

The Anti-Complain Book

Bart Flos

**THE
ANTI-
COMPLAIN
BOOK**

**First Aid Kit for
Nagging and Whining**



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Previously published by Bart Flos:

Het anti-klaagboek

Het anti-sleurboek

Het perfecte project

De kenniskermis

Vooruitkijken voor gevorderden

De mens als grens ('Our Inner Limits')

The Anti-Complain Book

The Perfect Project

As addenda to 'De mens als grens':

Addendum I – Het begin van het einde: onwetendheid

Addendum II – De frontale confrontatie: klimaatverandering

Addendum III – Het grote probleem: overconsumptie

Addendum IV – Het laatste taboe: ineenstorting

As addenda to 'Our Inner Limits':

Addendum V – The Beginning of The End: Ignorance

Addendum VI – De Frontal Confrontation: Climate Change

Addendum VII – The Big Problem: Overconsumption

Addendum VIII – The Final Taboo: Collapse

Addendum IX – BONUS – The Next Step: Collapse Awareness

Addendum X – BONUS – The Last Resort: Collapse Acceptance

Addendum XI – BONUS – The Tough Choice: Collapse Resilience

Complaining about all that complaining.

That's complaining for the advanced.

Rik Prikkel

First edition August 2024 (V_7)

Original title: *Het anti-klaagboek – Eerste hulp bij zeuren en zaniken (2010)*

Publisher English edition: BlijvendBeklijven Boeken

Broederwal 81

5708 ZT Helmond

www.blijvendbeklijven.nl

info@blijvendbeklijven.nl

www.antiklaagboek.nl (Dutch version)

Author, translation, editing and correction: Bart Flos (www.bartflosveranderadvies.nl)

Logistics and administration: BlijvendBeklijven Boeken (www.blijvendbeklijven.nl)

ISBN: 9789077881934 (Dutch version)

NUR 740, 770, 800, 810

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Introduction

You can't please everyone ánd your father.

De La Fontaine

It was the first beautiful day of spring after a long, cold and gloomy winter. The sky was blue with a few sheep clouds and it was nice and warm. There was a light breeze, the birds were chirping and it smelled fresh and fruity everywhere. It was all just right. The terraces were packed and the city filled with the buzz of contentedly smiling people. It smelled sweet and delicious around us. We felt everything come back to life and we couldn't help but sniff deeply and enjoy.

Until the first guest started complaining. "Pooh, it's so hot, isn't it? Is that summer heat already starting? Boy, what a misery!" The lady in question seemed completely oblivious to the spring miracle that was taking place around her. I very kindly pointed out to her that she should take a look around: the weather was fantastic, everyone was enjoying themselves! And at the same time, I thought that this form of complaining should not be allowed. She should receive a formal reprimand of some kind, don't you find?

We all complain every once in a while. Your neighbor complains that your cat was digging in his garden yesterday. Your partner complains that you didn't take out the garbage. Your boss complains that your assignment isn't finished on time. Your coworker complains about your boss' complaining. Your friend complains about Dutch politics. The politicians complain about each other.

Everyone complains about everything and everyone: the weather, the partner, health, the state of the world, the euro, too little money and the large amount of money of others. It never lets up. Complaining is part of human life, you will probably say. Really? Should we just accept it and move on? Yes and no!

The American clinical psychologist William Doyle Gentry distinguishes a number of basic ingredients for happiness: safety, satisfaction, overview, peace, pleasure, gratitude and well-being. In a prosperous and orderly country like the Netherlands, these ingredients are there for the taking, you would say. Yet we still complain, because we feel unsafe and dissatisfied. We complain, because we are so busy that we miss the overview and can't find inner peace. We complain because we lack fun. We are easily ungrateful and defy our well-being by living unhealthy lives. And then we complain about that.

So yes, complaining is inextricably linked to the human species, also in the Netherlands, perhaps especially so. Nevertheless, research by the British psychologist Adrian White shows that the Netherlands ranks fifteenth out of a total of 178 participating countries in the list of happiest nations in the world. So we have been officially declared happy by science. But you only have to stand in a bus shelter or at a coffee machine at work for a few minutes to realize that we are still nagging and whining all the time. The fact that we are this happy as a country apparently does not guarantee the absence of lamentations.

Complaining is part of it, and no, we certainly shouldn't resign ourselves to it. Complaining, of course, has its advantages. For example, it is a great relief to grumble when your favorite sports team has lost. And especially if the Dutch national team plays a lesser match on the way towards the World Cup. Then we all grumble. And it's a relief to blow off steam when your colleague has cut

corners again, like he always does. Sometimes we just have to get it off of our chests.

But complaining too much has the opposite effect. Professor Martin Seligman, the well-known American happiness expert, has researched this. He discovered that complaining people live shorter lives, are ill more often, are less successful and have fewer friends. You can also see it in notoriously heavy complainers: their faces look like thunderstorms before the lament has even begun. They don't get any prettier. And don't forget: you and I suffer from all that complaining. It makes us gloomy: complaining is contagious.

Fortunately, you can do something about it. In this book I describe what complaining is, what causes it, how to measure it, how to actively combat the typical complaining culture in The Netherlands (and undoubtedly in yours too), but also how to reduce your own complaining. In this book I want to show you how to turn negative energy into positive energy, how to turn complaining into *anti-complaining*.

Anti-complaining is easier than you think and the more people that do it, the stronger it becomes. Anti-complaining is contagious too! Every complaint that is parried with an anti-complaint results in a bonus: the eyes of your conversation partners start to shine again and the corners of their mouths go up. You pump positive energy back into your environment, as it were, and that only makes people more beautiful. The choice is yours!

As a crisis manager and interim project manager in large companies, my daily job was to solve problems. I was the flying keep who was flown in when projects got stuck and no one knew how to proceed. I always started my work by

listening carefully to the stories of the employees and managers involved. And of course, their stories were teeming with complaints. After years of listening, I've learned three things:

1 – Derailed collaborations and crises seem, when you compare them, very complex and different. However, that's an illusion: they're all essentially simple and equal.

2 – The cause of a crisis rarely, if ever, has anything to do with a failing machine (the technology) or a faltering method (the process). The cause almost always has to do with people botching things up.

3 – Complaining doesn't solve anything. Nagging and whining only ruin the atmosphere, spread negative energy and reduce the chance for a solution to be found.

Over the years I've learned that by addressing unnecessary complaining, it can drastically improve the mood. When I tackle notoriously heavy complainers and encourage them to think positively, they often take the initiative to solve the underlying problems themselves. And by treating both the employee and the manager equally, the result is equally positive at all levels of collaboration. I wrote this book for anyone who complains and wants to improve their lives. But also for anyone who is annoyed by the complaining of others. This book is suitable for you, if you want to understand the annoying and harmful effects of complaining behavior and if you want to do something concrete about it.

Are you harboring harbors feelings of dissatisfaction sometimes, but nevertheless want to change? Are you someone who would like to pro-actively

engage the complaining of others? Are you someone who just wants to feel better and go through life smiling more often? Then this book is ideally suited for you. You will soon understand what complaining is, where it originates and what you can do about it. Take advantage of all the tips and tricks. You will discover that you can turn into an optimistic anti-complainer and thus have a positive influence on those around you. When you are a born optimist already, you will undoubtedly recognize your personal ideas and positive lifestyle, but may be able to sharpen it a bit. For the anti-complainers among us, this book will be a feast of recognition.

Remember: the choice is yours. You can spend your life complaining, or join the growing group of optimists who prefer anti-complaining!

That same spring evening I took a walk along the edge of my neighborhood. The air was pregnant with the energy of that first super day of spring. The sun brushed low across the houses and painted the surroundings in pastel shades. I got talking to an older woman. "What lovely weather, isn't it?" I said, smiling. She looked a little misty in the distance and said, "Yes, but I hear it will be over tomorrow. It's going to rain!" I again experienced a mild shock. "But, ma'am," I suggested, "the weather is beautiful now!" I pointed out the sun-drenched landscape, the birds in the sky and the smell of all the sweet spring delights. 'Yeah, but still...' she said without a moment's hesitation. Yes, but still! Sigh. There was just no pleasing her!

Chapter 1

What is complaining?

*To be satisfied with little is difficult, to be satisfied
with much is impossible.*

English proverb

About nagging and whining, moaning and groaning

Everyone complains, but some seem to have more complaining rights than others. If someone dear to you has died at a young age, you have every right to complain about the fact that this is terrible: after all, he had his whole life ahead of him. If you get burnt potatoes in a restaurant, it's perfectly normal to report it; after all, you pay well for it. But if you walk into the supermarket and there is a long queue at the checkout, you don't have the right to sigh loudly about the delay. We all have to wait sometimes.

So there are big differences between complaints. What is complaining anyway?

Complaining is so widespread that a thousand and one synonyms have been developed for it over the years: *beefing, bellyaching, bemoaning, bewailing,*

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bitching, bleating, carping, caviling, chicaning, contravening, demurring, deprecating, differing, disapproving, discontenting, dissenting, denouncing, expostulating, fretting, fussing, gainsaying, grieving, groaning, grouching, gouching, growling, grumbling, griping, griming, kvetching, lamenting, moaning, mourning, murmuring, nagging, niggling, nit-picking, objecting, protesting, quibbling, railing, remonstrating, repining, reproaching, scathing, sighing, simmering, sniveling, sniping, squabbling, squawking, thrashing, thundering, wailing, weeping, whimpering, whining, worrying and yammering.

You're welcome.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, complaining is: 'to give expression to feelings of ill-usage, dissatisfaction or discontent'. The first evidence of the word *complain* in our literature is from around 1374, in the writing of Geoffrey Chaucer, poet and administrator. So, we go way back with our whining. But complaining can also be regarded as the 'expression of pain or sadness' that we feel after, for example, the demise of a dear family member. It's complaining in the form of mourning or *grief*. However, when you're *gouching* in line at the checkout of the supermarket, because you feel it's all moving way too slow; that is just complaining for the sake of complaining.

In this chapter, apart from these two definitions of complaining, *grieving* and *gouching*, I will distinguish a third form: *grievance*. Please note: I have left *collective protest* as a possible fourth form outside the scope of this book, and I will not cover the phenomenon of *gossip* either, as I will explain later.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them so well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The grumpy neighbor

The moment he sticks his soured head over the fence, you already know: no spontaneous compliment will follow about your magnificent magnolias or your sparkling begonia flowerbed. And indeed: it's about your cats digging in his garden again. And it's about your children who could be a little quieter. And yes, there it is, yet another lament about how difficult it is to be on a disability income. Your statement that there are more cats in the neighborhood than just yours and that the children simply use the playground in front of the door, does not make much sense to him. The grumpy neighbor needs to get rid of his gram and you're just in the way.

These are the three main definitions of complaining that I will discuss in this book:

1 – Grief

Grieving is the act of wanting to share worries, suffering and pain in order to vent the heart, to ask for attention and to obtain, maintain or strengthen a bond (for example, in the event of illness, accident, dying and death).

I don't deal with mourning in depth in this book because it's a normal, useful form of complaining that we shouldn't 'try to handle'. It is an important social trait of the human species. In times of adversity, people will grieve, especially in the case of profound personal suffering, and our small social groups will provide consolation. We mourn in the face of misfortune, illness, the dying process, and in death. There is no problem or conflict to resolve, but from the mourner point of view it is a perfectly understandable attempt to gain attention, compassion, support, and hope.

Marketing manager Peter's elderly mother died on Sunday. She was buried on Thursday. Although he could barely hold back his tears during the funeral, Peter spoke candidly about his mother's life and her long and cumbersome illness. A week later, he went back to work. Initially, he was approached and consoled by many colleagues. They listened to his story, genuinely concerned with his grief.

Months passed and Peter noticed that people's attention waned when he started talking about his mother. He kept telling how bravely his mother had received the bad news about her illness, how hard she had fought, how difficult it had been for him to pick up where she left off. Wim, with whom he had been working for seven years, stood up and said: 'Well, it's not easy. And yes, it's hard, I understand, but life goes on! All right, I've got to get back to work, I'll see you in a bit.'

Grief is personal. We deal with our pain based on our personality and depending on our environment and specific circumstances. Over time, prolonged grieving is sometimes experienced as a form of complaining. Even in mourning, there is a socially desired 'end to the pain', regardless of the actual

feelings of the mourner. Subconsciously, at some point, we tell grievors that it is time to start acting 'normal' again. If they don't, grieve turns into whining, we feel. Is that fair? I guess not, but as a larger group, we hardly take into account the individual's need to complain for a prolonged period of time. 'Life goes on', we say. Indeed. Socially, culturally and psychologically evolved rules and laws of social group behavior determine the boundaries between the three forms of complaining and our subsequent behavior. Both grief and grievance can easily deteriorate into some form of grouching.

2 – Grievance

To utter grievances is the substantiated, purposeful and positive critical reclamation of bad service, inaccuracy and injustice, during arguments, conflicts and disagreements.

As with grieving, uttering grievances is socially 'legitimate', because it has a clear purpose. And as with grieving, you can't expect your environment to be eternally understanding. If, after a long wait, the bookstore has delivered the wrong book, you can complain and say that you find that annoying. After all, you had been looking forward to reading that book. Allow the supplier to correct the mistake, but don't whine about it endlessly. It was a mistake, that happens. To err is human. But if you keep on whining about it, grievances turn into grouching and grumbling, and that doesn't add to your popularity.

Marcel ended up in a wheelchair after a serious car accident. He would never be able to walk again, the doctors told him. Because Marcel is the main breadwinner of the household with three children, the family income decreases considerably. That has a huge impact on the family's prosperity

and wellbeing. At first, there is a lot of support from family, friends and colleagues (the family grieves and the environment provides comfort).

Marcel goes to court against the other party (he utters his grievances). However, Marcel himself is not entirely free of guilt. A complicated legal procedure ensues, which takes years. He fights against the odds and gets out of the frying pan into the fire. His wife can't take it anymore, leaves him and takes the children with her. The environment can no longer keep up with the amount of misery (the willingness to comfort decreases). He loses the lawsuit, but appeals, against the advice of his lawyer. To anyone who will listen, he complains about the legal system, about biased judges and life's injustice. He loses the appeal and the case is closed, but Marcel, in his early thirties, becomes embittered, lonely and alienates himself from his environment. He gets stuck in his lamentation (grievance has turned into grouching).

Uttering grievances is useful: you stand up for yourself, both professionally and privately, when promises are not kept, when agreements are violated or in case of bad service or bad product delivery. This can vary from returning burnt potatoes in a restaurant and disagreements in the relational sphere (a quarrel) to legal wrangling over warranty conditions, business transactions or employment laws, and everything in between. Just remember that uttering grievances has a limited shelf life; it can easily deteriorate into grouching, unless you approach it tactically.

You're having a nice dinner and your table companion gets burnt potatoes with his main course. He complains about it to you in a whisper (the beginning of grouching, or grievance turning into grouching). You respond alertly: 'Well, just call the waiter and tell her' (you propose to him to utter his

grievances). Your table companion responds dismissively: 'Well, um, no, I don't want to do that. But what kind of a restaurant is this, that they dare to serve something like that!' (The grouching is ramped up). You propose to complain on behalf of your table companion in an attempt to turn the grouching back into grievances. 'Yes, that's a great idea; you do it!' You complain to the waiter in a polite way by first complimenting the steak dish, which is excellently prepared. The potatoes are served correctly now, with kind and heartfelt apologies.

The circle is complete, the grouching has effortlessly been promoted into politely uttered grievances and the diner may proceed in peace and tranquility. And who knows, maybe your less assertive table companion has picked up a thing or two and might even utter his grievances himself next time.

There are limits to uttering grievances. Initially you may complain to get properly prepared potatoes, to regain your lawful rights or to improve your personal relationship. But if you keep at it, even when you can't win or when the matter is already settled, complaining will quickly have the opposite effect. Uttering grievances is not like picking a fight. It is only successful when you execute it with a positive attitude in mind. You need to be goal-oriented and resolute in character, for sure, but you also need to show respect for others and be courteous, even when you are in the middle of a quarrel. Unless, of course, your goal is to *end* a relationship, because then relentless grouching and grumbling might just do the trick.

Uttering grievances in the sense of standing up for your rights has a strong relationship with self-awareness and self-determination, but also with

decisiveness and assertiveness. These are well-known aspects of *personal leadership* that run like a thread through this book. If you want to become a proficient anti-complainer, they will all come in handy.

3 – Grouching

Grouching for the sake of grouching is complaining for the sake of complaining. It's nagging and whining without wanting to do anything about it. It is complaining without any real purpose; it leads nowhere.

The third and final manifestation of complaining is grouching and grumbling, nagging and whining. This is what this book is all about. While the first two forms of complaining are (or at least can be) 'legitimate', grouching for the sake of grouching is by definition a 'unlawful' form of complaining. It has no 'legal base' and it is not socially accepted. It doesn't serve any purpose, other than that it might be pleasing and comforting to the complainer himself. But in that case complaining becomes a 'socially unlawful' personal goal.

(Please bear in mind that my definitions of 'legitimate', 'legal' and 'unlawful' are strictly limited to the confounds of this book. I will lay down the 'laws' of complaining and anti-complaining within a social-psychological and cultural context and for the purpose of personal improvement. I do not believe that there is any lawful impediment to grouch, grumble, nag and whine your way through life with a vengeance. You will not be fined for it, get arrested for it or go to jail for it. The only price you have to pay might be a social one: people won't like you as much and you won't get ahead as much in life as you would like).

The study by the British psychologist White cited in the introduction of this book shows that the Netherlands is in fifteenth place in the list of happiest countries in the world. It is a list of a total of 178 countries and we score a good 9 out of 10 on the happiness scale. We are happier than, for example, the USA (place 23 = 8.7), Germany (35 = 8.0), England (41 = 7.7) and France (62 = 6.5 out of 10). Much happier than China (82 = 5.4), India (125 = 3.0) and Russia (167 = 0.6 out of 10). But the most unfortunate nation is the Republic of Burundi, a country in East-Africa, lonely and alone in that miserable 178th place (0,0 out of 10). The people must really be burdened by life over there.

According to psychologist Doyle Gentry, everyone has the innate talent to experience happiness. There are no people on this planet who are incapable of feeling joy, contentment, peace and well-being, he says. Unlike its counterparts anger, sadness, and fear, happiness is a positive emotion. Happiness is what binds us together and it is the basis for any form of civilized behavior.

Ultimate Complaining

Paul Ekman is professor emeritus of psychology and has travelled the world in his forty-year career. He found the same smiling faces everywhere. His research has helped us understand that emotions are not learned: we are born with them. You can, however, learn how to get a grip on happiness. But to do that, we must first address the behaviors that stem from anger, sadness, and fear. Because while we might combat mild to moderate complaining very well with specific stimuli, nagging and whining sometimes takes on malicious forms. It becomes persistent, more chronic.

According to the Dutch Professor of Social Psychology Roos Vonk, some complainers do indeed open up the cesspool excessively. Their stream of complaints is the same every instance, without providing any kind of solution. 'And [providing a solution] is actually what you want as a listener,' says Vonk. Complaining has to have a certain function, otherwise we quickly get tired of it.

Everyone knows such chronic complainers: they are just looking for an outlet. These hopeless cases often have a very poor understanding of what their wailing triggers in others. Vonk says that their so-called 'self-monitoring' is not in control. I call this *notoriously heavy complaining*.

Protest

Yes, but, you might say, what about *protesting*? Isn't that also a form of complaining? That's right, and I equate a protesting individual with a complaining individual. However, the protesting done by a (large) group of people that I am referring to here, is the *collective resistance* in the event of, for example, social injustice or labor disputes. It is then used as a strategic, tactical and operational means to achieve an end. For example, you can think of incidental protest marches or a structural protest movement. However, I will leave protesting as a form of complaining aside. Protesting is in itself a positive form of complaining (as long as it remains peaceful) that cannot be 'mirrored' like anti-complaining. After all, what is the opposite of a collective protest? Doing nothing and resigning to the injustice of the situation? That makes no sense at all.

Whether you are going to protest against fossil fuels emissions or global warming, or against nuclear war, or against cuts in health care and education, or against the planned mass layoffs at your employer; protesting is actually an organized collective lament. You stand together in the same fight, in the hope that the sum of all that complaining sends a more powerful signal to the authorities than the actions of smaller groups of individuals (or just the one) could achieve.

Peaceful protests against the established order will sometimes, but certainly not always, be successful. And it serves a purpose: you fight a common enemy within a group of like-minded people and that temporarily puts your personal grievances in the background. Moreover, it creates a sense of belonging within the group, just like winning (or losing) a soccer match for the World Cup. After all, sorrow shared is sorrow halved! I will get back to this ‘sense of togetherness’ further on.

Gossip

But why won’t I discuss the phenomenon of *gossip* then? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, gossip, hearsay or slander is ‘to talk idly, mostly about other people’s affairs; to go about tattling’. It is ‘idle talk, trifling or groundless rumor’. We gossip when we take a certain pleasure in telling others what we *think* we know about someone, usually based on what *other* people say and less so from personal observation. And we also exaggerate it; becoming a form of slander.

‘If you say you never gossip, you’re lying’, says Dutch journalist Renate Zoutberg. Everybody is chatting about everybody all the time. There is nothing

wrong with that in and of itself. It can even be healthy, because you fraternize with your social group mates and that creates a bond. But you have to be careful! It takes a special kind of sensitivity to know what you can and can't share. And you have to be able to estimate how your counterpart will deal or cope with your information.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them so well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The stressed-out manager

He takes himself very seriously, has no sense of humor at all and is so tightly bound by his own deadlines, that all that escapes him is monotonous grumbling. Nothing is ever good or even satisfactory and the constant nagging and whining is mainly about daily pressures and stress, lack of understanding from 'upper management' for the problems in the workplace and the constant utterance of their disappointment. The stressed-out manager complains about backlogs, overdue reports and the department being understaffed. He's constantly on the brink of tears and the tie around his neck is snared so tight that there is an imminent threat of oxygen deficiency. Constantly looking over everybody's shoulder, he is envious of the talents of his employees (and yours in particular) and frustrated by his own lack of aptitude.

'Gossip is a common way of manipulating others and playing them off against each other,' says Dutch communication expert Frank van Marwijk. He distinguishes no less than twelve types: the chatterbox, the sensationalist, the blabbermouth, the manipulator, the snitch, the swagger, the slanderer, the sniffer, the collector, the braggart, the quiet enjoyer and the humorist.

When we gossip, we bend towards into each other and we start whispering, because it's actually quite exciting to gossip. And of course, the person in question is not present – that would negate the whole point of gossiping! We purposefully want to spread rumors and private information. Gossip is a word-of-mouth type of communication that doesn't require concrete and verifiable facts. When we allow gossip to go unchecked it gets worse real fast.

Like grieving, gossip is inseparable from our social and cultural behavior as a human species. It has similarities and a certain overlap with complaining, but it also differs in an important sense: those who complain seek comfort, satisfaction and attention. Those who gossip seek sensation, chaos and self-affirmation. The latter is where the overlap lies. However, the different psychosocial motivations for complaining or gossiping are too far apart, so I will leave the subject aside for now.

The Top Ten Most Popular Complaining Topics

People are always complaining, everywhere they go. You just can't escape it. Nagging and whining are contagious as well; it can easily spread from individual to individual, and from social group to social group. The more groups are involved in the complaining, the deeper the grumbling settles and the more it affects the collective culture of such groups. Structural,

institutionalized complaining can affect entire organizations and bring them to a grinding halt. Carefully analyzing all that complaining around me over the years, and observing those notoriously heavy complainers in their natural habitat, I have been able to distinguish five fruitful grounds or five *complain domains*, if you will:

1 – The individual

In this domain we complain of problems with sleeping and resting, eating and drinking, income, costs of maintenance and living, housekeeping, personal care, health, spirituality and religion. We complain about ourselves and regularly about others. We contemplate our place in the world and our impression of its existential condition, and complain about it. We complain about more general topics such as the weather, politics, traffic jams, public transport, the internet, social media, radio and television. When we complain, everything seems to turn around ourselves, nothing else matters.

2 – Family and household

In this domain we complain about problems with partners and offspring, parents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces. And about other people's families and in-laws.

3 – Work and career

In this domain we complain about problems in work and career, about our colleagues and bosses, about overtime, about our salary and benefits, about

promotion and demotion, about our traveling for work (like being stuck in traffic jams all the time) and about office politics.

4 – Friends and acquaintances

In this domain we complain about problems with our best friends and our lesser friends and acquaintances. We complain about other people's friends and their human relationships with us and others, because we think we know them better than they know themselves.

5 – Hobbies, leisure and recreation

In this domain we complain about how we spend our free time, that we don't have enough of it or that we don't know what to do with it. We complain about every aspect of our hobbies, our free evenings and weekends, our days off and our holidays, even when we chose the destination and the amount of luxury (of lack thereof) ourselves. But we also complain about how other people spend their free time.

