

Clearing the Air: How to Eliminate Complaining

Liz came to class wearing a blue rubber bracelet on her right wrist.

"It's to keep me from complaining," she explained. One of her children had sent it to her. "Every time I complain, I have to switch wrists. The goal is to go twenty-one days without switching wrists."

The idea, launched by Rev. Will Bowen of Christ Church Unity in Kansas City, is that complaint management is like anger management. In a March 6 interview he told MSNBC, "You catch yourself not articulating these negative thoughts that are in your head, and because there's no place for them to flow, they tend to dry up."

Not only does he disallow complaining, but also criticizing, gossiping, and the use of sarcasm. His idea has taken off like wildfire, and his congregation members volunteer to come into the church on weekends to fulfill orders for the official purple no-complaint bracelets. Anyone who makes it successfully through twenty-one days gets to return it for a "certificate of happiness."

It took the good rev. three and a half months to take off his purple band. Other folks have taken up to seven. Some folks, I imagine, are doomed to life with a purple appendage.

I didn't have the feeling that Liz was the kind of woman who often complained. But Liz, like the other nearly 200,000 Americans who are taking the complaint-free challenge, it's not easy.

We all know complainers, folks who seem to thrive on griping. If it's not their health, it's the weather. If it's not the weather, it's lack of a boyfriend. If they have a new boyfriend, he doesn't make the bed right. Yeah. You know the type. Of course, you're not one of them.

Or maybe, like Liz, you find that to some extent you are. Maybe we all have some propensity toward self-pity that propels us to moan, to seek sympathy, to focus on what's wrong.

From what I can see, complaining serves at least two purposes. It helps us voice our discontent, and for sure, this is important. Whatever anger or frustration we swallow wholesale will come back up uglier and more vitriolic than the first time around. You don't need to be a shrink to know that, though psychologist Barbara Held, author of "Stop Smiling, Start Kvetching" lends the notion credence.

But beyond venting, complaining for an audience is also a way to get attention. Like a toddler who comes running to his mom to show her his new invisible scratch so that it can be kissed, sometimes the complainer looks for something to complain about simply because he or she knows it's worked in the past as an attention getter.

But what defines complaining, really? If I curse aloud about the rain falling in the forest, is it complaining if no one else hears?

The dictionary would say yes. To complain is to express grief, pain or discontent.

But surely it's not so wrong to say something like, "I had a tricky day with my toddler today," especially not if he peed on the wall, colored all his toys with permanent black marker, screamed while I was on the phone to get my attention, dumped the cat food in the water dish, threw his train track pieces around the living room, sawed off a low branch on the spruce tree in our front yard and kicked me in the shin.

Just reciting the litany of naughtinesses, is that complaining? Or is it just a statement of fact?

Somehow, I think, the kind of complaining that causes "ear pollution," as Rev. Bowen might say, has more to do with *how* we focus on our grief and discontent. In the talking about it, are we

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earnestly looking to neutralize the emotional antecedent? Or are we thrilling in the mire, showing off our wounds for sympathy and pouring salt in them for effect?

The very word *complaint* hails from dramatic origins. It's related to *plaintiff*, *plaintive*, and *plaint*, all of which stem from the Latin verb *se plangere*, to strike one's breast in grief. The prefix *com-* is used as an intensifier. As if striking one's breast in grief weren't intense enough?

I think the art of not complaining comes down to accepting what is. Where we get into "complaining" versus describing the events of the day likely has something to do with judgment and a certain "woe is me" factor in the way we relate an incident. I don't know how you quantify that, but if the listener needs to detox after conversing with you, chances are that's complaining. In the end, I think the complaint-free idea will not only help the individual feel better by recognizing how negative thoughts can control us, it also will help keep negativity from spreading.

Though the thought of a happiness certificate to hang on the wall is no inducement for me, I like the idea of monitoring and decreasing my complaints.

I think I'll start with a pretend purple band on my right wrist. Wearing bracelets drives me nuts. Oops. Is that a complaint?

Switch the dang pretend thing over to the left. Back to day one.

If you would like a real bracelet, go to <http://www.complaintbracelet.org>.

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