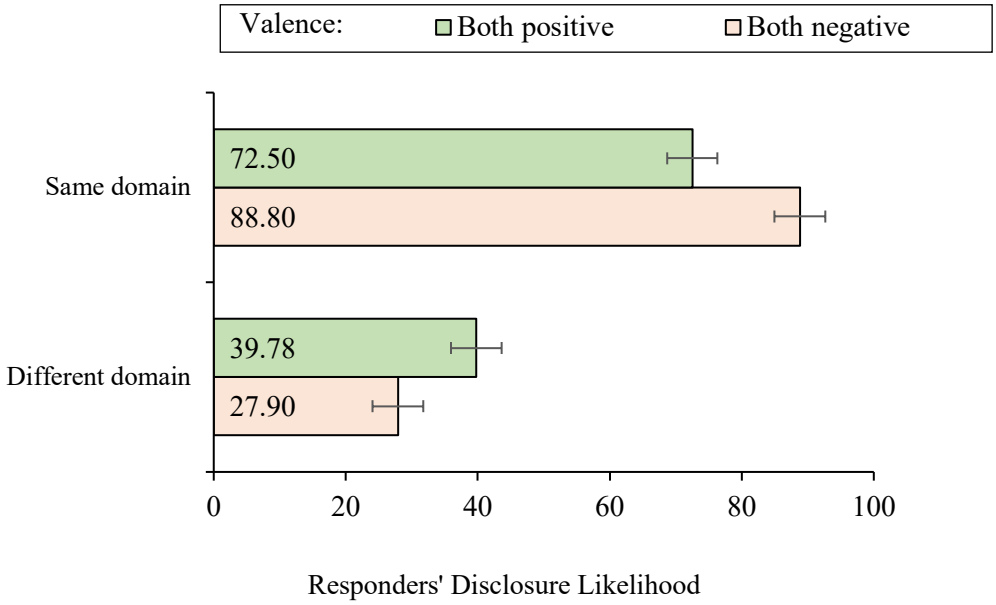

Valence:
Both positive
Both negative
Same domain
72.50
88.80
Different domain
39.78
27.90
0
20
40
60
80
100
Responders' Disclosure Likelihood

Table 4: Responders' Disclosure Likelihood of a Same-Valence Positive or Negative Outcome by Domain in Study 3. *M* (SD), [95% CI].

Domain Relevance	Both positive	Both negative
Same Domain (I. Health, R. Health)	72.50 (28.56), [68.56, 76.45]	88.80 (17.94), [86.28, 91.31]
Different Domain (I. Investment, R. Health)	39.78 (33.19), [35.15, 44.41]	27.90 (28.63), [23.90, 31.90]

A 2 (valence: both positive vs. both negative) × 2 (domain: same vs. different) between-subjects ANOVA on responders' disclosure revealed no significant main effect of outcome valence, $F(1, 797) = 1.27$, $p = .260$, $\eta^2_p = 0.002$. However, there was a significant main effect of domain, $F(1, 797) = 572.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.418$, such that responders were far more likely to disclose same-valence outcomes when in the same domain as the initiator's versus a different domain ($M_{same} = 80.53$, SD = 25.25, 95% CI = [78.05, 83.01] vs. $M_{different} = 33.85$, SD = 31.53, 95% CI = [30.75, 36.96]). Critically, there was a significant interaction of domain and outcome valence, $F(1, 797) = 51.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.061$.

In the same-domain conditions, we replicated the matching asymmetry: responders were significantly more likely to disclose their matching negative outcome (negative health outcome in response to the initiator's negative health disclosure) than their matching positive outcome (positive health outcome in response to the initiator's positive health disclosure) ($M = 88.80$ vs. 72.50), $F(1, 797) = 34.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.042$. In contrast, in the different-domain conditions, this pattern reversed: responders were *more* likely to disclose a positive health outcome following the initiator's positive financial disclosure (both positive, different domain) than they were to disclose their negative health outcome following the initiator's negative financial disclosure (different domain; both positive: $M = 39.78$ vs. both negative: 27.90), $F(1, 797) = 18.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.023$.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 identify a boundary condition for disclosure matching: domain relevance affects whether people respond to disclosures with same-valence outcomes. When outcomes were in the same domain, participants were more willing to disclose their matching negative outcomes than their

matching positive ones, consistent with other-focused motives. However, when outcomes occurred in different domains, this pattern reversed: participants were *more* willing to disclose matching successes than matching failures. What accounts for this reversal? Perhaps, in the negative outcome condition, people predicted that their counterparts would find a reciprocal disclosure of a negative outcome in a different domain not comforting, but weird and possibly even insulting. If your friend had an investment loss, telling him about your negative health test might insinuate that you believe he would be comforted by your own random misfortune. These findings speak against the idea that reciprocal disclosures are driven by broad emotional congruence—such as the notion that "misery loves company" (Gray et al., 2011)—or a basic general preference to disclose negative information over positive information.

Instead, responders appear to consider whether their disclosure could be helpful. When their experience feels directly relevant (same domain), responders are more inclined to share matching negative outcomes, possibly to provide support. When their outcome feels less relevant (different domain), such disclosures could seem distracting, or even be perceived as misery one-upmanship.

Supplemental Mechanism Studies. Studies 2 and 3 provided process evidence through moderation and content analysis of self-generated motives. One additional study, reported in Supplement 5 ($N = 997$, preregistration: https://aspredicted.org/8K8_H18), measured the proposed mechanism directly, asking responders how much they thought their disclosure would help or hurt the initiator. Mediation analysis provided direct evidence that a concern for the counterpart's emotional state drives responsive disclosure patterns.

Study 4: Disclosure Asymmetries in Investment Outcomes

Study 3 demonstrated that disclosure is attenuated for different-domain outcomes. However, one ambiguity is whether this attenuation was driven by domain mismatch per se, or whether investments represent a uniquely sensitive domain that reduces disclosure likelihood even within domains. To address this, Study 4 examined disclosure patterns when both the initiator's and responder's outcomes occurred in the investment domain. Study 4 also examined how responders shape their messages beyond whether they disclose. If responders care about the feelings of initiators who disclose negative outcomes, but do not

themselves have a negative outcome to disclose, they may use other strategies to provide comfort by adjusting the content, tone, and length of their responses.

To examine both disclosure likelihood and message content, Study 4 employed a new dependent measure. Instead of allocating points, participants wrote their own responses and then self-coded whether they disclosed or not. This allowed us to test whether the disclosure asymmetries would generalize to natural, self-generated responses and to examine the communicative strategies responders used to shape their responses.

Method

Participants. We recruited 601 participants on Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 42.65, SD_{age} = 13.83, 46.3% male, 52.6% female, 1.2% 'other/prefer not to say').

Design and Procedure. Study 4 employed a 2 (responders' outcome: successful vs. unsuccessful investment) x 2 (initiator's disclosure: successful vs. unsuccessful investment) between-subjects design, and was preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/8mng-94xw.pdf.

Participants imagined that about a year ago, they had invested money in a biotech company. Their investment had either been successful (financial gain) or unsuccessful (financial loss), manipulated between subjects. They then met their friend Alex for dinner, during which Alex disclosed either a successful or unsuccessful investment. Comprehension checks required participants to summarize both their own and Alex's outcomes.

Participants wrote their response in an open-ended text box, answering the question "How would you respond to Alex?". On the following page, they were reminded of their response and asked to self-code whether they had disclosed their outcome or not ("Yes, I told Alex about my own (un)successful investment." vs. "No, I did not tell Alex about my own (un)successful investment.").

Open-Ended Response Coding. We first examined *response length* (word count) as a measure of elaboration. To examine how responders disclosed, the second author semantically coded participants'

open-ended responses for communicative strategies directed at managing the counterpart's emotions[6]. Specifically, she noted the presence or absence (1/0) of 1) *consoling* (i.e., whether comfort, encouragement, or validation was offered when Alex failed); 2) *offers of repair, help, or advice* (i.e., whether participants offered help, ideas, or recommendations to Alex); and 3) *compensatory apology* (i.e., whether participants minimized or downplayed their success, expressed discomfort about it, or referenced luck or external circumstances).

