

Chapter 1

General Introduction

Common wisdom holds that we should not bottle up our emotions, but instead, we should talk about them: *A problem shared is a problem halved* (Zech, 1999). The mere venting of one's emotions is thought to lead to cathartic benefits, as evidenced by expressions such as "get it off your chest", "let it all out" or "blow off steam", regularly employed as advice to foster relief. Following these beliefs, most people turn to others for support when in emotional distress, a phenomenon that has also been termed social sharing (Rimé, Mesquita, Boca, & Philippot, 1991). Social sharing is a very common means of regulating one's emotions: We share most of our (negative) experiences with others, often with multiple people, and repetitively (Rimé, 2009; Rimé, Philippot, Boca, & Mesquita, 1992). However, despite the widespread belief that sharing helps make us feel better, little scientific evidence supports this notion. Even though people *perceive* sharing to be helpful, it typically does not make people feel better in the long run (Rimé, 2009; Zech & Rimé, 2005). More specifically, people have the impression of feeling better after sharing, reporting feelings of relief, perceived understanding, and the feeling that sharing was useful to them. However, sharing does not predict emotional recovery over time. For example, various studies have failed to find a reduction in the experience of negative emotions, intrusive thoughts about the event, or the search for meaning several days after sharing (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998; Rimé, Paez, Kanyangara, & Yzerbyt, 2011; Zech, 1999; Zech & Rimé, 2005).

In the present dissertation, I sought to shed light on this paradox: Why do people perceive sharing to be effective, when in fact scientific evidence suggests that it is not? I present several different research lines, examining the general notion that the benefits of social sharing may depend on the way in which someone shares and the way in which the other person responds. Each research line focuses on a different part of the dynamic process between two people involved in social sharing (henceforth 'sharers' and 'listeners'). The different parts of the thesis examine different aspects that may make sharing (in)effective. First, I examined what kind of support sharers seek when sharing their emotions with others (Chapter 2). Second, I examined whether sharers can effectively communicate their support needs to others, such that listeners come to understand what the sharer needs (Chapter 3). I also examined whether sharers' needs affected whether listeners actually provide support that is aligned with sharers' needs (Chapter 4). Third, I focused on the support that listeners provide, examining whether they tune their support to contextual demands (Chapter 5). Finally, in light of the many obstacles people may face when seeking support in daily life, the last study examined whether virtual humans may provide an effective alternative for human support provision (Chapter 6). Before outlining the empirical chapters, I first introduce social sharing as a means of interpersonal

emotion regulation, after which I review the empirical literature on the effectiveness of social sharing for bringing about emotional recovery. Then, I introduce a key distinction between two different forms of support (socio-affective and cognitive support), and discuss the important role of the listener in facilitating recovery.

Social Sharing as a Means of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

Until recently, most work on emotion regulation has focused on intrapersonal processes, that is, the strategies that people employ when they attempt to change their own emotional experience or expression (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Gross, 2002; Gross, 2013; Gross & Thompson, 2007). Most of this work is influenced by Gross' process model that outlines five different stages of an emotional episode that can be targeted when trying to change (or maintain) one's emotions (Gross, 1998). Strategies focused on the emotion-eliciting event are termed antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategies, and include situation selection (e.g., avoiding to feel sad by not going to see a sad movie), attentional deployment or distraction (e.g., trying to focus one's attention on other people in the cinema), and cognitive change or reappraisal (e.g., trying to change one's interpretation of what is happening by telling oneself that it is not real, but just a movie). Finally, response-focused regulation is directed at altering the emotional response, and entails suppression of one's thoughts, feelings or expression (e.g., holding back one's tears). Extant work has documented how individuals employ these strategies in solitude, for example, by having participants watch disturbing pictures or movies and instructing them to employ one specific type of emotion regulation strategy (e.g., Gross, 1998; for a meta-analysis, see Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012), or by asking them what strategies they typically employ in daily life (e.g., Gross & John, 2003; Mauss, Cook, Cheng, & Gross, 2007). While these studies have provided important insights into emotion regulation, their paradigms could be taken to imply that emotions typically occur in a social vacuum.

