

Ep #89: Why Complaining Never Helps



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With Your Host

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Last week, we talked about the problems with false positivity, pretending everything is fine when it's just not. Because you don't want to be a burden, a bother. You don't feel you deserve to be upset or to find fault in someone or something, and how that habit of slapping some false positivity on a challenging situation can hold you back from getting real with what's not working in your life, so you can make changes.

This week, we're going deeper on the complex issue of complaining and we'll be talking about how it doesn't serve you. Whether you're a chronic complainer or don't let yourself complain, keep listening. It's going to be a good one.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. My goodness, the leaves are putting on quite the show up here on occupied Lenape territory in the Hudson Valley of New York State. And it's so magnificent to be in nature and to experience autumn all around me.

We're also coming up on the elections here in the US, and if you haven't already either cast your vote or made a plan for voting, I want to encourage you to do so and to remind the folks you love to do the same. It is so vital that we get out to vote.

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Alright my beauties, that was my soapbox moment. So this week, we are going to talk more about complaining. There's a complexity here, and you know me, I love to dive into the complexity.

So one of the things I talk about so much is how important and vital it is to recognize when something doesn't work for you, when you want to make a change in your life so you can take action to shift things, while holding that to be true and that you get to feel all your beautiful feels and that it is so vital to honor them, to give them air and space, and not to attempt to cover them up with false positivity, not to beat yourself up for having human feelings.

This week, I want to dive into how complaining, especially chronic complaining, can be less than helpful, what it does to your brain and alternatives, remedies, to help you navigate the moments in life where things aren't what you want them to be. So you can take courageous action, episode 38, for your life.

And for those of us with codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thought habits, it can be a really challenging thing to recognize when things aren't working for us, much less to name them. Because our mind-body is screaming no, don't be seen, don't be heard, don't be thought of as whiny or a problem.

Endure, endure, endure, stay perfect, and then you'll be safe. Stay compliant and easy to be with, and then you'll be safe. Stay falsely positive and falsely happy with people and situations in your life and then you'll be safe.

And my love, I totally get these false stories our brains tell us. Like, 473% get it. And I totally did exactly this for years. I didn't want to rock the boat; I

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didn't want to upset folks because someone being upset with me was unbearable.

And the whole paradigm was so much a part of my socialization as a girl, so part of my Latinx immigrant, "My parents gave up so much for me to live in the US, who am I to complain" narrative. So I pretended everything was just fine, thank you. And I always looked for that bright side as a coverup for the feelings I didn't feel safe acknowledging or feeling in my body.

And what I came to realize was that I was holding in the realness, the truth of what was bothering me. Not even letting myself see and feel it, by not speaking from a vulnerable place about my struggles, and instead, and stay with me here, instead of recognizing the realness, I was actually complaining a lot while still holding that who am I to complain story in my heart.

I know it sounds paradoxical, and I can already hear you being like, "Vic, you just said you didn't let yourself acknowledge the negative, but you complained a lot? How does that make sense?" And it's true.

So if I hated something at work, I would kvetch to anyone and everyone around how I was bored or annoyed or thought something was inefficient or dumb. If I was having a problem with my romantic relationship, I would tell anyone within earshot about how my partner was totally failing me and can you believe she did this, or they keep doing that thing or not doing that thing, ugh.

And I was telling tales about everyone else and how they had done me wrong, but I wasn't owning the realness. And that's the thing; the easy complaint-y story was that I hated my job because my idiot boss did x, y, z. Instead of recognizing and being real with the fact that I was worried I

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wouldn't live into my potential in life or find my passion or joy. I felt unfulfilled at a desk job and I was worried it would never change.

I complained about whomever I was dating instead of looking at my thoughts about that person, myself, our relationship, my own history coming into the relationship and where I wasn't being loving or kind or accepting.

I complained instead of just leaving because I was petrified of how I would beat myself up if the relationship ended, that I would be cruel to myself for picking the wrong person, that I was in this deep place, both scared to be alone and was so comfortable in relationships where I wasn't treated well, and I didn't realize it because I was so focused on that surface-level complaining.

The complaining filled the gap between what I was most deeply feeling and fearing and wanting and needing and my capacity to see and own it all. Fascinating, right? The complaining was effectively a buffer, which we talked about in episode 14. A way to attempt to put distance between myself and the realness of my feelings.