Results

Disclosure. The pattern of disclosure replicated that of prior studies (Figure 7; Table 5).

Figure 7: Responders' Likelihood to Disclose their Outcome by Condition in Study 4. Error bars: 95% CIs.

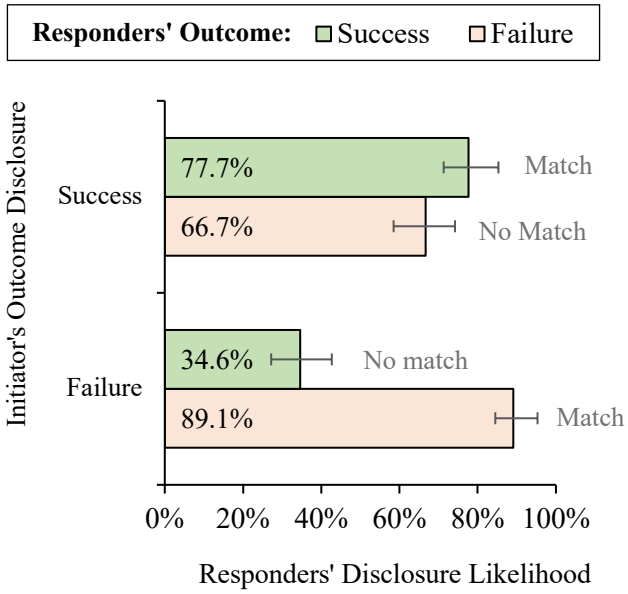


Table 5: Responders' Disclosure Likelihood by Condition in Study 4. *M* (SE), [95% CI].

	Responder: Success	Responder: Failure
Initiator: Success	77.7% (3.4%), [70.1%, 84.1%]	66.7% (3.8%), [58.6%, 74.1%]
Initiator: Failure	34.6% (3.9%), [27.1%, 42.8%]	89.1% (2.6%), [82.9%, 93.7%]

[6] While a second coder would have been ideal, the categories were defined by observable linguistic features (e.g., explicit apologies, offers of help) that required minimal inference.

Preference for Disclosure of Matching Over Non-Matching Outcomes. In support of Hypothesis 1, participants were significantly more likely to disclose their outcomes when these matched (vs. did not match) those of the initiator. This preference emerged for both responders who failed and succeeded. Specifically, responders who failed were significantly more likely to disclose their failure to initiators who disclosed an investment failure than a success (89.1% vs. 66.7%), $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 21.78$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.269$, and responders who succeeded were significantly more likely to disclose their success to an initiator who disclosed a success than a failure (77.7% vs. 34.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 301) = 56.57$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.434$.

Asymmetries. The predicted asymmetries also emerged (Hypotheses 2 and 3). First, participants disclosed matching failures (failures in response to failures) more frequently than matching successes (successes in response to successes; 89.1% vs. 77.7%), $\chi^2(1, N = 295) = 6.94$, $p = .008$, $\Phi = 0.153$. Second, for non-matching outcomes, participants more frequently disclosed failures in response to successes than successes in response to failures (66.7% vs. 34.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 306) = 31.39$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.320$.

Importantly, overall disclosure rates in this investment paradigm closely matched those observed in Studies 1–2 (health and job contexts). This rules out the possibility that the low cross-domain disclosure in Study 3 reflected a general reluctance to respond to others' disclosures of investment outcomes.

Open Responses Analysis. We examined how participants formulated their responses both in terms of elaboration and communicative strategies.

***Number of Words*.** Responses were longer when participants disclosed than did not disclose their outcome ($M = 24.59$, SD = 11.93 vs. $M = 17.45$, SD = 12.42), $F(1, 599) = 41.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.064$. Moreover, they were longest when participants disclosed a success in response to a failure ($M = 30.47$, SD = 15.92).[7] This pattern suggests greater effort in managing potentially delicate disclosures.

Communication Strategies. We next examined how participants shaped their responses by coding open-ended replies for the theoretically relevant conversational strategies (Table 6); darker shading represents higher prevalence.

[7] The average length of responses was 22.33 words (SD = 12.61; median = 20; range = 2-87). Full word count statistics are provided in Supplement 7.

Table 6: Prevalence of each Coding Category in Responders' Written Responses by Condition and Self-Coded Responder Disclosure and Non-Disclosure in Study 4.

Condition		Reason Listed for Disclosure vs. Non-Disclosure		
Outcomes	Responder Disclosure	Consoling	Offering repair or help	Compensatory apology
I. succeeds R. succeeds	No		3.0%	
	Yes		2.6%	2.6%
	Total		2.7%	
I. succeeds R. fails	No		0.0%	
	Yes		4.9%	
	Total		3.3%	
I. fails R. succeeds	No	24.0%	20.0%	
	Yes	18.9%	30.2%	17.0%
	Total	22.2%	23.5%	
I. fails R. fails	No	12.5%	12.5%	
	Yes	18.3%	3.8%	
	Total	17.7%	4.8%	
Overall	No	22.4%	11.5%	
	Yes	18.5%	7.2%	7.1%
	Total	20.0%	8.7%	

Note. The colors represent prevalence, from low (lighter colors) to high (darker colors). Colors darken every 10 percentage points (0.1%-10.0%, 10.1%-20.0%, 20.1%-30.0%, 30.1%-40.0%), with 0% marked white. Empty cells were not coded.

Consoling. We examined consoling prevalence in cases where initiators failed. Consoling responses were common and represented the most frequently observed strategy overall (20.0%). In this study, consoling did not vary significantly by whether the responder experienced a success or a failure (17.7% vs. 22.2%, $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 0.964$, $p = .326$, $\Phi = 0.057$). This suggests that consoling functioned as a general conversational response to help cheer up the initiator who failed.

Offers of Repair or Help. Offers of repair or help showed systematic variation across conditions. They were most common when responders experienced a success and initiators disclosed a failure (23.5%), especially when responders disclosed their success, which they accompanied with some offer of helpful assistance (30.2%, comparisons to other conditions: *ps* < .001).

Compensatory Apology. Compensatory apologies involved attributing success to luck or external circumstances. These were examined only in cases where responders disclosed a success. Responders who disclosed success in response to a failure were significantly more likely to use apologetic language than responders who disclosed a matching success (17.0% vs. 2.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 168) = 11.30$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.259$. Thus, compensatory apology appears to reflect efforts to soften the emotional impact of disclosing a positive outcome to someone who is anticipated to be hurt by it.

Discussion

Study 4 provided further evidence for the robustness of the disclosure asymmetries, as the patterns replicated in the investment domain with effect sizes comparable to Studies 1-2, and with participants' self-coded open-ended disclosure responses. Beyond replicating the core disclosure patterns, Study 4 revealed how responders actively shape their messages to manage the initiator's emotions. Responders experiencing a non-matching success produced longer responses and were more likely to offer help and use apologetic language, particularly when they disclosed their outcome. These findings suggest that other-focused concerns operate not only at the level of disclosure decisions (whether to share) but also at the level of message construction (how to share).

Study 5: How Responders Shape Their Disclosure Messages

In Study 4, participants wrote their own replies and self-coded whether they disclosed their outcome. Study 5 built on this approach with participants again composing responses, but with researchers coding the responses. Beyond disclosure, we examined the strategies responders use to shape their responses using the categories from Study 4 (consoling, offers of repair or help, compensatory apology), plus two additional ones: deception (misleading communication about their outcome) and delayed disclosure (first attending to the initiator's emotions before revealing their outcome). Consistent with our

other-focused account, these strategies reflect additional ways responders may manage the interpersonal consequences of disclosure. When responders anticipate that sharing their outcome could harm the initiator, they may engage in deception or delay their disclosure. Thus, deception and delayed disclosure represent alternative strategies for regulating others' emotions when straightforward disclosure could be seen as emotionally costly, particularly when responders lack a matching failure to share as a form of support.