Importantly, however, emotions are inherently social (Parkinson, 1996). Not only are most of our emotions elicited by others, others also shape the ways in which we appraise events, as well as the ways in which we try to regulate our emotions, and others are, in turn, often affected by our emotional expressions (Fischer, Manstead, & Zaalberg, 2003; Manstead & Fischer, 2001; Parkinson & Manstead, 2015; Van Kleef, 2009). For instance, one may feel anger upon another person cutting in line, but may be more likely to express the anger if others in line seem to be appraising the behavior as inappropriate as well. Furthermore, the nature of people's relationships may motivate them to actively up- or down-

regulate their emotions, such that the level of expression is considered appropriate within the specific relationship context and thus adheres to the prevailing social norms (Shields, 2005; Van Kleef, 2016). If the person cutting in line would be one's boss, for example, one may be more likely to inhibit one's expression of anger, because it is inappropriate to express anger to those with a higher status than oneself (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, & Meulders, 2004; Van Kleef et al., 2010). Similarly, whether or not people decide to socially share their emotions is also dependent on the nature of the relationship: When people are close to their interaction partners and expect them to respond in a supportive way, they are more willing to express emotions like sadness that make them seem vulnerable (Clark & Finkel, 2005; Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001; Von Culin, Hirsch, & Clark, 2017).

Consequently, numerous pleas have been made to adopt a more social approach to the study of emotions (Butler & Gross, 2009; Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011; Fischer & van Kleef, 2010; Parkinson & Manstead, 2015; Rimé, 2009). And only recently, the field of emotion regulation has seen an upsurge in focus on interpersonal processes (for an overview, see Butler, 2011; Butler & Gross, 2009; Dixon-Gordon, Bernecker, & Christensen, 2015; Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2009; Zaki & Williams, 2013). For example, Zaki and Williams (2013) have conceptualized interpersonal emotion regulation as people's attempts to either use others to help them regulate their own emotions (such as when seeking social support) or attempts to alter others' emotional experiences (such as when providing support). In the present thesis, we approached emotion regulation from a social perspective, conceptualizing social sharing as a means of (interpersonal) emotion regulation¹: By expressing their emotional experience to others, people may elicit support, which may help them to regulate their emotions (Rimé, 2009). The urge to seek out others when in distress was already evident in Schachter's classic work (Schachter, 1959), who found that when people anticipated an electric shock, they preferred to wait with others who were about to undergo the same stressful situation, whereas they were relatively indifferent or preferred to wait alone when the level of threat was low. This tendency to seek out others when in uncertainty or distress has later been termed "tend-and-befriend" by Taylor (2006), who considered it another primary response to stress, in addition to fight-or-flight behaviors.

¹ Others have used the term interpersonal emotion regulation to refer to attempts at changing others' emotions (e.g., see Niven, 2017). This definition is partly included in our conceptualization, to the extent that listeners attempt to help regulate sharers' emotions. We are, however, excluding the regulation of others' emotions driven by motives other than the prosocial motive of trying to make the sharer feel better (e.g., egoistic motives to achieve personal instrumental benefits; see Netzer et al., 2015; Niven, 2016; Niven et al., 2019).

