

# To Complain, or Not to Complain...

## That Is the Question

**D**id you know that on average people complain about once a minute during a typical conversation?! Go ahead, observe this phenomenon for yourself the next time the opportunity presents itself. So why do we do it? What function does complaining serve? On one hand, the answer is simple: we do it because we get something from it, and we assess that the costs associated with complaining aren't significant enough to make us want to stop.

Complaining is a behavior that can increase our social supports, helping us to adapt to changes in our environment (e.g. wearing masks...again). Complaining is reinforced because we enjoy the social bonding it facilitates. But like many things that "feel good" to our brains (e.g. eating bacon, sipping bourbon, and sleeping in past noon) complaining isn't really good for us in the long run. When a behavior is repeatedly positively reinforced, our brains get "rewired" at the cellular level, which makes repetition of the behavior easier. As complaining becomes easier, it overrides our brain's drive to engage in behaviors that it esteems as more complicated and less efficient (e.g. focusing on developing solutions, or other ways to adapt) – eventually our typical behavior is recorded by others and begins to define our reputations and our personalities.

Research from Stanford University has shown that complaining actually shrinks the hippocampus, an area of the brain associated with memory and problem solving. It also activates the brain's "fight-or-flight" system, which increases the production of stress hormones, impairs the immune system and increases the risk for high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and stroke. Long story short, there are any number of reasons to complain sparingly.



A key to changing a behavior is recognizing when it is occurring. There are many "flavors" of complaining, which can easily go unnoticed:

- **All or Nothing Thinking:** Seeing things or situations in black-and-white terms
- **Jumping to Conclusions:** Reacting to situation with incomplete information
- **Fortune Telling:** Anticipating things will turn out badly, and treating predictions as facts
- **Overgeneralizing:** Assuming one event is actually a pattern
- **Disqualifying the Positives:** Filtering out or rejecting positive experiences to maintain negative beliefs
- **Catastrophizing:** Predicting the worst possible outcome imaginable

The next time you feel like complaining, try shifting your attention to something that you're grateful for. Research from UC Davis showed that feeling of gratitude can your body's stress response by 23%, and improve mood, energy and substantially decrease anxiety. If you feel you must complain, try a solution-oriented approach, i.e. complain with a purpose.

- **Have a clear purpose:** What kind of outcome are you looking for? If you don't know, chances are you're complaining for reasons mentioned. Call "Knock It Off" on yourself.
- **Start positive:** Starting a complaint with a compliment, reduces defensive reactions. E.g. "I've been a customer of yours for years, and I've been thrilled with your service..."
- **Stay focused:** Be as specific as possible and focus on things that can be changed. Only try to change is manageable or reasonable now...other changes will follow.
- **End positive:** Saying "I'll never talk to you again" reduces others' motivation to change. Try, "I'd like to work this out. I'm angry right now and need to take a break, this relationship is too important to spoil with anger."

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