What are we grumbling about with so much eagerness? A hot topic is the increased rudeness (*'hufterigheid'*) in the Netherlands. Dutch society has had it with the lack of manners, the impoliteness and the discourtesy towards others. This is evident from market research by *Multiscope* in 2010, who found that eight out of ten respondents agree with the statement that anti-social behavior has increased over the past five years. Causes are a lack of education, a lack of clear boundaries and not enough effective counter measures. But increased individualism is also an important cause.

According to the study, these are the main annoyances:

1. *Jump the queue*
2. *Dumping waste*
3. *Dog poop*
4. *Tailgating*
5. *Spitting on the ground*
6. *Loud music in public*
7. *Loitering youth*
8. *Second-hand smoke*
9. *Noisy mobile phone calls in public*
10. *Not being given the right of way*

What I find disturbing about this research is that the Dutch are apparently not heroes in offering an effective rebuttal to anti-social behavior. Under the adage 'live and let live', frontal confrontations are being avoided carefully. Only a minority of about a third of the participants in this study say they intervene where possible. It is a good example of how we complain about something that aggravates us, without engaging it or wanting to offer solutions to the problem.

Complaining about the rudeness of society is but one of a countless number of complaint topics that we have at our disposal. You must have been living under a rock if you don't recognize the following top ten of complaining topics:

Complaint topic 1 – The weather

The weather is a global phenomenon with a very common denominator: we are all powerless to influence it. This subject of *lamentation par excellence* is the

most grateful source of our nagging and whining. But at the same time, it also provides us with a common enemy. We all experience it together, but it is comforting when we can grouch and grumble about it together. Sometimes it is quite *gezellig* (cozy) under the umbrella.

Our fascination with the weather undoubtedly has its origins in prehistoric times. The moment we left our cave, we were instantly and mercilessly exposed to it. There was no escaping it, but, of course, we had to hunt and gather if we wanted to survive. We were forced to do that *outside* and we were not the only ones who were bothered by the weather; so did our neighbors. And they had to hunt and gather too.

So, I imagine a drizzly morning in prehistoric times when two cavemen stick their noses into the wind and the chilly humidity slaps them in the face. The shivers run down their spine and they wrap their bearskins around their shoulders even more tightly. They look at each other, then up and down, left and right, they mumble and growl a bit, nod to each other in agreement, then shrug their shoulders, put the spear to their shoulders and sprint to the hunting grounds. That growling could have been the very first joint complaint about the weather in the history of mankind.

Complaint topic 2 – Work

If we observe a normal working week, a simple calculation shows that of the $7 \times 24 = 168$ hours that are available to us, we spend about 30% on work. Think about it: if we add another ten hours of traveling time to a nominal working week of forty hours, we spend on average $50 / 168 = 30\%$ of our time on work. It gets even worse when we realize that in that same week we also need about

$7 \times 8 = 56$ hours of sleep to recover from all that 'hunting and gathering'. So, the percentage we spend on work in terms of 'conscious time' is even higher: $50 / (168 - 56) = 45\%$. Just a little bit of overtime or getting stuck in traffic will push us over the edge of spending more than half of the available time per week on work. No wonder it is a rewarding subject to complain about! It has become quite common to spend more time on work than on family, household, friends and free time. We all have to work, and that weighs heavily on our shoulders.

Nowadays, laptops, smartphones, tablets, fast networks and flexible workplaces make it possible to do our work online anytime, anywhere. It was supposed to save travel time, increase productivity and provide more opportunities to restore work-life balance. We thought we would work less and achieve more 'efficient and effective' results to free up time to do other things. In practice, however, we actually work *more*. And we complain about it, naturally.

A global survey of 25,000 IBM-employees found that employees who are able to work flexibly from home, only feel that work had a negative impact on their work-life balance after 57 hours. But if you're working in the office, they got that feeling after 38 hours already. 'Flexible workers' spend way more time on work, therefore spend less time on family, household, friends and hobbies. That may be a good deal for the employer, but it does lead to many complaints from both employees and the employee's loved ones.

Complaint topic 3 – Money

I'll revisit this topic in chapter 2, because we can't seem to get enough of it: money, money, money! Greed is one of the worst mortal sins, which might

explain why it cause so much trouble. Our salaries are never high enough, we feel our colleagues earning more don't deserve it and there seems to be no level of prosperity and wellbeing we find satisfactory. And last but not least, since the introduction of the euro on January 1st of 2002 (in terms of coins and bills; the actual implementation date was January 1st of 1999), we are convinced that everything has become 'ten times' as expensive, which earns us, so we feel, the right to nag and whine about it. However, research shows that money does not, or only to a very limited extent, increases our happiness. But that doesn't seem to stop us from considering money as one of the most grateful sources of complaining.

Greed is an ugly trade of the human species. The more money we get, the more we spend it. The more we spend, the more money we need. But how about this: we only become truly 'rich' when we are able to stabilize our spending pattern at a certain point and spend the increased income on other, less material things. So, for instance, don't finance that bigger house, that third car or that major renovation, but rather pay off your debts, carry out overdue maintenance and work on your partnership or relationship. Only filthy rich people have the luxury of feeling blasé about their capital, wealth, and prestige. But that's just because they have it. As it turns out, rich people complain just as much about money problems as less wealthy people, perhaps even more.

Complaint topic 4 – Holidays

We work our butts off all year round and then the time finally arrives: we're going on holiday! What should be a source of relaxation, tranquility and new experiences, regularly degenerates into a vale of tears that we eagerly nag and whine about afterwards. Just take a look at the top ten causes of 'fights on

vacation' that the site *zoover.nl* collected: irritations due to fatigue, wrong expectations of the holiday destination, disagreements about spending, jealousy, disappointing sex, alcohol abuse, crazy driving, bad weather and fights whilst setting up the tent! More than enough misery to bother our audience with when we return. But the next year, we'll do it all over again.

I experienced the most extreme form of holiday complaining when I listened to a particularly gloomy nitpicker at a party. This wealthy entrepreneur had gathered an interested group of listeners around him. He spat a litany of misery stories onto his audience: the accommodation was too small, the price disproportionately high, the distance to the beach was too great, the swimming pool was not private, but had to be shared with other guests, the rental car was worthless and so on and so forth.

Only at the end of the story did it turn out that this gentleman was not victim of a rogue travel agency. Because perhaps then there would be something to complain about in terms of legitimately uttered grievances. No, this filthy rich vinegar-pissing holidaymaker had booked this holiday all by himself! He could have stayed in a castle with a large crew of footmen and butlers, if he wanted too. In reality, all the subjects of his complaints were initiated by him himself. It was the ultimate form of self-flagellation: doing a lousy job planning your vacation and then keep on nagging and whining about it endlessly. It was quite bizarre.

Complaint topic 5 – Family

There's no way around it: family includes in-laws. In life we freely choose our own partner (that is to say, if your marriage is not arranged), but with our

partner we get the in-laws too, free of charge. They are complementary to the package. As a consequence, we feel we are 'allowed' to complain about them to our heart's content. But, so you know, we don't get to choose our family either! As soon as we pass the diaper and weaning phase and start to feel the hormone effects of puberty, we are increasingly aware of the annoying presence of parents and siblings. They came with the package too. But when we choose our partner for life, we better choose wisely, because that may be the only variable to which we can apply some form of control. Next, we have to deal with the question of producing offspring. And even that apparent free choice is a grateful source of complaining: there is also plenty to grumble within our own household.

Arguments about our in-laws may very well escalate to the point of divorce, so marriage counselors have told me. Relationships with in-laws are traditionally difficult because of their constant meddling in the married life of their children and grandchildren. Expectations are high, disappointment and frustration ensues, tension builds up and, to add insult to injury, we put them all together in one room at the dinner table with Christmas. What a fine collection of unique human specimen!

According to experienced relationship therapists, as a parent-in-law you should avoid the following: to condemn, disrespect, argue, blame, to compulsively convince and enforce, to complain, to take matters personally and to burst out in flames. What you *should* do as a parent-in-law is: to respect, to make matters negotiable, to clarify expectations, set boundaries, think solution-oriented, to steer matters in a more positive direction and to be able to let go. That resembles the art of anti-complaining almost to the letter, as we will soon discover.

Complaint topic 6 – Health

We are bombarded with well-known health mantras: eat a varied diet, avoid prolonged stress, don't smoke, drink moderately and exercise regularly. Commercials and advertisement are overflowing with tanned, glowingly healthy, super-slim and muscular people who, with their improbably white teeth, want to sell us one beauty product after another.

We want to be as handsome and healthy as they are, but that's just wishful thinking, since we are who we are, we are as busy as we are and we don't have the time nor the inclination to snap to it and get moving. In the meantime, we accumulate on average just about 100 grams of excess weight every month. After twenty years the 20 kilograms of additional dead weight will have become a fact of life. Currently there are more people overweight than underweight in the world and we complain about that with groans and grumbles.

A survey by the *National Information Network for General Practitioner Care* shows that the general practitioner is the most popular doctor. Together, all general practitioners in the Netherlands have 105 million contacts with patients per year. In all these contacts (telephone and personal consultations) they hear about 126 million complaints! That's more than 10 million complaints per month or about 2.5 million complaints per week, 35,000 complaints per day or a good 14,000 an hour, seven days a week. What are all these complaints about?

The number one is high blood pressure (5.4 million complaints per year), followed by diabetes (3.4), birth control (2.3), unspecified diseases (2.0), insomnia (1.8), depression (1.6), asthma (1.5), contact eczema (1.5), bladder

infection (1.4) and bad coughs (1.3). Many of these complaints are well-founded, but we also tend to exaggerate our aches and itches. Health complaints and the nagging and whining that accompanies them, tend to hit the patient's immediate environment first (partner, family, friends, colleagues) before it reaches the doctor's chambers. Perhaps this is an interesting challenge for political parties: educate and stimulate the art of anti-complaining among the general public, to, first and foremost, reduce the workload and stress of GP's.

Complaint topic 7 – Traffic

Every year, the *National Police Service* compiles a *Traffic Annoyance Top Ten* based on a national survey that looks like this:

1. *Tailgating*
2. *Driving whilst under the influence of alcohol- and drugs*
3. *Aggressive driving*
4. *Driving on the left unnecessarily*
5. *Slow driving*
6. *Prolonged overtaking maneuvers*
7. *Hindrance when inserting and exiting*
8. *Driving past traffic jams on hard shoulder*
9. *Obstruction when changing lanes*
10. *Improper use of turn signal*

Remarkably, traffic jams are no longer in the top ten. Perhaps they are regarded as an inseparable element of travel. However, given the collective

complaining we still do about traffic jams, it's probably an *über-annoyance* for which a top ten simply falls short.

The very first traffic jam in the Netherlands occurred on 29th of May 1955, Pentecost Monday, at the *Oudenrijn Junction*. Back then, it was quite a sight, beheld by a crowd of disaster tourists with picnic tables, ham sandwiches and pots of coffee. Now, on an average working day, there are about 350 kilometers of traffic jams at the peak of the morning rush hour. On January 22nd 2019, we experienced the busiest evening rush hour ever, with 2,287 kilometers of traffic jams due to intensive snow showers and treacherously slippery conditions. In addition to personal frustration, traffic jams have painful macroeconomic consequences as well: according to employer associations the annual loss of production due to traffic jams runs into the billions of Euros. We complain about all that for sure, but in the modern age it has just become a 'new normal'.

So, why aren't we traveling by public transport more often? Well, if you want to get me started... Public transport does not seem to be a good diversion from all the nagging and whining about traffic jams in the Netherlands. The public Dutch broadcaster *Omroep MAX* made an inventory of the top five of public transport annoyances: poor hygiene, delays, filth, poorly managed travel information in the event of delays and the cancellation of bus and train rides. Whichever form of transport you choose, it's an inspiring cesspool for sourpusses of all sorts. And whilst complaining about all that suffering we have to endure, we simply forget to mention the flawless travelling we experience, the schedules that are kept to the minute and the connections that work like a charm. Shame on us.

Complaint topic 8 – Politics

It's a well-known phenomenon: during the Soccer World Cup, we all magically transform into sports experts and professional referees. Same goes for politics: when we engage in discourse about them, we suddenly turn into elected politicians, professional analysts and highly educated judges, all rolled into one. Because no matter what party rises to power, we will never be satisfied.

As a nation goes, The Netherlands seems to be going under in bickering and nitpicking about the best way forward in terms of executive policy. All ministers suck, apparently, we denounce the decision-making process and hate its consequences. We complain about it until the cows come home, but we fail to realize what it takes to govern a country. Perhaps we should start to think in terms of solutions instead of problems all the time. And what would you do if *you* were the prime minister? Sit in that chair for a while and no, you will not be getting unlimited funds or absolute power and immunity. You will have to play with the cards you were dealt.

Discussions about politics are inevitable. Not a social gathering goes by without someone shouting something about some minister botching things up. We can't drink a cup of coffee for five minutes without someone being indignant about the political state of affairs in the Netherlands.

Not so long ago, a colleague was ranting and raving about the nation's politics. The reason for his tirade was caused by the irregularities that took place in the west of the country during the municipal elections. Within minutes the entire story became extremely negative. He kept going on about 'this banana republic', 'the downfall of our country' and, of course, those

'bloody migrants'. The Netherlands was 'flooded' with them, his home town was 'going down the tube' because of it and it was about time that 'somebody stood up and actually did something about it'. I got the feeling that, if this was all true, collapse was imminent. Everything was bad, we would all perish soon and there wasn't a glimmer of hope or relief in his narrative. It was quite exhausting.

In my attempt to move him towards a solution (by focusing less on emotion and impossibilities and more on facts and possibilities), it soon became clear that he was not interested in that at all. This person wasn't prepared to fill the hypothetical prime minister's chair and try to sort things out himself. He just wanted to find scapegoats for all this misery. While I was looking for a solution and kept pressing on it, he became visibly irritated, being so busy with complaining for the sake of complaining. So I switched to comforting him. I summarized his ranting and raving and said that I could, to some extent, understand his feelings. I stopped trying to get any kind of solution out of him and simply focused on his emotions, without agreeing with him on any of his points. I just nodded along, listening and smiling, scanning for the nearest emergency exit.

Complaint Topic 9 – Television

In the old days, before the internet and the smartphone started spoiling everything, it used to be quite annoying when you missed a television show. The next day, you weren't able to talk about it with your friends or colleagues and that isolated you. Maybe it's my nostalgic nature that makes me think that, back then, we only shared passion and enthusiasm about the stuff we saw on the telly. Nowadays we seem to be particularly annoyed by anything that is

shared with us on our flat screens. The traditional TV got company and is joined by the pc, the laptop, the smartphone and the tablet. We are able to watch everything, everywhere, all the time.

The internet in general and the (a)social media in particular, are a grateful platform for all sorts of complaining. We nag and whine excessively about irritably long, annoying and loud commercial breaks, the background cartoons and sounds, the rapid image changes and flash-colored short videos, the influence of American style programming and advertising with eight-minute commercial breaks every ten minutes, the blatant lying, deception and scams, and the attention-seeking influencers that in fact don't really know anything and still gather a flock of hundreds of thousands or even millions of so called 'followers'. But we keep asking for more and we keep complaining about it.

If you really want to find out how sad things are with today's television offerings, just indulge yourself in a few rounds of fruitless zapping. As you accelerate the zapping pace and relentlessly complain about everything you see, it won't take long before you notice white foam forming on the corners of your TV-partner's mouth. Right at the same time, tiny pieces of your own brain begin to die off and start pouring down from your ears.

There is, of course, a very simple remedy to all this sadness and that is that little button, usually located at the top left of the remote control: standby. Put your TV on standby, take yourself out of the loop, get up and walk! Grab a good book, make some music, produce a painting or a poem, go for a run or let the dog out. Any initiative to do something different and more useful than destroying your brain cells will instantaneously reduce all that lamenting and simultaneously save your relationship.

Complaint topic 10 – The hospitality industry

‘Did you enjoy your diner?’ – ‘Yes, fine!’

‘Was everything to your liking?’ – ‘Oh, sure!’

Liars we are! Our cappuccino tasted like water, because the coffee machine is poorly maintained, but we don’t mention it. We ordered our steak raw and got it well done, but we happily continued chewing. We actually needed a megaphone to get the attention of the waiters, but we still gave a big tip at checkout. What, for Peat’s sake, is that all about?

The Dutch public broadcaster *Omroep MAX* did not only investigate the annoyances about public transport, but also the hospitality industry. Apparently, the art of nagging and whining is a favorite activity within their target group. MAX’s viewers are complaining about pricing (too high!), ambiance (too loud!), background music (annoying or wrong!), waiting time (too long!), staff (disinterested!) and hygiene (filthy toilets!). So, apparently, the hospitality industry leaves something to be desired. Eating out is expensive and we have high expectations. That inevitably leads to a lot of complaining.

We share our suffering with our table companions, whispering about it, but when the waiter appears, we all over sudden become shy, turning our eyes down or smiling uncomfortably. It’s one of the more interesting discrepancies in the world of complaining: getting bad food and service, complain about it, but not out loud and still tipping handsomely and smilingly. In the end we will probably not return to that restaurant, so the staff won’t learn and keep repeating its mistakes.

On of the more extreme examples of bad service I have ever experienced took place in a local eatery. Once on a Friday, after a long hard week's work, the four of us had dinner there and we enjoyed the prospect of the weekend ahead. The lady assigned to our table clearly didn't like her job. She couldn't be brought to the table with a megaphone, her face was radiating indifference and her reactions were curt and irritated.

In services in general and in the hospitality industry in particular, 'having a bad day' is taboo: you are simply not allowed to have a bad day (or at least not show it). The lady in question still had to grab her head around that principle, because she kept halving her tip during the course of the evening. In this case however, the devil is in the tail. I ordered a coffee with liqueur for dessert ('the liqueur on the side and without ice, please') and waited in suspense. The liqueur came, but with ice and I kindly pointed that out to her. She uttered a loud sigh, snatched the glass right out of my hand and walked away.

When I looked over my shoulder, I saw her back at the bar, whipping the ice out of the glass with her fingers, putting the glass back on her tray and returning to our table. That, of course, was the last straw. Now a stern, but justified grievance was in order. It turned out to be the last straw for her indeed, as she burst into tears. What was the case? Her boyfriend had broken up with her that same night and she was stifled with stress. She hadn't been able to change her shift, because her colleague was ill as well, so her hand was forced.

In the end, we were able to settle it all amicably with the restaurant owner and we even comforted her a bit. There were extenuating circumstances for

sure, but her tip was reduced to zero nevertheless. After all, we didn't order a Dish of Chagrin with a Sauce of Disservice, a Bowl of Brake-up Cries with Agonies or a Filthy Finger Whip with Flaked Nail Polish.

Anti-complaining for beginners

In my definition, the art of anti-complaining implies the active transformation of negative forms of complaining (the nagging, whining, groaning and grouching) into more positive behavior.

Fortunately, we don't complain all the time. Imagine that! Some of us still have a very positive attitude towards life and are already mastering the art of anti-complaining. I will introduce you to the miraculous world of anti-complaining by mirroring the three main manifestations of complaining behavior as discussed previously: *grieving, grievance and grouching*. The art of anti-complaining is the exact opposite of those three: *consoling, commending and encouraging*.

Consoling in opposite of grief

Consoling is showing compassion and pity, sharing one's worries, suffering and pain, empathizing (being able to put oneself in the shoes of others) in response to sadness such as unhappiness, illness, dying and death.

An anti-complainer provides comfort in being pleasant company for the grieving complainer, who is simply crying out for attention and understanding. When there is mourning, the anti-complainer sympathizes. The lamenting is truly felt, understood and fed back in words of comfort. Consoling does not

provide concrete and measurable solutions to the root cause of the grieving (there are none), but it simply supports and comforts. When we grieve ourselves, we benefit from the comfort that others provide us. We appreciate receiving unconditional support from our loved ones. This entire process strengthens the mutual bond within small social groups.

Commending in opposite of grievance

Commending is giving compliments and praise in response to a service rendered, a product delivered or a pleasant (personal or business) relationship, always prior to the actual utterance of substantiated grievances about something (or someone).

An anti-complainer will not utter grievances about something or someone without first handing out compliments. After all, there is always something positive to be found in the product, service or relationship. By commending before lamenting you spread a soft carpet first, so to speak. This is good for both the recipient of the grievance and the person who does the commending (being the anti-complainer). For the former, the grievance itself is pleasantly captured in a positive context. The admissibility of the just complaint is, as it were, enhanced. For the latter, a pleasant side effect acts as a reward. Just like giving gifts, commending and praising something or someone can make even the complainer feel good. It works both ways.

Encouraging in opposite of grouching

Encouraging is the act of distracting and redirecting, the act of putting the complaint into perspective. It emphasizes the good, the happy, the beautiful

and the hopeful by stimulating, exciting, tantalizing and inspiring the complainer, always looking for the positive, the fun aspects and the advantages of a situation. You encourage your opponent by actively helping to find the causes of all that growling and grouching and assist in the search for a solution or a solution direction.

An anti-complainer encourages someone to (help others) to get rid of the grouching in people in a creative way. The whole principle of anti-complaining revolves around dispelling gloomy thoughts, creating positive energy, and putting the root cause of complaining into perspective. It stimulates self-awareness and it provides the complainer with hope. Even when nagging and whining threatens to become notoriously heavy, a helping hand is offered. The process of encouraging is literally meant to 'nudge', to 'poke' in a friendly sort of way, to 'wake up' the complainer. But it also protects the anti-complainer from being exposed to negative energy for too long.

Ultimate anti-complaining

Have you ever gone back to a store just to tell you how satisfied you are with the product you purchased? Have you ever spontaneously said to someone: 'Gosh, you really look good today?' Have you ever just walked up to the DJ of your favorite pub to tell him that his Saturday night sets are the best? When was the last time you told a garbage collector, cleaner or housekeeper how important and meaningful you believe their work is?

Such positive actions can be seen as the *ultimate form of anti-complaining*. Where nagging, whining, growling and grouching have certain self-preserving properties (it is complaining for the sake of the complaint), you can call

ultimate anti-complaining a form of praising for the sake of the praise, or complimenting for the sake of the compliment. Ultimate anti-complaining is not linked to a grievance or to a prior act, action or event. You are making a *selfless compliment*, so to speak, casual and spontaneous. It's the exact opposite of notoriously heavy complaining.

People usually react very surprised to an act of ultimate anti-complaining. The spontaneous pat on the back has become a rare thing. Give it a try, why don't you? People don't expect selfless acts of kindness and that says quite a lot about the way we treat one and other. Ultimate anti-complaining is the lid that closes the anti-complaining jar. You can apply the art of ultimate anti-complaining without worries, because unfettered compliments serve all parties involved. So I would say: just give in to your spontaneous impulses; do something crazy and give a spontaneous compliment! Make someone happy for the rest of the day. Small effort, big pleasure.

Join in and become an anti-complainer!

Complainers grieve, they utter grievances and they grouch. And we brave anti-complainers respond to it by practicing the art of consoling, commending and encouraging. Consoling opposes grieving, commending opposes grievances, and encouraging opposes grouching. It's as simple as that. On top of that, the superlative of anti-complaining is ultimate anti-complaining in the form of selfless complimenting. It is complimenting for the sake of the compliment itself.

Soon you will be an accomplished anti-complainer. You will learn how to free naggers and whiners from gloomy thoughts by applying the art of anti-

complaining. Whatever level of growling and grouching you may encounter in life, you will discover how to recognize it and you will learn how to counter it. Whether you're dealing with an incompetent waiter, a difficult colleague, a meddlesome neighbor, a grouchy friend or an annoying partner: from now on you will end every encounter with a smile on the face of your fellow human, and on your own!

Chapter 2

Why do we complain?

A person spends his life reasoning about the past, complaining about the present, and worrying about the future.

Rivanol

The social concept of complaining doesn't come out of the blue. When we grieve or utter our grievances, the causes are clear, as we have seen in the previous chapter. When it pertains to the art of groaning and grouching, it becomes a bit more complicated. Where does all this complaining come from? What is the driver behind it? And if it is so widespread, so common in all cultures around the globe, we would expect some kind of purpose behind it, wouldn't we?

That's right, psychologists say. We as a species are social group mammals. We want to get rid of our problems as soon as possible and we do that by sharing them with others. We look to each other for support. Admittedly in a clumsy way, says the Dutch psychologist Roos Vonk, but that's because people generally find complaining annoying. But it's not all negative. Complaining brings people together. It is comforting to grumble together. That's why complaining about the weather is so popular and widespread: it's a universal, common phenomenon that no one can influence. Just imagine that each of the

eight billion individuals on this planet has a set of buttons, controls and levers to set the weather for the day. What do you think would happen?

We are social group mammals and the relationships that we adopt are a grateful source for irritations, annoyances and frustrations. Just look at how annoying our partners are! A study by *Psychologie Magazine* shows that 36 percent of women and 39 percent of men are annoyed with each other several times a day. In addition, 39 percent of women and 34 percent of men indicate that the behavior bothers them very or very much. That's a lot of negative energy!