Social sharing is a very clear illustration of this affiliative tendency in response to stress. Social sharing has been defined as the process of describing an emotional event to others, which in its full form constitutes a description of the emotion-eliciting situation and the feelings and thoughts this situation has brought about (Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 1991). In two reviews of a wide variety of studies using methods such as autobiographical recall, experimental emotion induction, follow-ups on recent major life events, and daily diaries, Rimé and colleagues established the robustness of social sharing (Rimé et al., 1998, 1992). They found that a large majority of people share their emotional experience with others, often with multiple people, and multiple times (although situations eliciting shame or guilt were shared to a lesser degree; Finkenauer & Rime, 1998; Rimé, 2009). The more intense the emotional experience, the more frequently it was shared – not only by the person who experienced the event, but also by the listeners, who may engage in secondary sharing (Rimé et al., 1998). Similar effects were found across several Western (USA, France) and Eastern (Korea, Singapore and Japan) countries, though the number of times situations were shared was lower in the Asian countries (Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 1998; Singh-Manoux & Finkenauer, 2001). Furthermore, the frequency of social sharing was not found to vary as a function of personality (e.g., Big Five) or gender (Rimé et al., 1998, 1992). Thus, it can be concluded that emotional experiences typically elicit social sharing processes.

Yet, despite the fact that social sharing seems an omnipresent phenomenon, it can be considered a somewhat puzzling behavior, a paradox that is also evident in its consequences: People will relive the painful emotional experience by talking about it (e.g., see Littrell, 2008; Smyth, 1998), but they nevertheless have a strong urge to share (Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, & Rimé, 2000; Rimé, 2009). In addition, while people generally perceive social sharing to be helpful, it often does not alleviate the emotional impact of the emotional situation (Rimé et al., 1998, 2011; Zech, 1999; Zech & Rimé, 2005). The subjective benefits rhyme with the general lay notion in Western culture that talking helps (Zech, 1999), which is also reflected in clinical practice, with emotional expression being a core component of all major therapies and psychological interventions (Whelton, 2004). However, the empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness in down-regulating negative emotions is scarce.

Overall, verbalizing one's emotions to oneself (e.g., through writing) or to others (e.g., through social sharing) has been found to be associated with several positive outcomes, but these outcomes are mostly self-reported and do not concern emotional recovery from the specific situation that was verbalized or shared. For example, some older work on expressive writing has shown that writing about one's deepest emotions and thoughts may lead to positive outcomes in the long run (Frattaroli, 2006; Frisina, Borod, & Lepore, 2004; Pennebaker, 1997;

Pennebaker, 1993). Yet most of these positive outcomes concerned subjective benefits, such as the subjective impact of the writing session or self-reported health. Effects on physiological functioning and psychological health were small. Similarly, group-interventions that rely on social sharing in order to prevent the development of trauma among those exposed to extreme circumstances have shown a similar discrepancy between perceived benefits and actual recovery. For example, the most widely used type of psychological debriefing, critical incident stress debriefing (CISD), consists of a semi-structured group meeting in which participants discuss their thoughts and feelings in response to the potentially traumatizing event (Everly, Flannery, & Mitchell, 2000). While the majority of participants typically report the debriefing as helpful, randomized-controlled trials have shown that CISDs in fact are not effective in preventing post-traumatic stress symptoms, and some studies have suggested that the debriefing may in fact impede natural recovery (Litz, Gray, Bryant, & Adler, 2002; Rose, Bisson, Churchill, & Wessely, 2002; van Emmerik, Kamphuis, Hulsbosch, & Emmelkamp, 2002). Thus, these studies show that disclosing one's emotions may lead people to feel better, but they do not show evidence for social sharing as a means of down-regulating the specific emotional experience.

Importantly, studies that have directly investigated the impact of either spontaneous or experimentally instructed social sharing of emotions have found no relationship with emotional recovery – that is, sharing did not reduce the emotional distress elicited by the specific event (Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 1998, 2011; Zech & Rimé, 2005). Studies examining spontaneous sharing have typically measured emotional recovery by assessing the amount of sharing that people engaged in after the event and taking the difference between the initial emotional intensity experienced before sharing and the level of emotional intensity experienced when recalling the event at a later point in time. Surprisingly, these studies have failed to find a correlation between the amount of social sharing and emotional recovery (Rimé et al., 1998). Similarly, two studies comparing events that had been socially shared versus kept secret found no difference in emotional recovery (Finkenauer & Rime, 1998). These findings are corroborated by a longitudinal study conducted in the context of bereavement, which showed that the extent to which the bereaved talked about the loss and their emotions was not associated with adjustment at two-year follow-up (Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, & van den Bout, 2002). In fact, another study showed that social sharing of emotional events was even associated with a prolongation of the experience of the negative emotion (Verduyn, Van Mechelen, & Tuerlinckx, 2011). Finally, experimental studies in which participants have been instructed to share a highly upsetting personal event similarly have found no effects of social sharing on (short-term or long-term) emotional recovery. Sharing one's thoughts and feelings