Method

Participants. We recruited 610 participants on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 42.42, SD_{age} = 13.44, 46.7% male, 51.1% female, 2.1% 'other/prefer not to say').

Design and Procedure. The study employed a 2 (responders' outcome: failure vs. success) x 3 (initiator's disclosure: failure vs. success vs. no outcome) between-subjects design and was preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/SFH_P2X. We used a version of the job application paradigm of Study 2 in which participants imagined applying for a prestigious job, and between-subjects, received either a rejection or a job offer. Participants imagined running into their acquaintance Alex at the airport on their way home. Alex disclosed either a success (job offer), a failure (job rejection), or no outcome.

Disclosure. Participants summarized the scenario and then wrote a response in their own words. Responses were coded as disclosure if they explicitly mentioned the interview outcome, and as non-disclosure if they referred only to the interview or emotions. Coding was conducted by two independent coders: the first author (blind to conditions) and a trained research assistant (blind to hypotheses and conditions). Initial discrepancies (initial agreement: 95.2%, Cohen's $\kappa = 0.903$) were resolved through discussion. In addition to human coding, we also employed human-AI coding for disclosure. We found high reliability (97.3% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = 0.945$), providing support for the validity of the AI-coding.[8]

[8] When both initiators and responders failed, 86.0% of responses were coded as disclosure by the human-AI collaboration, versus 45.7% when only responders failed, $\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 36.72$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.423$. Similarly, when both initiators and responders succeeded, 68.3% of responses were coded as disclosures, compared to 34.0% when only responders succeeded, $\chi^2(1, N = 204) = 24.06$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.343$. Disclosure of matching failures was also higher than disclosure of matching successes (86.0% vs. 68.3%, $\chi^2(1, N = 201) = 8.90$, $p = .003$, $\Phi = 0.210$), and failed in response to successes were disclosed marginally more than successes in response to failures (45.7% vs. 34.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 208) = 2.99$, $p = .084$, $\Phi = 0.120$. These results offer reassurance for the reliability of our coding approach.

Open-Ended Responses. We first examined *response length* (word count) as a measure of elaboration. We also semantically coded the open-ended responses for additional communication strategies.[9] We used the categories from Study 4 (consoling, offers of repair or help, and compensatory apologies), but additionally coded for the presence or absence (1/0) of deception and delayed disclosure. We defined deception as engaging in any misleading communication, and delayed disclosure as any disclosure that occurred in a delayed manner, only after an initial counterpart-focused message. To scale a human-defined semantic coding framework across the full set of responses, we used an AI-assisted coding procedure (Claude Opus 4.1, Anthropic). Responses were divided into 10 batches of approximately 40 responses each. Each batch included a subset of calibration cases previously coded to serve as reliability benchmarks. Coding proceeded through four iterative steps. First, each batch was independently coded by the AI on each coding category. Second, for each batch, challenging or borderline cases were discussed in real-time between the researcher[10] and the AI to reach consensus. Third, coding criteria were refined and updated based on the ambiguous cases encountered in each batch. Fourth, coding accuracy was verified using embedded calibration cases within each batch.

This process was continued until the coding categories were clearly defined and consistently applied. The final semantic coding prompt is available on ResearchBox. To assess reliability, 50 randomly selected responses were cross-checked by two independent human coders, with no disagreements. In addition, we compared AI-coded disclosure against the existing human-coded disclosure. Agreement was high (97.3%; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.945$), with discrepancies limited to borderline cases (e.g., ambiguous references to interview outcomes or vague expressions of uncertainty[11]).

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[9] For this analysis we examined only the conditions in which the initiator disclosed an outcome ($N = 409$), excluding the control conditions.

[10] Given that the first listed first author coded the open responses manually, this analysis was conducted by the second listed first author, to reduce bias in the results.

[11] Of the 11 disagreement cases (2.7%), eight involved Claude coding borderline responses as disclosures that the two humans coded as non-disclosures (e.g., "I actually also came here for an interview and it went quite well."), while three showed the opposite pattern—Claude coded borderline responses as non-disclosures, whereas humans coded them as disclosures (e.g., "Thank you, Alex, that makes me feel better. But where do I get a job now?").

Results

Disclosure. Disclosure behavior (using the human coding) resembled the patterns observed in prior studies (see Figure 8 and Table 7).

Figure 8: Responders' Likelihood to Disclose by Condition in Study 5. Error Bars: 95% CIs.

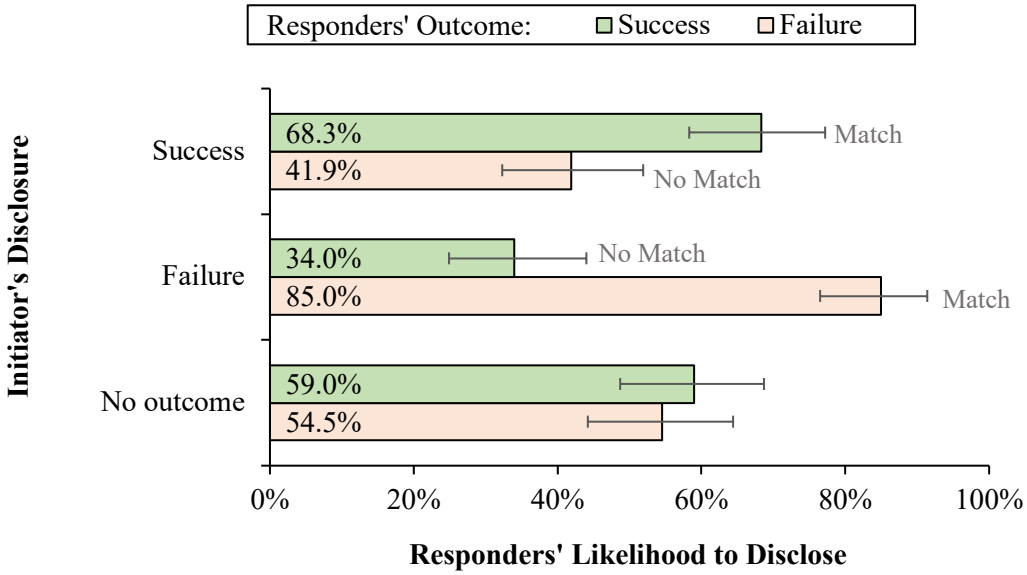

Table 7: Responders' Likelihood to Disclose by Condition in Study 5. *M* (SE), [95% CIs].

	Responder: Success	Responder: Failure
Initiator: Success	68.3% (4.6%), [58.3%, 77.2%]	41.9% (4.8%), [32.3%, 51.9%]
Initiator: Failure	34.0% (4.7%), [24.9%, 44.0%]	85.0% (3.6%), [76.5%, 91.4%]
Initiator: No Outcome	59.0% (4.9%), [48.7%, 68.7%]	54.5% (5.0%), [44.2%, 64.4%]

Preference for the Disclosure of Matching Outcomes. Responders were more likely to disclose their outcomes when these matched those of the initiator (Hypothesis 1). This pattern emerged for both failures and successes. First, responders disclosed their failures more when initiators also disclosed failures than successes (85.0% vs. 41.9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 40.78$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.446$. Second, responders

disclosed their successes more when initiators also disclosed successes than failures (68.3% vs. 34.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 204) = 24.06$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.343$.

Asymmetries. Replicating the matching asymmetry observed in prior studies, participants were significantly more likely to disclose failures in response to failures (85.0%) than they were to disclose successes in response to successes (68.3%), $\chi^2(1, N = 201) = 7.81$, $p = .005$, $\Phi = 0.197$[12], supporting Hypothesis 2. For non-matching outcomes, participants were directionally more likely to disclose failures in response to successes (41.9%) than to disclose successes in response to failures (34.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 208) = 1.39$, $p = .239$, $\Phi = 0.082$. Although this difference was not statistically significant, its direction is consistent with Hypothesis 3 and with the pattern observed in prior studies.