Because at my core, in a deep, dark place, I didn't think I had the right to be upset. So it was an attempt to keep those feelings at bay, to keep me from experiencing emotion I wasn't sure I could handle. And I had no idea I was doing it.

I was talking recently with a member of my six-month masterclass, *Overcoming Codependency*, and she was sharing that she's getting divorced after 26 years. And she was complaining about how her now ex-husband asked her if she wanted to see his new apartment.

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And she was so mad and went on and on about how could he even ask me that, what is wrong with him, why on earth would I want to see his apartment after he left our house. On and on.

And when I invited her to pause and to check in and to ask herself what the real feeling in her body is, if she was really actually angry about him asking her if she wants to see his new place or if there was something else going on, she came to see that she was actually sad, hurt, upset, angry about their marriage ending. And his question as the easy buffer. Something to focus her energy on and talk about other than what was really going on for her.

Complaining for the sake of complaining can also be a way to not take responsibility for addressing the problem directly with the person. This can come from so many places and for those of us with codependent thought habits, it can be about not wanting to upset someone else or having them think less of us.

For perfectionist thinkers, it can come from fear of rejection and being told the ways you're doing it all wrong, which can feel untenable. And for folks with people-pleasing habits, it can come from a worry that if you voice what isn't working for you, people will not be pleased with you, which is often true.

That they'll think you're rude or unkind for having feelings or an opinion, and you're worried that you'll be mean to you for that. With that said, it's important to pause to talk about systems of oppression and power structures and that you can't always address problems with your boss directly because if you do, you'll lose your job and that's super real.

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So I get the desire to grumble about it, as a thing you can't currently change. And the truth is my darling, gossiping or complaining about the situation only serves to work you up, to put your energy towards others, to put the focus of your life on how other people are doing you wrong, and it's time and energy you're not using to find another job, to increase your skillset so you can apply for another job, to work towards structural change.

And for me, complaining also served the codependent function of attempting to recruit others to agree with me, to validate my suffering, to agree with me that the person I was dating or my recent ex was a total jerk. And thus, I was right to be upset or angry and could continue on not looking at my side of things.

This kind of complaining also served to strengthen that story in my head that things have to be horrible in order to leave. That I can't just leave something because I want to, because I want something different for my life.

Instead, I have to create this whole scenario where I'm complaining vociferously about how someone else is totally, totally, totally horrible, terrible, the worst. Instead of just saying this doesn't work for me, I want a different life.

Another thing that complaining does for us is it gives us a sensation of being in control. Because when we know what's better, when we know how someone else should act, should behave, what they should say, then we feel in control in that moment.

Again, it's that validation of self through having someone else agree. You're right, he's wrong. And of course my nerds, we get to pause to say it is vital for humans to be heard and to co-regulate with each other. I am never,

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ever, ever out here for the rugged individualism. I believe in the power of sharing our stories.

We need to vent, to let it out. And what we need to be seen and heard around is not the service-level buffering complaining. It's the true deep vulnerability, and I get it that that can be so scary. And it's so vital to begin to get comfortable with the discomfort of doing that.

Because when we share our truth with someone, we strengthen our bond in real and lasting ways. And when we complain about things we could take action to shift, we're just recruiting people to commiserate, which keeps us spinning in believing our own stories.

Nerd alert, my darling. Studies show that people who listen to complaining or who are themselves complainers feel worse than those who complain less. Other research found that people who rate themselves as being happier also complain less, and that those folks are more mindful overall.

They complain more mindfully and strategically, which of course we'll get to in just a moment. My love, my sweet nerd, please remember, your brain believes the things you think over and over and over again to be true facts simply because you've always thought them.

And it isn't until you pause to lovingly question your own mind, which we've talked a lot about here, particularly in episode 49, all about embracing having wrong thoughts and working to shift them, that you can begin to see where your habitual, historical thoughts may not serve you, may not lead you to live an intentional life but a habitual one.

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And my nerds, you can engage your brain's magnificent neuroplasticity, your power to change your own thinking, to create new beliefs, and to see where a way of thinking and doing and being hasn't served you.

So complaining, that surface-level grumbling about things as they are keeps you focused on the problem and doesn't let in room for solutions because you're so focused on the problem. And the problem is usually other people, which is the second problem with complaining.

It's generally very externally focused. He's terrible, she's rude, they effed it up again. When complaining, you believe that the locus of your feelings is external to you and it's just not true. And the evidence for this lies in the simple fact that not everyone will find a given situation annoying or upsetting and at different points in your life, you may not find the same situation annoying or upsetting, and recognizing that gives you an opportunity to ask yourself why, why you're upset.

What's really bothering you here? Are you projecting feelings from your relationship on to work? Are you projecting feelings from work on to your relationship? And whether the story you're telling about what is bothering you is actually a coverup job for more complex feelings that are vulnerable-making.

And in terms of neuroplasticity, you're actually making it worse for yourself, my darling. You are reifying your thoughts, strengthening that neural connection that says if he says x, I will automatically feel y. And I will only be okay if I gather folks around me to validate that he sucks. And thus, I'm justified in being upset, I'm justified in having my human feelings.

And my sweet one, you get to question that automatic assumption. And if you are actually upset or offended, you get to stay on strong in that, to own

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that, to address that without other people validating your experience. Surface-level grumbling can also be a way to convince yourself or justify to yourself and others that you have the right to complain because look at all this evidence.

So it's like, my boss is a jerk and here are the 473 reasons why, or my partner sucks and here's the 473 reasons why, or, or, or. And this can come from a place of attempting to validate why you have human emotions, why you do in fact have something real to complain about, because look at all this evidence, in an attempt to counteract that deep belief that you are not allowed to complain, that your pain or annoyance or other feeling isn't valid somehow because you aren't suffering quite enough in these suffering Olympics.

So your brain takes that and swings you on over to the other side like a pendulum to complaining massively. As though that would provide the evidence for why you aren't happy, or why you're not reaching your goals, why that relationship, that job, that situation isn't working for you.

Well, the truth is you don't need to pile the evidence on. You get to have and honor all of your beautiful feelings and if you want to leave, you get to. If you want to stay, you get to. But you don't need to pile the evidence on to attempt to validate why you feel what you feel.

And when you find yourself chronically complaining, feeling constantly dissatisfied, disappointed in the world, you are focusing your limited and precious human energy outward, versus focusing on the one thing you can change.

So I can imagine you saying, "But Vic, you talk so much about co-regulating and the importance of connecting with each other. Help me

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understand how that fits in with what you're saying here?" And to that I will say venting is amazing as long as you're just venting.

That is responding with love to your own need to be heard, seen, witnessed. Getting human connection without asking that other person to validate your feelings. And getting human connection about what's up for you and then through that process, letting it go.

The distinction here is that when you're venting, you're not recruiting anyone to your side. It's not a coverup job. And venting, letting it out, can lead to the action of releasing the grump, versus complaining, which is more passive and is often about drawing people in. It's other-focused.

He did this, they did that, she said this, versus when you're venting, the focus is on you and processing your beautiful emotions through your magnificent body. I feel upset, I feel sad. And the energy and the outcome are so different, my love.

Because venting carries that emotions and self-focus, it is more actionable. Sometimes just feeling seen and heard is enough. Giving it air can be powerful. All feelings are welcome in my world and as always, better out than in. It's vital to let it all out and to connect with others around what we're feeling.

The more I accept that life is full of change, life is full of circumstances that I don't like or want, the less I feel that need to complain and can continue to shift into more acceptance. And from there, can make more change.

For me, complaining feels really different than venting. When I'm complaining, it revs me up about the situation. It makes it feel worse and

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worse in my mind, body, and spirit. And that's how I know I'm in complaining mode.

I'm not processing the emotion out loud through my body so I can move on. Instead, I'm sinking deeper into it and getting more upset. I'm creating more evidence for my own problem by building it up with the hope of someone else believing I'm right or justified.

It can also lead to an intense case of the woe-is-me, in which I'm seeking pity. And my brain's negativity bias is at the forefront of my mind, piling the bad on the bad on the worse, making it all feel so much worse.

Ruminating on problems versus making change, or thinking that things can never get better keeping your brain habituated to thinking that things in your life are inherently bad, there's no other way to think about it, and will stay that way. That the lions are definitely coming to destroy the village, so we see the negative at every turn.

A key question I ask myself is am I looking for someone to validate my experience as terrible, or am I looking to be heard and comforted by another? The former is complaining, the latter venting and co-regulating.

There's an energetic felt difference there and I'll invite you to pause and to feel the difference in your body. I'll also invite you to ask yourself what your goal is before you start to gossip, talk crap about someone, complain. Are you truly looking for a witness so you can release and move on? Or to connect with someone on the false pretense of shared annoyance?

To recruit others to make you feel better, to use complaining as a buffer for that deep underlying story, who am I to complain, which brings me to a

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remedy from the world of nerdy science, and that's the framing of instrumental complaints.

So this comes from the psychological research and is a complaint towards a goal, which I'll use that language because it's the terms researchers use, but it doesn't even feel like complaining to me. So this refers to only bring up a problem with the goal of co-creating a solution.

For example, you take a look at the credit card bill and your partner is spending x dollars on something from the collective funds when you decided you would save up towards a mutually decided upon financial goal. So you bring this up with the goal of creating understanding and working together to find a solution.

Let's say for example, now you're working from home, you find that you're doing more of the housework than you would like to, so you bring it up with the people with whom you live, with the goal of coming to a more equitable solution.

So the goal isn't just to bemoan the situation when we're presenting an instrumental complaint. The goal is not to recruit anyone to your side, to justify having feelings, to people-please or evade responsibility. It's to get to a solution that works for you and the people in your life, and that's just beautiful.

Some other remedies that work for me are to check myself, indeed before I wreck myself, by asking myself if I really want to vent and release, or if my mind wants to shift into complaining mode. If the latter, I do my thought work on it so I can get clear about what's really bothering me, what part is within my control, what part is systemic, and what I really need.

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In my own life, I have chosen to stop complaining about politics. Instead, I accept that the political system, particularly here in the US is working just as designed, holding BIPOC folks, queer and trans folks, immigrants, women down at every turn.

Instead of spending my time complaining about the status quo, I get to work, making calls, donating, sending letters, doing get out the vote work, doing what I can to take action to create a different result. But complaining about politics, I'm done.

I also have made the choice to not actively choose to spend my time with folks who have the chronic habit of complaining a lot. Zero judgment. Actually, the literal opposite. I accept that that is their thought habit. That's how they communicate in the world.

And I have no judgment in any way. I'm not like, that's good, that's bad. I just accept it. And from there, I realize that I'm just not interested in being around that energy. So I'm not.

I also no longer choose to spin around things in the past. Things that are done and over, because I know it doesn't serve me. Again, there is a major difference between complaining about the past and processing it. The former doesn't get you anywhere. The latter can be a beautiful thing. Such an important part of healing, which is why I love therapy because it's a place to process the past to both experience safety around talking about challenging things and feeling them in your body.

And when we keep focusing our brain's energy and attention on the past and complaining about what happened yesterday or last week, our brains believe us. That the past is more important than this present moment and building towards the future.

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Let me say it clearly to any new listeners and all of you who are subscribed and listen regularly know this, I am never ever encouraging you to put up with BS like abuse or prejudicial or discriminatory language or practices. Never ever ever ever. Not complaining does not mean being anyone's doormat without directly communicating what doesn't work for you.

And that's the point. Complaining is as far from direct communication, which we talked about in episode 33, as you can get. And my love, I want to empower you to communicate directly, with love for self and others, versus simply backroom complaining.

And I get it, this is a skill that is often so new to our codependent and people-pleasing brains, and I know it's one you can build. Finally, I'll invite you to look at complaining as evidence of judgmental thinking.

Baby, I make mistakes. You make mistakes. We make mistakes. We are human. And I know how deeply judgmental thinking and perfectionist thinking go together. We are so harsh with ourselves. And we hold each other to the same intense perfectionist standards we struggle to meet ourselves.

And my darling love, you can drop the rock. You can give yourself and others the grace. You don't have to keep being so mean to you or to the people in your world.

So I'll invite you to take a look at the stories you're telling in and about your life, my beauty. And the life you're creating and co-creating from those stories. You get to feel all your feels and I want to always encourage and support you to do so. And you don't have to have a list of endless complaints to believe that it's okay for you to feel the way you feel.

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Thank you for listening, my beauty. I want to let you know that my six-month masterclass program, *The Feminist Wellness Guide to Overcoming Codependency* will be starting up again in early 2021. Head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to get on the waitlist.

We'll start doing calls very soon so you can join me for this amazing six-month program where you will learn these tools, the tools of thought work, so you can start to see your codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thought habits so you can shift them to live a more intentional life full of self-love, deep wellness, and joy.

Alright my beauties, thank you, thank you. Sending big love to you all. Let's do what we do. Nice breath in and out. And remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.