did not result in enhanced emotional recovery as assessed by self-rated impact of the emotional memory (e.g., general emotional distress, emotional intensity when remembering the event), general wellbeing (e.g., negative mood, life satisfaction) and self-reported physical health (Zech, 1999).

The Role of Social Support

Together, the studies above suggest that mere sharing is not conducive to emotional recovery, despite people's beliefs that it is. Importantly, however, examinations of *social* sharing have not taken into account how the listener(s) responded. Whether or not sharing effectively reduces the emotional consequences of an upsetting event may depend on the type of support that the listener provides (Rimé, 2009). According to Rimé (2009), negative emotional experiences typically have two types of impact on the individual, each requiring a different form of support to buffer the impact. The first, which he terms 'obvious' impact, concerns the potential blockage of goals by the emotion-eliciting event, one's appraisal of the emotional situation, and the disconfirmation of one's expectations, view of oneself, or view of the world. The second, 'subtle' impact of an emotion-eliciting event concerns the simultaneous destabilization that the situation brings about. Having one's goals blocked, or worldview disconfirmed may lead to loss of self-esteem and general feelings of insecurity, alienation, and feelings of loneliness.

The first, 'obvious' impact requires cognitive support, in the absence of which people would continue to experience intrusive thoughts, mental rumination and a need to share (for a similar argument, see Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). By providing cognitive support, the listener may facilitate more adaptive ways of thinking about the situation, by recreating meaning and trying to reinterpret (i.e., reappraise) the event. The fact that reappraisal is necessary for long-term recovery from the shared emotional experience also fits with other lines of work. Appraisal theories of emotion posit that it is the way in which an event is appraised (i.e., evaluated) that determines one's emotional response to the situation (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Roseman, 1991; Scherer, 2005; Siemer, Mauss, & Gross, 2007; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). For example, if one can come to reappraise an unsuccessful grant application as a learning experience that is part of the (highly competitive) academic game, rather than interpret the situation as a personal failure, thinking about the grant rejection should elicit reduced feelings of sadness or shame. This same principle can also be found in the proposed effectiveness of reappraisal in Gross' process model described earlier (Gross, 1998).

Empirical evidence for the potential of reappraisal to effectively change emotional experiences comes from literature on both intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion regulation. Both the dispositional tendency to reappraise, as well as reappraisal instructed in the lab are associated with a wide range of benefits, including the experience and expression of more positive and less negative affect, more adaptive physiological responding, better interpersonal functioning, and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression (Aldao et al., 2010; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2006; Gross & John, 2003; Gross, 1998; Mauss et al., 2007; Webb et al., 2012). Furthermore, studies employing an expressive writing paradigm have shown that people experienced most emotional and physical benefits when they did not only write about their emotions, but when they also used words that reflect cognitive insight (e.g., Lee et al., 2016) or were instructed to reappraise the event (e.g., Lu & Stanton, 2010).