Comparisons to Non-Responsive Disclosure. These comparisons clarified how matching and non-matching disclosures differed from non-responsive disclosures. When responders experienced a failure, disclosure was significantly higher when it followed a failure disclosure (85.0%) than no disclosure (54.5%), $\chi^2(1, N = 201) = 22.18$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.332$. In contrast, failure disclosure was marginally lower when it followed a success disclosure (41.9%) than no disclosure (54.5%), $\chi^2(1, N = 206) = 3.25$, $p = .071$, $\Phi = 0.126$.

For positive outcomes, a different pattern emerged. Responders' success disclosure did not differ significantly when in response to an initiator's success disclosure versus no outcome disclosure (68.3% vs. 59.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 201) = 1.89$, $p = .170$, $\Phi = 0.097$. However, success disclosure was significantly lower when it followed the initiator's failure disclosure (34.0%) than no disclosure (59.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 203) = 12.77$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.251$.

[12] A sensitivity power analysis for the χ^2 test (G*Power; $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $N = 208$, df = 1) indicated that the study had 80% power to detect associations of approximately $w = 0.19$ ($\Phi = 0.19$) or larger. Thus, these results allow us to rule out medium or larger effects for the non-matching asymmetry in this study; it remains underpowered to detect smaller effects. Importantly, this null result is consistent with the broader pattern across studies, in which evidence for the non-matching asymmetry is less consistent than for the matching asymmetry.

Together, these results replicate the pattern observed in Study 1: matching disclosures increased relative to baseline only for negative outcomes, while non-matching disclosures fell below baseline for both outcome valences, but especially for successes shared in response to failures.

Finally, there was no significant difference in the disclosure of successes and failures for non-responsive disclosures (54.5% vs. 59.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 201) = 0.423$, $p = .516$, $\Phi = 0.046$[13]. Together with the results from Study 1, these findings suggest that there is no general preference for disclosing negative outcomes over positive ones, and that the patterns observed here are better explained by social preference considerations.

Open Responses Analysis. Beyond whether participants disclosed, we once again examined how they crafted their messages, analyzing both response length and content.

Number of Words. Responses varied in length ($M = 20.07$, SD = 12.06; median = 18; range = 1–124), and disclosure responses were longer than non-disclosure responses ($M = 23.10$, SD = 12.50 vs. $M = 16.06$, SD = 10.18), $F(1, 608) = 55.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.084$. As in Study 4, the longest responses occurred when participants had a non-matching success (initiator failure, responder success: $M = 24.87$, SD = 17.63) and chose to disclose this outcome ($M = 31.11$, SD = 22.38). This pattern suggests greater elaboration when disclosures are perceived to be socially delicate. Full word count statistics are provided in Supplement 8.

Communication Strategies. We analyzed participants' responses for several conversational strategies (consoling, help-offering, apologies, deception, delayed disclosure). Coding of response content revealed systematic adaptations consistent with other-focused concerns. Percentages by condition, disclosure, and category are presented in Table 8. Darker shading represents larger prevalence.

[13] A sensitivity power analysis for the χ^2 test (G*Power; $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $N = 201$, df = 1) indicated that the study had 80% power to detect associations of approximately $w = 0.20$ ($\Phi = 0.20$) or larger. Thus, these results suggest that in non-responsive disclosure settings, any true difference, if present at all, is likely very small. We also note that the results of Study 1 were directionally reversed but also not significant. This suggest that our observed patterns are unique to responsive and not to non-responsive disclosure contexts.

Table 8: Prevalence of each Coding Category in Participants' Written Responses by Condition and Responder Disclosure and Non-Disclosure in Study 5.

Condition		Reason Listed by Responder				
Outcomes	Responder Disclosure[a]	Consoling	Offering repair or help	Compensatory apology	Deception	Delayed Disclosure
I. success R. success	No		0.0%		6.3%	
	Yes		0.0%	4.3%		24.6%
	Total		0.0%			
I. success R. failure	No		0.0%		12.3%	
	Yes		0.0%			39.6%
	Total		0.0%			
I. failure R. success	No	35.3%	1.5%		26.5%	
	Yes	40.0%	14.3%	20.0%		40.0%
	Total	36.9%	5.8%			
I. failure R. failure	No	28.6%	0.0%		14.3%	
	Yes	20.9%	0.0%			17.4%
	Total	22.0%	0.0%			
Overall	No	34.1%	0.6%		17.0%	
	Yes	26.4%	2.1%	9.6%		27.3%
	Total	29.6%	1.5%			

[a] We used the AI-coded disclosure variable for this analysis. Out of the 409 responses, 171 (41.8%) were coded as non-disclosure, 238 (58.2%) were coded as disclosure.

Note. The colors represent prevalence, from low (lighter colors) to high (darker colors). Colors darken every 10 percentage points (0.1%-10.0%, 10.1%-20.0%, 20.1%-30.0%, 30.1%-40.0%), with 0% marked white. Empty cells were not coded.

Consoling. In line with our account, many responders used consoling language when initiators failed (29.6%). In addition, responders were more likely to console failing responders if they themselves experienced a success (36.9%) than a matching failure (22.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 203) = 5.41$, $p = .020$, $\Phi = 0.163$. This pattern suggests that responders may rely on verbal consolation when a shared failure is not available

as a means of support. In contrast, when a shared failure is available, disclosure of this shared outcome itself may have served a consoling function for responders.

Offers of Repair or Help. Offers of help or repair were rare in this study—appearing in just 1.5% of responses overall, compared to 9.5% in Study 4. These offers only occurred when the responder succeeded, but the initiators failed. In this group, 5.8% of responses included offers of help (overall comparison: $\chi^2(3, N = 409) = 18.09$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.210$). This was especially true when the responder chose to disclose their non-matching success (14.3%) versus chose not to disclose (1.5%), $\chi^2(1, N = 103) = 6.92$, $p = .009$, $\Phi = 0.229$. This replicates the pattern observed in Study 4, though the lower overall frequency here may reflect differences in the topic or setting. Together, the results suggest that when responders cannot express support by sharing a matching failure, they may instead offer help or repair by using their success as a way to encourage or assist the initiator.

Compensatory Apologies. As in Study 4, we examined compensatory apologies in cases in which responders disclosed a success. Apologies were more common when responders shared success following an initiator's failure disclosure (20.0%) than a success following an initiator's success disclosure (4.3%), $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 6.55$, $p = .011$, $\Phi = 0.251$. This replicates the findings from Study 4 and suggests that responders who are in a better position are motivated to mitigate the potential discomfort their success might cause in the initiator. As a result, they may use apologetic language to acknowledge the imbalance and reduce, or make amends for, the emotional impact of their disclosure.

Deception. Deception, defined as intentionally misrepresenting one's outcome, was especially common among responders who experienced a success when the initiator disclosed a failure. In this condition, 26.5% of responders engaged in deception, a rate higher than any other group (Φs ≥ 0.107[14]).

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[14] (1) Responder succeeds and initiator fails vs. both succeed (26.5% vs. 6.3%), $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 5.56$, $p = .018$, $\Phi = 0.236$,
(2) Responder succeeds and initiator fails vs. responder fails and initiator succeeds (26.5% vs. 12.3%): $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 3.90$, $p = .048$, $\Phi = 0.177$,
(3) Responder succeeds and initiator fails vs. both fail (26.5% vs. 14.3%): $\chi^2(1, N = 82) = .935$, $p = .334$, $\Phi = 0.107$. The comparison to the matching failure condition was not significant, which may reflect either a genuinely small difference or insufficient power to detect small effects; a sensitivity power analysis (80% power, df = 1, $N = 82$) suggests that we would have been able to detect effect sizes of w = 0.31 ($\Phi = 0.31$) or above.

