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Complaining 1: Explaining Complaining

By Brooke Loening

We all know people who complain. And maybe other people know that you are a complainer!

People complain about situations that they have little or no control over, which I will discuss in my next article. But today I would like to look at complaints about issues that we have influence over, which I believe make up most complaints.

If you are a complainer, you may need to understand the inner workings of complaining in order to make a change. If you find yourself listening in agony to others complain, this knowledge may help you deal with it better.

Why do people complain so much? It sounds obvious- they are expressing frustration about something, and probably trying to justify those feelings. But let's take a closer look; I can think of a few more specific reasons why people complain.

Pressure Release

Often, when people feel they have been dealt a bad hand- either involving another person, an event, or a particular situation that has come up, there is a feeling of "something bad has happened to me." Emotions build up inside- maybe, frustration, anger, or apathy. The pressure builds.

I like to compare this to a pressure cooker. If you have ever used one, you know that there is a release valve at the top, which releases steam in small amounts while cooking the food inside. If steam were not allowed to release, the lid might blow off and you would likely be in danger, or at least have a huge mess on your hands.

People are similar. When the pressure of negative feelings builds up, it needs to be released, and it is almost always through other people who happen to be around or who are physically the closest. When that pressure needs to be vented, many times it will be released by complaining. It may feel temporarily better, but of course the core problem does not change and more complaining will be on the horizon.

Shirking Responsibility

Complaining is also a perfect way to deny responsibility. By complaining, we are attempting to get other people to agree that we are the victim, and that outside forces are the source of our problem. Complaining leaves us disempowered, because we are saying that we must live with an unjust situation, which has been thrust upon us.

Justification

People like to feel right about their views and complaining gives them that illusion. “Yes, other people agree with me, I am not alone in this.” We are trying to get others to come down to our emotional level.

Laziness

Complaining could be seen as the laziness. If you are not willing to do the work to address your issues directly, complaining about them is the lazy way out.

The truth is that we are totally responsible for our life circumstance precisely the way it is right at this moment. Now that is an empowering statement! That means that we have brought ourselves here, so we have the power to change our situation at any time with actions we take.

I have a few examples from my coaching practice that might help. One client liked to complain constantly “I never see my grandchildren.” So I asked him a hard question, “what have you done to bring this about?” After peeling back a few layers of anger and irritation, he came to the conclusion that he would frequently do things to annoy his daughter and son in law, creating a situation where they were did not want to be around him. I asked him what his next step would be that would make him more welcome in the family. His response was not another complaint, it was action oriented. “I will write them a note to apologize for my behavior, and make a promise to myself to try to be a more positive force in their lives.”

Another client complained that about half of her team of sales people was not following the protocols for making sales, leaving records a mess, and even dressing inappropriately. She insisted that she had told them, even forcefully, all the details of the job, and that there were very clear project manuals outlining how everything was expected to be done. After some discussion about what the possible cause might be, she came to the realization that “I really need to cut back on my own sales calls and focus that time on my people, and do it with more patience. I have been expecting them to learn the way I learn-quickly- and I have been too short with them in general. My investment in them as individuals combined with patience, is my new priority, instead of making sales and pushing them for more sales.” She decided to take her focus off the money and put it on her salespeople. It was no surprise that her sales increased almost immediately, and she hit a new income record the following year.

Both of these clients turned their number one complaint into a specific action to change the situation. This made them both feel in charge instead of feeling like a victim.

Usually I sense a feeling of relief in them when I suggest to clients to stop complaining and look at their situation from another more proactive perspective. Inside, we generally feel disempowered when we complain. I suggest the following exercise the next time you feel the need to complain.

Ask yourself some questions:

- What responsibility do I have in creating this situation?
- What are three things that I can do starting this week to turn that situation around?

- What is my next action?

An affirmation that might help is “when I feel the need to complain, I stop, and I look at the ways I can change the situation. That is healthier and more positive for me and those around me.”

Brooke Loening is a life coach in Sharon who works with individuals, and runs weekly coaching groups on achieving growth in career, health and relationships. For more information and previous columns visit theloeningplan.com. Columns can also be found at tcextra.com