Similar benefits have been found when others attempt to facilitate reappraisal. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy, in which a therapist encourages the sharer to change the way they think about specific situations by challenging their unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, has been found to be successful in treating a wide variety of disorders characterized by emotion regulation impairments (for reviews of meta-analyses, see Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006; Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012). Similarly, the stimulation of more adaptive appraisals by friends is associated with less maladaptive interpretations of specific negative events by the sharer, reduced depressive symptoms, as well as a more positive appraisal style over a 6-month period (Dobkin, Panzarella, Fernandez, Alloy, & Cascardi, 2004; Panzarella, Alloy, & Whitehouse, 2006). Furthermore, comforting messages that include a high (as compared to low) degree of reappraisal are associated with greater perceptions of helpfulness and emotional improvement by the sharers (e.g. for a review, see Burlinson et al., 2005; Jones & Wirtz, 2006). Finally, cognitive support, as defined by Rimé (2009), has been found to facilitate long-term recovery from the emotional situation (Batenburg & Das, 2014; Brans, Van Mechelen, Rimé, & Verduyn, 2013; Lepore, Fernandez-Berrocal, Ragan, & Ramos, 2004; Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009). For example, in one study, participants watched a negative emotion-inducing movie, after which they shared their experience with a listener (a close other). Those who obtained cognitive support (compared to those who did not) showed altered cognitions and reduced emotional responding – effects that persisted two days later upon re-exposure to the videos. Together, these findings show that the provision or facilitation of another (e.g., more positive) perspective is effective in fostering emotional recovery.

Yet, as mentioned above, the emotional impact of an emotion-eliciting event goes beyond the specific situation: It typically results in ‘subtle’ impact, a

temporary loss of self-esteem and general feelings of insecurity, alienation, and loneliness (Rimé, 2009). As reflected in the tendency to affiliate under distress discussed earlier (Taylor, 2006), this general feeling of distress evokes the need for socio-affective support, which includes comfort, consolation and validation. By listening and being there for the sharer, socio-affective support fulfills these needs, giving sharers the feeling that they do not have to cope alone. Validating and legitimizing the sharer's feelings may make them feel less bad about feeling sad (or any other emotion that they experience, cf. Bastian et al., 2015). Furthermore, socio-affective support includes what has also been termed 'esteem support', which refers to bolstering the sharer's sense of competence and self-worth (see Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, & Gardner, 2007). Indeed, receiving socio-affective support has been found to reduce loneliness, and increase temporary feelings of relief, perceived understanding, and closeness to the listener (Cutrona et al., 2007; Morelli, Lee, Arnn, & Zaki, 2015; Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009). In sum, socio-affective support leads to temporary relief, whereas cognitive support is key to long-term emotional recovery.

Importantly, when support seeking and provision are predominantly focused on socio-affective support, sharing runs the risk of turning into a perpetual process of co-rumination (Curci & Rimé, 2012; Rose, Schwartz-Mette, Glick, Smith, & Luebke, 2014). Co-rumination involves the excessive discussion of problems and dwelling on the associated negative emotions, for example by rehashing details and over-speculating about potential causes and consequences (Rose, 2002). Co-rumination is associated with depression and anxiety symptoms (Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007; Rose et al., 2014; Starr, 2015; Stone, Hankin, Gibb, & Abela, 2011), though these maladaptive outcomes of co-rumination may be buffered or even reversed when the problem talk takes on a more reflective mode. This is termed co-reflecting and is characterized by trying to gain insight into the problem, making causal analyses and attempting to find meaning (Bastin, Bijttebier, Raes, & Vasey, 2014; Bastin, Vanhalst, Raes, & Bijttebier, 2018). Interestingly, despite the negative emotional consequences, co-rumination has also been shown to be positively associated with greater friendship quality (Rose et al., 2007, 2014; Rose, Smith, Glick, & Rebecca, 2016). These observations rhyme with the positive effects of socio-affective support on interpersonal closeness, yet again highlight the lack of benefits in terms of long-term emotional recovery. When sharing thus merely focuses on the negative emotional experience, without attempting to cognitively reflect and obtain a different perspective on the situation, it will continue to elicit negative emotions, and thus the need to share, thereby impeding long-term emotional recovery (Curci & Rimé, 2012).

