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### **Complaining 3: How to Handle a Complainer**

*By Brooke Loening*

I have a saying:

“Complaining = Draining, for those who have to listen.”

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I have two recent complaints I want to share from a dinner last night regarding my articles on complaining. My father said, “ There are too many article on complaining, I get the feeling ‘I’ve read this before.’” My mother said, “I’m tired of you complaining about people complaining.” Since these are isolated complaints, I will not use these as material for this article.

Seriously though, I have told clients in the past that they will have to pay me three times as much if they want me to sit and listen to them complain for an hour. A complaint here and there is part of life; we all like to vent our frustrations once in a while. But, the truth is, that no one enjoys listening to incessant complaining. What we say has a powerful effect on ourselves and those around us, and complaining can pull everyone down emotionally. So the reality is that complaining doesn’t work for the giver or the receiver.

So what do you do if you are confronted with a complainer? Most people think that they just have to listen to it and even sympathize. I say, “Not true!” There is no reason why anyone has to listen to ongoing complaining from anyone about anything if it does not feel good.

Don’t waste your time talking them through

Also, trying to engage the complainer to convince them that things are not as bad as they seem, or trying to show them the positive side of things may prove to be a waste of your energy. People who want to complain about something are not likely to change their minds about it due to your “insights.” You may find you are in an endless debate going nowhere, with no conclusion.

A friend of mine calls complainers “Con Coms” (constant complainers), and says she will just walk away from them mid-sentence! This might seem harsh to you, but instead of continuing on a disempowered track, try some of the following strategies to change your situation.

Change the Subject

Try asking a simple question that is totally unrelated to the current topic.

“How is your son’s soccer team doing?”

“Have you tried that new restaurant on Main Street, I heard it’s great?”

From my experience, it seems that most people deal with an abrupt conversation change quite well, and without needing to “finish” the last point.

#### Redirect the conversation

Get the complainer to shift gears by asking them to find a positive angle. If someone is going on and on in a negative direction try saying something like

- “What are some of the things that you see are moving in a positive direction?”
- “What are three things that you see are positive about this?”
- “What is actually working well here?”

This strategy is a clear but gentle statement that you would like to shift gears away from the current line of conversation. You might be amazed to see that the complainer will be relieved and happy to change the direction of the conversation when posed with your good question.

#### Have an honest conversation

Save this one for people close to you. A clients of mine told me about how she had listened to her sister complain for “most of her life.” Actually she was complaining about it; I thought it must be genetic. Yet she had never done anything about it and seemed to feel obligated to gut through it as part of the price of being in relationship with family. After some probing, we found that her primary limiting belief that kept her locked into this pattern was “our relationship is based on complaints, and if she can’t complain to me then she may not have anything to say to me at all. I want the relationship.” We found the truth here to be “we can slowly move our relationship away from complaints, and it will be healthier for both of us.”

She did have an honest conversation with her sister about the problem, but she did it in a very loving way with her eye on a positive outcome. Her sister did appreciate hearing the truth, and it brought the problem to a level of awareness for her that she had never had before. Less complaining was awkward and even undoable at first but over time it became more natural for her to stay away from negative topics.

An affirmation you can use is “When someone’s complaining does not work for me, I do not hesitate to redirect the conversation, and that is better for both of us.”

*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](http://theloeningplan.com). Columns can also be found at [tcextra.com](http://tcextra.com)*