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Complaining 2: What is behind the Complaint?

By Brooke Loening

I have a client who is always complaining about the weather, and how it is affecting her vegetable garden. “This rain is ruining my tomatoes,” she said after the June deluge. Yes, it is frustrating having put a lot of work into those tomatoes, but what is the payback she is getting by complaining about it? Personally, I have noticed that many of my plants thrived thanks to all the rain we had, as I am sure was case for her as well. The blueberries, blackberries and kale seem to be in great shape because of all the rain. In this article I want to address complaining about things that we do not have so much control over.

So why do certain people always complain? The truth about this is that there are many people who are in a habitual pattern of seeing negativity in everything. Subconsciously, it is satisfying on some level to see it and then point it out to others, and they are so used to doing it that it is automatic for them. It feels more natural and rewarding for them to zero in on what is wrong. The concept of pointing out the positive aspects of life is not satisfying, feels like too much work, and doesn't feel genuine. Let's go a little deeper.

The Need for Drama

Part of the reason people tend to do this is to satisfy the human mind's need for drama and excitement. We are addicted to drama and many times the negative side of things is seen as much more dramatic and exciting than the positive viewpoint. When you turn on the 10 o'clock news, what do you get? You see mostly stories about shocking crimes, disasters, or a huge health scare. What are the headlines of the New York Post and Daily News? Most of the time you can count on them being something totally sensational and probably very negative. Why? It satiates our restless minds' need for excitement. It keeps us juiced.

Misery loves company

Most people don't like to be all alone in any endeavor or way of thinking. Subconsciously, people who always see the negative side of life are uncomfortable in this state if nobody agrees with them. The saying “misery loves company” holds a lot truth because people would rather pull others down to their state in order to create agreement. Plus, it justifies more complaining in the future when you can get the stamp of approval on that way of seeing things.

Inaction

As I discussed in the last article, this approach to life is a great excuse for inaction or laziness. Complaining is a way of sitting on the sidelines but at the same time creating the illusion that you are participating in some way. Observations and comments are being made, but complainers are generally not doers because the two approaches are completely different ways of dealing with the perceived problem.

Importance

Some people get the feeling of being important and achieve a greater sense of self-esteem when they can pick out the negative and get others to see it as well. After all, it is a special talent, and it gives them the feeling of having identified something special. Then allowing others to share in that knowledge puts them in a superior position for just that moment.

How do we change a bad habit like this? First, realize that it is a habit or an addiction, and then you are in the position to do something about it.

I had one client who could have been an anchor for the 10:00 news. He always talked about the negative state of the economy, world relations, and the environment. He knew that this talk was not a positive influence on other people but he was so used to it he could not stop. But he wanted to make a change. So, we did an experiment where he had to come to each session prepared with 3 positive things that were going on in the world. At first this was very uncomfortable for him, and it felt totally phony. But, as weeks passed, he eventually saw that finding positive things in the world was not such a bad exercise and he started to experience some benefits. On a core level he started to know that there are a lot a positive things going on in the world and it was feeling much less heavy emotionally for him to focus on these things instead of what he was used to. With each exercise, it started to feel a little more real for him. He was able to create a newer, healthier habit by testing different approach over and over and over.

It takes a little time to change a bad habit, and complaining is simply a bad habit. Try an experiment. Every day for the next week, look for and share three positive things with someone else.

A daily affirmation that might help: “I look for one positive thing every day and share that with somebody else.”

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