One main reason why social sharing is generally experienced as beneficial, yet does not result in emotional recovery, may be that the sharing process is mostly

focused on socio-affective support needs and provision (Rimé, 2009). Rimé proposes several reasons for this potential preponderance, including the argument that sharers' most immediate needs are affiliative: People seek out close others in order to reduce their general distress, thereby likely evoking socio-affective responding. Furthermore, rather than engaging in more sensitive and complex cognitive work, most responses from the listeners may be relatively simple (e.g., validating emotions or eliminating the cause), perhaps because it constitutes a 'quick fix', or because sharers might not be open for anything more cognitively demanding immediately after an emotional event, which is when most sharing takes place (Rimé et al., 1991). In line with these proposals, listeners reported to have provided less reappraisal and more non-verbal comforting behaviors in response to shared emotional experiences of high (rather than low) intensity (Christophe & Rimé, 1997). Finally, several studies examining self-reported motives for social sharing revealed that these mostly consisted of the fulfillment of socio-affective needs (Duprez, Christophe, Rimé, Congard, & Antoine, 2014; Rimé, 2007, 2009). Based on these observations, Rimé argued that spontaneous sharing might typically revolve around socio-affective support provision. Consequently, social sharing is likely to elicit temporary benefits, such as emotional relief and feelings of closeness, which sharers may conflate with emotional recovery (Rimé, 2009). This focus on socio-affective support may explain why sharers experience sharing to be helpful, when in fact it often does not contribute to actual emotional recovery – a hypothesis that I empirically investigated in the present dissertation.

Chapter Overview

In summary, prior research has shown that people have a very strong urge to share their emotional experiences with others, and typically experience this to be helpful, despite scientific evidence suggesting otherwise (for an overview, see Rimé, 2009). Given the great prevalence of social sharing and its potential for actually *impeding* emotional recovery, it is therefore crucial to understand why social sharing so often is an ineffective means of emotion regulation, and to uncover the ways in which sharing might in fact foster beneficial outcomes for the sharer. Evidence points to the fact that the effectiveness of support depends on the type of support that sharers receive, but it remains unclear (1) what type of support sharers usually seek, (2) what determines the type of support listeners think sharers need and choose to provide, and, crucially, (3) whether and how sharers may play an active role in eliciting the support that they desire. The present dissertation seeks to answer these questions. The overarching aim was to shed light on the paradox that social sharing is typically perceived as beneficial by

sharers, yet is not associated with enhanced emotional recovery. In five empirical research lines and using a range of different methodological approaches, we examined different aspects of the social sharing process in order to illuminate different ways through which social sharing functions as an effective or ineffective means of emotion regulation.

In **Chapter 2**, we investigated whether sharers primarily prefer to receive socio-affective support rather than cognitive support. More specifically, the aim of this chapter was two-fold: First, we wanted to examine how people evaluate socio-affective and cognitive support when sharing their negative emotions with others, and second, to test whether support evaluations depend on the discrete emotion that is shared. After first confirming in a pilot study that these two types of support could be reliably distinguished, Study 2.1 and 2.2 experimentally tested participants' support evaluations in response to different emotional situations using vignettes. Chapter 2 thus tried to answer the question of what type of support sharers typically seek.

Building on these findings, **Chapter 3** examined the hypothesis that sharers may effectively communicate their support needs to the listener. This would demonstrate one way through which sharers may steer the sharing process towards their desired support. We examined whether sharers communicate their support needs to the listener by differentially expressing their emotions, and whether listeners pick up on these cues to infer sharers' support needs. To this end, we first manipulated participants' support goals, and assessed whether participants made differential use of emotion words and appraisals when sharing a personally upsetting situation in a video message (Study 3.1). In Study 3.2 and 3.3, we tested whether these differential expressions in turn affected the support goals that listeners inferred the sharer to have. We did this by providing participants with written stories representing emotional relays that varied in the use of emotion words and appraisals. As such, Chapter 3 allowed us to test the causal effect of sharers' support goals on their emotional expressions, as well as the causal effect of sharers' emotional expressions on the support goals inferred by listeners.

