

# Imagine a complaint-free world

## Advice Line

by Dr. Betty Phillips



*Instead of complaining that the rose bush is full of thorns, be happy that the thorn bush has roses.*

— Anonymous

To continue our work on relieving stress in Chatham County and thereabouts, let's join the worldwide movement to reduce complaining and negativity. Find [www.AComplaintFreeWorld.org](http://www.AComplaintFreeWorld.org) and sign up. In 2006 the Rev. Will Bowen, a One Community Spiritual Center minister in Kansas City Missouri, issued a challenge to his congregation which has now been accepted by almost 6 million people in 80 countries. The challenge is to go 21 consecutive days without making any complaints. Since we are so used to complaining, it takes the average person 4 to 8 months to accomplish this challenge! This organization distributes purple bracelets to use for this purpose. The idea is that you wear the bracelet on your right wrist but transfer it to your left wrist whenever you voice a complaint. This makes the choice to complain a more conscious process. Bowen's challenge helps people change this habit so that positive thinking and behavior become the

new way of approaching the world.

But what's wrong with complaining anyway? Isn't it a good thing to vent, to get our complaints off our chests, to point out problems in the world? Occasionally, yes; frequently, no. Data suggests that the average person complains 20 times a day, so this is indeed a strong habit. An occasional gripe or grumble may help secure social support and sympathy from others. Note I use the word "may", because most people in fact avoid complainers.

Why do people complain? People complain about things they perceive to be out of their control, they complain when they feel they are being treated unfairly, they complain to get sympathy or attention, they feel life owes them something, they express feelings of competition, jealousy or superiority, they whine, nag and nitpick, they worry and obsess about all the problems of the world, they feel hopeless and defeated, depressed, cynical and resentful, with a sour outlook on the world. When you really think about it, complaining is a negative and distressing habit.

Complaining adds a dark filter on the world, focusing attention on the downsides of life. Negative thinking is addictive and self-perpetuating. Complaining keeps you in a constant state of thinking that something is wrong and the world is unfair. You learn to scan the world for problems to add to your complaint list. Holding negative thoughts conditions your mind to expect continued problems thus attracting new negative experiences. It becomes difficult to break

## Need advice?

Send Dr. Betty Phillips questions about individual, relationship, marriage or family issues to [BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net](mailto:BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net) or 466 Eagle Point Road, Pittsboro 27312. Questions can be anonymous. Betty looks forward to hearing from you!

out of this pattern even when constant complaining increases your feelings of depression and hopelessness. Critical thoughts actually release stress chemicals in the brain leading to increases in irritability and frustration and eventually damaging the neural circuits which control anxiety and



Think positively!

depression. Constant complainers are also angry people with that proverbial chip on their shoulders. Complainers cannot let go of the bad experiences in their lives and remain stuck in the baggage of the past.

So how do you stop complaining? You have to substitute positive behavior and develop new habits. It's almost impossible to just stop a behavior without substituting new alternatives. The

classic example is to ask you to stop thinking about white bears. Immediately, you begin thinking about white bears although you really haven't thought about white bears before. You'll keep visualizing white bears until you substitute a stronger thought to suppress the white bear image.

The first step in suppressing complaining is to sort through the complaint list. Follow the advice of the poet Maya Angelou: "If you don't like something, CHANGE it. If you can't change it, change your ATTITUDE. Don't complain." You do not have to remain silent when a problem needs correction. Turn complaints into specific requests for change, provide alternative solutions and follow-through in a respectful manner. You can discuss problems without venting by merely stating the facts, trying to understand the origin of a problem and becoming proactive by proposing remedies. Negative thoughts create negative realities, while positive thoughts lead to productive change.

The best long-term solution for you is to develop habits of positive thinking. Express gratitude when positive things happen. Express what you want, not what you do not want. Let petty complaints go when you realize that they are not important in the long run. Realize that life does change for the better. View yourself and others with kindness and compassion without complaining, blaming or judging. Put bad experiences behind you and move on. I've written elsewhere about optimism and positive thinking; both increase happiness and fortify you in coping with difficult experiences. So order your purple bracelet and let's join the movement for a complaint free world!

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