We complain about negligence (being late), neglecting household chores, attitude to life and character traits (passivity), pushy behavior (giving criticism and issuing orders), bad habits (nose picking and farting) and behavior that violates cultural norms (drinking too much, speeding). Such annoyances are real relationship breakers, as it turns out. For about a quarter of men and women, the study shows, annoying behavior of this nature can be a reason to end the relationship.

If all these complaints about our partners cause so much negative energy, it's about time we actually do something about it. Because it's clearly in our nature to nag and whine. As a nation goes, it is often said that we Dutch people are well-known for our complaining skills, that we are a country of naggers and whiners. To complain is in our blood; we are very proficient at it. But at the same time, the Netherlands, a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary representative democracy, is a happy, wealthy and relatively stable country. Our average income is high and we're positioned in the top ten in terms of GDP per capita. So, we are high up on the happiness ladder and still we complain.

The American psychologist Doyle Gentry mentions a few possible explanations for this apparent contradiction:

- *Happiness has an appetite for more*

As a species we strive for the satisfaction of our carnal desires. Every time we reach a new level of success, we adjust the point at which we feel neither positive nor negative about the world around us anymore. After that, it takes a little bit more to make us happy. *Ad infinitum.*

- *The grass is always greener next door*

We are constantly comparing ourselves to others, usually with those who have more than we do. We then get the feeling that we have been deprived of something that we think will make us happy too. Instead, we would be more prudent to compare ourselves with people who are less fortunate than us, before we start complaining about others.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them so well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The frustrated colleague

You've only said 'Good morning!' to your colleague in the elevator and he is already looking at you with flaming eyes. 'Good morning? You call this a good morning?!? Do you know what time I got home last night? Do you?!' Of course you don't know, because you got home in time to hug your

partner and to play with your children and pets. He continues without a pause: 'Eleven o'clock! My boss always issues these assignments to me at the very last minute, and they always have to be done *yesterday*. I just don't know why I bother anymore!' Ping! The elevator doors open. 'I'll walk with you, okay?' he says. 'Oh, damn!' you think. He continues, imperturbably: 'And do you think I get paid for all this overtime? Are you crazy?! Everyone here gets these big pay raises except me! It's not fair. I should have been promoted to executive levels ages ago...!' Your frustrated colleague disappears around the corner, still groaning and grouching. With accelerated stride and a sigh of relief you move in the opposite direction.

With Doyle Gentry's principles in mind, I will now describe nine main causes of complaining as a phenomenon. Each cause is a possible reason to nag and whine in and of itself, but they are also related to each other. Sometimes we complain for more than one reason. That's okay, because I'll end up giving you more than enough tips and tricks to tackle them all:

1. *High expectations*
2. *Spoiled by modern times*
3. *The need for attention and recognition*
4. *Blinders against the positive*
5. *Wanting to fit in*
6. *Thinking that complaining is ok*
7. *Compliantly living the life you don't want*
8. *Being dissatisfied, silly, and anxious*
9. *Keeping everything bottled up inside*

Cause 1: High expectations

Expectations are inextricably linked to complaining. High expectations are the basis for chronic disappointment.

The American professor of psychology Robin Kowalski has done extensive research into the phenomenon of complaining. According to her, our complaining is highly linked to our expectations. We have expectations of almost everything: you count on that movie in the cinema to be awesome, that tomorrow will finally deliver some nice beach weather, that your new colleague will be a nice person. Sometimes these expectations are met or even exceeded and we feel good about that (yes, my fellow complainer, that actually happens). But at the same time, if you display a pattern of high expectations for something or someone, the risk of them not being met increases. The result? Disappointment! And what do we do when we are chronically disappointed? Right! The same goes for the pursuit of illusions.

In the documentary *Alles wat we wilden* ('Everything We Wanted'), the Dutch documentary maker Sarah Mathilde Domogola portrays the illusion and expectations of young, creative, busy networkers. They seem to be doing well, but behind that façade of a perfect and successful life lies a world full of stress and anxiety. Their expectations are high: everyone can be a star, beautiful and popular, or so they think. Due to external pressures combined with their own ambitions and expectations, the bar is set so high that they are constantly walking on the tips of their toes. That makes them susceptible to collapse. The frustrations of these people manifest themselves in psychological ailments. They live in a make-believe world of unrealistically high expectations, ironically the result of a safe, prosperous and happy world. Everyone is afraid.

'Too many possibilities, too much to think about, anything goes, there's no framework and if it doesn't work out, it's your own fault.'

It seems to me like a lot of nagging and whining from a spoiled generation, similar to the typical 'luxury problem'. This is also confirmed by the young people in question. *'A luxury problem is not less bad than other problems.'* The higher the expectations and the greater the illusion of outward success, the more bitter the lonely hours at home turn out to be. And the greater the disappointment afterwards.

Disappointment can be explained as a lack of something you expected (based on a promise, for instance) or something that the chaos and indifference of life itself throws at you. But that expectation or desire can be created by yourself as well. You disappoint yourself when you have an unrealistically high expectation of something or someone. The higher the disappointment, the more likely you start to complain about it. Sometimes rightfully so, but sometimes it's just nagging and whining. I call it the *Self-Imposed Stress Syndrome*, a form of psychological self-flagellation.

Chantal is her thirties. She has been in a relationship with Peter for years. They recently moved in together. Chantal is very neat and loves to keep the house tidy. She maintains an extensive, systematic cleaning schedule to keep the house clean and she is preoccupied with it all the time. From front to back, from left to right and from top to bottom. And then back again.

Peter is cut from a different cloth. He is a bit more relaxed about it and believes that 'the purpose of a house is to live in it'. Moreover, he can deal with a little more 'clutter' around him just a tad easier than Chantal is able to. But

Peter is less skilled in picking up nonverbal cues. If there are shoes on the stairs, he will step over them. If he detects an empty garbage bag hanging over the overflowing garbage bin, he regards that as 'good work preparation' and not so much as a hint to actually clean out the garbage can.

Chantal believes it's perfectly normal to keep a tidy, clean and well-organized house. She's got it from her mother. She therefore naturally assumes that this is also the case with others. When the shoes are not been taken upstairs and when the trash can hasn't been cleaned out, she complains about it to everyone, including Peter. He dismisses it, perhaps somewhat casually. She shouldn't exaggerate, he feels. A little bit of a mess is fine at times. 'If Chantal wants to skip a cleaning session every now and then, fine with me!' This difference of opinion regularly results in arguments and fights, which easily escalate and, on more than one occasion, end in shouting and banging with the doors.

In the end, Chantal and Peter hire a housekeeper. As a result, the arguing diminishes and it even leads to unexpected initiatives on Peter's end: he now picks up the shoes on the stairs and takes out the trash more often, without any subtle hints or being asked to. This makes it easier for Chantal to deal with his 'laziness' (to which Peter disagrees by the way; he calls it 'being laid-back'). It's always good to understand each other's origin and motives, without forcing them onto one and other, wouldn't you agree? As a direct result, living together becomes much easier.

In this example, Chantal's complaining is clearly caused by unrealistically high expectations. These arise from her own frame of reference. The resulting lamentations can be easily resolved: adjust the high expectations by talking

and listening to each other, think more in terms of compromises and make agreements about each other's household tasks in good consultation (or get some help).

Cause 2: Spoiled by the modern age

The perception of happiness is relatively independent of the state of prosperity. Complaining stems from collective indulgence and saturation of happiness.

Between 1957 and 2005, the median income of Americans increased by a whopping 278 percent. But the percentage of people who described themselves as 'very happy' remained practically unchanged: around 30 percent. From this finding alone, happiness researchers are convinced that a lifestyle with more income has little impact on how 'positive' a person feels.

Research in Belgium into the relationship between happiness and the winning a big prize in a lottery yielded similar findings. Price winners were asked to rate the quality of their lives before and after receiving the money on a scale of ten. What was the result? The perception of happiness increased by about one point on average. If life used to be worth a six out of ten, it became a seven. If it was a seven, it became an eight. The research shows that we do not immediately give our happiness a ten out of ten when we suddenly get access to large sums of money.

Recent research by the universities of Tilburg, Amsterdam and California confirms this. For instance, six months after the street prize of the *Postcode Loterij* (the Zipcode Lottery) in The Netherlands, the winners are not that

much happier. But their neighbors who didn't win anything, didn't get more depressed either. Interestingly, within six months, people who missed out on the big price bought a newer car. As if they wanted to say to the winners that they are also quite capable of buying something luxurious. 'After six months, only a few newer cars on the driveways hinted at the fact that the *Postcode Loterij* had visited,' according to the researchers. It takes a lot more than just money to be happy.

Whether it's because of winning a big lottery prize or because of the increase in your income: money doesn't buy happiness. Or does it? In an article in the journal of the American Academy of Sciences, Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahnemann and economist Angus Deaton of Princeton University drew the conclusion 'that money [does] make you happy, but that there is a limit to that happiness'. With an annual income of the equivalent of 81,000 euros, you reach the ceiling of your happiness. If you make more money, you may become more satisfied, but not happier. 'Our conclusions are that money buys contentment, not happiness,' the researchers said. In any case, money and happiness have an interesting relationship.

But for now, let's take a moment to talk about where you live (this was addressed to the readers of the Dutch version of this book). The Netherlands is a fantastic country! Things are going very well here. The level of prosperity is high, social services are excellent. Health care is of a relatively high standard and incomes are among the highest in Europe. There is little to no social upheaval and the political climate is stable on average. The American website US News confirms this: The Netherlands is in the top ten of best countries to live in! The website made a ranking of 87 countries in terms of the quality of life:

'Beyond the essential ideas of broad access to food, housing, quality education, health care and employment, quality of life also may include intangibles such as job security, political stability, individual freedom and environmental quality. Through all phases of life, these countries are seen as treating their citizens well.'

Guess what? Based on these criteria, the Netherlands deserves a 7th place! Yahoo! The Netherlands is doing better than its neighbors Germany (9th place) and Belgium (11th place).

Indeed, the Dutch live in abundance. Every year, the *Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau* or SCP (the Netherlands Institute for Social Research) finds that the quality of life in the Netherlands is at a high level compared to other countries in the European Union. The Dutch are among the happiest people in the world. But that happiness lies mainly in the small circle of family and friends. We give them an eight out of ten, where society and the government have to make do with a meagre six out of ten.

In spite of all this, there is a gradually growing lament, an increasing, collective nagging and whining about relatively little. All it takes is a small ripple in our ordered lives, a power outage, for example, or an unexpected traffic jam during the weekend, or a flue wave, a harmless fender bender, or an unexpected flat tire and we are out of balance. The train or bus is running late and we completely go berserk. Our mobile service provider goes off the air for a few hours and we don't know what to do with our 'useless' smartphones. It freezes a tad harder and there is that tiny bit of snow during rush hour and we immediately go off the ramp.

The American historian James Kennedy is professor of modern history in the Netherlands. He sees a society with a clear problem. 'We expect a smooth, well-ordered society in which we can flourish', he says. 'We don't want any setbacks.' But setbacks are inevitable; they are part of life. There's nothing we can do about them. If, during an unexpectedly harsh winter, half the train traffic comes to a complete standstill, we have such a setback on our hands. As an American, Kennedy chuckles about the petty laments. Born in rural America, he is used to it. In his view, Dutch so-called 'winters' are mere pinpricks.

Because we are so spoiled and conceited, our values and norms become diluted. We tend to forget about our prosperity and wellbeing. We get accustomed to the amenities, the high standard of living, the convenience of a service-oriented society and the relative security of a parliamentary representative democracy (as long as it doesn't linger too far off to the right or left). You don't even have to look that far beyond the Netherlands to see that some countries are far worse off than we do. As a result of this process of selective perception and indulgence, we get disconnected from reality.

These days, we are exposed to the far-reaching effects of individualization as well. What do we really know about our neighbors? Who actually lives down the street? *Mind your own business!* We might not know each other very well, but that doesn't stop us from being biased, shortsighted and ignorant. And at the same time we get spoiled by what we've come to take for granted. We are easily irritated by other people, or even angry, based on relatively minor incidents. Complaining is closer to the skin than laughing.

Years ago, on a cold winter's evening just after eight o'clock, the power went down. We were just watching the eight o'clock news with a cup of coffee and

an cookie, and THUD, it went pitch black. After the initial hesitation and an awkward 'now what?', we got off of the couch. A slightly irritated feeling took hold of me. 'Damn, what a nuisance! I was just enjoying a quiet evening and then this happens'. At the same time, the realization dawned that just about everything in our modern day houses run on electricity. So is the boiler! We had no fireplace and no other way to heat the house. What to do?

Pitch black at eight o'clock in the evening in the dead of winter really means pitch black. A power outage means that the cold from outside will eventually find its way in. It was ten degrees Celsius below freezing outside (14 degrees Fahrenheit), with a strong wind from the east, and I was totally unprepared for such an inconvenience. There's no smoking in our house, so there were no lighters or matches. The stove was a halogen cooktop. We stopped burning candles a long time ago because of fire safety. And when was the last time I needed a flashlight?

I started looking, whilst grumbling and grouching. It turned out to be quite difficult to be searching in the dark for what you need to make searching in the dark easier. After a lot of stumbling, I found a flashlight by touch. Without batteries, of course. We didn't have that type of battery – the 'large ones' – in stock. I found another rechargeable flashlight but, needless to say, it was empty. Meanwhile, candles were found in another drawer of the house, but no matches. By this time the cold had crept up to chest height and we started to look for extra sweaters. A phone call to the electricity company soon revealed that it would take at least a few more hours.

We went to bed early that night, out of balance, lamenting about the inconvenience and nuisance of it all. Looking back, it wasn't a creative

solution exactly, but hey, it led to other, more, ehm, romantic initiatives. By six o'clock that morning, the fault had been repaired. All the lights came back on. Now we had all the clocks in the house flashing at 00:00 hrs.

The irony is that this happened already many years ago, and I still don't have a 'survival package' stacked away somewhere: a box in a central location containing flashlights, batteries, candles, matches, water and a transistor radio. But in a well-organized country such as The Netherlands, power outages are rare. We soon fall back into our old habits of indulgence and complacency. When another power outage hits, we find ourselves in the same predicament. And we will undoubtedly grouch and grumble again. Only when things go really wrong and the power outage lasts for days or weeks – or indefinitely, as in societal collapse – we might finally learn how spoiled and complacent we have become.

Cause 3: The need for attention and recognition

Complaining is part of being human. Someone who complains has a natural need for attention.

Complaining is part of life, it's part of the human condition. When we complain, we ask for attention, just like screaming babies or crying little children do. Spread across the countless cultures of human civilization, the art of complaining will differ in appearance, but no human being is exempt from a bit of nagging and whining now and then. And, as we have seen, it appears to be disconnected from the actual level of prosperity and wellbeing. Occupying a high position in the pyramid of happiness does not guarantee immunity to grouching and grumbling!

As a psychologist, Roos Vonk is not exempt from her own need to complain. During a telephone interview with the monthly magazine *Quest*, she drives into a traffic jam. Because she didn't count on it, she immediately starts to complain about it to the interviewer. She explains that her complaining is actually meant to seek recognition. 'You want someone else to sympathize with you and say: 'Bummer, dude'. That's an important part of complaining.' If you seek recognition from someone, that person will usually be very close to you; like a partner or a close friend for example. 'You don't just complain to everyone,' Roos continues. 'It's not something sympathetic.'

As human beings, in addition to recognition, we tend to cherish our feelings of restlessness. When we cherish something, we want to add warmth to it, we want to take care of it, pamper it, maintain it with love. It all goes back to our childhood and upbringing. A crying baby or a nagging child automatically receives attention (food, a cuddle, a toy), which is encoded in our brains. If you cry (read: nag and whine) long enough, you'll eventually get the attention you desire (to survive another day).

Thus, the natural need for attention is unavoidable. It causes an equally natural tendency to complain. It relieves the complainer and satisfies his need. By simply listening to someone complain, you are actually providing a pacifier. For example, when you recognize that the colleague who complains about work doesn't actually want to talk about work (and sometimes doesn't even have an actual problem), but is in need of attention, you shouldn't provide a rational solution, but some understanding and comforting instead.

Ellen is a 35-year-old married woman. She is somewhat melancholy and hypochondriac in nature, constantly worrying about all kinds of small

illnesses, aches and pains and oftentimes imaginary misfortunes. She is weighed down by it. She shares her concerns with anyone who comes near her and describes in detail the various physical complaints she has, has had or undoubtedly will get. She talks about what she's being doing about it or wasn't able to do about it. She accounts in detail about her visits to the doctor. And she doesn't hesitate to fatten up her stories.

In reality, there is nothing abnormal about her. The doctor can't find anything wrong. Her complaints are probably related to a deeper, more psychological urge, something in the personal and relational sphere, for example. But her complaints are simply too vague for a referral. But Ellen doesn't want to be referred at all. She is terrified of hospitals. She quietly enjoys the attention she gets from her doctor when she tells her stories. She likes it when the people around her show interest in her.

Ellen is relieved to be able to share her thoughts, feelings and imaginary ailments. It's a self-induced distraction from the actual problem area: her current relationship and her work. She just can't decide what she wants out of life. Complaining about her health is in fact a disguised form of nagging and whining. But no one has yet taken her by the hand to guide her in finding the real cause of her problems. And that's why she remains unhappy and continues to attract unhappiness. That, in turn, effectively perpetuates her complaining. Ad infinitum.

Cause 4: blinders against the positive

Through evolution and natural selection, we are programmed to focus on the negative and to quickly and effectively respond to negative deviations.

When complaining, we tend to focus only on things that are bad. A simple exercise might clarify this. Take a look at the following three sums and immediately say what you see, without overthinking it:

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

$$2 - 3 = 3$$

$$3 - 2 = 1$$

Well? What do you see? The vast majority of people say: 'The middle sum is incorrect!' Hardly anyone says: 'The first and the third sum are correct!' This is indicative of how our brain works. We are, as it were, programmed to detect anomalies, negative deviations and threats and respond to them. It's not that we don't see that the first and third sum are correct. We just skip that and emphasize the deviation instead.

This is a residual phenomenon of the survival instinct of the human species. Negative deviations from what is perceived as 'normal' (read: safe, sound, solid) was a serious threat to our lives, back when we were hunter-gatherers. Just imagine a lion on the verge of attacking you. It doesn't matter between what specific types of grass and trees that lion is hurdling towards you, or what the position of the sun is, or whether you left the fire burning at your cave: you have to run for your life!

Our brain is constantly comparing what we perceive (sight, sound, feeling, smell, taste) with familiar patterns. It continuously monitors for deviations. It constantly chooses the information we need to increase our chances of survival. Other information becomes (temporarily) less important. And where information is lacking, our brain tries to supplement it or compensate for it.

For example, we tend to see faces in everything, a psychological phenomenon known as *pareidolia*. For years, people have been fascinated by the famous photo of a boulder on Mars. It looked like the face of a monkey-like creature. Could Martians exist after all? Exciting stuff! I hate to disappoint you, but, due to the advancement of technology, better and more detailed photos became available. This showed that the apparent face was just an accidental interplay of shadows and structure. But our brains wanted to see a face in it, and so we did.

Complaining is a naturally evolved form of reacting to negative deviations. What is 'good' is taken for granted: it is 'normal' and therefore not threatening to our livelihood. We react to what deviates from that norm: that is 'abnormal' and therefore potentially threatening. This general posture has helped us survive as hunter-gatherers. In those days, it was prudent to run away from something that you thought was a snake, but ultimately turned out to be a twig, than to hang around something that you thought was a twig, but ultimately turned out to be a snake. Better be safe than sorry (or dead). Be that as it may, in modern day times, most of the time we are able to attach something positive or something good to most things (even 'negative' things), that is to say, as long as we are willing to see it or to look for it.

Rob is an ambitious 25-year-old man. He has been working on a presentation with regards to the upcoming reorganization. Tomorrow is D-day: he gets to tell his story to management and colleagues of his department. He polishes his presentation until the early hours. He updates the images and writes a solid executive summary. He curtails the story where possible. The whole thing looks neat and slick. Rob has done numerous test runs of his

presentation. He is master of the subject matter now and all fired up. ‘This has something in it for everybody!’ he says out loud. ‘I’m ready to go’.

The next day, Rob goes straight to work, because his presentation is the first one to go. Turnout and attention level are high; always a good sign. His story flows smoothly and it is quiet in the room. However, there is hardly any reaction and afterwards it remains quiet. ‘Are there any questions?’, Rob asks. At the back of the room, a finger hesitantly goes up in the air. ‘Yes, please?’ – ‘Can you show me that last table again... That one, yes... Thanks. The right-hand column doesn't add up to a hundred percent.’

Rob is flabbergasted. Is that the only response to his narrative that, in the end, concerns everything and everyone in the company?

Fortunately, in retrospect it turned out that the story was well-received: clear, concise, succinct and informative. It simply hadn't occurred to the questioner to report something positive before nitpicking. He had not yet mastered the art of anti-complaining: praise the good stuff before you comment on aspects that might be done a little bit better. Like so: ‘Good story, Rob. Crisp and clear and well presented. I look forward to receiving a copy. I think me and my team can definitely expand on your work. However, I do have a comment about one of your tables...’. See what I mean? It’s perfectly fine to point out aspects of improvement, but it won’t hurt to emphasize the positive first.

Cause 5: Wanting to fit in

To complain makes us feel good, especially when we do it together. But this ‘sense of togetherness’ inevitably comes with both a constructive and a destructive side.

It's nice to complain together; it strengthens our sense of belonging and it makes us feel secure and safe. We complain in closed formations and the output circles around us in self-repeating lamentations and monodies. It creates a 'sense of togetherness'. Just think about the aforementioned alternative form of complaining: protesting in a group. Collectively going against a common enemy strengthens the sense of belonging within a social group: it tells you that you belong, that you actually mean something. You're in it together, sharing the same umbrella, whatever may come your way.

But in order to truly experience this feeling of togetherness, you have to be in *the same boat* together. The complainers must share the same context: being stuck in traffic together or shivering from the cold on a bus stop or train platform with no bus or train in sight. But you don't necessarily have to be *physically* close together. The feeling of togetherness also arises when you know that (hundreds of) thousands of other people are watching the same soccer match, for example, or the outcome of a general election. However, the fact that a large number of people are complaining together does not imply that the common problem will be solved more quickly. Quite the contrary in fact. Group complaining has a constructive side, indeed, but it can also have a destructive side. They are sides of the same coin.

Ending the complaining together

A group of complainers sometimes reasons (consciously or subconsciously) as follows: 'Apparently we have a common problem, we all suffer from it to some extent, we agree on the causal factors, we want to address the problem constructively and we want to do something about it together!'

The manager of the internal sales team of a commercial enterprise, consisting of about twenty office employees, has been replaced. The team has been working together for a number of years now, and retention is low. It's a close-knit team. The new boss starts out energetically, but has little ear for the experiences and ideas of the team members.

The decision-making process turns out to be less than democratic. The new leader is preoccupied with 'general management stuff' and he rarely shows himself on the office floor. As a result, he gets completely disconnected from reality. Resentment arises among the employees, resulting in more and more complaints. The boss is now clearly botching up his responsibilities and he appears uninterested in the consequences. The team's complaining turns into nagging and whining.

The sales employees decide to take action, but not directly towards the sales manager. Not yet. They decide to sit down together first and spew some bile (collective consoling). That's a relief! After that, the concrete annoyances are inventoried, accompanied by a number of positive aspects of the boss's behavior (collective commending). Agreement is reached about how things might be improved and what the team's own contribution will be (collective encouraging). All of this is entrusted to paper, and a joint meeting is scheduled with the team manager to further discuss the best way forward.

By turning the already present sense of togetherness into a concrete and constructive plan, the team takes itself out of the complaining mode. The negative energy is converted into positive actions. The team's frontal confrontation with the manager's flawed management style might prove to be difficult for him at first, but with an open mind and some patience he will soon

discover the mutual benefits of the new deal: the working atmosphere will improve enormously.

Aggravating the complaining together

Sometimes a group reacts less productively: 'We apparently have a common problem, we all suffer terribly from it, we are not so sure about our facts and figures, actually, we haven't got a clue how to tackle the problem and therefore we just remain inactive, except for all the nagging and whining we're doing about it.'

The same team with a new boss, but in this scenario the yearly retention is high. The hiring policy has been deteriorating for years and the overall quality of sales employees has suffered considerably. Team spirit is low. Due to a combination of circumstances, the new sales manager has been promoted to this position only because his former department was disbanded. He doesn't have a sales background and has little ear for the problems of the team members.

The quality of the decision-making process is deteriorating as well. The new leader, having less affinity with sales, keeps himself busy with more general management matters and he rarely shows his face on the office floor. As a result, he is completely disconnected from the daily business. The resentment among the employees grows. In addition, the boss is botching up his affairs, stacking blunders upon mistakes. Yet, he doesn't seem to be the slightest bit worried about the consequences.