Participants used a range of deceptive strategies. Some changed the context of their visit (e.g., visiting friends or traveling for fun, rather than for a job interview). Others omitted key details (e.g., "waiting to hear back" despite already knowing the result). One participant even falsely reported a rejection. This willingness to deceive suggests that when disclosing a better outcome felt potentially harmful, some participants resorted to misrepresentation as a means to mitigate the potential harm to the initiator. Although deception is a more extreme communication strategy, it reflects the same underlying sensitivity to the initiator's emotional state that likely motivated other protective strategies (e.g., offers of repair/help or compensatory apology).

Delayed Disclosure. Participants also strategically timed when they shared their outcomes. Overall, matching outcomes were disclosed sooner than non-matching ones. Only 17.4% of matching failure disclosures were delayed until later in the response. In contrast, 40.0% of success disclosures when the initiator failed, and 39.6% of failure disclosures when the initiator succeeded were delayed. Both were delayed more than matching failures (χ^2s > 6.94, *p*s < .008). This pattern suggests that responders used timing as a strategy to regulate the initiator's emotions. When they could offer the immediate comfort of a matching failure disclosure, they did so right away. But when their disclosure risked emotional harm (better outcomes) or might have damped a moment of celebration (worse outcomes), they strategically delayed, perhaps allowing space for initial emotional reactions before introducing potentially disruptive information. In short, even the pacing of disclosure appeared to be guided by concern for the initiator's emotional experience.

Discussion

Study 5 replicated the matching disclosure pattern observed in prior studies and confirmed both asymmetries using content-analyzed open-ended responses. Beyond disclosure likelihood, the analysis revealed how responders managed the interpersonal consequences of their disclosures. When responders experienced a success while the initiator had failed, they employed multiple communication strategies to soften the potential emotional impact: longer responses, offers of concrete help, compensatory apologies, and strategically delayed disclosures. These strategies were less common when responders disclosed

matching failures, presumably because such disclosures were perceived as inherently supportive. Together, these findings reinforce the idea that disclosure behavior is guided by consideration of its impact on the initiator of the disclosure exchange.

Study 6: Disclosure Asymmetries in Live Interactions

Having demonstrated the effects in both self-coded and researcher-coded written responses (Studies 4 and 5), we next tested whether the matching pattern and the asymmetries would emerge in live interactions involving real, experienced outcomes. Unlike Studies 1-5, which used hypothetical scenarios, Study 6 captured real-time, dyadic conversations between participants who completed either an easy or difficult task, designed to produce success or failure, respectively. Participants were then paired to engage in online chats. To observe naturalistic disclosure behavior, we incentivized one member of each pair (the initiator) to share their outcome early in the conversation, then examined whether and how the other person's (the responder) decided to disclose in return. We content-analyzed immediate responses using the same coding scheme as in Study 5.

Method

Participants. We recruited 1,005 participants from Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 33.87[15], SD_{age} = 11.90; 47.8% male, 51.3% female, 0.9% 'other/prefer not to say') to complete the study for £1.55 (~$2.10), with the opportunity to earn an additional 60¢ in bonuses. Of these, 946 (94.1%) were successfully paired into 473 dyads. In 430 of these dyadic conversations (90.9%), the assigned initiator complied with our disclosure instructions.

Design and Procedure. Study 6 used a 2 (participant task difficulty: easy task leading to success vs. difficult task leading to failure) × 2 (chat role: initiator vs. responder) between-subjects design. At the outset, all participants completed two filler tasks followed by a bonus task that determined their assigned outcome. In the bonus task, participants had 25 seconds to find two numbers that summed to 10 within a matrix. Task difficulty—and therefore the failure or success outcome—was manipulated by matrix size:

[15] One participant entered the age of 222. We excluded this participant from the average age calculation.

participants in the success condition received an easy 2×2 matrix, while those in the failure condition received a difficult 4×4 matrix. Afterward, participants were told whether they had earned a 30¢ bonus based on their performance. This manipulation was effective: 89.5% of participants in the success condition received the bonus (384/434), and 89.4% of those in the failure condition did not (381/426).

After completing the bonus task and receiving task feedback, participants engaged in a 3-minute live chat with another participant. Within each pair, one person was randomly assigned to be the *initiator,* and the other was assigned to be the *responder*. Before beginning the chat, initiators were offered an additional 30¢ bonus in exchange for disclosing their outcome. To qualify, they had to (1) state their outcome, (2) avoid asking about their partner's outcome, and (3) do so before the partner disclosed anything about their own experience. Responders received no such instructions and were unaware of their partner's incentive.

Table 9: Example messages written by initiators and responders in Study 6 [verbatim]. Column 1 classifies the responder's message as disclosure or non-disclosure.

	Initiator Example Message	**Responder Example Message**
Disclosure	I won a bonus doign the last task! [sic]	me too!
	Hey, guess what? I got a 30 cent bonus!	Hey! That's awesome I didn't get it ☹
	Hello I failed the bonus question :laughing:	Good morning. Chatting from Florida! I failed also even though I'm good at math. :disappointed:
	Hi I failed to solve the last task and didn't win a bonus :(	Hello, I happened to recieve the bonus :smiley: [sic]
Non-Disclosure	Guess what! I solved my last task correctly and won a bonus! :smiley:	nice!
	Hi, I just won a bonus by completely a task correctly! Sorry, completing. :)	congrats. how is your quarantine going?
	I didn't solve the grid quick enough so I didn't win a bonus […]	Oh, dang.
	Hi! I failed to solve my last task correctly and did not win a bonus...	Oh man that is a bummer.

Disclosure. Our primary dependent variable was whether responders disclosed their own outcome in the conversation, following the initiator's disclosure. Two coders assessed each conversation. The first coder (a research assistant) was blind to both experimental conditions and hypotheses. The second coder (the first author) was blind to the conditions. We used the same disclosure criteria as in Study 5.[16] Example responses are shown in Table 9. Interrater agreement was high (Cohen's $\kappa = .970$), and coders resolved discrepancies through discussion. In addition to coding full conversations, the second coder also examined whether disclosure occurred immediately following the initiator's disclosure message (i.e., within a single conversational turn).

Coding of Immediate Responses. We coded responders' immediate responses following the same coding scheme as in Study 5: disclosure, consoling, offers of repair or help, compensatory apology, deception, and delayed disclosure (within the immediate response), all on binary dimensions (0 = absent, 1 = present).

Context: Conversation Structure and Content

Conversation-Level Summary. At the conversation level, interactions averaged 8.94 turns (SD = 3.77; median = 8; range = 2–27) and 84.64 words (SD = 35.16; median = 80; range = 17–262). Neither assigned condition significantly influenced total turns or words (*ps* > .10). Conversations centered on the task, with participants frequently discussing their performance, or the task difficulty. Many participants also engaged in small talk. Supplement 9 shows the distribution of total conversational turns and words across conversations. It also lists the 18 most frequently used words and depicts the corresponding word cloud across all conversations.

Initiator Behavior. Conversations were started by both initiators (50.5%) and responders (49.5%). When initiators began the conversations, they almost always disclosed their outcome immediately (96.3%), though a small number delayed until their second turn (3.7%). When responders

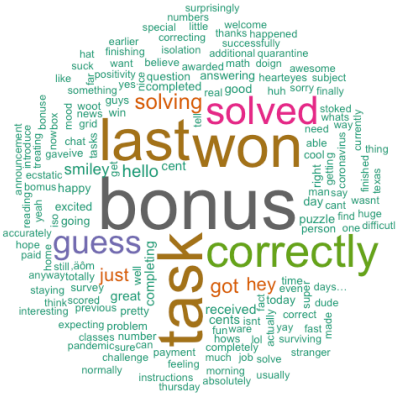
[16] We coded a response as disclosure if the responder explicitly stated that they had won or lost the bonus, or indicated having the same or a different outcome as their partner. Vague statements (e.g., "Good for you") or references to emotions alone were not coded as disclosure.

started the conversation, initiators typically initiated disclosure immediately after (in 93.4% of cases), although some delayed to their second (5.6%) or third (0.9%) turns.

