

How Complaining Rewires Your Brain For Negativity (And How To Break The Habit)

TAGS: ANXIETY, BRAIN CHANGES, WORRYING



by Annie Wood via Tiny Buddha

“Spending today complaining about yesterday won’t make tomorrow any better.”

~Unknown

When I was about sixteen or so, one of my parent’s friends got into some trouble with the law. When we’d visit him he’d often shake his head from side to side and mumble, *my life is in the toilet*.

He said it many times, for many years, even when things seemed to have gotten better for him.

My life is in the toilet was his mantra.

At the time I thought it was funny, so I adopted it for myself, until one day I started to believe it. I've since dumped that charming phrase and gotten a new mantra.

Things haven't magically become ideal for me since I did that. I mean, there's this pinched nerve in my neck and those construction sounds across the street, and I could really use some more work, and...

Type of Drains

Everyone complains, at some point, at least a little, says Robin Kowalski, PhD, a professor of psychology at Clemson University.

There are different types of complainers, according to Kowalski, such as *The Venter*. *The Venter* is a "dissatisfied person who doesn't want to hear solutions, however brilliant."

Venting. We're just letting off steam, right? Maybe not. I've personally found that the complain drain can be soul draining, not just for the complainer, but for all within earshot.

Other types you may have met along the way (or may be yourself) are the *Sympathy Seekers*, the *I got it worse than you do*, and the habitual *everything sucks* folks.

The Chronic Complainers, those living in a state of complaint, do something researchers call "ruminating." This basically means thinking and complaining about a problem again and again. Instead of feeling a release after complaining, this sort of complaining can actually make things worse. It can cause even more worry and anxiety.

No one is suggesting you be a peachy-keen-Josephine and pretend all is swell when it isn't. What I've learned in my mindfulness practice is to aim to do the opposite.

In mindfulness meditation, we try to experience fully the truth of the situation, in this exact moment, and allow it to just be. Easier said than done (but what isn't?) Still, with

practice, the need to express our dissatisfaction for things not being how we'd like them to be lessens.

Can't We Just Call Roto-Rooter?

Running with this drain analogy...

Call Roto-Rooter, that's the name and away go troubles down the drain!

When I was a kid I loved singing along to those Roto-Rooter commercials. Wouldn't it be cool if we could "away go troubles down the drain?" Well, maybe we can.

Most of us may have been unintentionally reinforcing the nasty habit of complaining, by virtue of... complaining.

There's something called "experience-dependent neuroplasticity," which is the continuing creation and grouping of neuron connections in our brains that take place as a result of our life experiences.

Neuroscience teaches us that neurons that fire together, wire together. Donald Hebb, a Canadian neuropsychologist, coined that phrase back in 1949. What this means is that whenever we think a thought or have a feeling or physical sensation, thousands of neurons are triggered and they all get together to form a neural network.

With repetitive thinking, the brain learns to trigger the same neurons each time.

So, if you keep your mind looping on self-criticism, worries, and how nothing is working out for you, your mind will more easily find that part of your brain and will quickly assist you in thinking those same thoughts again.

This shapes your mind into greater reactivity, making you more vulnerable to anxiety.

Imagine a truck driving down a muddy road. The wheels create a groove in the mud, and each time that truck drives down that exact spot, the groove gets deeper and deeper.

The truck might even, eventually, get stuck in that mud rut. But it doesn't have to. Instead of repeating the same negative complaints, we can drive our thoughts on a different road so we don't get stuck in that negative mud rut.

Throughout our lives we are wiring our brains, based on our repetitive thinking. We get good at what we practice.

If we worry, creating more unease and anxiety, we become stellar worriers since our brain is responding, making it easier for us to worry each time we do it, thus creating our *default mode living*.

Default mode living is our habitual way of going about our lives. It's our *reacting* minds as opposed to our *responding* minds.

Our reacting minds are often knee-jerk reactions to something. We often say or do things that we've said and done in the past, as if we were in that default mode living, on automatic pilot. But our responding minds come into play when we give ourselves a pause before responding to a situation.

We ask ourselves what's really going on and what the next best step is. It's a clearer response in the moment that's not linked to past responses. So, how do we respond instead of react?

4 D.I.Y. Tips – Stop The Drain!

You're stuck in traffic and not only are you complaining out loud to the cars that are in your way, you're imagining getting home and complaining to tell your significant other all about it. You're practicing this conversation in your head while in the car. Your heart races, your forehead tenses up. It's all so very annoying! What to do?

Read the full article at [Tiny Buddha](#).

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