The team first starts gossiping about the sales manager and that quickly turns into complaining. In reality, the sales employees' own incompetencies are masked by a boss who is doing even worse. During the breaks, the coffee machine is center stage for nagging and whining. It continues during lunches and deteriorates after working hours (collective grievance turns into collective grouching). The business objectives get lost in translation and due to lack of personal leadership within the group, there is no one to steer the negative energy into a more constructive working atmosphere.

Problems are quickly getting worse. The group is souring up and the collective performance begins to suffer. Their 'analysis' of daily problems remains stuck at the lowest possible level: 'Our boss sucks and we all hate it!' (ultimate collective complaining). The situation deteriorates further and a management intervention becomes unavoidable. The manager is demoted and replaced. An interim crisis manager is appointed to determine the root cause of the problems and he is authorized to clean house.

This 'deteriorating sense of togetherness' clearly doesn't increase the problem solving capabilities of a social group. On the contrary, it prolongs and aggravates the situation, transcending the team's roles, tasks and responsibilities, up to the point of an intervention by higher management. By then, the damage is done, both professionally and privately. A lot of time, money and energy has been wasted unnecessarily with all that nagging and whining. Surely there must be a way to prevent all this? Hang in there; we're going to find out soon.

Cause 6: Thinking that complaining is normal

Complaining can be pure habit. And congratulations, you can easily inherit that from your own family.

Imagine growing up in an environment, starting with your own family, where nagging and whining is just business as usual. Hairs are being split continuously. All emphasis is placed on the negative. Nothing is good, it's all just getting worse before it never gets better again. Everything sucks: politics and economics, work and career, colleagues and bosses, the coffee and air-conditioning, salary and benefits, partner, offspring, family and in-laws and, naturally, the weather, which sucks *big time*. As social group mammals, we have a tendency to adapt to the prevailing atmosphere within a small social group. When a lot of complaining is the norm, we conform to it. It becomes a social starting point and at some point we simply don't know any better. Luckily this process is congruent-symmetric: we also adapt to a more constructive environment, as we will soon find out.

An entire family can become a collection of sourpusses, contaminating each other and conforming to each other. It is no longer possible to think outside the box. Nagging and whining becomes normal, because 'it has always been this way and why should we be any different?' Not exactly a pleasant environment to move around in, let alone to be raised in. This collective nagging, whining, nitpicking and lamenting is infectious; it easily spreads to adjacent environments.

Leon is 45 years old and grew up in a family whose parents 'lived through the war'. Mum and dad had to work hard to build a life for themselves and a lot

of misery came along with it. Most decisions about work, income and education turned out to be mistakes. His parents are resentful towards today's youth: everything seems to come so easy to them. All in all, Leon's parents have become a grim couple and the entire family bears the marks. The constant focus on the negative, the incessant nagging and whining about everything and everybody takes its toll.

This complaining sickness has rooted itself to the degree that even positive and happy stories are greeted with grumbling and grouching. In addition, there is this irrational adage that says 'act normal, that's crazy enough'. This subcutaneous atmosphere of jealousy, envy and resentment spoils everything and turns light into darkness. When parents argue and fight all the time, the children conform to it and start arguing and fighting too. What a happy bunch!

Because Leon doesn't know any better, and to not go under with the rest of them, it has become normal for him to fight to survive. He grumbles along, cracks down on others and nitpicks his way through the day. But lately an uneasy feeling has crept over him. There's this voice in the back of his head that whispers that this can't be it, that there must be something better out there. Ever since Leon met Suzanne, that voice has started to sound louder and is now finding a way out of his head.

Suzanne is ten years younger and of post-war parents. She had a totally different upbringing. Suzanne's family is inundated with sincere warm interest and understanding. They actually listen to each other, there's genuine appreciation and a lot of hugging going around. That has a profound impact on the general atmosphere. In this family, the emphasis lies

on the positive aspects of something or someone. The less positive things are seen as 'points of attention' or 'improvement items'. Initiatives are supported and encouraged.

To Leon, engaging with his in-laws feels like a warm bath. He realizes that there are other frames of references, other ways of going through life. Not everything has to be cracked down or burned to the ground. On the contrary, it is extremely refreshing for him to experience that it is possible to convert negative energy into positive energy, turning complaining into anti-complaining.

What is the actual impact on Leon? He decides to bring this new positive energy to the doorstep of his own family. He chooses to make a positive contribution to the atmosphere at the next family gathering. He will no longer be tempted to adapt to this thick, black cloud of doom. Perhaps, if he really tries and sticks to it, he might be able to allow the sun to enter his parent's house. Leon is well aware that he won't be able to change his family completely. That kind of transformation is virtually impossible. But the least he can do is to disconnect from this negative atmosphere of chronic complaining, not allowing it to creep up on him ever again.

Cause 7: Compliantly living the life you don't want

A victim mentality can lead to complaining in and of itself. One can actively chose to be unhappy, even if it leads to a frustrated life.

Our society has countless written and unwritten rules and laws. You are tacitly expected to know these rules, to abide by them. Docility is expected and we

tend to adapt and conform to the behavior within our small social groups. Deviating from the social norm is not accepted and you can't stand out from the crowd too much. Constantly trying to do things differently, to be contrarian, is something we simply don't like. 'Just act normal, that's crazy enough!' What a petty mentality!

Ok, I'll admit it, a certain amount of adaptation and conformation is necessary, that speaks for itself. Imagine everybody wanting to do things completely differently all the time. That wouldn't work, complete chaos would ensue. Our society cannot exist without a certain degree of order. However, as an individual, you do have a choice: be docile or be assertive. It's called personal leadership. If you are assertive, you are able to stand up for yourself. You know when to say 'no'. You are able to distinguish between rules that you are required to follow (by law, by social or cultural construct) and rules that allow for some personal interpretation and application. On the other hand, being compliant all the time might lead to more harmful consequences.

We all recognize them when we look around us: the 'unfortunate ones', the 'Donald Ducks'. In Dutch we call them '*pechvogels*'. This phenomenon arises when a person, through a complex combination of bad luck, chance, chaos, indecisiveness and clumsiness, exposes us to unwarranted lamentations. It oftentimes creates an unjustified victim role, because the problems are a direct result of the inability to deal with everyday life. These types of Donald Ducks are, unlike Gladstone Gender, Donald's counterpart, unfortunate by design. Frustrated by not achieving their goals, they live miserable lives, nagging and whining about it all the time. But the lamenting is unjustified. It will only decrease when the person in question, whether or not under (professional) guidance, becomes more decisive and assertive, and starts regaining control.

The Dutch Psychologist Roos Vonk calls this 'victim behavior'. Victims experience a lot of adversity, they see obstacles everywhere. They will share the suffering with everyone until they get some kind of recognition. Vonk suggests that you can tackle these kinds of persistent complainers in three steps: act like Oprah Winfrey, adopt Dr. Phil and finish as Barack Obama:

Step 1 – To start with, become an Oprah Winfrey-like hero by listening carefully to the complainer and giving them attention and recognition. 'Gosh, how awful for you! Tell me more about it'. *Score!* Finally someone who listens to the complainer.

Step 2 – Next, become a Dr. Phil adept by asking that one sensible question: 'What could you contribute to the solution of your problem?' *Gotcha!* Back to the source, the complainer himself.

Step 3 – Finally, become a Barack Obama-esque leader by offering an attractive perspective. Direct the complainer towards his actual desires: his ideals, norms and values. Emphasize how wonderful it would be to really tackle the problem. *Touch down!*

Dutch Author Berthold Gunster describes in his book *Ja-maar, wat als alles lukt?* ('Yes-but, what if everything works out?') ten rules for a 'yes-but'-free life. Why is it, he wonders, that we so often don't do what we actually want to do? What is the origin of that inner voice that prevents us from living life to the fullest? 'Yes- but' as an attitude to life, he argues, is not very fruitful, to say the least. Gunster advises you not to go back and forth all the time.

The messages from Vonk and Gunster are clear and simple: take matters into your own hands. Don't complain about your life all the time: do something! Stop being the victim of self-created circumstances. Don't be the nitpicking saccharin when the possibilities and solutions are all around you. Stop nagging and whining about it, stand up and walk!

Danielle has just turned forty and is annoyed by her family, friends and acquaintances. They harass her with unexpected and unsolicited phone calls, requests and visits. When she finally has the house in order and the children in bed, the doorbell rings. When she is finally about to plop down on the couch with a nice cup of tea to watch some TV, her smartphone rings. When she manages to finally get a day off for herself (because she sent her husband away on a trip with the children), her parents spontaneously pay her a visit. And that is on top of all the birthdays, family visits and other social obligations that already ram-pack her diary.

She complains about it all the time. How annoying it is that no one seems to respect her having a bit of time-out every now and then. That she doesn't appreciate visitors just dropping in unannounced. That no one understands her. That she never has a moment's rest. That she has worked so hard to keep everybody happy and satisfied. She's getting so tired of it! But she doesn't complain to the actual people involved. Because imagine what they will think of her. They'll think that she's an egoist and an egotist, that's what they'll think of her! Before you know it, they won't like her any more.

But on the other hand – when she thinks about it – life isn't that bad. She's actually doing very well, in terms of prosperity and wellbeing. And others need her helping hand and need her sympathetic ear. It's just the way it is

when you're married and have a large family and a bunch of in-laws. When everybody lives so close, it's inevitable that they drop by on a regular basis. And of course, your social calendar will overflow. And who doesn't have some form of societal stress these days? They just can't live without her, because she is a nice person and a good listener, always packed with good ideas.

Danielle goes on and on like this. Her thoughts go up and down, left to right, diagonal and back again. Until the bell rings and the next guest shows up. Or it's time to visit the next second cousin, first nephew or mother in law. As long as Danielle doesn't express her complaints directly and tells people what she likes and dislikes, a vicious circle of unjust complaining arises. If she wants to change it, she'll have to get more outspoken and assertive about it.

Cause 8: Being dissatisfied, silly and anxious

Complaining is linked to thoughtlessness. Fear, ignorance and aversion are poor counselors.

You probably know them, people that just don't think things through. They don't analyze, don't pause for a minute, constantly parroting (and criticizing) others, engaging in subsequent stupid behavior, whilst complaining about all the complaining elsewhere. It's a form of daftness. These people regard nagging and whining based on their gut feelings as an inalienable right that cannot be challenged, even if it is self-induced. Everything can and must be said about everything and everybody, in any way possible, so they argue. Freedom of speech, you know. Out of dissatisfaction and ignorance they are constantly nitpicking, cursing, sighing, groaning, moaning, grumbling, nagging and whining.

These daft lamentations are not solely based on dissatisfaction and ignorance, but they also stem from fear. Fear of the unknown and fear of foreign cultures. Fear of the distant, the strange and peculiar, and fear of intangible things. In addition, the fear is mixed with aversion. Aversion to authority and government. Aversion to rules, regulations and laws. Aversion to education, science, reason and logic, mixed with an unhealthy dislike of strange habits and customs (to them), strange tastes (to them), strange people (to them) and strange forms of expression (to them).

In politically uncertain and unstable times, populist parties will jump to the occasion to harvest, amplify and redistribute these gut feelings and false sentiments. Being unclear and ambiguous about the real causes of societal problems (read: blaming others) creates the perfect common enemy. Doubt, fear and anger are sown simultaneously. Complaints are allowed to escalate into collective lamentations. Millions of dissatisfied votes are collected at the ballot box and used as proof of concept. ‘You see, the people have spoken!’ Established and more moderate main stream parties struggle in their rebuttal. In the end, all these conspiracy theories and disaster scenarios only lead to collective doom and gloom. Fear, aversion, ignorance, shortsightedness and stupidity are very bad counselors indeed.

The police and a special arrest team used all their might to assault a private residence to apprehend an alleged robber. The front door was kicked in with force and within a few minutes the suspect was taken away in handcuffs, head down, with heavily armed law enforcement officers on each side, and shoved into a police arrest vehicle. The dazed mother of the suspect was whimpering and whining loudly, accompanying the police officers wherever they went.

Her lament suggested that great injustice had been done here. With her hands spread to the sky, she shouted it from the rooftops. 'Look what they're doing to my son! They're hurting him! Those thugs broke my front door and my furniture. But he did nothing wrong! Nothing at all. What is this country, this world coming to? They kicked in my door, wrecked my house, beat up my son and drove him away to who knows where! It's just not normal!'

What happened? Well, it turned out that her beloved son had robbed a local shop with an axe, whilst under the influence of crack cocaine. Whilst being highly intoxicated and extremely violent, he took a few swings at the shop assistant with his axe, injuring him severely, wrecking the interior in a state of complete rage. All he took was a few pennies as booty. Then he waddled home, he put the bloody axe on the TV downstairs, dragged himself upstairs to his bedroom, fell on his bed, fully clothed and blooded, face down, straight into a self-induced coma.

Cause 9: keeping everything bottled up inside

Worrying, brooding and fretting are gateways to complaining. Brooders are internalized complainers who deserve special attention.

An extensive survey, commissioned by *Psychologie Magazine* in The Netherlands in 2010, showed that one in three citizens worry every single day. In fact, seventeen percent worried so frequently, that it became harmful to body and mind. The main cause? Concerns about money. According to the magazine, health was no longer in the Worry Top-3. Apparently, money had become more worrisome than health. 'That's due to the financial crisis,' said Dutch psychologist Saskia Decorte. 'When questioned further, it turned out

that people lie awake because they fear losing their job, they have unpaid bills and accumulated debt, or they worry that their house won't get sold.'

Worrying doesn't solve anything and is unhealthy! 'It's a form of self-induced chronic stress,' explained Decorte. 'Those who worry a lot are constantly tense, can't enjoy themselves, lie awake at night, feel exhausted and gloomy. They are more prone to disease and depression.' Decorte's explanation is in line with the findings of the American happiness expert Martin Seligman, who researched the long-term impact of complaining. He discovered that complaining people suffer from reduced longevity, are ill more often, are less successful and have fewer friends. Apparently, there is a clear causal relationship between complaining and happiness.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them so well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The Nitpicking Friend

He's quite a nice guy, that friend of yours, but sometimes he elevates nitpicking to a true art form. In real life he actually doesn't have any real problems and that's why he's constantly looking for ever so tiny flaws in just about everything. This has nothing to do with perfectionism, which could be understood to some extent, but rather with the lack of real challenges at work (being underloaded instead of overloaded) and being

stuck in his own career path. The slightest hiccup is enough to criticize any small thing, and he does so with gusto. If anyone can split hairs or engage in a wild goose chase, it's him; he has developed a sixth sense for it. It's reminiscent of the English word *nitpicking*, which means 'delousing', literally picking nits (or lice eggs) out of someone's hair. Your friend's endless stream of trivial problems is like a large fur coat full of lice eggs that he can pick for hours on end.

Worrying, brooding, fretting and obsessive-compulsive thoughts are gateways to a variety of complaining behavior. Nagging and whining to yourself only reduces the chance of finding a solution, because no one is able to provide you with a more positive-constructive input or a refreshing insight. It is a self-reinforcing process that leads to increased discontent with detrimental effects to our health. Brooders are introverts. To help them, they first must be willing to 'turn outwards'.

According to research conducted by *Psychologie Magazine*, men worry as much about love and relationships as women do. For men, that topic holds a third position in the Top-3, right, after money and work. Women mainly worry about children, money and health. As many as 85 percent of men and women experience some form of stress, both at home and at work. The biggest stressor: having a child and the sleepless nights that come along with it. Whatever we worry about, it easily leads to complaining. And whatever we complain about can, in turn, just as easily lead to a lot of worrying. Both phenomena interact with each other, strengthen each other and before you know it, you find yourself in a vicious circle of sorrow and lament.

Heidi is 31 and a natural brooder. She never properly learned to express her feelings of concern. She thinks she's got that from her mother. Her father on the other hand is a very dominant man with a controlling character. At home, problems were not so much discussed, but carelessly brushed aside with great fanfare by her father, under the passive eye of her mother. Ironically, Heidi is now involved in a relationship with a dominant and controlling partner herself. His name is Eric and she thought he was a rough diamond, ready to be cut to find some kindness and compassion inside. Well, she's at it for seven years now, but that soft core has yet to reveal itself.

When Heidi worries about something, she doesn't know how to express it. She tends to overthink everything. But this only leads to worrying and brooding. She finds it hard to have a good night sleep, she's tossing and turning all the time and she can't find a way out. Heidi is married to Eric, a busy man and not exactly what you would call 'accessible'. Heidi knows that, but she still tries to talk to him about it. Eric tends to dismiss her problems (just like her father did). When he shows his dominance, her insecurity level increases. Expressing her concerns only leads to fights. Eric tends to walk away angrily and become as cold as ice for the rest of the day. She's kind of given up for now, keeping her worries to herself in order to keep the peace.

This is now beginning to take its revenge. The worrying and brooding leads to a string of sleepless nights. Heidi is constantly tense, she's all wound up and spooked by the slightest sound. Less able to concentrate, she now even starts brooding during the day. Physical complaints follow all too soon: headaches, back pain, dizziness. Eric now notices something odd about her, asks about it, but she waves it away, afraid of yet another fight. Due to the day-to-day routine of running a household with three children and being

busy with two jobs, it's just too busy to deal with it. It's a vicious circle that engulfs and inundates Heidi. She can't escape from it on her own. Her internalized ruminations will first have to be converted into external grievances before she can be helped.

Eventually, Heidi takes confidence in her lifelong friend Suzanne. She listens with care and attention, comforts her, but soon finds out that this is a more encompassing problem than just worries shared amongst friends. Suzanne is wise enough to refer Heidi to external help. First a medical doctor, followed by a referral to a psychologist. Now she is able to share and express her daily worries to an objective professional. Worries can be turned into concrete grievances first and into concrete solutions later. For the longer term, a form of relationship therapy might even be prudent.

The Anti-Complain Book

First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining

Chapter 3

Unmask the complainer

*Those who cannot enjoy happiness when it comes,
should not complain when it leaves them.*

Cervantes

Before you can actively engage with complainers, you must first recognize them for what they truly are. This is an arduous task, because the professional complainer packages his nagging and whining in a way that is as colorful as it is inconspicuous. Find out the characteristics of the complainer before subjecting them to one of the two complaint tests in this chapter.

How do you recognize a complainer?

Human interaction is complex, because we are a complex social group mammal. It is therefore not surprising that the concept of complaining is a complex cultural phenomenon as well, especially since the human species is a collection of countless fascinating cultures (not races) with a fascinating variety in human behavior. Be that as it may, you can easily learn to recognize both explicit as implicit complaining behavior in your fellow human beings. By carefully observing and listening to naggers and whiners, you'll notice that their manners oftentimes meet a set of very specific characteristics. Learn to

recognize the following ten characteristics of the notoriously heavy complainer, because it will come in handy when mastering the art of anti-complaining:

1 – Attention-seeking

The complainer chronically nags for the sake of whining. He complains only to get attention. He aims to draw the focus of everything and everyone to himself. When you propose a solution (or ask him to give you one), evasive and hesitant behavior arises, because solution oriented thinking would take away the 'source of pleasure': the complaining itself. The complainer will avoid that at all times and at any cost.

2 – Dominance

Whatever happens, the complainer wants to tell her story. Depending on her audience and her dominance, she will exaggerate her complaint. If that works well, she will allow the complaint to swell up like a big red balloon. Extroverted and domineering complainers like her are very difficult to stop. She is very creative and resourceful in finding a breeding ground for her lament. She imposes her will and she will not let up.

3 – Wear and tear

The complainer clearly bears the outward signs of a lifetime of complaining. He shows puffiness, wrinkles, descended corners of the mouth and a dull skin. He is poorly groomed with a neglected appearance. His posture is inactive, tired and with drooping shoulders. Sometimes he even walks a little crooked. The complainer suffers from physical discomforts and a flaming, nervous glance. He is chronically angry and clearly frustrated. His general appearance is accentuated with sighs, growls and groans. Occasionally, there is even cursing, ranting and raving.

4 – Anger

The complainer uses a range of non-verbal signs of fury. This includes dismissing gestures, vigorous headshaking, looking (away) angrily and looking around nervously. She barely makes eye contact, but she also masters ‘the stare’, with intensely flaming eyes. Sometimes she folds her arms tightly in front of her chest while slouching, or she partially turns away. She will constantly interrupt you and walk away when it doesn’t go her way. True complainers master the art of having their eyes disappear into the top of their eye sockets.

5 – Tenacity

When you try to bring the conversation to another topic, you will notice that it is extremely difficult to veer the complainer off course. There seems to be no stopping him. He wants to convince you that he's right, no matter what. It appears to be some kind of fortitude or tenacity, but it's not. On the contrary, it is a primitive, vile form of stubbornness. He will make his complaint anyhow, by any means possible. He won't answer your questions substantively, he just won't listen and he will keep on distracting you.

6 – Shortsightedness

The complainer only sees what she wants to see. She suffers from confirmation bias and will ignore any rational or logical argument. When you offer a solution or emphasize the positive, you will be attacked for it (‘What are you? Some kind of positivity guru?’). She is completely unaware of her surroundings, ignoring signs, signals and warnings. She simply can't see past the length of her own nagging nose, constantly oversimplifying matters whilst repeatedly stating the obvious.

7 – Stubbornness

The complainer completely ignores the incentives of the anti-complainer. He ignores constructive-critical solutions. He does not allow his complaints to be placed in a different context. When he is asked to mention something positive, or to provide a solution, he just refuses to answer, or will repeat some other negative aspect of the problem, or get sarcastic. The complainer is extremely persistent when sticking to his own ideas. This is often accompanied and aggravated by anger and aggressiveness. He is simply unable (or unwilling) to distinguish between subjective and objective matters.

8 – Hypocrisy

The complainer doesn't acknowledge the nagging and whining behavior. 'I'm not complaining; I'm just saying it the way it is, because it is what it is'. Obviously, other people are complaining and she's simply annoyed by it. She vehemently condemns this behavior in others, but is unaware of her own participation in the process. She will complain extensively about everybody else; because they 'simply don't get it'. However, in a head-on confrontation with her own laments, she will deny it, ignore it and reject it. She is incapable of acknowledging her own double standards.

9 – Ignorance

The complainer does not like objective analyses. He is averse to scientific scrutiny and he hates qualitatively or quantitatively substantiated facts. The complainer eschews rationality; he's all lamentation. He either expresses himself in generalities or he will use unverifiable sources of information. His complaints are weak and poorly substantiated, but that doesn't seem to bother him at all. He is not open to rational and logical analyses and he hates the scientific community. He will dismiss their findings with the most ignorant

statement of all: ‘science is just another opinion’. It’s virtually impossible to explain how stupid that is.

10 – Egocentrism

The complainer is not able to put things into perspective. She can't look at herself objectively, but still feels proud and self-confident. She simply can't imagine anyone having a different opinion from hers; why anyone would not share her thoughts and ideas (read: her constant ranting and raving). The world simply revolves around her. Due to a lack of self-awareness and self-knowledge, she can't change her behavior,. She simply doesn't grasp the concept of different opinions, let alone the concept of subjectivity and objectivity. She simply doesn't understand why we're not all seeing it the way she does.

How much do you complain yourself?

What's up with your own nagging and whining? Are you a pest to your surroundings or do you already master the art of anti-complaining?

Before you start complaining, call yourself to order and answer the following fifteen ‘questions of conscience’. The higher your score, the more self-aware and stronger you stand in life and the less you tend to nag, whine, groan and grumble. When you score low, there's still a lot of work to do before you master the art of anti-complaining.

The fifteen questions below, applicable to both private and professional life, are meant to encourage you to think a bit more about your own behavior in

daily life and about your place in the world. You will discover that some of the questions are quite confrontational.

Question 1

How much time have you spent on positive things in the past few weeks?

- [a] None
- [b] Far too little
- [c] Insufficient
- [d] Enough
- [e] Amply

Question 2

How many problems have you encountered in recent weeks that are beyond your control?

- [a] Too much
- [b] Quite a lot
- [c] A lot
- [d] Very little
- [e] None

Question 3

How many negative things have you concretely turned into something positive in recent weeks?

- [a] None
- [b] Far too little

[c] Insufficient

[d] Enough

[e] Amply (or: I haven't come across any negative things)

Question 4

How many people have you made to laugh in the past few weeks?

[a] None

[b] Far too little

[c] A couple

[d] A lot

[e] More than enough

Question 5

To what extent have you contributed to the interests of the social groups around you ('the bigger picture') in recent weeks?

[a] Not

[b] Far too little

[c] Insufficient

[d] Enough

[e] Amply

Question 6

When was the last time you cheered someone up?

[a] I can't remember

[b] More than a decade ago

- [c] Not in recent years
- [d] Just a few months ago
- [e] Very recently

Question 7

Which of your set personal goals are you going to achieve soon?

- [a] I didn't set any personal goals for myself at all
- [b] None as it stands today
- [c] Far too little
- [d] A pretty significant part
- [e] Almost all of them

Question 8

How many of your previously set and now unfortunately unachievable personal goals have you been able to let go of (in acceptance and resignation)?

- [a] I didn't set any personal goals for myself at all
- [b] None as it stands today
- [c] Far too little
- [d] A pretty significant part
- [e] Almost all of them

Question 9

When was the last time you actively exerted yourself for more than half an hour?