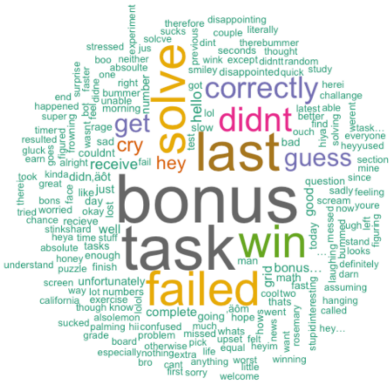
Initiator disclosure messages focused on task outcomes (correct/incorrect, winning/losing) and sometimes included emoticons (e.g., smileys or crying faces). These messages averaged 14.23 words (SD = 5.28, median = 14, range = 3–54). Figure 9 shows word clouds with the most frequent words used in initiators' disclosure messages. Supplement 9 shows the 20 most common words in a table.

Figure 9: Word Clouds for Initiators' Success Disclosure Messages (Panel A) and Failure Disclosure Messages (Panel B) for the Entire Conversational Turn.

Panel A. Initiators' Success Disclosure.



Panel B. Initiators' Failure Disclosure.

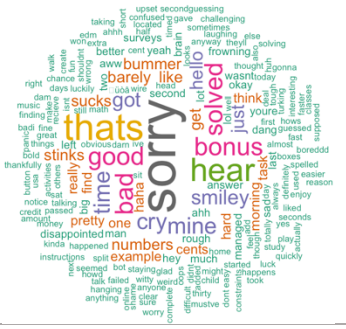
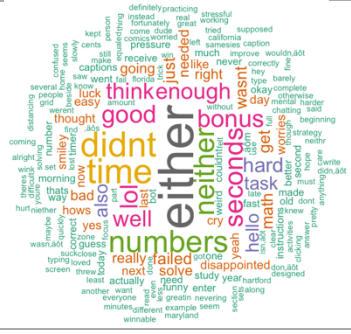


Responder Behavior. Responses to initiator's disclosure messages averaged 8.52 words (SD = 6.90, median = 7, range = 1–52). As in Study 5, disclosure responses were consistently longer (M = 9.38, SD = 7.18) than non-disclosure responses (M = 6.05, SD = 5.34), $F(1, 428) = 226.20$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2 = 0.011$, and messages in which responders disclosed a success in response to an initiator's failure disclosure produced the longest responses (M = 11.60, SD = 8.42)[17], suggesting that responders devoted more effort to disclosures that were emotionally delicate. Figure 10 presents word clouds for responders' immediate responses, categorized by condition. Responders who disclosed their outcome typically did so

[17] Full descriptive statistics are reported in Supplement 8.

immediately after the initiator's disclosure (in 86.8% of cases), though some delayed until their second (11.3%), third (1.3%), fourth (0.3%), or fifth (0.3%) turns[18].

Figure 10: Word Clouds of Responders' Immediate Disclosures by Outcome Condition. Word Size Reflects Relative Frequency Across all Transcripts Within Each Condition.

	Responder: Success	Responder: Failure
Initiator: Success		
Initiator: Failure		

Results

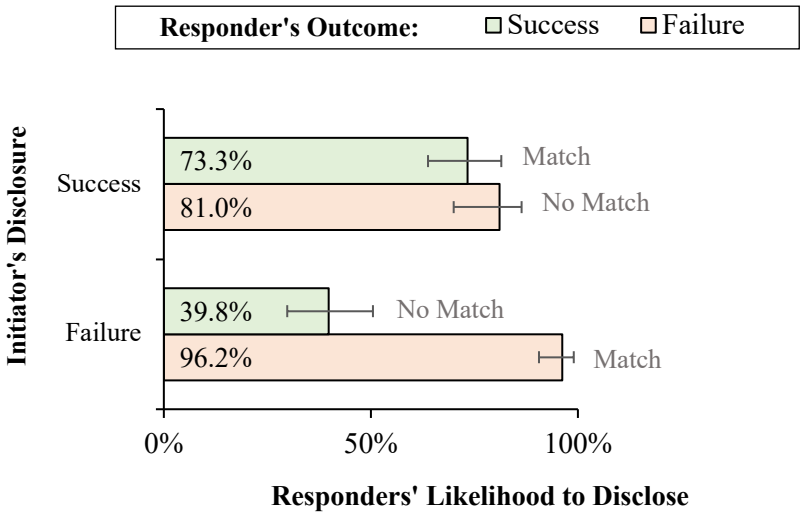
Disclosure Behavior. The predicted disclosure patterns, both a preference for matching and the hypothesized asymmetries, emerged across multiple analytical approaches.

As Treated Analysis with Reallocation. We first conducted an as-treated analysis in which participants were categorized based on their actual (experienced) outcomes. We treated those who failed

[18] Outcome disclosure messages, including later disclosures, averaged 10.25 words (SD = 7.16, median = 9, range = 1–52).

in the easy task (10.5%) as having failed, and those who succeeded in the difficult task (11.6%) as having succeeded. Figure 11 visualizes the results.

Figure 11: Responders' Likelihood to Disclose Their Outcome by Condition in Study 6 (As Treated with Reallocation Analysis). Error bars: 95% CIs.



In support of Hypothesis 1, responders were significantly more likely to disclose outcomes that matched those disclosed by the initiator. Responders who failed were significantly more likely to disclose their failure to initiators who failed versus succeeded (96.2% vs. 81.0%), χ^2 (1, N = 232) = 12.66, p < .001, Φ = 0.234. Responders who succeeded were significantly more likely to disclose their success to initiators who succeeded versus failed (73.3% vs. 39.8%), χ^2(1, N = 198) = 22.73, p < .001, Φ = 0.339.

We found additional support for the asymmetries. Responders were significantly more likely to disclose matching failures (failures in response to failures) than matching successes (successes in response to successes; 96.2% vs. 73.3%; Hypothesis 2), χ^2(1, N = 211) = 21.49, p < .001, Φ = 0.319. Responders were also significantly more likely to disclose failures in response to successes, than to disclose successes in response to failures (81.0% vs. 39.8%, Hypothesis 3), χ^2(1, N = 219) = 39.11, p < .001, Φ = 0.423.

Robustness Analyses. To assess the robustness of these findings, we conducted two additional analyses of disclosure (see details in Supplement 9). In a per-protocol analysis, we excluded 87 conversations (20.2%) in which one or both participants did not perform as assigned (i.e., someone assigned to succeed via an easy task actually failed, or vice versa). In an intention-to-treat analysis, participants were analyzed based on their assigned condition; those assigned to the difficult task were treated as having failed, and those assigned to the easy task were treated as having succeeded, regardless of actual outcomes. Both analyses replicated the core patterns: a heightened propensity to disclose matching over non-matching outcomes and the two predicted asymmetries (Table 10).

Table 10: Responders' Likelihood to Disclose their Outcome by Condition by Analysis Type in Study 6. *M* (SE), [95% CIs].

	Responder: Success	Responder: Failure
As Treated with Reallocation		
Initiator: Success	73.3% (4.3%), [63.8%, 81.5%]	81.0% (3.5%), [73.0%, 87.4%]
Initiator: Failure	39.8% (5.1%), [29.8%, 50.5%]	96.2% (1.9%), [90.6%, 99.0%]
Per Protocol		
Initiator: Success	69.5% (5.1%), [58.4%, 79.2%]	79.0% (4.0%), [70.0%, 86.4%]
Initiator: Failure	37.3% (5.6%), [26.4%, 48.3%]	98.8% (1.2%), [93.3%, 99.97%]
Intention to Treat		
Initiator: Success (Easy Task)	51.0% (4.9%), [41.0%, 60.9%]	80.5% (3.5%), [72.5%, 86.9%]
Initiator: Failure (Difficult Task)	68.3% (4.6%), [58.3%, 77.2%]	95.9% (2.0%) [89.8%, 98.9%]

Finally, we conducted the above analyses using only responders' immediate responses, excluding disclosures that occurred in later conversational disclosures (i.e., excluding the 13.5% of disclosures that were delayed; the rate of delayed disclosure did not differ significantly by condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 318) = 1.28$, $p = .733$, $\Phi = 0.063$[19]). The results replicated (see Table XI in Supplement 9).

