

How Complaining Makes Us More Miserable, Ineffectual, and Insecure

[The Harvard Business Review reports](#) “a majority of employees spend 10 or more hours per month complaining – or listening to others complain – about their bosses or upper management. Even more amazing, almost a third spend 20 hours or more per month doing so.”

Only voiced complaints were measured and reported in the study. Add unspoken complaints and it is easy to see there is a lot mental churning and self-inflicted emotional disruption in our lives.

Those who complain about their managers probably also complain about their peers and their employees. They may complain about their spouse and children, the weather, traffic, the service at the restaurant, the economy, or the president.

Complaining can become a state of mind, directing our orientation towards life. Comedian Lily Tomlin once quipped, “Man invented language to satisfy his deep need to complain.”

In his book [Complaint Free Relationships](#), minister Will Bowen observes, “Complaining is often done to absolve a person of responsibility. Complaints express, ‘It’s not my job. I’m not culpable. I’m not responsible.’”

Aren’t there times we should draw attention to things that need correction? Of course. You don’t have to accept the wrong dish in the restaurant. When you call the waiter over and explain the problem, you don’t have to become indignant.

A tip-off that your mind has gone beyond mere facts into the realm of complaining is the mental churning you experience and the agitation you feel in your body.

Complaining Makes Us Ineffectual

When we complain, we are certain we are reacting to objective realities. We might mistakenly believe we'll stop complaining when others change.

"How do I change other people?" is the most common question asked of Minister Bowen when he counsels others.

Bowen relates the secret of Norm Heyder, a man who can stand his ground, listen empathetically, and draws out the best in others even during "contentious interactions." Norm's mindset: "The only way to change someone is to change what you think about them."

Ben Franklin said, "A good example is the best sermon." And, as the proverb goes, "If you want to clean up the entire world, begin with sweeping your own doorstep."

We think we are relating to other people, when we really are relating to our thinking about other people.

Via our thinking we have assigned meaning to the actions of others. Bowen writes, "Our world is an alignment of our own thoughts into a coherent narrative." The behavior we see in others is filtered through our interpretations, our experiences, and our own insecurities.

Often, we complain because we are taking things personally. We assume the worst motivations of strangers and even those close to us. We think we have a right to complain when we attribute intentionality to the actions of others. We might believe angrily expressing our complaint gets them to care about the consequences of their actions so they'll stop doing what they are doing to us.

When we depersonalize our narrative, our complaints often dissipate. The power of choice is our own; no one makes us complain.

Reporting on a study, Bowen explains, "Stopping the negativity

of complaining does more to improve relationships than does adding positive aspects to the relationship. In other words, it's more beneficial to the relationship to send kind words than to send flowers."

Complaining Increases Insecurity

In another of Bowen's books, [*A Complaint Free World*](#), he observes, "One of the main reasons we gossip or complain is to make ourselves look better by comparison: 'At least I'm not as bad as [insert name here].' When I point out your faults, then I'm implying that I have no such faults so I'm better than you are."

Bowen writes, "A cry of superiority is, in reality, often a whimper of insecurity. Complaining... is a way of saying, 'Please tell me I'm okay because right now, or in this area of my life, I don't feel that I am.'" Thus, Bowen writes,

"A person who is insecure, who doubts their value and questions their importance, will brag and complain. They will tell of their accomplishments, hoping to see approval reflecting back to them in the eyes of their listeners. They will also complain about their challenges to get sympathy and as a way of excusing their not accomplishing something they desire."

In contrast, Bowen describes people who do not complain as "people who have healthy self-esteem; people enjoy their strengths and accept their weaknesses; people who are comfortable with themselves and don't need to build themselves up in the eyes of others."

Following Bowen's logic, we can see that complaining is a defense against our feelings of insecurity. Like most defenses, complaining is maladaptive. The more we use our defenses the more insecure we feel.

Complaining involves comparisons. Comparisons rest our emotional well-being on thin ice; there will always be someone

better and someone worse. The more we focus on puffing up our ego, instead of taking responsibility to improve our performance and relationships, the more our insecurity increases which leads to still more complaining.

The way out of our endless complaining is to become more aware of the many ways we complain. With awareness, we turn our attention away from complaining and instead notice qualities and traits we admire in others. Bowen observes, “[Those] positive traits may lie dormant now, but if you focus on them, look for them within yourself, nurture and cultivate them, you will through your attention, draw them to the surface.”

Jean-Paul Sartre may have believed “hell is other people,” but Bowen’s work on relationships helps us to know better.

Awareness is often the disinfectant that allows us to take more responsibility. When the steam goes out of our complaints, we are able to turn our mental bandwidth towards meaningful change.

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