- [a] I don't engage in active exercise
- [b] Not in recent years
- [c] That was months ago
- [d] Just last week
- [e] I do that a few times a week

Question 10

How much time have you spent listening with genuine interest in the past week?

- [a] None
- [b] Far too little
- [c] Insufficient
- [d] More than adequate
- [e] I always listen with genuine interest

Question 11

How many people have you surprised with a heartfelt compliment in recent weeks?

- [a] Not that I can remember
- [b] Very few
- [c] Maybe one or two
- [d] Quite a few
- [e] I compliment someone every week

Question 12

How many people have you helped solve a problem in the past few months? (like in the personal sphere or with a move, renovation, repair, etcetera).

- [a] I don't have time for that
- [b] I can't remember (perhaps one)
- [c] Not more than two
- [d] At least three or four
- [e] More than four

Question 13

To what extent have you been annoyed by other road users in recent weeks?

- [a] I get annoyed by other road users every day
- [b] I almost always get annoyed in traffic in one way or another
- [c] At least about half the time
- [d] Only incidentally
- [e] I rarely, if ever, get annoyed by other road users

Question 14

How many times have you left your car at home in recent weeks to avoid traffic jams and traveled by public transport instead?

- [a] Public transport? What is that?
- [b] I rarely, if ever, travel by public transport
- [c] Occasionally
- [d] Regularly
- [e] I travel by public transport by default and rarely use a car

Question 15

How much personal time have you had left all to yourself in the past few weeks?

[a] I rarely, if ever, have any time left for myself

[b] Just a little bit

[c] Much less than I would like

[d] Not as much as I'd like, but I'm getting better at it

[e] I make sure that I reserve plenty of time for myself on a regular basis

[a] = 0 points

[b] = 1 point

[c] = 2 points

[d] = 4 points

[e] = 8 points

Scores:

0 – 30 points

You must be very busy with yourself, because you are certainly not busy with others. You think you know who you are, where you stand, and what you want, but you probably don't have a clue whatsoever. I wouldn't be surprised if you're constantly growling and grumbling without knowing head from toe. You may be surrounded by lots of fellow human beings, but you certainly don't seem to care about them. Perhaps the time has come to sit down and reflect on your transgressions. It's not too late to change, but you must first ask yourself what it is that you're trying to achieve in life. You are, perhaps unknowingly, among the busiest, unhappiest and most ignorant complainers of our time.

31 – 60 points

You are, albeit sporadically, doing a little more for others and spend some more time on yourself, but it is still far too little. You're still too busy with yourself

and too busy with busyness. You're only scratching the surface of life's possibilities and still complaining way too much. But fortunately, every now and then you have moments of clarity that help you to put things into perspective. If that's your way of moving upwards, I advise you to stick with it. Try to taste that positive energy on your way out of the negativity well, because there is still a lot to be done. You haven't reached the tipping point yet.

61 – 90 points

This is a step in the right direction! More and more often you manage to tear yourself away from your hustle and bustle and care for others. You are more aware of who you are and where you stand. Now your focus can move on to what the heck it is that you want. Your grasp on life in general is getting more firm and you are more able to put your personal life into perspective as well. You are able to relax more often and you choose these moments all by yourself. To your credit, you occasionally show genuine interest in others, without the need to make each conversation about you. You have passed the tipping point and you are well underway to master the art of anti-complaining.

91 – 120 points

Wow, you're doing an excellent job! You definitely know who you are, where you stand and what you want. You stand strong in life, you are genuinely interested in others, you listen well and you are ready and able to help wherever you can. At the same time, you keep a very close eye on self-preservation, making sure that that your social and professional engagements don't burn you down in the process. You are constantly monitoring your work-life balance. You're enjoying yourself more, laugh more frequently and you don't hesitate to join in the fun with others. You encourage others to follow your example and you radiate positive energy, that permeates your

surroundings. You are an anti-complainer at heart and you don't hide it. Keep up the good work!

What about all the others?

Is it right that you are so annoyed with that colleague? Is he really a pain in the butt? Use the following complaint test to find out.

The complaining ability of others is relatively easy to test. You just have to recall the person and circle the score for each of the traits mentioned. Finally, add up all the scores and weigh them on the complaining scale at the end of this test.

1 – Attention-seeking

The complainer chronically nags for the sake of whining. He complains only to get attention.

Never	10
Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7
Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

2 – Dominance

Whatever happens, the complainer wants to tell her story. Depending on her audience and her dominance, she will exaggerate her complaint.

Never	10
Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7
Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

3 – Wear and tear

The complainer clearly bears the outward signs of a lifetime of complaining. He shows puffiness, wrinkles, 'descended' corners of the mouth and a dull skin.

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Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7
Half the time (1/2)	5
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Almost always	1
Always	0

4 – Anger

The complainer uses a range of non-verbal signs of fury. This includes dismissing gestures, vigorous headshaking, looking (away) angrily and looking around nervously.

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Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7

Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

5 – Tenacity

When you try to bring the conversation to another topic, it is extremely difficult to veer the complainer off course. There seems to be no stopping her.

Never	10
Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7
Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

6 – Shortsightedness

The complainer only sees what she wants to see. She suffers from confirmation bias and will ignore any rational or logical argument.

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Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7
Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

7 – Stubbornness

The complainer completely ignores the incentives of the anti-complainer. He ignores constructive-critical solutions. He does not allow his complaints to be placed in a different context.

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8 – Hypocrisy

The complainer doesn't acknowledge the nagging and whining behavior. 'I'm not complaining; I'm just saying it the way it is, because it is what it is'.

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Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

9 – Ignorance

The complainer does not like objective analyses. He is averse to scientific scrutiny and he hates qualitatively or quantitatively substantiated facts.

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Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7
Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

10 – Egocentrism

The complainer is not able to put things into perspective. She can't look at herself objectively, but still feels proud and self-confident.

Never	10
Almost never	9
Sometimes (1/3)	7
Half the time (1/2)	5
Fairly common (2/3)	3
Almost always	1
Always	0

The Complaint Scale

With the complaint scale, you can quickly and effectively assess complainers in your direct environment. I distinguish three levels of professional nagging and whining: light, medium and heavy:

Heavy – 50 points or lower (score 0 to 5)

This a level of serious, even excessive complaining. The levels of negative energy have completely absorbed the positive energy. Here we find the notoriously heavy complainer, the true nagging and whining professional. We should all try to help such a person escape the vicious circle of growling and grumbling. But we have to be careful not to be worn out and subsequently be dragged down. As we have learned by now, all that negativity is dangerously contagious.

Medium – 50 to 70 points (score 5 to 7)

Watch out: this tipping point is a danger zone. Here we possess about as much negative as positive energy. Negative energy has a tendency to root out positive energy. On this level we complain too frequently and such an attitude towards life needs some refreshing. But there's still hope: everyone once in a while the positive energy wins. We should exploit that and help each other to complain less and become active anti-complainers!

Light – 70 points or higher (score 7 to 10)

On this level the complainer has more positive than negative energy. We all tend to nag and whine from time to time, but when we become aware of this, we can adjust or even stop it. Still, we're better off staying more on the high side of this level. The more we strive reduce our nagging and whining, the higher the chance it becomes a normal, intrinsic part of our daily behavior.

Notoriously heavy complainers are a rare commodity, but so are incorrigible optimists. These kind of personalities preside on both extremes of the human behavioral scale. But their influence is disproportional to their numbers. So, you won't find a lot of them, but you will be able to notice their impact instantaneously, both positively and negatively, especially within our small social groups of family, household, friends, colleagues and teammates. But when it comes to the notoriously heavy complainer we need to be at our best. We need to be sharp and frosty to not be seduced by that dark side of the complaining force. We must help ourselves first, before we engage in helping others. Unless all hope is lost.

Guido was in his early sixties, working as a senior consultant in a large international ICT-company. On the complaint scale, he scored particularly high on dominance, wear and tear, anger and persistence. In total he scored a 9 out of 10! Guido was a true, dyed-in-the-wool complaining champion, as a result of years of sheer frustration. He bore the proud marks of spitting bile as deep furrows in his face. There was no reasoning with this man. The only two things that kept him afloat in the organization was his expertise in a rare field of ICT-technology and the fact that he only had a few years left until his retirement.

I had worked with him before and I can assure you: he didn't make anybody happy. Guido had elevated 'the art of complaining for the sake of nagging and whining' to a whole other level. There was no point in arguing with him, because 'everything sucked, had always sucked and would surely suck some more in the future'. Guido spewed his venom all day long, causing perpetual conflict with everyone around him. On several occasions, openly and brutally combatting his supervisors led to him being removed from meetings. Once,

he was even kicked out of an important business change project, because he simply refused to collaborate.

A few years later and shortly before Guidi's retirement, I ran into him again. It was a random encounter at one of the many coffee machines in the building. I engaged him, because I thought that, perhaps, he might have seen the light of day. I asked him how he was doing. Before I had a chance to take a breath, he started ranting and raving about everything that was still crappy about the organization. The management sucked (obviously, because it had always sucked), the coffee sucked too (had always sucked, by the way), and 'everything' was just one big, hopeless mess, didn't I see?

He was right in my face, eyes spitting fire. I caught myself unconsciously taking a step back, bouncing into the coffee machine. He didn't even notice. There was no getting through to him and at that point I didn't even want to try any more. As soon as I could I ran for the emergency exit.

Tempting as it may be to judge others, even rightfully so, we should always realize that when we point our finger at somebody else, three fingers are pointing right back at ourselves. It is prudent to get rid of our own whining before we start judging others, or, even better, before we start helping others to get rid of their unproductive complaining tendencies.

Chapter 4

Get rid of your own nagging

When I'm finally alone, I don't have anyone to complain about being alone.

Bram Vermeulen

Before you start addressing the nagging and whining of others, it's good to take a moment to reflect on your own complaining behavior. How do you become aware of it? How do you avoid a lament yourself? And if you can't avoid it: what is the best way to complain?

To complain is a choice. To do so is a decision that you take on your own accord. It depends on the kind of life you aspire to lead and how (un)happy you feel when leading it. It depends on how *busy-busy-busy* you are with work and private life. It depends on your willingness and ability to actively change your habits. Complaining is strongly connected to assertiveness. Being indecisive easily leads to nagging and whining.

Dutch Psychologist Manon Sikkel distinguishes between two types of people: people who take responsibility for their own lives and people who don't. Which

group do you think complains the most? Right! People who exist in a state of perpetual overload have the idea that they are *being* lived, that they themselves are not responsible for the direction their lives are taking. They feel they are victims of chance, of bad luck, or of other people. And they sure like to complain about that.

The American psychologist Julian Rotter says that people with a tendency to deflect responsibility have a strong 'external locus of control'. Locus means place and 'locus of control' could be translated as 'the control room of your life'. The internal locus of control is of course the control room where you turn the knobs yourself. In the 1950s, scientists used the 'locus of control test' developed by Rotter. It's still exists today. Those who score high on the internal locus believe that most events in their lives are the result of their own actions. Those who score high on the external locus believe that their lives are made up of coincidences.

Being aware of your own complaining behavior is the first step towards reducing it. Anti-complaining is a true art form that you can learn to master. I will provide you with tips and tricks that will increase the awareness of your behavior in day to day life and the impact it has on the small social groups that surround you. Self-awareness is the basis to break habit and a physical action works better to capture and log the event, as it were. It helps to get rid of old, undesired behavior.

But how do you go about it? The American pastor Will Bowen thought he found a solution. He wanted to make the world a better place by tackling complaining behavior and the former ad salesman developed *the purple bracelet*. Everyone in their church community wore one on the wrist. If you complained about

something, you had to move the bracelet from one wrist to the other. As such, you became aware of your own nagging and whining, right then and there.

Bill Bowen's bracelet was a resounding success. Millions of them have been sold in more than a hundred countries. He wrote a book about it called *A Better World*. As a form of therapy, he suggests that, with the help of the bracelet, people are encouraged to forgo complaining for 21 consecutive days. According to Bowen, that's the exact period it takes to get rid of a habit. There is no scientific evidence for it, mind you, but the bracelet and the subsequent strategy are nevertheless a great success.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them so well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The bored teenager

Hanging on the couch with the game controller on his lap, headphones around his neck, laptop to the left and smartphone to the right, cans of energy drinks on the table and bags of crisps all around, your son looks up at you with a disturbingly blank stare. 'I'm bored...' – 'Have you finished your homework yet?', you ask. Silence. On the flatscreen meanwhile, entire tribes are dying a horrible death. 'Well?' – 'Wha-at?' he says irritably. 'I asked you about your homework...' – 'I'll do that in a moment, *dude*', he replies. 'Let me finish out this level first...' – 'Hey! Just a minute ago you

said that you were bored! So, finish your homework first, *DUDE*, or there will be hell to pay!' – 'Hell-to-pay? Who talks like that? DUHUUH!' – Time for some affirmative action. You turn off the tv, close the laptop and disconnect the controller. You confiscate his smartphone. 'Upstairs NOW!' Angry whining and wailing now fills the house when he walks upstairs, fades in the distance and ends with the deafening bang of a bedroom door. You reluctantly start walking up the stairs yourself, because this Master of the Universe owns an equal arsenal of digital distractors on his bedroom...

A good conversation with yourself

Even if you don't feel like wearing such a magical bracelet, there are other ways to prevent your own complaining. The following five tips might prove useful. They are meant to be internal dialogues, conversations with yourself. You call yourself to account, as it were, before you make your complaints public. Preventing your own nagging and whining will contribute to a more upbeat world and will encourage others to follow your lead. Let's go!

1 – Count to ten

How important is it to you? Do you just want to spew your bile or do you have an actual purpose to your complaints? Count to ten first and only then click on 'send'.

While some of us need to gather some courage before making a face-to-face complaint, these days social media are making it quite easy for anyone to rant and rave. When you receive the newsletter of your sports club, in which you

read that the new construction of the sports canteen has been postponed for the umpteenth time, because the chairman apparently still does not dare to take any financial risks, you feel your blood boiling. You're not going to take that, are you now? That guy doesn't have balls! He just won't take any risk, ever, to support new initiatives, let alone come up with some himself!

You open your laptop and within a few minutes you create this is strongly worded e-mail with lots of adjectives, bold font, underlining and exclamation points. You add the complete council and some of your sports friends in the cc and all you have to do now is click on 'send' and, of course, post it on your social media platforms. In such a case, it is better to cool down first. Just close your eyes and slowly count to ten. And then pick up the phone (yes, it's true, you can also make phone calls with your smartphone) to first exchange ideas about the backgrounds of this issue.

Email is not the best initial medium to vent your frustrations and social media are by far the worst; written text is easily misunderstood and social media messages spread like wildfire, especially when they are laced with frustration, anger and hostility. When you finally send that email or make that post, be sure to remove the redundant adjectives, bold font, underlining and exclamation points. You can make your point, sure, but there's no reason to be rude. Ever.

2 – Think positively

Name a number of positive things about the subject of the complaint first. After that, is there anything left to complain about? Is it really all that bad?

When you've been worrying about something for a long time, you run the risk of getting stuck in negativity. Before you know it, you're nagging and whining from within that dark cloud of pessimism. You just have to know how to find the constructive, the positive aspects of a given problem and learn to formulate them. So, take a blank sheet of paper and a pen and sit down. Close your eyes for a while and relax.

Now, log the subject of your complaint at the top of the page (in 20 words or less), then create two columns. The left column answers the question 'what are good aspects of my problem?' The right column answers the question 'which aspects of my problem might be improved?' It is vital that you start with the left column and you don't call the right column 'bad aspects' or 'disadvantages'. Studies have shown that when you start with 'good aspects' before you address 'what could have been better' (and not 'what went badly?'), the number of negative aspects that you *would* have mentioned if you started with the negative, are reduced by half.

3 – Ask yourself why

Why am I complaining? Is it just complaining for the sake of nagging and whining? Am I looking for acceptance or comfort? What do I want to achieve?

Self-knowledge is the way to get in touch with your emotions. For instance, if you are dissatisfied with your work and your employer, but you are stuck with them (for now), your dissatisfaction might show inadvertently. For example, you start to curse at the TV, at the adolescent behavior of your children, at the snoring of your partner, or at all these idiots on the road. It's impossible for

people to see through all that; they will respond directly to what you're complaining about.

- *"Well, then turn off the bloody TV!" (good advice)*
- *"You've been a teenager yourself, don't you know?" (that's right)*
- *"I only snore when I've been drinking!" (that's true)*
- *"Then take the train, why don't ya!" (a useful piece of advice).*

Firstly, these are all fair points, but I'm sure you know that yourself already. Secondly, it doesn't solve the core of your problem: you hate your work. So, ask yourself: why are you complaining in the first place? Be clear about it and say it out loud to yourself first: 'I hate my job!' Then start sharing that constructively with others, instead of harassing your environment with sour, indirect laments. By recognizing your own complaining behavior, you will learn to recognize your underlying motives and emotions.

4 – Define your problem

Ask yourself: What is my core problem? What causes it? What are the consequences? Learn to be concise and succinct and repeat it out loud.

It's always a good idea to transfer complaints from your brooding mind to another medium. For that purpose I have developed the *Problem Analysis Checklist* or PAC (see also stimulus 9). Sit back and relax in an environment where you can't be distracted and think rationally about your problems. The first section of the PAC consists of three open questions:

- *What is the problem?*

- *What causes it?*
- *What are the consequences?*

Write it all down. Be concise and succinct. If you're struggling with getting your concerns down on paper, how do you expect people to understand you? Do your own homework for a change. Now that you're isolated from others, feel free to ask the questions out loud to yourself. Repeat them. Pitch your problem to yourself, see if you can feel it. This simple exercise, a true 'conversation with yourself', is a good preparation for the dialogue with other people. It's the beginning of the solution.

5 – Think in terms of solutions

What needs to be done? By whom? When must it be finished? What must be done to avoid recurrence? Can you analyze all that without complaining about it?

Once you've managed to define your problem and it's beginning to take shape, take the next step in the *Problem Analysis Checklist* or PAC. You are one step away from preventing your own lament: the solution to your problem. These are the next three open questions:

- *What needs to be done?*
- *By whom?*
- *When must it be finished?*

This is your action plan. Sometimes you need help from others, but it is wise to keep in mind that a significant share of the problems you experience (and

complain about), will have to be solved by you, yourself and you alone. Just be honest about it and remember: ‘me, myself and I’ are three persons in one. So, you’re never truly alone.

Don’t lose sight of the most important personal goal: ‘I want to solve my own problems, without prejudice and without complaining about it’. This will bring you closer to that other important goal: ‘I want to help others solve their problems, without prejudice and without complaining about it’. And that brings us to the final open question of the PAC:

- *What must be done to avoid recurrence?*

Some problems are a one-off and will never come back once you’ve solved them. But if you want to avoid the perpetual phenomenon of ‘symptoms fighting, take some extra time out to finish your problem analysis with ‘the art of practical prevention’ and take active measures to eliminate the problem from your life.

What to do if you can't resist?

When you have a tendency to complain, you're actually in a fight with yourself. Think about it: you are dissatisfied about something, or you worry about something, and that ignites an internal debate. You are, in a way, arguing with yourself. That’s, in a manner of speaking, a special form of having an internal fight. As a next step, ‘turning outwards, you want to express yourself, say what's on your mind and that’s perfectly within your providence. But there are several ways to go about it. Prevent unnecessary annoyance and aggravation from your conversation partners with the following tips:

1 – Don't forget to praise

Praise the defendant before you begin. Give a compliment, mention something positive, make the defendant smile. In other words: lay down a soft carpet first.

You've been struggling with your irritations for a while now, but it's also starting to eat you up inside. Every time the contractor promises to deliver part of the work on your house, he suddenly has a rush job elsewhere. The work goes in fits and starts and the end date keeps shifting. All that time you're living amidst constant mess, dust and rubble. It is about time to say something about it, but you have been very busy with work yourself, so you're under a lot of pressure. You now run the risk of just 'spitting it out'.

However, despite the botched up planning and the mess in the house, the quality of the finished work is excellent. These guys are pros! So, you first compliment them and emphasize that you are very satisfied with the work. You praise their craftsmanship and promise you'll definitely recommend them to colleagues, family and friends. However, you would like to express some concerns... And then you substantiate the complaint and seek for a new joint agreement on planning and deadlines. By improving the mindset of the contractor in a positive way, before addressing possible improvements, you increase the chance of a successful and fruitful collaboration.

2 – Stay respectful

When complaining, remain calm, polite and respectful. Keep in mind what you want to achieve with your grievances and don't lose sight of the ultimate objective.

Whilst talking to your partner, you feel your blood pressure rise. No one can infuriate you like her! After more than thirty years she just knows you too well. Which buttons to push, turning the topic of the conversation around, distract you and trap you in a dead end; it has become a true art form. You try to talk to her about her general sloppiness in the house, but she just can't remember any of the concrete examples you lay before her. On top of that, she simply dismisses all your arguments and laughs at you a bit for 'being so silly'.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them so well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The annoyed table companion

It's hard to get positive news from the media these days. It's all disaster, murder, traffic accidents, house fires, violence, bad economic news, crisis, conflict, war, natural disasters, global warming, gossip and countless lists of unfavorable trends of just about anything that is trendy. If you happen to sit across someone scrolling through the timelines on his smartphone, reading all that dreadful news out loud, constantly sighing, moaning and groaning, you're in for a treat. 'It's unbelievable! It's sheer madness! How much crazier can it get?! Listen to this: ...' And then he reads all the terrible headlines out loud. The endless timelines of the daily news inundates the annoyed table companion with bad news and as a consequence he stuffs it down your throat as well. 'Where has all the good news gone', you wonder,

'It can't be all that bad'. But if you try to share that with him, he huffs and puffs and moans and groans some more: 'I hate good news!' Figures...

Before you realize it, you make a nasty comment about her weight, and that shifts the original argument about ordinary household problems to the dark side. The fight becomes personal and it gets out of hand. Your goal of talking about her sloppiness has faded into the background. To reach your objective, it would have been better to stay on topic and throw some well-intended compliments into the mix. Above all, you should have avoided hypersensitive topics such as looks and appearance. Now you will have to start all over again (but it might be wise to skip it for now and give it a few more days).

In his book *Ruzie in the tent* ("The fight is on") Dutch psychologist and relationship therapist Jean-Pierre van de Ven advises not to focus on the other person's unwillingness during an argument. It's better to focus on your own goals. If your goal is a tidy house, don't end up arguing about your partner's appearance. If you want your partner to assist you with something, don't mention her laziness. If your objective is to redistribute each other's domestic chores, don't mention his lack of initiative. You know, to keep the fight out of the house.

3 – Avoid generalities

Be specific about your grievances and provide examples where possible. Stick to the facts. Avoid oversimplifying or exaggerating. What do you really want to say? Say that!

You've been annoyed with your colleague for a while. She is constantly late and you feel that the quality of her work leaves something to be desired. On top of that, you feel she clearly lacks talent and motivation. As a result, the team spirit deteriorates. For a while you try to ignore it, but at some point you feel enough is enough: 'You're *always* late!', you say. 'Your assignment will *never* be finished on time! I *constantly* have to correct your work!' Your colleague reacts annoyed. She has plenty of examples of actually being on time, delivering on time and executing correctly. She doesn't recognize your complaints and throws them right back at you. If you live in a glass house, you shouldn't throw stones, she feels.

It would have been better if you hadn't expressed yourself in absolutes. Adjectives like *always*, *never* and *constantly* don't work well when you want to voice a complaint or concern. It is better to mention specific examples of her being late or not delivering on time, where you feel the quality of her work might be improved and what suggestions you have to improve overall collaboration. And don't forget to apologize for being late yourself. After all, you're only human.

4 – Summarize

At the end of the conversation, summarize it. Did you reach agreement and made appointments? Repeat them, so they can be properly logged.

You've had a difficult conversation with your daughter. Her school results have been disappointing and it has come to your attention that she shirks quite regularly. This is also evident from her grades, which are below average. You're worried about that, because her grades have always been top of her class.

Hanging around with her girlfriends, watching Netflix, being on her smartphone and laptop all the time; they are clearly distractions at the expense of learning.

You've had a constructive conversation with her and you were able to convey your concerns adequately. She now appears to understand. You've also agreed that if the results don't improve, it will have consequences: less time on Netflix, restrictions on the use of her smartphone, more time dedicated to homework. At the end of the emotional, but nevertheless constructive conversation, you summarize these agreements succinctly, compliment her for her collaboration and you end by expressing your confidence in her. After all, this is your daughter, she's is going to be fine!

5 – Dare to (temporarily) let go

Are you not achieving your goals with your grievances this time around? No worries. Redirect the conversation to a different topic. Let it go for now and schedule a new appointment. New round, new opportunities.

The discussion with your girlfriend is not going well. You have tried to explain your disappointment in the friendship. That you always take the initiative, but not the other way around. In addition, she regularly cancels appointments at the last minute without, as you see it, valid reasons. But you can't get your message across. She's distracted, closed up, not really into it. Perhaps there's something else going on, but you can't put your finger on it. She reacts absently, irritated and uninterested.