[19] Still, delays were most common when disclosing better outcomes (18.9%), followed by matching successes (14.3%), worse outcomes (12.7%), and matching failures (11.8%). These findings are broadly consistent with Study 5, which also showed the longest delays for better outcomes and the shortest delays when both parties disclosed failures. The comparison between the matching failure condition (18.9%) and responder better off condition (11.8%) was, however, also not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 139) = 1.18$, $p = .278$, $\Phi = 0.092$.

Open Responses Analysis. We next applied our semantic coding framework to responders' immediate replies. Several meaningful patterns emerged consistent with our other-focused account. Table 11 shows the prevalence of each strategy by condition, with darker shading representing higher prevalence.

Table 11: Prevalence of each Coding Category in Participants' Written Responses by Actual Outcomes and Responder Disclosure and Non-Disclosure of their Experienced (Actual) Outcomes in Study 6.

Condition		Reason Listed by Responder				
Responder Outcome	Responder Disclosure[a]	Consoling	Offering repair or help	Compensatory apology	Deception	Delayed Disclosure
I. succeeds R. succeeds	No		0.0%		0.0%	
	Yes		0.0%	12.2%		24.3%
	Total		0.0%			
I. succeeds R. fails	No		0.0%		0.0%	
	Yes		0.0%			47.0%
	Total		0.0%			
I. fails R. succeeds	No	31.6%	0.0%		0.0%	
	Yes	11.1%	0.0%	44.4%		33.3%
	Total	23.7%	0.0%			
I. fails R. fails	No	75.0%[b]	0.0%		0.0%	
	Yes	16.7%	0.0%			6.9%
	Total	18.9%	0.0%			
Overall	No	34.4%	0.0%		0.0%	
	Yes	15.2%	0.0%	22.7%		27.0%
	Total	21.1%	0.0%			

Note. The colors represent prevalence, from low (lighter colors) to high (darker colors). Colors darken every 10 percentage points (0.1%-10.0%, 10.1%-20.0%, 20.1%-30.0%, 30.1%-40.0%), with 0% marked white. Empty cells were not coded.
[a] This column is based on the AI-coded disclosure variable and considered immediate responses.
[b] This is based on a very small sample (3 out of 4 participants who did not disclose their outcome in the matching failure condition).

Consoling. We examined whether responders consoled initiators who failed. Among responses to initiators' failures, consoling occurred in 23.7% of better-off responses (i.e., responder succeeds, initiator

fails) and 18.9% of matching failures, a difference that was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 199) = .682$, $p = .409$, $\Phi = 0.059$. Nevertheless, consoling was directionally more common when responders were better-off (i.e., responders succeeded, initiators failed). Together with the results of Study 5, the findings suggest that when responders cannot offer the support of a matching failure disclosure, they may resort to consoling language.

Compensatory Apologies. We again examined whether responders used compensatory apologies when disclosing success. Compensatory apologies were more common when the initiator failed and responders disclosed a success (44.4%) than when the initiator failed and responders disclosed a failure (12.2%), $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 14.37$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = 0.361$. Thus, responders were more likely to apologize when their success disclosure could be hurtful—when the initiator had failed. Across Studies 4–6, this consistent pattern highlights how responders use apologies to navigate the emotional dynamics of disclosure, especially when sharing positive outcomes in potentially sensitive contexts.

Offers of Repair or Help and Deception. Interestingly, offers of repair or help were absent from the immediate responses in this study. This absence likely reflects the nature of the interaction: in this brief, one-off setting, responders had little opportunity to provide meaningful assistance to the initiator. Similarly, deception did not occur in any of the immediate responses. Since participants were responding relatively quickly in a live chat, they might have had less time to craft a deceptive response.

Delays. Finally, delayed disclosure was again most common for non-matching outcomes (47.0% when the initiator succeeded and responder failed, and 33.0% when initiators failed and responders succeeded). In contrast, disclosure was less often delayed when outcomes matched those of the initiator—only 6.9% of matching failure disclosures and 24.3% of matching success disclosures were postponed. These patterns mirror the findings from Study 5. Together, these results suggest that responders may use timing of the disclosure to manage the emotional state of their counterpart.

Discussion

Study 6 showed that the disclosure patterns predicted by our other-focused account also apply to real-time, more natural conversations involving real, personally experienced outcomes. Even in these brief

exchanges between strangers the same disclosure matching patterns and asymmetries emerged. Across Studies 4–6, content analyses revealed that responders flexibly managed their replies in ways consistent with other-focused concerns. The most consistent patterns included compensatory apologies, consolation, and delayed disclosure of non-matching outcomes.

Importantly, Study 6 showed that other-focused concerns operate also in brief interactions with strangers. Responders still demonstrated sensitivity to how the initiator was likely to feel, suggesting that other-focused disclosure decisions reflect a fundamental aspect of social interaction rather than calculated relationship management. Taken together, these findings show that responders actively regulate both whether and how they disclose in anticipation of the initiator's emotional experience.

General Discussion

Across nine experiments (total $N = 8,229$), we found consistent support for our other-focused account. We combined controlled experiments with analyses of 2,216 self-written responses and 473 real conversations, spanning diverse methods (allocation tasks, self-coded responses, researcher-coded responses, live interactions), domains (health, employment, investments), and relationship types. These studies revealed three main findings. First, we confirmed the basic tendency to disclose outcomes when these match those disclosed by an initiator (Hypothesis 1). Second, and more importantly, we observed two novel and systematic asymmetries that reveal the other-focused nature of these decisions. Responders were more likely to disclose failures in response to failures than successes in response to successes (Hypothesis 2), and more likely to disclose failures in response to successes, than successes in response to failures (Hypothesis 3). Third, beyond the disclosure decision itself, responders also strategically managed how they communicated their outcomes. Content analyses across Studies 4-6 revealed systematic adaptations aligned with concern for the other party's emotions: better-off responders (those experiencing success when the initiator failed) showed a heightened proclivity to use compensatory apologies, delayed their disclosures, offered help, and, in some cases, even resorted to deception. These patterns demonstrate that responsive outcome disclosure serves as a flexible tool for regulating others' emotional experiences.

Theoretical Contributions

Our research makes several contributions. First, we advance work on reciprocity in disclosure by revealing systematic asymmetries in how people respond to others' outcome disclosure. Prior research has shown that people tend to reciprocate disclosure, matching what others share (Jourard, 1971; Derlega et al., 1993). We extend this work by showing that the strength of reciprocity varies systematically: responders disclosed matching failures more than matching successes, and worse outcomes more than better outcomes. Importantly, these asymmetries were strongest when responders liked the initiator (Study 2) and when their outcomes felt more supportive (Study 3), but they did not vary by status or closeness. These results reveal that disclosure reciprocity is moderated by concern for the other person's emotional experience: people reciprocate disclosure not merely as norm-following but as a way to provide emotional support or avoid causing harm.

Second, our findings extend research on social preferences by demonstrating that these other-focused concerns shape communication behavior. Research on social preferences has shown that people care not only about their own outcomes but also about others' outcomes and well-being (Loewenstein et al., 1989; Messick & Sentis, 1979). We show that disclosure serves as a mechanism for enacting these social preferences: responders shared matching failures to benefit the initiator emotionally and withheld better outcomes to avoid imposing psychological costs.

Third, our findings contribute to research on interpersonal emotion regulation by showing that disclosure decisions are guided by attempts to regulate, and generally to improve, others' emotional experiences. Self-reported motivations revealed that concern for the other person's feelings was a prominent consideration (Study 2), and content analyses showed responders employed multiple strategies—compensatory apologies, delayed disclosure, offers of help, and even deception—to manage emotional impact. Taken together, these results demonstrate that responders' disclosure choices are not merely self-serving or defensive, but reflect prosocial efforts to support others emotionally. Responsive disclosure is a multifaceted emotion regulation strategy, with responders making nuanced decisions about both content and delivery in an attempt to manage the well-being of their conversation partners.

