



Managing People

# Managing a Chronic Complainer

by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

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Published on HBR.org / April 08, 2021 / Reprint [H06A15](#)



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**Lisa couldn't stand it any longer. Every** time she met her colleague Peter, one of the senior executives at the large retail chain where they both worked, he would begin an endless lament about his work, the government, and his personal life. After listening to Peter's moaning, it didn't take long before she experienced a claustrophobic reaction. It didn't help that whenever Lisa tried to reframe Peter's situation more positively, he would revert back to his negativity. Peter's constant grumbling, whining, and lamenting was toxic for everyone, himself included.

## **The Damage Done**

Research shows that chronic complaining like Peter's has physiological effects. Through the repetition of bad, sad, mad and powerless feelings, the neurotransmitters in the brain can go through a neural "rewiring," which reinforces negative thought patterns, making it easier for unhappy thoughts to repeat themselves and leaving little room for the more positive feelings of gratitude, appreciation, and well-being. A continuous cycle of negative thoughts may even cause damage to the hippocampus, the part of the brain used for problem solving and cognitive functioning. Over time, complainers become negativity addicts, attracted to the drama that comes with a complaining attitude.

They are also prone to black-and-white thinking. Compromise isn't part of the equation. No wonder that chronic complainers like Peter are more likely to see problems instead of solutions, making it very difficult to work with them. Given their negativity, it is hard for them to make decisions and solve problems. Ironically, complaining about things creates more things to complain about.

Chronic complainers also have a damaging effect on those around them. When people are thinking and reacting in negative and pessimistic ways, without realizing it, they transfer these feelings onto others in a process psychologists call "projective identification." It is as if they use other people as some kind of garbage can for their negativity, making these others feel weighed down and exhausted.

Interestingly, it is very likely that this kind of "transfer" is part of our evolutionary makeup. Some neuroscientists have suggested that human beings possess what are called mirror neurons in their brain that are important for survival. As social beings, our brains unconsciously mimic the moods of the people around us, which can be an advantage when we are faced with danger. It can also serve as a form of social cohesion. This neuronal mirroring, however, has a flip side. People who complain about

everything become contagious and, before we realize it, we turn into complainers ourselves.

### **Why Complain?**

Complaining isn't all bad. Occasional venting and expression of negative emotions to a colleague about difficult situations allow us to get our concerns out into the open, and in doing so, lessen possible stress reactions. Repressing our feelings may stop us from naming our problem and getting to the bottom of it. People also complain in order to feel better about themselves. Returning to Peter, perhaps he wanted Lisa's validation for how unfair or annoying his situation was and to establish some kind of emotional connection.

But complaints can also be used as a way to exercise power and influence perceptions. Especially within organizations, which can be hotbeds of political games, people use complaining in order to get people's support. On this interpretation, Peter might have been trying to recruit Lisa to his point of view concerning what he thought was wrong with some of the people in their organization.

In many cases, chronic complaining starts early in life, as a means of gaining visibility and establishing rapport in the family. These early experiences can become deeply ingrained patterns of behavior, and in Peter's case, may have become part of his identity. This would explain why he reacts poorly to advice because resolving his problem would take away the reason to complain, threatening his sense of self.

### **Managing a Complainer**

Attempts to help chronic complainers often have little or no effect. Most likely, Peter would continue to be absorbed on the downsides of his situation, rather than seek solutions. It's what makes dealing with these chronic complainers so exasperating.

It's better to begin by setting clear boundaries. Lisa should tell Peter that she is prepared to listen and to talk, but not to engage in a repetitive conversation. Going over the same thing over and over again isn't doing either of them a service. She should tell him that while she recognizes that he feels bad, his constant complaining is upsetting everyone in the organization. She should acknowledge that everyone complains at some point, but also point out that most people do so in moderation and that there is a right and a wrong way to complain. Complaining is useful in situations where he thinks that he could affect real and positive change but to complain the way he does is not constructive.

Next, Lisa should make clear to Peter that he would be much better off if he adjusted his perspective. Purposeful complaining — taking a proactive stand — will give him a roadmap to transcend his negativity. After all, if he has the time to whine and complain about all the bad things happening to him, then he should also make the time to do something about it. He should be complaining in order to fix and solve something, not just to win sympathy.

Lisa could also suggest that Peter cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Whenever he feels the urge to complain, he should see this as a red flag to shift his attention from complaining to counting his blessings. In doing so, he might find that his mood improved; he might have more energy and feel less anxious. Of course, creating such a behavior change takes time. But he could get help on the journey from a coach or psychotherapist, who could work with him to explore his tendency to fall into victimhood, why he constantly seeks validation from others, and how to work on alternative responses when he experiences the need to complain.

While chronic complainers appear to be harmless on the surface, they owe it to their colleagues and themselves to regulate their behavior. Eventually people will tire of the negativity. Peter needs to realize that the squeaky wheel doesn't always get the grease. It can also be replaced.



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