Instead of pushing through your grievances (and risk a fight that will only make things worse), it is wiser to let go for now. The time is clearly not right. Steer away from this sensitive issue and ask her about something else, something more uplifting. Say that you will get back to her when the time is right. Rest assured, your moment will come.

Now that we've learned what complaining is, why we do it so eagerly, how to unmask the notoriously heavy complainer and now that we've gotten rid of our own nagging, the time has come to start dealing with other people's whining. Let's dive into the countless means at our disposal to convert complaining into anti-complaining and to go from grief to consoling, from grievance to commending and from grouching to encouraging. Are you with me?

First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining

Chapter 5

Dealing with other people's whining

*If people could purchase happiness,
they would certainly buy too much of it.*

Pearl S. Buck

To deal with the everyday complaining of family members, friends, co-workers, bosses, shop assistants and all those other sourpusses who make your life miserable, I will provide you with nine tried-and-tested stimuli that you can apply to encourage naggers and whiners to become more aware of their behavior and to seduce them to embrace more positive and constructive behavior.

These nine stimuli are the tools you need to master the art of anti-complaining. Apply them one at a time, or in combination with others, to encourage the complainer to see the light of day. You will discover that the application of a combination of stimuli is more effective than using the same one over and over again. Just remember:

- *What doesn't work on one occasion, may better work the next time.*
- *What works for the one, might not work for the other.*
- *What might produce immediate results on one occasion, may take a little longer on the other.*

Each stimulus or encouragement is accompanied by an example, case or anecdote from practice. You will learn that the art of anti-complaining will not only decrease the nagging and whining in your direct environment, but, as a result, in will simultaneously increase the level of positive collaborative energy.

These are the nine stimuli or encouragements:

- *The power of the positive*
- *The clever distraction*
- *Attention to the emotion*
- *Listen, reflect and repeat*
- *The power of laughter*
- *Go back to the source*
- *The power of the unexpected*
- *The referral*
- *Take the back door using The Why*

Good luck!

Stimulus 1 – The power of the positive

*Nothing brings about such a hustle and bustle
as when people go to relax.*

L. Versteylen

You can always find something positive about something negative. First, let the complainer mention some positive aspects of his complaint.

This is a very simple incentive to start with. If someone has been complaining to you for a while, suddenly swoop in and kindly ask to list a few positive aspects of their problem or situation.

So don't defend yourself, or address the actual content of the lament, or offer a solution, but say, for example: 'My apologies for interrupting you, and I sympathize, it sounds like you have a lot riding on your shoulders. But I'm curious. Could you please list a few positive aspects of your problem?' Guide the complainer as follows: 'Great! Thank you. That's one. I'm interested to hear some more'. The goal is to distract the complainer's thoughts by actively focusing on something positive. Make sure that the complainer does not circle back to the lament.

And beware of sarcastic comments. Naggers and whiners are inundated with negative thoughts, so it will take a while for them to cool down. In the end, our brain is simply unable to exist in a positive and a negative state simultaneously. Once you have successfully dragged the complainer away from the dark side,

you create an atmosphere with more willingness to come up with solutions, instead of blockades.

As social group mammals we are extremely sensitive to each other's behavior, especially within our small social groups. This applies to both positive and negative emotions. American Professor and author Aron Wolfe Siegman has observed that when two people engage in discourse, the verbal expression of anger in one person causes the other to become angrier as well. It is a form of 'repayment in kind' and it has escalating properties. Grief, grievances and grouching have the same effect. But the great thing is: it also occurs when we laugh! Fortunately, laughter is contagious. I'll get back to that when we reach stimulus 6, *The power of laughter*.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them so well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The social media maniac

We are all guilty as charged: family and friends, colleagues and co-workers, princes, presidents and politicians, famous folk and ordinary runts, leaders and followers, managers and employees: social media are in, social media are it, social media are everywhere! Tweets and tags, posts and pundits, blogs and vlogs; they offer the individual the opportunity to say anything about everything or everyone, instantly sharing it with countless others.

The smartphone enables the naggers and whiners to moan and groan, to do it instantly and to repeat it constantly. How many letters does it take to spew your bile? How many words together make a hateful complaint? Very little, as it turns out. A short, quick and vile message can reach lots of recipients in the blink of an eye; all we have to do is press 'send'. And in doing so, we elicit a stream of follow-up complaints that in turn ignite other ones and feed the flames of frustration, hatred and intolerance, *ad infinitum*. Just as complaining is a choice, social media offer us a choice as well: what news do I want to spread? How do I say it? Am I going to complain or anti-complain?

The Dutch author and public speaker Frank van Marwijk writes in his book *Manipuleren kun je leren* ('How to Master your Manipulation') that it is more pleasant and effective to influence people from a positive attitude. 'Be positive when approaching other people and answer their questions with a *yes* instead of a *no*!' To say *no* limits your options, while saying *yes* will create opportunities and possibilities. Van Marwijk: 'The word *yes* has a stimulating effect on human communication. The word *no* does not go well with positive qualities such as decisiveness, inspiration and enthusiasm.' This is his proposal: for a period of twenty-four hours, respond with *yes* to every situation. You are only allowed to say *no* if there is really no other option. Just give it a try, why don't you? I would like to add though: if you say *yes*, don't say *yes*, *but...*, because that would kind of negate the entire purpose of the exercise.

Psychologists and therapists who deal with our the energy management of our emotions claim that it takes far more positive energy to compensate for negative energy. Some even estimate it to be a factor of ten. This implies that

an *hour* long nagging and whining about your work must be compensated with more than one positive working *day*. What a waste of time!

Once I took part in a project management seminar with a hundred other project specialists. There were several guest speakers from all walks of life, including politics. One of the speakers was a former politician who had left the political arena quite recently. Out of dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the country, he originally joined the largest rightwing populist party in the Netherlands. Now this ex-politician was working as a consultant for an ICT service provider in the Netherlands.

Right from the start, his entire narrative came across as a negative political speech. The Netherlands was in dire straits, headed in the wrong direction! He passionately 'backed it up' with a litany of half-truths, fake news, unsubstantiated accusations, highly suggestive developments and debunked conspiracy theories. At breakneck speed, his lament arose to a level that took the audience aback. What was he on about? During his rant he offered no solutions whatsoever. I was therefore both entertained and annoyed. 'If you are so dissatisfied with the political climate in the Netherlands, why leave politics in the first place?', I thought.

'Are there any questions?' the presenter asked. 'Yes, sir!' I shouted. I was sitting at the very back of the room and had raised my hand as high as I could, with all five fingers spread out. I said: 'I just don't get it. What do you want us to do with all that negativity? If I may ask, could you please name five positive aspects of the Netherlands and the political climate. And preferably, could you go about it with the same vigor as you just brought the whole country down?'

That brought the speaker out of balance. Now hé was taken aback. Apparently, he had never dealt with such questions before, and he wasn't prepared for it at all. He reluctantly came up with a 'positive aspect', stating that we should be glad that the heating is still on in The Netherlands. 'I'm sorry', I interrupted him. 'That's just a sarcastic sneer. I'm sure you can do better. Just give us five actual positive aspects of our country and the way It's being run. I'll count along with you...'

I have to admit, in the end he managed to come up with five positive aspects, but with far less enthusiasm and passion with which he burned down the country before. Between each example, he had to think really hard and he kept stuttering, saying *uhm* a lot. It was quite the show. I guess I would have been really worried if he hadn't been able to come up with any positive aspect.

National politics are a rewarding subject of lamentation, because it is all-encompassing and complex. When it comes to politics (and soccer championships), we are all 'experts' and we like to oversimplify matters to satisfy our gut feelings. After all, politics is all about justice, safety, freedom and the future of our children. We find this so important that we isolate, magnify and simplify everything that we find unjust, unsafe, limiting and threatening. In such an atmosphere it is hard to find the light switch.

Do you ever take the politician's seat yourself? Try to think in terms of solutions instead of just complaining. Are you taking the full brunt from someone who nags and whines about your country's politics? Simply ask what he's proud of. What would he do if he were prime minister? How would he solve the nation's problems? What needs to be done? Who must do it? When does it have to be ready? How realistic is it?

Problems are here to be solved and we should not shy away from that. But the world isn't all problems. First we need to focus on the subset of problems that are within our zone of influence. Then we need to learn to master the special skill of listing positive aspects of a problem first, before we focus on possible improvements. That is the art of anti-complaining.

The power of the positive in practice

It's election time again and your friend is sitting across from you, growling and grumbling about the state of the world in general and that of his country in particular. Before you have a chance to respond, the ranting and raving switches to the 'asylum seekers' and 'migrants' and 'criminals' who 'steal our jobs', 'harass our women' and 'fail to integrate'. 'They just keep on crossing our borders' and now our proud nation is flooded with foreigners'. He is proud to have chosen for a political movement 'that is finally going to do something about it'.

What to do when it hits you smack in the face like this? Well, just ask him about the facts and figures of the matter.

Your friend: 'This morning I saw a group of loitering youths in my neighborhood, just hanging around. All migrants of course...'

You: 'Well, well, well. And what were they doing?'

Your friend: 'I don't know. Probably not much. And they certainly were up to no good! It seems to be getting worse every day.'

You: 'Ok. That's interesting. If I may ask, do you actually know how many migrants cross the border each year?'

Your friend: "I don't know. Hundreds of thousands? It sure feels like millions. And they just keep on coming'.

*You: 'Ok. And do you know how many of these migrants are due to economic, forced, irregular, legal and long-term migration? How many are asylum seekers? Do you know what the current migration numbers are compared to last year? Or five years ago? What are the actual crime statistics of migrants compared to the domestic population? I'm just asking...'.
Your friend: 'Why would I need to know all that? I see what I see and I feel what I feel'.
You: 'Of course you do. I understand that. But it wouldn't hurt you to know the actual facts and figures before you draw such drastic conclusions'.*

Stimulus 2 – The clever distraction

*There are few things that people are
as dedicated to as being unhappy.*

Alain de Botton

Complainers are very easy to distract. Think about some alternative topics or positive aspects that you can throw into the mix at the appropriate time.

You'll be surprised how easy it is to distract complainers. Just don't engage in substantive argumentation and let the story take its course for a short while. Listen, reflect and repeat. Then you pick your moment and start talking about a completely different subject, something positive and uplifting. Or you ask the complainer about some positive event or optimistic development of late. It can be anything, as long as it completely deviates from the complaint, in a positive-constructive way. Complainers will switch like *thát* – no hesitation – to any kind of subject that reflects a positive experience or uplifting event.

It works best if it is an alternative topic that is closely related to the complainer himself, for example within the family ('my daughter won a volleyball championship!'), or of personal interest ('I love my new electric car!'), or on a career development ('I have been promoted with increase of pay!'). Just pick your moment, choose some natural pause in the complainer's rant, and ask about his positive affairs. It can be as simple as that.

At first glance this might appear to be a form of symptoms fighting, but it's not, it serves a very specific function. While the complainer is talking about

uplifting events and cool developments, his brain will switch to a more positive mode of operation as well. Just let him dwell on it for a while and then circle back to the problem at hand. Success is not always guaranteed, but your chances of reaching some kind of practical solution increase considerably.

Martin's parents are in their late eighties and in the last stages of their retired lives. They are of the generation that just seem to groan and grumble about everything. They nag about the last holiday destination, the journey there, the accommodations and the journey back. They whine about the people around them, the local politics, the weather, their health and the burden of aging. These are not serious complaints, mind you. It's all a bit trivial, because for their age they are in pretty good shape. However, large amount of small complaints have a tendency to pile up. Martin always gets a tad gloomy when he listens to them.

Martin's mother usually adapts to any topic of conversation of her husband, they are like two peas in a pot. But, lo and behold, his father has a few hobbies that he just can't stop talking about. Besides enjoying vintage wines, he loves gardening around his huge, professionally maintained koi carp pond. So, whenever the doom and gloom starts to dominate, Martin has access to a wide range of topics to employ the clever distraction tactic. He's got them all stacked in his head, ready to casually throw on the table.

Usually Martin allows the complaints run their course for a while, nodding a bit and occasionally saying: 'Oh, yeah? How annoying! How terrible that must be for you'. But when it all gets too negative, he will jump in and suddenly say: 'Heey dad, I see that the garden has had a major overhaul...'. Or: 'Have you been able to manage the scale disease of that big white one?'

Or: 'Did you manage to get hold of that 1978 Chateau Neuf du Pape that you were chasing?'

His father will seamlessly, with the snap of a finger, switch to the topics that are so close to his heart and start rambling on about it. Every time – Success guaranteed. The flow of complaints disappears like snow before the sun and the entire atmosphere clears up instantly. 'Another cup of tea, my boy?', his mother will say. 'Oh, yeah, please, mum. Yummy!' – 'Want another cookie?' – 'You betcha, yeah!' – 'You can take two'.

Smart distraction in practice

When your colleague sits down at her desk in the morning, sighing heavily, with the announcement that she has been stuck in traffic for hours yet again, it isn't wise to say that traffic jams aren't that bad or that she shouldn't complain about it all the time. Because your colleague has just said that it is bad and she doesn't feel that she is complaining at all. Just fetch her a cup of coffee and listen to her lament first, as patiently as you can muster. When she's done nagging and whining, simply ask her what she was doing whilst being stuck in that traffic jam. Maybe she listened to the radio or played her favorite music. That's your chance: give the conversation a twist and inquire with interest about the music she loves.

Colleague: 'Terrible weather this morning, I got stuck in traffic again and it took almost two hours longer. It's getting worse every day'.

You: 'Two hours?! Wow! That must be a new record'.

Colleague: 'It really is!' <utters a second big sigh>

You: 'Want some coffee?'

Colleague: 'That would be nice, thank you. I'll have a cappuccino please.'

You: 'What did you listen to in your car?'

Colleague: 'I played a few delicious golden oldies from the Top-2000: The Eagles, Golden Earring, Supertramp, The Police...'

You: 'Did you sing?'

Colleague: 'Sure. I always do. I must have looked a bit silly from the outside.'

Stimulus 3 – Attention to the emotion

Life would be a real pleasure if we did half of what we expect others to do.

J. Cockerill

Do not engage in a substantive discussion about the complaint itself, but focus on the emotion that accompanies it.

In his worldwide bestseller *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus – The classic guide to understanding the opposite sex*, originally published in 1992, British philosopher and author John Gray describes his thesis as follows: ‘As soon as you understand that sometimes you don’t understand anything about each other, many relationship problems are solved immediately’.

It is based on the notion of the proposed ‘fundamental differences’ between men and women and it might best be applied when you’re dealing with someone of the opposite sex. The incentive boils down to a man being more focused on action. He prefers to tackle problems and complaints hands on and he just wants to solve them as quickly as possible. In doing so, he often ignores the emotional side of it. A woman on the other hand, as Grey argues, prefers to talk about the *emotions* that a problem brings. She doesn’t want action; she wants acceptance. Of course she can come up with a solution, she’s not daft. But she benefits much more from understanding, compassion, comfort and empathy. In that respect, men and women appear to be coming from different planets, hence the book title.

You can imagine that I was relieved when British philosopher of science, psychologist and author Cordelia Fine published her book *The delusions of gender – The real sciences behind sex differences* in 2011, twenty years too late in my opinion. In her book she not only explains the difference between *nature* and *nurture*, but also exposes the pseudo-science behind *neurosexism*, ‘revealing the mind’s remarkable plasticity, the substantial influence of culture on identity, and the malleability of what we consider to be ‘hardwired’ difference’. In the brilliant and witty book Fine ‘shows the surprising extent to which boys and girls, men and women are made – not born’. By the way, the Dutch translation of her book bears the title *Waarom we allemaal van mars komen* (‘Why we all come from Mars’), which I find to be even wittier, because it more clearly mirrors John Gray’s book.

So, when push comes to shove, both sexes have an equal desire for acceptance and comfort when dealing with the problems of life. That implies that you can apply this stimulus to all people on this planet, independent of gender or sexual orientation. We are all human after all. The beauty of this stimulus is that it temporarily distracts attention from the complaint. It’s no longer about the specific problem, but about the emotions that come along with it. Paying attention to the actual feelings of a complainer creates an atmosphere of understanding and comfort, instead of rejection and agony. It will bring both parties closer to each other, which creates a better ‘platform’ to address the problem that instigated all the nagging and whining in the first place.

John is 43 and he has a problem at work. As team leader within a large company, he has to collaborate with other team leaders within the supply chain to deliver the final product. If he doesn't get input from the other teams on time, he can't deliver on time either. Good consultation is of the essence.

And that's exactly where things go haywire. His closest colleague and team leader Leonard is obviously incompetent and sloppy in keeping appointments as well. It causes annoyance, friction and animosity between the two teams. John is frustrated about it. It causes stress and it makes him anxious.

Helen, John's wife, has a job as a department manager in another company. In contrast to John's team, Helen's department is one of a strict gung-ho mentality, and the all-present decisiveness is mixed with an attitude of 'don't whine about it; just get it done!' If a problem arises, it is solved on the spot, or the problem is escalated immediately, with oftentimes equally swift results: practical solutions to keep the process going.

After work on Friday, at home on the couch, John tries to talk to Helen about his feelings. He complains about the deteriorating working atmosphere and about his own anxiousness and stress. Helen listens to his lament and suddenly interrupts him halfway through. She just throws it out: 'What are you nagging about? Where I come from, that's not a problem at all. Talk to your boss about it and get things moving. Just do it! Get your shit together, draw up an action plan and get cracking!'

John is not only taken aback, he's clearly annoyed. Of course he knows all that! He has been a team leader for years and he's well versed in company politics and the intricacies of a chain of command. In fact, he already prepared an escalation document to present to his boss on Monday. He just wanted to vent his problems to get some understanding from Helen. She would have been wise to just listen for a bit and provide some comfort. That surely would have made a better start of the weekend.

Helen would have done much better if she acted more along the lines of: 'Gee, honey, that sucks bigtime!' And: 'If I were in your shoes, I would feel pretty bad about it too.' And: 'Can I get you a nice cup of tea? Or a cold beer? Maybe open a nice bottle of wine?' It would have improved their personal relationship as well. All in all, a missed opportunity for Helen.

Attention to the emotion in practice

If your son comes home from school, groaning and grumbling because he had a bad math test, it's not useful to solve his problems on the spot. Your son is a smart cookie and he knows all too well that spending six hours a day on his smartphone and game box is not doing his school work any good. He might not say it, but he is fully aware of it. You would be wise to first show some attention and understanding for his feelings. Once you've got that going on, and he has cooled down somewhat, you can still work the problem.

Your son: 'That stupid teacher can't explain anything properly! I hate math! And that test was stupid too!'

You: 'Tough day at school, sport?'

Your son: 'Duhuh! You betcha yeah. It was brutal!'

You: 'I guess it must have been difficult to finish on time as well...'

Your son: 'You think? Way too little time! And we didn't even cover most of the test topics in class!'

You: 'Did others have trouble with it too?'

Your son: 'Everyone! We all thought it was só stupid!'

You: 'I can imagine. Can I get you anything? Orange juice? Cola? We've got gingerbread cookies!'

Your son: 'Cola would be nice. And can I have two cookies?'

You: 'Of course you can. Because you've had that stupid test...'

Your son: 'Thanks dad...'

Stimulus 4 – Listen, reflect and repeat

Insults should be written in sand and compliments engraved in stone.

Arabic proverb

Speech is silver, silence is golden, but truly listening is brilliant. You can make the complainer 'run dry' by repeating his own lament. Teach the complainer to put his own problems into perspective.

With this stimulus, you allow the complainer to vent extensively about everything and everyone. You keep the story going by reflecting or mirroring what the complainer says. Just let it rip. As an anti-complainer, you listen carefully. You repeat what the complainer says in your own words and you move along by nodding. Don't comment, don't exaggerate and avoid downplaying the lament. The intention is to comfort the complainer, to convey a sense of understanding and empathy. Like so:

- *'Hmm, okay...interesting...'*
- *'That seems very annoying indeed...'*
- *'Would you care to elaborate...?'*
- *'I understand. And then, what happened then...?'*
- *'I see. That must have been awful...'*

But beware: do this only for a few minutes, otherwise you become part of the problem by being sucked into the complaining mechanism. Remember the intent: you want to transform the lament towards more positive-constructive energy, to lay a foundation for a solution or a solution-oriented approach.

In his book *Manipuleren kun je leren* ('How to Master your Manipulation') Dutch author Frank van Marwijk describes very aptly what constitutes a good listener: 'Did you ever experienced someone saying this to you at the end of a conversation: "That was truly pleasant. Your advice has helped me tremendously!" Perhaps you came to the realization that you didn't even say that much. In that case it wasn't your verbal advice that served the other person so well, but your listening ear and your undivided attention.'

The American listening experts Larry Barker and Kittie Watson (from the book *Listen Up*) distinguish four types of listeners:

- The *people-oriented listener* puts the individual first: all attention is focused on the interlocutor.
- The *action-oriented listener* focuses on activities, preferring to listen to concise information.
- The *content-oriented listener* is focused on concrete matters, listening to news, content issues and technical details.
- The *time-oriented listener* focuses on time management, trying to organize time as efficiently as possible.

The anti-complainer is first and foremost a people-oriented listener, perhaps with some added value of the other three types on the side, but he clearly puts the complainer's interest first. How good a listener are you? British coach and facilitator Jeni Mumford distinguishes three levels of listening to give you an impression of your own listening skills:

- **Level 1**

You don't focus on the person talking, but on the way the story relates to you. You draw on your own experiences, which blocks you from the overall picture. Don't do this when someone starts complaining to you: it's about the complainer, not about you!

- **Level 2**

Your listening is now much more concentrated. You are completely focused on the complainer and you do not interrupt him by talking about yourself or by providing advice or solutions. That's truly brilliant listening.

- **Level 3**

Now you're listening with inspiration. By following your intuition you pay much more attention to what the complainer *isn't* saying. You are sensitive to the feelings and emotions that are projected unconsciously, the so-called non-verbal signals.

To listen brilliantly is a combination of the type of human-centered listening at levels 2 and 3. Therefore, the better you get at level 2, the more often you will be able to reach and sustain your listening skills at level 3.

The challenge with this stimulus is to avoid asking open questions ('why, what, how, when, who, where?') for a while. When they start nagging and whining, notoriously heavy complainers tend to push forward with fortitude. Complaints are fired off at such a rapid pace that you won't be able to find a place to hide. They are professional complainers, so it's up to you to stay sharp and frosty. With this stimulus you allow the complainer to 'run dry' on the lament, whilst laying down a soft carpet. It is a form of 'smart mirroring': you

send the complaint back to the complainer without agreeing or disagreeing. You show interest and provide comfort at the same time.

Listen, reflect and repeat in practice

When your partner expresses her worries about mortgage payments and other debts and expenses, you can't solve that overnight. Financial issues can be overwhelming. Fortunately, you don't have to solve that kind of problems immediately; you can simply start by listening carefully. She just wants to get it off of her chest and you are there to catch it.

Partner: 'I'm all stressed out! Our old house still hasn't been sold and in three months we will be moving! How are we ever able to pay a double mortgage?!'

You: 'It's true, the housing market is in bad shape. I can understand that this is worrisome for you; I worry about it too.'

Partner: 'Worrisome? It's downright scary! We haven't had any viewers at all in the last few weeks.'

You: 'That's frustrating, I agree. But we can't pull them off the streets, now can we?'

Partner: 'If only that were true. And the renovation is also more expensive than we thought...'

You: 'That's a little bit of a setback indeed. I can imagine you're worried, but it's nothing that we can't handle.'

Partner: 'If we can't sell the house, I really don't know what to do!'

You: 'I wouldn't know what to do either. But what are the chances of that? We just have to be a little bit more patient. Remember that is only takes one buyer to set us free.'

Partner: 'I guess so. Oh well, we'll figure it out. It'll be just fine. I was just looking for a shoulder to cry on. And you're right, we're in this together.'

Stimulus 5 – The power of laughter

Human beings are a monkeys with possibilities.

Roy Chapman Andrews

If the situation allows, take the complaint to the level of ridiculousness, Exaggerate to the n-th degree and make the complainer laugh at himself.

Ah, humor! A brilliant way to confront a complainer with the trivialities of his lament. Humor underscores the old folk wisdom 'a day without laughter is a day wasted', or: 'One good laugh is enough vitamin C for three days.' Indeed, research shows that sick children heal faster when the recovery process is accompanied by clowns: the basic principle behind the *CliniClowns*. They must be true masters in the art of anti-complaining!

Some complainers seem to be weighed down by a seemingly unbearable 'heaviness of existence'. They become accustomed to their own misery and it all becomes like crying over spilled milk; the deed is done and the damage is minimal. When complaining shifts to the realm of triviality ('What a bummer! I just looked in my drawer and noticed that I'm all out of paperclips'), you are authorized to use humor to put the complaint into perspective. Make them see that it's not the end of the world when we run out of paperclips, and make them laugh about it.