In **Chapter 4**, we adopted a different methodological approach: Instead of experimentally breaking up the interaction into two parts (communicating needs and inferring needs), we invited participants to actually share their emotions with another participant in a more naturalistic interaction. This allowed us to examine the extent to which sharers themselves play a role in eliciting different forms of support. To this end, we paired participants with another participant whom they did not know, and randomly assigned them the role of sharer (who was asked to discuss an upsetting situation) or listener (who was instructed to respond naturally). After an 8-minute interaction, both sharer and listener independently

watched the interaction on video in short fragments. For each fragment, sharers rated their experienced emotional intensity and socio-affective and cognitive support needs, and listeners rated their perception of the sharer's emotional intensity and their own support provision. We hypothesized that throughout the interaction, sharers would communicate their feelings and support needs such that they would shape listeners' support provision.

Chapters 2-4 examined the role of sharers in eliciting support – support that may be generally helpful or unhelpful for emotional recovery. Yet importantly, whether or not support is helpful is also context-dependent; What works in one situation, may not work in another (Aldao, 2013; Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Haines et al., 2016; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Troy, Shallcross, & Mauss, 2013). **Chapter 5** is a first step in examining whether listeners take the context into account when attempting to regulate others' shared emotions. Specifically, in this study, we were interested in whether and how listeners vary their support depending on whether sharers' distress needs to be immediately down-regulated or not – a contextual determinant that we called 'regulatory demand'. In examining this question, we expanded our take on support provision, by not only looking at support directed at engaging with the emotional experience (such as socio-affective and cognitive support), but also at support directed at disengaging from the emotional situation (e.g., distraction or suppression). We hypothesized that when immediate down-regulation was required (i.e., high regulatory demand), participants would provide lower levels of socio-affective and cognitive support, but instead try to distract the other person from the emotional situation or guide them to suppressing their emotion, compared to when there was no such urgency (i.e., low regulatory demand). Chapter 5 thus provides insight into how contextual demands may impact the way listeners regulate sharers' emotions. This question is important because different regulation strategies are associated with differential outcomes, and so contextual effects may therefore have implications for the effective regulation of others' emotions.

Finally, in light of the many obstacles that people may face when seeking support in daily life, the last study examined whether virtual humans could provide an alternative route through which effective support may be provided. In **Chapter 6**, we attempted to apply the knowledge acquired throughout prior research and the previous chapters in examining virtual humans' potential to overcome sharers' resistance to cognitive support. People might have different expectations of virtual humans than of humans, given that they do not ascribe virtual humans the mental capacity to experience empathy (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). Consequently, sharers might be more willing to accept cognitive support from a virtual human. We examined whether sharers show a preference for socio-affective support over cognitive support from virtual humans, as they do

when sharing with humans, or in fact do not show such a preference, as a result of these different expectations. To this end, participants shared two personal emotional experiences with a virtual human who provided either socio-affective or cognitive support, and we examined whether these two different forms of support had differential emotional and relational consequences. While we do not conceive virtual humans as a replacement for humans, this study examined whether virtual humans may be a valuable addition for those who may, at times, lack appropriate support from close others or clinicians.

Using a variety of different methods and experimental approaches, this thesis attempts to shed some light on the paradoxical fact that people are strongly inclined to share their emotions with others and perceive this to be beneficial, even though it is generally not associated with improved emotional recovery. In different research lines, we have investigated different parts of this puzzle, examining what type of support sharers need or desire, whether they can effectively communicate their support needs, and how effective support may be brought about. Of course, these chapters do not provide an exhaustive answer to when and why social sharing may be an (in)effective means of regulating one's emotions, and there are many questions remaining. In the final chapter (**Chapter 7**), I integrate the findings of this thesis with the wider literature, and discuss several outstanding issues that may be addressed in future research. Finally, please note that the empirical chapters (Chapter 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) are based on stand-alone research articles. Consequently, they can be read independently, yet therefore also contain some theoretical overlap. These articles are the result of the collaboration with my advisors and other collaborators, as is reflected in the plural use of "we" throughout these chapters.