

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

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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,*

bitching, bleating, carping, caviling, chicaning, contravening, demurring, deprecating, differing, disapproving, discontenting, dissenting, denouncing, expostulating, fretting, fussing, gainsaying, grieving, groaning, grousing, grouching, 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 *grouching* 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 *grouching*, 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

[...]

First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining

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*!

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