'Start the day with a joke!' Dutch psychologist and humor expert Sibe Doosje gives lectures on humor. Together with Martha Jong and Nanne Wijma he is the founder of the *Humor Academy* and even obtained his PhD on this subject.

Humor is a good medicine against stress, according to Doosje. A well-timed joke lowers tension and removes the chill from the air, but nothing is more annoying than a bad joke at the wrong time. 'Humor is quite complicated,' says Doosje. 'For my research, I looked at the effects of humor on people with a burnout. They make the same kind of jokes, without getting dark or gloomy. The difference is that burned-out people value other people's jokes less positively. In general, they experience less cheerfulness.'

Everyone in the world laughs in the same manner, it's a universal phenomenon. All humans are of the same species (there are no different human 'races', there are only different human cultures), so laughter is similar to the roar of a lion or the call of a peacock. No matter what language we speak, or what particular dialect of that language, our laughter is truly universal. It's a primitive form of communication, says American psychologist and neurologist Robert Provine. For more than a decade he studied human laughter, culminating in his book *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. Some findings: laughter is contagious, healthy and stress-reducing. It also plays an important role in forming relationships: smiling people are seen as relaxed, friendly and trustworthy. An excellent remedy for nagging and whining!

In my role as international ICT program manager, I attended an executive board meeting which soon became inundated with problems, issues and crises. The board room was packed with high-level executives, directors of industry, dead-serious middle managers and highly educated consultants, culminating in a ponderous atmosphere. There were rants and ravings about a variety of problems and complaints, endless discussions, but solutions were not forthcoming. The hours crept by. At this rate, my urgent agenda item would never be discussed.

My mind wandered and, naturally, being a jazz pianist and composer and all, I got a musical idea. Before I knew it, I was concentrating on composing a jazz piece, writing down chords and rhythms. The meeting soon faded into the distant background. I got so busy writing everything down – but I also looked up from time to time, you know, for appearance's sake – that, for all intents and purposes, I seemed to be fully concentrated on the meeting. That was going to backfire spectacularly soon...

Being in higher creative spheres, I had totally forgotten about time. I woke up rudely from my musical musings when my colleague poked me in the side. I could just hear the last fragment of a question: '...so, where do you stand in all this, Bart?' – Dead silence. All eyes on me. You could hear a pin drop, just like in the movies. I had no idea what the topic or the question was. Just as the silence was starting to become unbearably uncomfortable, I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket, pulled out my wallet, flipped it open, brought it to my ear and said, 'Beam me up, Scotty!' (I waited a moment). "Scotty!?" NOW would be a good time!"

My colleague had enormous difficulty controlling his laughter, and his bladder function (I can still see him shaking, tears rolling down his red cheeks), but the whole incident was entirely unappreciated. For a long time after that dreadful meeting I was reminded how unprofessional my behavior had been. But I was clandestinely pleased that I was also asked by some whether Scotty had been able to fix the transporter yet to get me out of harm's way in the future.

The American clinical psychologist Doyle Gentry puts it bluntly: don't be so heavy-handed! Try to take life less seriously. Put a smile on your face, because

that's highly contagious. Go to a stand-up comedian every once in a while. Spend some time with a shameless friend, someone who has a healthy respect for the absurdity of life. There is a time to laugh and there is a time to cry. But you have to keep these two in balance, according to Gentry.

The American psychiatrist, educator and author Avery Weisman has a number of strategies for dealing with problems and the subsequent complaining about them. One of them is 'laugh it off, change your emotional tone'. Laughter is great, he says, it defrosts a 'stuck brain'. According to Weisman, you can think of humor as a lubricant, which allows the cogs of your thought process to start turning again. This paves the way to a solution and stops the complaining in its track. Creativity is the mechanism underlying effective problem-solving. It's the brain's ability to come up with new, unique answers to life's many challenges. In that respect, creativity and humor go hand in hand, says Weisman.

With this stimulus, you may take the lament to the extreme, if the situation allows. Deliberately exaggerate the problem and joke about it out loud. Above all, get the complainer to laugh at himself. Make it clear to him that 'running out of paperclips' is not going to bankrupt the company. It debunks the 'appearance of seriousness of the complaint in question'.

Self-criticism and self-irony are unique human skills. We express thoughts and opinions in such a way that it becomes clear that not everything that is expressed has to be taken seriously in all its aspects. When notoriously heavy complainers tend to take themselves and their problems way too seriously, throw some humor their way. Just beware: use humor, but never deride or mock a complainer. That strategy will backfire instantly.

The power of laughter does not only apply to the individual. A small social group of complainers, for example a team that has fallen into the pitfall of endless laments with no solution in sight, can also benefit from this approach. Negative-critical behavior tends to amplify within a group of like-minded people, especially in the absence of personal leadership. Those who apply humor to defuse a situation, are the first to flip the group towards a more positive-constructive attitude. Having a good laugh is a big relief!

The power of laughter in practice

When your colleague returns from a totally rained out holiday in Spain, that is a sad event, naturally. She traveled more than fifteen hundred kilometers to get some good weather, and then it rained for two weeks straight. Meanwhile, a high pressure system bathed the Netherlands in endless sunshine. When she came back, the sunny and warm weather had moved back to Spain, naturally, and it was raining cats and dogs for two weeks straight. That's serious holiday shit. But It's also water under the bridge. Lots of reasons to nag and whine, but humor is the remedy. Just start your exaggeration machine and go in overdrive.

Colleague: 'So, we were really depressed about that weather. At one point my air mattress even started to float!'

You: 'Oh, my. Did you have your paddles with you?'

Colleague: 'I'm sorry?'

You: "Your paddles. You were camping at the lake side, weren't you? So, I guess, you could paddle from your tent to the lake. Or to the showers...'

Colleague: 'Hahaha. Yes. We could have paddled for eternity. Peddle up and down, back and forth, paddle all the way...'

You: 'As long as you had your life jacket...'

Colleague: 'LOL. Go to Spain! Bring your wetsuit! Oxygen bottles! Flippers! Peddles! Yeah! – Oh, my goodness, what a deluge it was. Nah, well, hopefully we'll do better next year.'

Stimulus 6 – Go back to the source

Compliments we receive from others are usually the echoes of compliments we made to others.

Santiago Ramón y Cajal

Refer the complainer back to the person being nagged and whined about or to the real cause of the problem: the complainer himself.

Unless you actually are the one causing the mischief, complainers are more than often talking to the wrong person: you. They should report back to the real source of their misery. Of course you can't say that right in the first minute of their lament, like: 'I'll stop you right there, buddy. You're barking at the wrong tree here!' Don't be rude and don't rush the argument. You have to provide the complainer with a good feeling first, remember? Provide some comfort and consoling before you do the referral.

So, you do your part in listening, reflecting and repeating first. Lay down that soft carpet. Next, indirectly remind the complainer that you are not a first line helpdesk or a public *Nag and Whine Hot Spot*. After all, no one can expect you to have all the solutions ready for everybody. Try to found the actual root cause of the problem in one of two sources: a third person or the complainer himself.

In the first case – when someone complains about someone else to you, without that person being present – the solution is simple. Make the complainer 'get real' with the situation. Listen to the problem, provide comfort

and show understanding. And then lay the groundwork for a possible solution without getting involved directly.

Try it like this:

- *'That is an interesting story you just told me about Fred. If I may inquire: did you talk to him about it?'*
- *'If those are your concerns about Fred, why don't you just tell him? Explain your worries to him, get engaged in conversation.'*
- *'Look, I understand your concerns. But I wouldn't like Fred appearing at my desk tomorrow complaining about you. So talk to him about it first, and if you can't figure it out, you both come back to me.'*

In the second case – when the cause of the problem lies within the *complainer* – you have to be a tad more careful. Because the actual root cause of the complaint will be carefully masked with a lot of irrelevant details, countless complications and a variety of human emotions. They are meant to distract and confuse you, to shield you from the real cause of the problem. No one likes to self-incriminate. So you go like this:

- *'Okay, I understand what you're saying. Now tell me, what are you going to do about it? What kind of actions could you take to address the problem yourself?'*
- *'Thanks for sharing. I'm curious, the last time I checked your duties, responsibilities and authorities it appeared to me that you have to tackle this by yourself. What do you say?'*
- *'I can think of only one person here in the room with me, that bears the sole responsibility to solve this problem. Who do you think that is?'*

You have to be real sharp when you take on this approach. The complainer wants to drop the problem in your lap, is adamant about it and knows all the details. So, be kind but relentless, don't get distracted and keep your eyes on the ball: the complainer is the problem-owner here. Relay the message that you are willing to assist when the problem escalates, but not this instance.

Every time Richard and Cary are visited by their friends John and Patricia, the evening follows the same ritual. After small talk about work, career, children and weather, the conversation turns to Patricia's sister-in-law, Debby. The two clearly aren't fond of each other and since they regularly babysit for one and other, the situation has gotten tense.

Debby has been bringing her children over to Patricia a lot lately, because Debby is currently unemployed. But Patricia is not her babysitter, she feels. On top of that, she also thinks her sister-in-law's children are cheeky, spoiled brats with a bad influence on her own children. But she doesn't convey that to Debby. She argues about it with her husband instead and, subsequently, with Richard and Cary. What should be a pleasant evening of catching up, is increasingly becoming an evening of nagging, whining and gossiping.

The next time John and Patricia come to visit, the gossip starts already within a few minutes. But Richard has had quite enough of it and takes the plunge.

'Say Patricia, if I may ask, have you ever talked to Debby about all that yourself?' Apparently that wasn't the case. It was 'difficult to discuss' and 'useless, because she never listens' and 'it wouldn't help anyway'. 'That might very well be', Richard continued. 'But I still believe it to be the best way forward. Because there is very little we can do about it here, as we continually

only hear your side of the story. I think it would be most useful if you discussed it directly with Debby. Give her a call, why don't you, invite her up or go visit her yourself. Talk about it, express your feelings. Try to come up with some kind of a solution by compromise. In any case, anything is better than these endless discussions with us.'

This is a double-edged sword for Richard (and Cary): he doesn't only refer the problem back to its source, but he also ends the specific topic of conversation at that moment. Now the present company can move on and engage in more pleasant conversation. Maybe that's up to Richard too. Since he has the floor, he might introduce something completely different, some positive news or development or an anecdote. It will save the evening and, with a little luck, it will set the tone for even more pleasant evenings to follow.

Going back to the source in practice

Your friend comes over for coffee and immediately starts complaining about the local employment agency for domestic help. They keep sending her a different maid every time, so she has to explain how she wants things done over and over again. Her home is sacred to her and she would much rather have a permanent help, which is perfectly understandable. But she's actually talking to the wrong person.

Girlfriend: 'Just yesterday they sent a new one again. I had to explain my ways all over again! It's getting tiresome'.

You: 'Oh, that's inconvenient indeed. I can imagine how you must feel'.

Girlfriend: 'Yep. I'm not Crazy Dora. And she was very sloppy in her cleaning too.'

You: 'I thought this agency had a guarantee of continuity and quality. They are advertising about that all the time. Couldn't you invoke that?'

Girlfriend: 'A continuity and quality guarantee? Humbug, I tell you. Humbug! Haven't notice that at all...'

You: 'If it's in your agreement you can claim that guarantee. Have you ever talked about them about it?'

Girlfriend: 'Nope. Too busy. I haven't gotten around to that yet.'

You: "Why don't you just go to their office and present your arguments? Couldn't hurt, now could it?'

Girlfriend: 'Hmmm. Maybe you're right. And yeah, It's about time. All right, tomorrow then, I'll call them tomorrow.'

You: 'Let me know how it turns out. Now, how are the children?'

Stimulus 7 – The power of the unexpected

*Many failures are the result of not realizing how close
one was to success when one gave up.*

Edison

Do something crazy! Make the complainer experience (see, hear, smell, feel, taste, experience, do) something completely different.

We've talked about it a few times already: complaining has all the earmarks of a filthy habit (thank you Basil Fawlty in Fawlty Towers). When complainers get stuck in their lamentation, we need a more radical approach to help them. We need to get a little bit crazy by dragging the naggers and whiners out of their complaining environment. Just get up, go somewhere else, take a walk and take the complainer with you. Make the complainer experience (see, hear, smell, feel, taste, experience, do) something completely different! Stimulate, tickle, push and pull them a little. It's like grabbing the complainer by the shoulders and shaking them a little bit, like so:

'Hello my friend! Wake up, smell the coffee and take a look around you. I'm sure you've got a lot of burdens resting on your shoulder, but why don't we just put a pin in it for now and do something completely different first. Are you coming?'

Be careful though. The complainer might not be up for this approach that easily. Being stuck in a lament literally means that it is difficult to break free. Apply gentle urges to remove the complainer from his environment. Be creative! Take

a walk around the block, go hiking in the woods, take a ride to some inspiring place. Ignore the protests and excuses and, temporarily, ignore the substantive aspects of the complaint itself. It's perfectly fine to be a little bit more dominant this time. In love, war and anti-complaining anything goes. Allow that other, more positive energy to work on him; the problem itself won't go anywhere. Provide the complainer with a breath of fresh air, a deep sniff – in through your nose, out through your mouth – and then watch what happens.

Joshua has just turned 35 and he's a busy-busy-busy man, with a challenging job and career, matching partner, young children and an overloaded social schedule. Joshua is experiencing some light health problems lately, due to a sheer lack of exercise. Unpleasant feelings of restlessness and uneasiness are constantly crawling up on him. These are clear signs of a potential burnout. Because of all the hustle and bustle, he can't find the time to get together with his wife; they hardly talk to each other anymore. On top of that, Joshua stopped playing with his band. He's a guitarist, singer and composer, making music for as long as he can remember, but he just can't handle it any more. Of all consequences of his busyness, this is the one that gnaws at him the most. Making music always injected him with creative energy and he now has to go about his business without it.

He complains about it to Arnold, his best friend and colleague. Thursdays around lunchtime is often the only time they can talk to one and other. Joshua rants and raves like a madman. At the peak of his lament about the apparent unbearableness of being, Arnold suddenly interjects and says:

'What are you doing tomorrow night?' – 'Tomorrow night...you mean, Friday, ehm...?' Joshua is taken aback slightly. 'Well, I have tons of work at

home for sure, I have to take the kids to soccer and volley ball, mow the lawn, take care of this and that and such and so...' – 'Nope! That's not what you're going to do!' interrupts Arnold sternly. "We're going to hit the town. I'll pick you up at seven o'clock, because we're going to dinner first. No ifs or buts, just make sure you're ready.' – 'Now wait a minute there, Arnold', stammers Joshua. 'You know very well I can't just go...' – 'Yes, you can, my friend! You'll see. But I have to go now. Remember: tomorrow night, seven o'clock exactly. Be ready! Ciao.' Arnold hangs up the phone.

Joshua and Arnold went out, of course. They ate at a good restaurant. Joshua talked and Arnold listened. The food and wine were excellent, and so were the beers in the pub afterwards. There was a live band playing, Joshua got a little lightheaded from the drinks and that took the edge off. The music, fine company and present happy crowd of people just enjoying themselves helped in putting all his problems into perspective. What a relief! It stimulated his inner urge to break the vicious circle.

Joshua came to the realization that it was about time for a major overhaul of his life: more work-life balance, less social obligations, more attention for wife and children and more time to relax. And without any doubt: he was going to pick up his guitar again. After all, family and creativity are the last things that should fall prey to busyness, stress and burnout. In the midst of the sizzling energy of nightlife, Joshua laid the foundation for his personal transformation. Arnold's spontaneous action was exactly the catalyst Joshua needed.

The power of the unexpected in practice

If your friend calls you, groaning and moaning that he can't handle the stress of work anymore, hates his boss and loathes the working hours, you have but a few options to help him. It's not so easy to do that over the phone. So, you will have to lure him away.

Friend: 'This week alone, my boss has forced me to work overtime for three nights already. He's a real slave driver!'

You: 'Really? That sucks. Now what are we going to do! I know, let's have a cup of coffee. I know this unique fifties diner just around the block. Want to get away from it all? Let's go!'

Friend: 'Not so fast! I don't know if I can just leave...ehm...'

You: 'Come on, don't be a pussy. We're just going to get some fresh air: cup of coffee, apple pie, a brisk walk...'

Friend: 'I don't know. I can't just leave. I would first have to arrange...'

You: 'Fine, fine, fine. You take care of it. You have five minutes. Oh, and when was the last time you bowled, skated, karted or bungee jumped? Do you ever go out at all, mate?'

Friend: 'Not that I can remember...'

You: 'You see? You are in big trouble and I'm here to liberate you. Stop procrastinating and get ready. I'll be there in ten minutes!'

Stimulus 8 – The referral

If some people were to be proved right, they would complain that they were being deprived of their wrongness.

Oliver Herford

Refer the complainer to someone else, either within your own circle of influence (likeminded complainers) or outside (to a professional or specialist).

Referral within your own circle of influence

Even after patiently listening to all the nagging and whing, after all the consoling, comforting and stimulation on your part, you sometimes discover that you can't help sufficiently, or that you simply can't do it on your own. In that case, have a good think and refer the complainer to others within your network of family, household, friends, colleagues and teammates. For example, refer the complainer to someone who has been through the same thing. Name someone you know who has (had) similar problems and dealt with them. Refer to someone who has more experience with the problem at hand. Refer to a good book you've read on the subject, or send a link to an interesting website.

People who complain a lot tend to think that their problems are unique. They think they are the only ones (or at best one of the few) that carry that specific burden on their shoulders. More than often the opposite is true. A shared sorrow is half a sorrow! There is no problem or complaint in this world that someone else hasn't already experienced or gone through before. Please note: before you refer to someone in your own circle of influence, inform that third

person in advance. No one likes to be saddled with a 'ricocheted lament' voluntarily. So, ask for permission. After all, forewarned is forearmed.

Referral outside your own circle of influence

The stimuli in this chapter are not a panacea, it doesn't provide you with a magic wand. The tips and tricks are meant as practical suggestions, possibilities and hints to help people reduce their complaining. They are meant to perceive life in a brighter light, in a new perspective of possibilities, rather than inhibitions. Each of the nine stimuli is a simple idea to make everyday life more bearable. But sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes the problem is too big to fix then and there.

In that case, the complaints probably are more of a serious, sometimes more sinister nature, or they are simply too complex, too overwhelming. Sometimes you are faced with an ethical or moral dilemma, or with a mental disorder, like a clinical depression or some form of autism. Trying to help might get you into trouble with your conscience, or it might be way over your head. The conversation now becomes more risky, both for the complainer and you. After all, you're not a psychologist or psychiatrist (and even if you are professionally, you are not one privately).

The only remaining course of action and best advice is to refer outside your own circle of influence, to more professional assistance, for example. There are specialists in all kinds of fields: life coaches, mental coaches, doctors, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, professional advisors, career counselors... It's not a shame at all to refer. After all, you did your best and you only wanted to help. Comfort the complainer, offer consolation and support,

but leave it up to the professionals to get to the actual root cause of the complaint. That's what they are there for.

Stimulus 9 – Take the back door using The Why

*Every problem has a solution. If a problem doesn't have a solution,
it's not a problem, but a fact.*

Anonymous

*Avoid the (apparent) subject of the complaint. Asking open-ended questions
will bring you closer to the truth much faster.*

You know the drill: when people are in a complaining mood, it's always the other person's fault. Or it's caused by 'unforeseen circumstances'. It's the bloody weather or the position of the planets, but it's never their fault. Many complaints are inundated with all kinds of excuses, justifications and defenses not to do anything about it. All these excuses are, as it were, piled up in front of the complainer's front door. It's very hard to work your way through that pile of subbush, only to find out that the door is heavily barricaded as well. But what about the back door? It's probably less fortified and therefore more easily breached. Not everyone builds a wall all around themselves; there are always weak spots and cracks in the wall. You can make good use of this by asking smart, open-ended questions.

When I ask questions to find out the cause of a lament, I mainly use open-ended questions. These are questions that cannot be answered with 'yes' or 'no'. Open-ended questions start with what, how, when, who, where, how much, when, and so on. But the most important one is the *why-question*. The aim of open-ended questions is to ensure that the complainer becomes more aware of the *real* background of the complaints. Closed-ended questions are not 'bad'

questions per se, they have a purpose too, but they possess significantly less power. Just take a look at the following two questions:

'Did that make you feel bad?'

Or:

'How did that make you feel?'

The first is a closed-ended question that directly influences the mindset of the interviewee. If 'yes' is the answer, it will remain unclear whether that was actually the feeling of the complainer. But if you had asked an open-ended question, perhaps the answer would have been very different. Moreover, if the answer to a closed question is 'no', you are forced to ask more questions: *'Were you annoyed then?' – 'Nope'. – 'Disappointed, perhaps?' – 'Not at all'*. And so on. It's a silly guessing game leading nowhere. An open-ended question on the other hand is not only more intelligent, but challenges the mind. They are a very useful tool to get to the root cause of a problem and work your way towards a possible solution. Good reporters and interviewers don't leave home without them. Here are seven smart, open-ended questions that can help you find your way around countless problems, both in business and in private:

1. *What is the problem?*
2. *What causes the problem?*
3. *What are the consequences of the problem?*
4. *What needs to be done to solve the problem?*
5. *Who must do it?*
6. *When must it be ready?*

7. *What needs to be done to prevent recurrence?*

I call this the *Problem Analysis Checklist* or PAC and you can learn more about it in my book *The Perfect Project – Why People Are Key to Success*.

There is a logical order to the questions of the PAC: they are chained together. We can't skip ahead, because we need the previous one to answer the next one. We shouldn't underestimate the difficulty of a proper root cause analysis. The answers must be concise and succinct (for example, try to answer the first question in 20 words or less – it's a real challenge), we have to be concrete and to the point and we must be Masters of the Summary. But the reward is utterly satisfying: it brings us to the heart of the problem: no more symptoms fighting!

Theodore is in his early forties and has been profoundly dissatisfied for years. Dissatisfied with himself, his work, his relationships and his life. Theodore is indecisive. He has a tendency to procrastinate. In addition, he prefers to be lazy rather than tired and he's constantly making excuses for just about everything. The fact that he's so busy at work is, obviously, his boss's fault. The fact that he is starting to gain weight, but doesn't get around to exercising, is 'unavoidable', because, you know, he's so damned busy. The fact that he is always arguing with his wife is 'logical', because she just fails to understand him. A large stack of excuses and justifications has been piling up in front of his door, but Theodore denies responsibility and accountability. If need be, he'll crawl down a broken glass window to get around them.

Naturally, Theodore profusely complains about all this to his friend Oliver. They are drinking beers in the pub and Oliver, having listened to Theodore's lament for quite some time, decides to take a different approach: he goes on

an open-ended questioning tour. With every complaint, he simply asks: 'Yeah, sure, but Theodore, why is that?' Or: 'Ok, but how is that possible?' Or: 'Right, but what do you think is the cause of that?' Or: 'Who said that? Why did he say that?' And: 'I see. But why is that then?' Oliver doesn't address the actual complaints once, he only listens and asks questions.

That evening, a miraculous moment ensues. Most of the time, Theodore has plenty of answers, because he's just gotten so used to his misery, so familiar with the lament of his life. But the open-ended questions wear him down and ultimately have a profound effect. Theodore struggles to find the answers to the open-ended questions, because he's been fighting symptoms for so long. At some point he falls silent. Minutes go by and then he finally says: 'Boy, that's a good one! No one has ever asked me that before... Geez, man, I actually don't know. I'll have to think about it a bit more'.

Bullseye! Oliver was wise enough to remain silent at that supreme moment, those minutes of silence. Theodore clearly wasn't prepared to answer open-ended questions and being tongue-tied was a new experience for him. The most important turning point for notoriously heavy complainers is the very moment when they are at a loss for words. The trick is not to fill the silence with new questions or with ready-made solutions. Allow the silence to work its magic and talk about something else. It's now up to the complainer to come up with the real answers to life, the universe and everything (and no, it's not 42).

Take the back door using The Why in practice

If you're helping a family member get rid of all that groaning and grouching about life, you don't have to work your way through the Problem Analysis Checklist every time. If your intentions to anti-complain start to look like a cross-examination, you're missing the point. After all, you're family, not a psychologist. And you're not at work. So feel free to rephrase the questions, express them in your own style. For example, if a family member complains to you about not getting around to exercising, you can also get to the heart of the matter with a style of 'veiled questioning'.

Family member: 'Bummer. I've gained a lot of weight yet again. I haven't been to the gym for weeks, because it's so busy at work.'

You: 'It's not that much, I hardly noticed it. But I do see that you're a bit more stressed out lately. What's going on at work?'

Family member: 'A few colleagues dropped out all at once and now I'm screwed. It's all up to me to keep things going...'

You: 'What's the matter with your colleagues?'

Family member: 'Sick, weak, nauseous, I don't know. My boss is simply horrible at organizing his department. Sheer incompetence, I tell you.'

You: 'When did you talk to your boss about it?'

Family member: 'I haven't. Just didn't have the time. Maybe tomorrow, because it can't go on like this. It's his problem to fix, not mine.'