Alternative Theories

Our other-focused account proposes that disclosure asymmetries reflect concern for regulating the initiator's emotional experiences. However, several alternative theories could potentially explain our findings. We address each in turn.

General Negativity Bias. One alternative interpretation of our pattern of results is that outcome disclosure reflects a general negativity bias, with people being generally more likely to disclose failures than successes. This account does not, however, fully explain the broad range of our results.

First, a general negativity bias would predict greater disclosure of failures than successes even in non-responsive disclosure settings. However, in Studies 1 and 5, in experimental conditions in which there was no prior disclosure of success or failure, we did not observe a preference for disclosing failures over successes. The preference for sharing failures only emerged in responsive disclosure contexts. Second, a negativity bias cannot explain the moderations by liking and domain relevance we observe. The asymmetries strengthened when responders cared more about the initiator (high liking, Study 2) and when outcomes felt more relevant (same domain, Study 3), suggesting that these decisions are shaped by a consideration of other people's emotions rather than a general disposition to reveal negative information.

Self-evaluation Maintenance. A related possibility is that responders' disclosures are guided by self-evaluative considerations. Self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) theory (Tesser, 1988; Tesser et al., 1988) proposes that people are motivated to maintain positive self-evaluations, which can be threatened or enhanced by the performances of others. According to SEM, people bask in the successes of close others in self-irrelevant domains, but experience threat when others outperform them in self-relevant domains, motivating threat-reducing responses. However, SEM primarily addresses how individuals manage their own self-evaluative concerns, and it is unclear how disclosure would resolve evaluative threats for the responder. In our scenarios, responders already know both their own outcome and the initiator's outcome before deciding whether to disclose. Thus, disclosure does not modify the responder's self-evaluation, only the information available to the initiator.

SEM might nevertheless play an indirect role if responders anticipate that their disclosure would trigger upward comparisons that would threaten the initiator's self-evaluation. From this perspective,

responders might avoid sharing better outcomes to prevent triggering upward comparison. Critically, however, this anticipated comparison logic would not be able to explain the increased prevalence of disclosing matching failures versus matching successes, given that neither would pose self-evaluative threats to either party. Finally, in our studies, responders' self-reported motivations centered on the initiator's feelings rather than self-evaluative concerns.

Impression Management and Self-Presentation. Another possibility is that responders shape their disclosure to manage how they are perceived by the initiator. Classic impression management theories distinguish between intrapsychic motives (managing how one sees oneself) and interpersonal motives (managing how others perceive oneself) (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Leary et al., 2015). Both focus on managing perceptions of the self. Our research reveals a different focus: managing how the initiator perceives themselves. Rather than using disclosure to craft a favorable self-image, responders appear motivated to regulate another person's emotional state and self-perceptions.

Several findings distinguish our other-focused account from self-presentational accounts. First, if disclosure primarily served impression management, the asymmetries should strengthen when managing one's image matters most, for example, in status-differentiated relationships where impression concerns are heightened. Instead, the patterns were unaffected by status hierarchies (Supplement 4) but were stronger when responders liked the initiator (Study 2), consistent with empathy-driven concern rather than strategic self-presentation. Second, self-reported motivations explicitly referenced concern for the initiator's feelings (e.g., "I wanted to make them feel better," "I did not want to hurt them") rather than self-presentational goals (Study 2). Third, responders employed strategies like deception and compensatory apologies specifically when better outcomes risked hurting the initiator, behaviors that suggest emotional protection rather than image enhancement.

Avenues for Future Research

Our findings open several promising avenues for future research: expanding the taxonomy of outcome disclosure, examining cultural and individual variation, and investigating downstream consequences.

Expanding the Taxonomy of Outcome Disclosure. Our findings open several promising avenues for future research. One important direction is to examine a wider taxonomy of outcome disclosure that considers not only outcome valence, but also outcome intensity and domain overlap. In this regard, Study 3 showed a decrease in the disclosure of cross-domain outcomes. Although these findings strongly support an other-focused account, an alternative possibility is that cross-domain outcomes differ in their perceived intensity. For example, a health success might seem more significant than a financial success. Under this interpretation, disclosing the cross-domain success could make the responder's own outcome seem less favorable in comparison, effectively transforming a positive-positive disclosure into a psychologically mismatched interaction. However, this explanation requires responders to first compare outcome magnitudes across different contexts, then reinterpret their own positive outcome as relatively worse, which is a more complex process than simply judging whether disclosure would be helpful or appropriate. Future research could disentangle these dimensions for a more nuanced understanding of when and why responders choose to disclose.

More generally, future research could examine whether the consistent patterns of disclosure we observe generalize across different types of outcomes, including those resulting from controllable (e.g., lack of effort) or uncontrollable causes (e.g., bad luck), as well as more mundane positive or negative events, such as pleasant versus unpleasant weather, or everyday hassles and minor wins. Examining these factors would clarify whether our findings are specific to outcomes with meaningful self-concept implications or reflect more general principles of emotion-focused communication.

Cultural and Individual Differences. Cross-cultural research represents another valuable direction for future research. Cultures emphasizing individualism or hierarchical relationships may show different patterns of other-focused disclosure. For example, in cultures with high power distance or individualism, people may be more willing to disclose their successes or less motivated to protect others from upward social comparison. Conversely, in collectivistic cultures that emphasize interpersonal harmony, the asymmetries we observe might be even more pronounced.

Individual differences may also impact how likely people are to disclose information, though their influence may depend on disclosure context. For instance, while Carbone et al. (2024) found gender differences in spontaneous disclosure of positive and negative information, we observed no such effects in our responsive disclosure paradigm. This suggests that the other-focused nature of responsive disclosure may override individual difference factors that matter in self-focused disclosure decisions. However, while responder gender did not moderate our effects, we used gender-neutral names and thus could not assess whether initiator gender influences disclosure decisions. Future research could examine whether responders adapt their strategies depending on the gender, age, or other characteristics of their counterparts.

Downstream Consequences of Disclosure. Finally, given the growing interest in impression mismanagement (Steinmetz et al., 2017; Sezer et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2021; Valsesia et al., 2021; Moon & Prinsloo, 2025; Wald et al., 2024), future work should examine whether responders' well-intentioned disclosure strategies actually achieve their prosocial goals. Decisions to withhold personal information can carry substantial relational costs. For instance, hiding success often leads targets to feel less close to the communicator and more insulted, in part because concealment invites inferences of paternalistic motives (Roberts et al., 2021). Similarly, while responders may disclose matching failure to provide comfort, initiators might sometimes experience them as competitive ("this is about me, not you").

Future research should investigate when disclosures of same-valence outcomes are seen as supportive and emotionally attuned, and when they instead create awkwardness, envy, or social friction. Does the effectiveness of matching disclosures depend on contextual factors such as timing, domain similarity, and relationship closeness? Addressing these questions would clarify not only when people choose particular disclosure strategies, but also whether those strategies achieve their prosocial goals.

Conclusion

Research on self-disclosure has largely focused on when and why people spontaneously share personal information, typically emphasizing self-focused motives like impression management, emotional relief, or relationship building (Pennebaker, 1999; Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Collins & Miller, 1994). Our research reveals a fundamentally different dynamic in responsive disclosure contexts:

when deciding how to respond to others' disclosures, people systematically prioritize the anticipated emotional consequences for their conversation partner over their own self-presentational concerns.

Across nine studies, we demonstrate that responsive outcome disclosure is seen as a tool for interpersonal emotion regulation. Responders do not simply mirror what others share—they strategically adapt both whether and how they disclose to manage their counterpart's emotional state. When initiators share failures, responders disclose matching failures to provide emotional support and to console; by contrast, responders anticipate that their success disclosures could be hurtful, leading them to withhold, delay, soften, or reshape their messages. This other-focused approach reveals disclosure as a tool for managing not only what information is shared, but also how conversation partners are likely to feel. These findings highlight the prosocial function of responsive disclosure and contribute to understanding how people navigate the emotional demands of everyday conversations.

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