You: 'Good idea. Talk to him. Don't wait. Show your boss the consequences of his inaction, so he can find a solution. You'll be back in the gym in no time!'

And that brings us to the last hurdle that we must take to master the art of anti-complaining. Because when all is said and done, we need to protect ourselves from the overwhelming tenacity of all that nagging and whining that surrounds us. When push comes to shove, we must draw the red line somewhere and defend it like our lives depended on it. We have to start exercising our right to confront the notoriously heavy complainers with the ultimate consequence of their behavior.

First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining

Chapter 6

First aid kit for complaining disasters

Pick something up every time you fall.

Oswald Avery

Some people complain just for the sake of complaining. Their purpose in life is to drag everybody down with them. The nagging and whining has become a fulltime job and it is virtually impossible to stop them, let alone stimulate them to engage in more positive-constructive thoughts and actions. Apparently, they have chosen to make all of our lives miserable. Well, we may not be able to save them, but we sure as heckfire do not need to go along with them.

Especially dedicated to the notoriously heavy complainer, I hereby provide you with four more tips and tricks to put some more pressure on them to wake up and smell the anti-complaining coffee:

1. *The self-fulfilling prophecy*
2. *The down-to-earth reality*
3. *About acceptance and resignation*

4. *Confronting the consequences of complaining*

As we will find out, There's a limit to what we can allow in terms of destructive human behavior and the immediate effects it has within our small social groups of family, household, friends, colleagues and teammates. And you certainly mustn't allow it to ruin your life.

1 – The self-fulfilling prophecy

Ultimate complainers set themselves up for failure and subsequently look for excuses to blame others for their own fiasco's.

L'histoire se répète: history repeats itself. The statement is attributed to Voltaire, pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet, a seventeenth century French writer, essayist and philosopher. Actually, he said something else: '*Ce n'est pas l'histoire qui se répète, mais bien l'homme!*': 'It is not history that repeats itself, but actually mankind!' A wise man, a true word.

In order to increase the level of self-knowledge and self-awareness of notoriously heavy complainers, we must stimulate them to think more carefully about their behavior. We must help them see what got them in trouble in the past. With that knowledge, we enable them to adjust their behavior in the present. Contemplating the real root causes of their nagging and whining will imprint an important message in their worrisome minds. And by doing so, we help him avoid a recurrence in the future. Talking about your personal transformation!

It takes a strong mind and a powerful mental attitude to say: 'Aha, that will never happen to me again; lessons learned!' When such a statement is locked into the brain it will significantly reduce the risk of recurrence. It's the equivalent of the donkey that doesn't hit the same stone twice. However, some complainers are very persistent.

In his business career, 52-year-old Pascal was a Jack of all trades, master at none. He had a turbulent private life with a number of children from different marriages. No matter what he tried in business or private life, it always seemed to slip right through his fingers. However, when you listened to his own version of events, he had plenty of strong stories to tell.

When he changed employer, he would give long monologues about how fantastic this career change was going to be and how much money he was going to make. When he got married again, he swore this was the one. But when things went haywire, there was yet another long monologue. That it wasn't his fault, that he couldn't have done anything about it, that it was these damned 'unforeseen circumstances' that kept creeping up in him all the time, that life itself seemed to conspire against him.

Pascal's plans for an early retirement were repeatedly revised over the years. He didn't seem to realize that he was losing credibility fast. On top of all that, Pascal had chronic stomach and back pains. He smoked a lot and his diet was frighteningly unhealthy too. He chronically lacked exercise. All this left a trail of dark bags, deep wrinkles and a big belly. He nagged and whined, groaned and moaned. Every new initiative to finally do something about his personal situation was announced with a lot of fanfare and retracted with a lot of excuses.

When Pascal's last business adventure finally crumbled like a house of cards, his entire world came crashing down as well. This time, there were no monologues, no strong stories. Instead, he fell completely silent, because finally, he had lost all credibility. Pascal found himself out of work and degraded into a world of benefits and welfare. Over time, he couldn't pay his mortgage anymore and foreclosure was imminent.

If Pascal had realized that he was not exactly the successful businessman he claimed to be, all of this would have been perfectly understandable. But no, when you talked to him about the umpteenth misfortune, there was this basic, fundamental attitude that exposed the actual problem and réally said it all: 'Oh well, I don't rule out the possibility that it will happen to me again...'

Pascal simply hadn't made the decision to actively intervene in his situation, to escape his rut, to take life in his own hands. His ailing career, his protracted personal relationships and his poor health were all the result of his own indecisiveness, his insecurity and his fears. By not ruling out the possibility that he could fail again, he bought a guarantee certificate that read 'Whatever happens to me in life, I can't do anything about it'. A recipe for disaster.

In his book *Social Theory and Social Structure*, the American sociologist Robert K. Merton first defined the term *self-fulfilling prophecy* as a false definition of a situation that evokes new behaviors that 'make true' the original false concept. The prognosticator will cite the actual sequence of events as evidence to show that he has been correct from the beginning.

It is also known as *the Rosenthal effect*. In 1966, the American psychologist Robert Rosenthal conducted an important psychological experiment. He

administered intelligence tests to students, but falsified the results randomly. He gave these fake results to the teacher. The students who were considered 'intelligent' according to the falsified tests, subsequently achieved much better results in school than those who were considered 'less intelligent'. The involuntary attitude of the teacher in question appeared to favor certain students.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them well: the typical nitpickers, the grippers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The Subjective Supporter

Every time we have the opportunity to borrow a soccer season ticket from our friends, we find ourselves high and dry, dead center and all the way up at the head side of the stadium. In that position, about seven thousand of the total of forty thousand cheering supporters are right in front of us. From the row directly below us, a couple of extreme soccer fanatics are constantly jumping up and down, screaming and cursing loudly, since the game isn't going their way. Their verbal attacks are extreme laments, directed at any action of the enemy in the field; the slightest movement or misstep, the smallest offence, all judged by their own subjective standards, naturally. They do not seem to limit their tirades to the opponent, no, even the slightest hesitation on the ball from their own team players elicits a litany of invectives, curses and deafening whistles. It must be that weekly release

of pent-up tension that clouds the minds of these fanatics, because if you were to actually follow their standards of rules and regulations, a soccer match would be impossible to play. It makes you wonder, if everything went just right for them all the time, with all their wishes coming true, winning every bloody match and every damned championship, would that be enough to shut them up?

Within the field of clinical psychology, the self-fulfilling prophecy is a well-known phenomenon. It occurs in people who suffer from clinical depression or anxiety disorders. These kind of complainers tend to make negative predictions about themselves, about the future and about the world around them. Because of this strong focus on the negative, they often actually see those predictions come true. By way of treatment, the self-made predictions of these pessimists are challenged to see if they hold up. The notoriously heavy complainer is, as it were, taken at his word! Investigators expect that, when the predictions actually fail, a more rational alternative can be offered; one that causes less depression and anxiety. But that will have already taken the complainer to the psychologist's chambers.

As an anti-complainer you make sure you avoid all that misery. Don't fall for it, don't participate in it, and beware of the self-fulfilling prophecy! Learn from your own mistakes and help others learn from their mistakes by applying the art of anti-complaining every day!

2 – The down-to-earth reality

Notoriously heavy complainers often exhibit flight behavior: they do not want to face the undeniable facts of life.

Our laments either arise from decisions we've made in the past (that cannot be reversed) or from chaos, chance, accidents and bad luck (that we all are subject to). As a result, many things in life become 'just the way they are'; there's nothing we can do about it anymore. In that case we can encourage complainers to face the music and count their (remaining) blessings instead. Stimulate the notoriously heavy complainer to actively remember how it all came to be. What happened? What did you do? How did you deal with it? Other things might have gone well. Work together to determine the actual size of the problem and its impact in real life. Offer some perspective.

Many decisions we make in life are very difficult, though not always impossible to reverse or change afterwards. You might have made bad decisions about your education; gotten into the wrong field of expertise, or you dropped out. You might have chosen the wrong career path and now you're stuck with that permanent annoyance. You might have migrated to a country that makes you homesick all the time. You might have broken up a relationship that can never be repaired. Or you might have purchased that dream house that now has become a financial loose around your neck.

Some complainers avoid these facts of life by fleeing into denial mode. Sometimes literally (by fleeing to some far away destination without realizing life's adage: *wherever you go, there you are*), mostly figuratively (by piling up that stack of excuses and justifications in front of their door). In doing so,

complainers oftentimes become obsessed with the achievements, possessions or life status of others.

As a well-educated anti-complainer, it is now up to you to bring the complainer back to reality. You might ask 'Is the grass next door really that beautiful shade of green?' Or: 'What would be the actual improvement if your grass was just as green?' Or: 'What are you able to do yourself to green your own grass? What's stopping you?' Perhaps you can dig a little deeper and ask a few questions of conscience: 'What are you fleeing from? What are you running towards? What do you hope to find there?'

Bianca has just turned thirty and she wants to leave, period! She regularly changes employers, and regularly changes departments at the same employer. She has always worked at large multinationals and conglomerates and she excels in her field of expertise, so she always had the opportunity to move around. But Bianca also has a pretty feisty temperament. She knows best, without exception, and she feels that her colleagues are 'incompetent amateurs' and 'a bunch of morons'. Bianca wears her heart on her sleeve and as a consequence she comes across as angry and frustrated. She complains at full strength, all the time, everywhere. As a result, she clashes with her supervisors on a regular basis.

Bianca has now come up with the idea of starting her own business. That way she can escape her 'moronic colleagues and incompetent bosses'. To outsiders however, this is clearly an escape from reality. In a number of long monologues, she rants and raves about why she has no other choice: she just wants to leave. As soon becomes clear, there's no real policy, no rational behind all these heavy-minded emotions. During coaching sessions she

doesn't respond well to open-ended questions. She absolutely hates the why-question and refuses to answer them. 'What a stupid game!' she cries. 'I'm not going to dignify that with a response'.

Bianca has always harbored the illusion that the next company, that other department or that new boss will understand her and finally do what they're supposed to do. That they will finally understand her. Starting her own business is the ultimate escape in this regard, because she feels she will only have to answer to herself. However, she doesn't realize that customers, principles and suppliers will take over the role of bosses and colleagues. At some point Bianca will have to come to the realization that the actual problem lies with her and herself alone. That, if she doesn't solve the real problem, she will always be out of place, always have conflicts and never find peace of mind.

After some more coaching sessions, Bianca finally decides not to start her own business. She finally discovers that where she's at, isn't that bad at all. The work pays well, with great benefits. She's allowed a lot of autonomy in her duties, responsibilities and authorities. When asked the right kind of questions, she actually admits that she likes her current position. In addition, she desperately needs the money for private reasons. Starting her own business would destabilize her income with no guarantee of success.

Confronted with critical open-ended questions about her attitude in general, whether she likes it or not, Bianca finally admits there's still a lot of work to be done. She decides to stay put and lo and behold, the first signs of acceptance and resignation are starting to emerge. She just needs to learn to *feel* it in the here and now instead of fleeing away from it.

3 – About acceptance and resignation

Through reflection we can help a notoriously heavy complainer to find inner peace. Some complainers simply lack the skills to help themselves. Not being able to and not wanting to, are serious obstacles towards change.

Notoriously heavy complainers are not open to improvement by default. The solutions you propose and the stimulus you provide will not be easily accepted or understood. At some point we must lead the complainer towards acceptance and resignation. If properly done, it can reduce the level of complaining considerably. It may even disappear altogether.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The tired teacher

(Big sigh) *'There is nothing more to be done with today's youth...'* (Another big sigh). Every day his gloomy contemplation is wearing the tired teacher down. Today's generation Z in general (11 to 26 years old), but especially those in his class, are spoiled, conceited, distracted, preoccupied and incredibly difficult to motivate, let alone be interested in anything. The continuous exposure to social media platforms leads to troublesome cases of smartphone addiction. Countless collections of short, fast and flashy

videos and a relentless pace of ever changing subjects poisons the minds of his students. The accompanying music, simplistic to the core, with the same four chords in an never-ending loop on tiresomely repeating beats, uncovers a continuously disturbing superficiality. The tired teacher moans and groans about modern times: *'They simply wouldn't know what to do without their smartphones, tablets, tiny ear plugs, large headphones and shiny laptops. I'm sure they'd develop a rash, with their hands shaking, vomiting a little bit every few minutes...'* Whenever one or two students take an actual interest in the subject matter, he is over the moon. *'There's hope after all!'* Nah, well, persistence is the way forward. After generation Z, I'm convinced the alphabet will start all over again.

Acceptance and resignation will only arise if the notoriously heavy complainers understand their own situation and their motivation. In order for things to improve, they need to gain a deeper understanding of their existence, a better understanding of themselves:

- **Who am I?**
- **Where do I stand?**
- **What do I want?**

These are the so-called *existential questions of life* and we would all do well to visit them on a regular basis. At first glance, they seem easy to answer, but appearances can be deceiving. For instance: we are *nó*t our work or career. We are *nó*t our house, our car, our material possessions. We are *nó*t our hierarchical position at work or in society. And that's only for starters. The existential questions of life are never completely answered. We struggle with

them all our lives, that is to say, if we have the actual courage to keep asking them of ourselves, or allow a life coach ‘to mess up our perfectly good life with these *damned* open-ended questions’, as one of my coachees once blurted out.

Frans is a real bag of nerves! He is over the age of sixty and displays a chronic restlessness in everything he does, constantly looking around nervously. Frans has trouble concentrating, he is stressed out from his job and suffers from chronic ill health. He’s inactive, smokes like a chimney and every meal is easily accompanied by a few glasses of red wine. Smoking has done little good for his asthmatic tendencies. He eats irregularly, far too quickly and, above all, he eats a lot!

Privately, Frans is in debt and on top of that, he owes quite some monthly alimony to his previous two wives. Due to his financial obligations, he has never been able to put his real passion into practice: trading in art and rare books. Frans is currently employed as a business consultant in the ICT sector, an industry that by definition lacks any culture, passion or creativity. In addition, his intellect is severely underchallenged. The relationship with his current wife clashes with his lifestyle.

Frans breaths dissatisfaction and frustration, almost automatically leading to a lot of groaning and moaning. Over the years, he has become quite sour, on top of being a classic fusspot in nature. To add insult to injury, his chronic indecisiveness has prevented him from any kind of meaningful intervention, either from the inside or from the outside.

Frans complains about his wheezing lungs, but doesn't want to (or simply can't) quit smoking. He complains about his work, but doesn't want to (or

simply doesn't dare to) change jobs. He complains about his physical condition, but he doesn't want to play sports or give up his Burgundian lifestyle. He complains that he is far too busy to pick up his real passion, but he is not willing to work less. All that complaining has become chronic; it has become a debilitating life style.

In any case, Frans doesn't think he needs help. He has never asked for it, always wanted to face the music alone. But it has also become clear that his way of life is now a bother to those closely around him. If he really doesn't want to intervene in the current status quo, then his last resort is resignation and acceptance. Resignation to his situation, both private and professional, and acceptance of his mental and physical condition. Because as an ultimate consequence, this kind of stressful lifestyle shortens life expectancy considerably.

On the face of it, Frans appears to be a hopeless case. But why would it? Perhaps, stimulated by an anti-complainer (a friend, a colleague), he could seek help. A life coach, a psychologist, a professional that he trusts and respects. He could work less, quit smoking, start exercising more, eat less and more slowly, work on his marriage and pick up his passions again. When at Frans' age, it's quite a challenge to turn one's life around, but it's not unheard of. Stimulated by friends and family he could take small steps towards a more meaningful and a more healthy life. Who wants to help Frans?

4 – The frontal confrontation

Notoriously heavy complaining has its limits. Sometimes we have to frontally confront complainers with the consequences of their behavior and draw a red line.

As an accomplished anti-complainer, you have done everything you can to help a persistent and professional complainer. You've spoken to him repeatedly, stimulated him, tried to talk some sense into him. But, unfortunately, there is no solution in sight, because the complainer is unable to change or doesn't want to change. He doesn't want to accept his fate, doesn't want to resign, he just wants to continue his grouching and groaning. To complain has become a true art form.

Notoriously heavy complainers

In everyday life, we know them well: the typical nitpickers, the gripers and sourpusses. Allow me to introduce:

The Spitting Spouse

'Listen, whenever you notice that I've put your shoes on the stairs, it's not because I like having them there! Feel free to take them upstairs to your room, where they belong!' The cynical undertone in the voice of the spitting spouse hardly penetrates the minds of her offspring. She sighs deeply, because her husband, not exactly eligible to a Medal for Outstanding

Domestic Services, is just like one of the children. When she places the garbage bags right at the back door, he perceives that as 'good work preparation' and not necessarily as a hint to take them out. When she explains her intentions (*'You are perfectly fine to take the garbage bags out for a walk, honey...'*), his loud sighs and groans aren't exactly the proper motivation for the children. They just shoot by their parents with a chuckle. After leaving a list of things to do, she comes home in state of hope and anticipation, only to find everybody on the couch in front of the TV, with the entire house in just about exactly the ragged state she left it in. No, wait! Belay that. Shoes and cloths have magically appeared everywhere, bags of crisps are casually strewn about and cans, glasses and pizza boxes litter the table, adding insult to injury. *'Hi, mum! What took you so long? Come join us!'*

Should we just accept that? Of course not! All behavior in general, and notoriously heavy complaining in particular, has consequences. We need to emphasize these consequences, make them explicit and make them be heard. So, in the case of consistent, incorrigible complaining behavior, and when all our well-intended anti-complaining efforts run into a brick wall, we simply don't have a choice: we will have to go on the offensive. The complainer must be made clear where he's at.

To prepare, make a last-ditch effort. Help the complainer one last time to see the errors of his ways and point out where he stands and what his options are. Use the *Seven Frontally Confrontational Anti-Complaining Rules* to point out the ultimate consequences of his behavior:

→ **Rule Number 1: Complaining is only allowed in the form of grief and grievance**

Grief and *grievance* are, besides collective protest as discussed in chapter 1, the only ‘socially legitimate’ or ‘culturally lawful’ forms of complaining.

→ **Rule Number 2: Complaining is not allowed for the sake of complaining itself**

Grouching is ‘socially illegitimate’ and ‘culturally unlawful’, so are nagging and whining. Unless it turns into grief or is turned into grievance.

→ **Rule Number 3: Grief, grievance and grouching must always be mirrored**

This can be accomplished by *consoling* (to express compassion and pity to the complainer), by *commending* (to give compliments and praise to the complainer) and by *encouraging* (to stimulate, excite, tantalize and inspire the complainer). The latter is the essence of the art of anti-complaining.

→ **Rule Number 4: Complainers who are not willing to work towards a solution, forfeit the right to complain**

There is a small subset of complainers who are structurally unwilling, seemingly powerless, or apparently disinclined to quit their nagging and whining. If they are not willing to make the investment to remove the cause of the moaning and groaning, if they do not want to help find a structural solution,

these notoriously heavy complainers forfeit the right to complain, temporarily or permanently.

➔ **Rule Number 5: Complainers who have forfeited the right to complain, must accept it and resign themselves to their fate**

When notoriously heavy complainers forfeit their right to complain, the complaining game is over. Unless they are able to regain the strength and the willingness to work towards a mutually accepted solution or solution direction, they are discharged from their duties and must resign in silence.

➔ **Rule Number 6: Complainers who do not wish to resign themselves to their fate, are allowed to be misled and distracted**

In that case, change the topic of conversation. Notoriously heavy complainers who do not want or wish to work towards a mutually accepted solution or solution direction, doesn't deserve to be in your company or in your presence. Stop trying to help them. Use all available means at your disposal to force the complainer to talk about something else. Be relentless in your efforts.

➔ **Rule Number 7: Leave or remove the complainer who continues to be obstructive and unwilling to change**

The notoriously heavy complainers who do not wish to change the subject of conversation and continue to nag and whine, groan and grouch, moan and groan, may be abandoned. 'To be abandoned' here means that you distance yourself from them. Just leave them then and there. Yes, that's right: walk away! You are perfectly in your providence to remove them from your presence

and/or from your company. Just send them on their way, to elsewhere, out of sight and out of touch. Abandonment may be temporary (after all, everybody deserves a second chance), but if the behavior resurfaces and continuous, abandonment might become permanent.

The *Seven Frontally Confrontational Anti-Complaining Rules* may sound somewhat formal, a tad harsh and perhaps even somewhat over-assertive, but that's exactly how they're meant to be. With notoriously heavy complainers, you can't be a push-over, you mustn't show any kind of weakness and you have to be relentless in your resolve. After abandonment, do not seek contact with them, unless you receive some kind of signal that the tide has turned. In that case, as the art of anti-complaining dictates, you are ready and eager to assist yet again. After all, when notoriously heavy complainers are willing to rise above themselves, we should admire and respect them for it. We should encourage that kind of personal transformation and grab the opportunity with both our hands.

Epilogue

*The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change;
the realist adjusts the sails.*

William Arthur Ward

Now that we've reached the end of our anti-complaining journey, you're probably wondering whether I go through life whistling, smiling, singing and dancing all the time. That I consistently look for positive aspects in everything. That I persistently work towards positively influencing the complaining mindset of my fellow human beings. To assist them in thinking more constructively and optimistically, to wholeheartedly reduce all the complaining in the world and to persistently press for positive-constructive solutions. Simultaneously you might wonder how I remain in good spirit with all that nagging, whining, groaning, moaning, grouching and growling that surrounds me.

Well...

It's true, I am fascinated by human behavior in general and the complaining human being in particular. I have actively fueled my innate positivism and optimism and have made the art of anti-complaining my second nature. And yes, I whistle a lot, but that's because I'm a jazz pianist and composer; my brain produces melodies and rhythms all the time. But I also whistle when I'm

cheerful, when things are going my way and chaos, chance, accidents and bad luck stay at a discrete distance.

The art of anti-complaining is at its best when applied at the ‘supra-local’ level: within our small social groups of family, household, friends, colleagues and teammates. As individuals, we can exert positive influence on our immediate environment by helping others to emphasize the good, the hopeful and the cheerful, instead of focusing only on the negative deviations of something or someone. Anti-complaining can be as contagious as complaining, if we allow it to be.

However, on the ‘supra-systemic’ level (planet Earth with by now over eight billion of its human inhabitants), my concerns have risen substantially. A lot has changed since *The Anti-complain Book* was first published in 2010. It’s hard to remain positive and upbeat when the evidence is everywhere: we pollute the environment, destroy the biodiversity and change the climate with such vigor that no amount of anti-complaining will ever be enough to set the record straight.

I’ve learned that the hard way: when you carry the world’s weight on your shoulders, worries turn into existential anxiety and that serves no purpose. So, indeed, I worry immensely about our future and the future of our children and grandchildren and I’ve authored my 6th book, my Magnus Opus, to convey these worries extensively. The Dutch title is *De mens als grens* (‘Our Inner Limits’), including eleven addenda of which seven in English. But none of that that implies that I’ve become a notorious heavy complainer. *No way in hell!*

It's just that I've re-dedicated my efforts to apply the art of anti-complaining from the supra-systemic level to the supra-local level, my own small social groups of family, household, friends, colleagues and teammates. That's where I have real influence to make a difference and that's where I reside at right now. So, to conclude, the ultimate conscience question: what about my own complaining? Do I ever nag and whine? Of course I do! Nothing human is alien to me. But if I do, I always try to provide a solution or a solution direction. And if I can't, I have learned to master the art of acceptance and resignation. That's where I find my inner peace. As a life's adage, I cherish that anonymous quote that I found floating around on the internet many years ago and that I apply as stimulus number 9:

**Every problem has a solution.
If a problem doesn't have a solution,
it's not a problem; it's a fact.**

And in that case I always apply the following adage:

**QWAIAMO
(Quit Whining About It And Move On)**

I wish you well in your endeavors to master the art of anti-complaining. Spread the word, I always say, and remember: you heard it from me first!

With kind regards,
Bart Flos, Helmond.
August 2024.

The Anti-Complain Book

First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining

Bart Flos' websites:

www.antiklaagboek.nl

www.antisieurboek.nl

www.hetperfecteproject.nl

www.dekenniskermis.nl

www.vooruitkijkenvoorgevorderden.nl

www.demensalsgrens.nl

www.bartflosveranderadvies.nl

www.blijvendbeklijven.nl

www.bartflosmusic.com

www.bartflosfotografie.nl

The Anti-Complain Book

First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining

Don't allow the nagging and whining of colleagues, family or friends ruin your day anymore. Find out how to put an end to their laments.

For many people, the glass is half empty. When the first day of spring arrives, they already complain about the heat. When it rains, they pour. When they get a salary raise, they start complaining about the neighbor's new car. Does this sound familiar? Then use your innate optimism and get rid of the complaining culture, both at home and at work.

After a career as international project and crisis manager, author and change specialist Bart Flos has become a professional complaint coach. More than anyone, he understands the drive of notoriously heavy complainers, why they like it so much and how we can positively influence their mindset.

Want to learn more? Go to *www.antiklaagboek.nl*!

HAYSTACK



First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining