
Whining, Gripping, and Complaining: Positivity in the Negativity

▼
Robin M. Kowalski

Western Carolina University

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in the positive psychology movement. The emphasis of positive psychology is on human virtue rather than on human vice, on human strength rather than human frailty. In an effort to focus on what is good about human nature, however, the positive psychology movement has neglected to examine the redeeming features of seemingly aversive behaviors. Thus, the purpose of the present article is to broaden the scope of positive psychology by examining, in addition to its negative facets, the positive features of one particular aversive behavior, complaining. After defining complaining, we address the personal, relational, interpersonal, and material benefits of complaining to show that there is, indeed, positivity in the negativity. © 2002 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol* 58: 1023–1035, 2002.

Keywords: complaining; whining; dissatisfaction; positive psychology; aversive behaviors

Generally speaking, psychology has tended to focus on human frailty rather than human strength, on the pathological aspects of human nature rather than on adjustment, and on vice rather than on virtue (Snyder & McCullough, 2000). In an effort to turn the tide of negativity, many researchers have begun to focus on the positive side of human nature, issuing a call for psychologists to turn their attention to the virtues of human existence, to emphasize optimism rather than pessimism (Sheldon & King, 2001). These efforts have collectively been labeled the positive psychology movement and reflect a new emphasis on what is good about human nature.

Despite the recent surge of interest in positive psychology, research in this area has been limited primarily to a focus on human virtues, per se, such as forgiveness, gratitude,

I thank Mark Leary for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Robin Kowalski, Department of Psychology, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC 28723; e-mail: kowalski@wcu.edu.

hope, optimism, and humility, and the positive elements of mundane, even aversive behaviors have been ignored. Thus, although researchers have begun to examine the positive aspects of human psychology, they have devoted relatively little attention to the positive features of what are normally regarded as negative behaviors or attitudes. However, a moment's thought will show that even predominantly aversive and antisocial actions may have positive features and consequences, and we may learn a great deal about dark behaviors by paying greater attention to their silver lining.

The purpose of this article is to expand the breadth of the positive psychology movement with a focus on positivity amidst the negativity. Specifically, our focus will be on complaining, a common behavior that is generally viewed as aversive and negative. In addition to examining the negative facets of complaining, of which there are some, we also will explore the positive side of complaining with a look at its personal, relational, and interpersonal benefits. To begin, however, we will take a look at what is known about complaining more generally.

Overview of Complaining

I am writing to complain about the fact that I am a chronic complainer. I never seem completely, 100% satisfied about anything. I complain about everything under the sun and I don't like to be like that. . . . Actually, I think I complain because that's how my mother is and it's just learned behavior. She is constantly critical and complaining about everything. She will criticize an overweight person, but she is overweight also. Or she'll complain about the large American flag on the pole in front of a restaurant located near the retirement apartment complex she lives in and says it's too big for the pole. . . . I work in an office, and a co-worker . . . is a complainer too. When we tell each other our complaints we seem to laugh a lot because we're surprised to find someone else that feels like we do. But it seems that what we're doing is releasing the floodgates. Unfortunately, the rushing waters of complaints don't seem to be subsiding. (Kowalski, in press)

As this excerpt from one individual's description of her complaining suggests, people complain about everything that one could possibly imagine, including things as trivial as the fact that a flag is too big for a pole or even that they are a chronic complainer. People whine, gripe, vent, kvetch, and "whinge" (an Australian term) about nearly everything (Kowalski, in press). To fully appreciate how common complaining is, one only needs to listen carefully to oneself or to other people in the course of a normal day. In almost every conversation, at least one person will complain about something, and commonly several people will gripe. Complaining is so common that there are websites provided for "cyberventing." One of these sites, maintained by the National Consumers League, receives as many as 1,000 complaints each month. The Federal Trade Commission receives as many as 4,800 complaints monthly. Over 25,000 websites are devoted to people's complaints about very specific behaviors, what one might regard as "pet peeves." One particularly interesting Web site called "complaintbook.com" allows people to file complaints that they may have about anything. The complaints are then forwarded to the appropriate company or individual, who then issues a response that is posted on the website. The most recent data from the complaintbook.com website showed that 25% of the complaints were against private organizations whereas 20% were levied against government organizations. Twenty-four percent of the complaints were sent to providers of service such as telephone companies, but interestingly, 5% of the complaints were directed at "no one in particular" (Kowalski, in press)!

Given the frequency with which people complain, identifying and defining complaining should be a relatively easy task. On its surface, complaining would seem to involve

the verbal expression of a subjective experience of dissatisfaction, distaste, or unhappiness. However, the fact that someone expresses dissatisfaction in the form of a complaint does not necessarily mean that the person is actually dissatisfied. Although people sometimes complain when they are unhappy or dissatisfied, at other times they complain even though they are not actually dissatisfied. In these instances, people presumably complain because doing so facilitates their achievement of some desired goal (Kowalski, 1996). For example, people may complain about their health even though they feel perfectly healthy to get attention, evoke sympathy, or avoid going to work.

The fact that dissatisfaction is a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition for complaining suggests that we must consider separately the factors that create dissatisfaction and that promote complaining. One way to conceptualize this is in terms of different thresholds for experiencing dissatisfaction (dissatisfaction threshold) and expressing dissatisfaction (complaining threshold; Kowalski, 1996). Although a person may not be subjectively experiencing dissatisfaction (i.e., his or her outcomes do not exceed the dissatisfaction threshold), he or she may still complain to facilitate the attainment of some interpersonal or intrapersonal goal (i.e., the complaining threshold is low). For example, a person might be perfectly satisfied with his or her job, yet complain about the requirements of the job in an effort to get a pay raise or increased recognition. Given that people express dissatisfaction both when they are and when they are not dissatisfied, complaining is best defined as "an expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals, interpersonal goals, or both" (Kowalski, 1996, p. 180).

The fact that people may complain whether they are dissatisfied or not suggests that the processes underlying complaining are twofold, with one process influencing the subjective experience of dissatisfaction and the other influencing complaining in the absence of dissatisfaction (Kowalski, 1996; Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). Regardless of which process is operating, a state of self-focus forms the basis of every complaint episode. When in a state of self-focused attention, people compare the current state of events with their standards for those events. If the current state of events surpasses the standards for those events, then positive affect is experienced. If, on the other hand, actual events do not measure up to one's standards or expectations, dissatisfaction and negative affect result. Because the discrepancy between actual events and one's standards for those events is unpleasant, the individual is motivated to reduce the discrepancy (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Ingram, Cruet, Johnson, & Wisnicki, 1988; Pyszczynski, Hamilton, Greenberg, & Becker, 1991).

Before complaining as a means of reducing the discrepancy, however, people evaluate the perceived utility of complaining (Kowalski, 1996; Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). In other words, they determine the degree to which complaining will be instrumental to the achievement of intrapersonal or interpersonal goals. If the perceived utility of complaining is high, then individuals will complain to reduce dissatisfaction and negative affect. If the perceived utility of complaining is low, however, individuals will not be likely to complain, at least at the present time.

In cases in which people are not subjectively dissatisfied, whether they complain will depend entirely on the perceived utility of complaining. As before, if the utility of complaining is high, even in the absence of dissatisfaction (i.e., the dissatisfaction threshold is high), the individual will complain as a means of obtaining desired outcomes. If, on the other hand, complaining is not perceived as useful for attaining desired interpersonal or intrapsychic goals, the individual will not complain.

Although a person may perceive whining and griping to be instrumental to the attainment of desired goals, complaining—like other aversive behaviors—has a host of nega-

tive features associated with it, both for the complainer and for his or her audience. At the most basic level, people find it annoying to listen to other people continually express dissatisfaction with everything under the sun (particularly when they seem unwilling to do anything about their discontent). Not surprisingly, then, and as will be discussed later, people who complain too frequently often are ostracized and rejected by those who must listen to their complaints. Complainers also jeopardize any positive impressions that they might want to project, instead appearing as critical, grumpy people.

The fact that people will engage in an interpersonally aversive, annoying, and negatively sanctioned behavior such as complaining even when they are not really dissatisfied suggests that complaining also must have positive qualities associated with it. Herein lies the paradox of complaining. How is it that something that most people perceive to be so aversive can have redeeming value? And, why, if people perceive complaining to be so aversive, do they do it so frequently? Clearly, complaining has both positive and negative features, each of which will be discussed in turn.

Negative Consequences of Complaining

As mentioned earlier, complaining has negative effects for the complainer, his or her audience, and the relationship between the two. The greatest consequence for the complainer is the possibility of being rejected by other people who are tired of hearing the complainer's constant whines and gripes. People frequently use ostracism as a response to others' aversive interpersonal behaviors (Williams, 1997) because it provides an effective means for audience members to distance themselves from aversive actions, such as chronic complaining. Thus, even when a person's complaining is effective in changing an undesired state of affairs, the complainer may nonetheless find himself or herself ostracized if the complaints were perceived as unwarranted or excessive.

Most likely to be rejected are those individuals who repeatedly complain to seek attention, advice, and help only to reject any and all help that is offered. These individuals, who are labeled "help-rejecting complainers" (Yalom, 1985), play Berne's (1964) "Why Don't You . . . Yes But" game. They continually express their seemingly insurmountable problems, but when others offer suggestions in the form of "Why don't you . . .," the help-rejecting complainer acknowledges the suggestion but gives reasons why the proposed solution will not solve the problem ("Yes, but . . ."). Anyone who has encountered a help-rejecting complainer can attest to the aversiveness of interactions with such individuals and to the degree to which people desire to avoid future contact with the person.

Chronic complainers also risk being labeled as just that—chronic complainers. Given the aversiveness of interacting with habitual complainers, very few people would relish being stigmatized with the label of "complainer." However, some individuals seem either oblivious to the fact that others view them as chronic complainers, whiners, or crybabies or are unable to stop themselves from complaining despite its effects on others' evaluations of them.

In addition to the possibility of interpersonal rejection or being labeled as a chronic complainer, complainers also risk the intrapersonal consequence of becoming disgruntled, critical individuals. Psychology is replete with examples of the power of expressing beliefs on subsequent attitude change: "Saying is believing" (Higgins & Rholes, 1978). Even when people say things that do not reflect their true feelings, they may come to believe the authenticity of their claims (Bem, 1972; Festinger, 1957). Applied to complaining, people may create or magnify their personal dissatisfaction simply by stating that they are unhappy or disgruntled. For example, a student who really likes a particular

professor may still complain about him or her simply because other students dislike the teacher. Yet, as a function of hearing themselves complain, they become disgruntled with the professor. This situation is particularly problematic for people who complain even when they are not subjectively dissatisfied because they may create dissatisfaction that never existed in the first place.

The negative effects of complaining are not limited to the complainer. Those who listen to others complain also experience negative effects of complaining, not the least of which is mood contagion. Listeners often become dissatisfied as a result of listening to others complain. Just as people who are around depressed individuals often report subsequent feelings of depression and anxiety (Coyne et al., 1987; Joiner, Coyne, & Blalock, 1999), people who are around frequent complainers often report feeling dissatisfied. In the Winnie the Pooh story "Oh, Bother! Somebody's Grumpy!," just such a mood contagion of complaining occurs. Eeyore (the old, gray donkey) starts off complaining about the snow and ice to Owl. Owl suddenly also then becomes aware of the dangers of the snow and ice, dangers that are then relayed to Tigger, and so the story goes. Ultimately, in an attempt to get residents of the Hundred Acre Wood to see what has happened, Christopher Robin discusses the Galloping Grumps, saying that "Grumpiness and grouchiness gallop quickly from one person to another" (Birney, 1992).

These mood contagion effects of complaining may arise from three processes (Kowalski, 1996). First, hearing another person express dissatisfaction may alert the listener to his or her own dissatisfaction with the object, person, or event being complained about, thereby influencing the dissatisfaction threshold. Listeners who are reminded of their own dissatisfaction may subsequently complain, creating a domino effect of complaining.

Second, hearing another person complain may create a cognitive burden on the listener that may be reduced by subsequent complaining, in much the same way that hearing another person's secret produces an overwhelming urge to subsequently disclose the secret (Kelly & McKillop, 1996). This process also may set up a domino effect of complaining.

Third, hearing other people complain may set the stage for one-upmanship. For example, hearing other people express their pet peeves with their spouse may stimulate one's desire to top those pet peeves with some of one's own.

The negative effects of complaining on the listener are illustrated in a letter written by a woman who had tired of listening to people complain:

I am about to give up a job that pays more than any other I've had because I can't listen to the complaints any more. The position involves the management of a long-term health care unit, staffing, budgets, and marketing. This is a breeze compared to the complaints and negative comments I hear from the residents on an on-going daily basis, only a very small proportion of which are valid. And, when the valid concerns are resolved it wasn't done fast enough, good enough or the way it was done in the past. I've only held this position for three months but I give up. (Kowalski, in press)

Given that complaining has negative effects on both the complainer and the listener, it is probably not all that surprising that complaining may have negative relational consequences as well (Alberts, 1988). Kelley (1979) found that complaining ranked third in a list of 15 problems that romantic couples indicated that they faced. Two explanations account for the frequency of complaining as a relational problem. First, a complaining/countercomplaining interaction style may develop between the individuals. The domino effect of complaining referred to earlier suggests that this is a likely outcome when at least one of the individuals in a relationship complains frequently. One complaint sets up another complaint in response, leading to still other complaints, and the cycle continues.

Second, frequent complaining on the part of one individual may trigger feelings of anger and resentment in the partner, creating relational conflict. This is similar to the phenomenon observed among individuals who must interact with a depressed individual for a period of time (Coyne, 1976; Coyne et al., 1987; Howes & Hokanson, 1979; Strack & Coyne, 1983). However, interacting with a depressed individual is interpersonally aversive only to the degree that the individual engages in depressotypic behaviors, such as excessive reassurance seeking and negative feedback seeking (Katz & Joiner, 2001). In other words, interactions with depressed individuals are aversive when "distress is clearly and repeatedly signaled to other people" (Katz & Joiner, 2001, pp. 117–118), primarily through the expression of complaints (e.g., "You don't love me anymore" or "Our relationship isn't what it used to be"). Wanting to distance themselves from the negativity surrounding such individuals, people exposed to the constant complaints or depressotypic behaviors of others may reject the complainer.

Thus, whereas complainers risk interpersonal rejection and negative self-images as a result of their complaining, people who must listen to others complain are at increased risk of becoming complainers themselves due to mood contagion. Furthermore, because of listeners' feelings of anger and resentment toward complainers, the stage is set for relational conflict. Given all of these negative effects of complaining, why do people continue to complain so much? How is it that people could so frequently engage in a behavior that apparently has so many negative consequences associated with it? The answer is that, like so many other aversive behaviors, complaining does have redeeming value—a topic to which we will now turn our attention.

Positive Consequences of Complaining

Although most people easily see the negative consequences of complaining, its positive functions may be more difficult to discern. Yet, there is indeed positivity in the negativity. Complaining can be personally, relationally, socially, and materially beneficial.

Personal Benefits

Given the frequency with which people complain, there are obviously personal benefits of complaining, primarily in the form of improved affect. Complaining allows people to vent, to get their frustrations off their chests (Alicke et al., 1992; Kowalski, 1996). Think of all the cathartic complaining that people do in their cars as they express dissatisfaction with other people's driving. Because the other drivers cannot hear the griping, these complaints do nothing to change others' driving now or in the future. Nevertheless, people typically feel better after expressing the complaints (Kowalski, in press). The expression of dissatisfaction provides a release for negative, hostile feelings as revealed in the following narrative written by a college student:

Last semester, I had a very boring professor. I could not stay focused in that class. Everybody else in the class felt the same way. On one of our tests, there was an opinion question and, when I got the test back, my opinion question was graded wrong. I really thought that wasn't right. I complained to other people in the class. It really made me feel better to complain to the other class members. (Kowalski, in press)

An understanding of the benefits of cathartic complaining is achieved most easily by looking at what happens when people do not express their dissatisfaction in the form of complaints. People who inhibit expressing their dissatisfaction often ruminate about the problem, blowing their dissatisfaction out of proportion (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, &

White, 1987). They even may become obsessed with the object of their dissatisfaction. The continued rumination produces negative affect, which produces additional dissatisfaction—setting in motion a vicious cycle whereby the individual feels compelled to complain yet still inhibits expressions of dissatisfaction. If and when they finally do complain, they generally express far more unhappiness than was warranted under the circumstances. As noted by Pennebaker (1990, 1993), the failure to reveal troubling or traumatic information takes psychological and physiological work, resulting in impaired psychological and physical functioning. Effort is required to suppress or inhibit thoughts and actions, effort that may compromise physical and psychological well-being. Releasing this inhibition by talking about troublesome events, including events with which one is dissatisfied, may thus result in improved physiological and psychological health.

Not surprisingly, then, people who inhibit expressions of their emotions also suffer from a number of other problems, including a Type C personality style, a Type D personality style, and depression (Kowalski, *in press*). Type C personality refers to the cancer-prone personality (Dattore, Shontz, & Coyne, 1980). The inhibition of emotional expression is what distinguishes Type C individuals from other people. These individuals are seen as very "nice" because they rarely complain and are rarely involved in conflicts with others. Despite favorable interpersonal impressions, however, Type C individuals show decreased immune functioning, with a resultant increase in the incidence of physical health problems.

Like the Type C personality, the Type D personality also is identified by the inhibition of emotional expression (Denollet, 1991; Denollet et al., 1996). Relative to non-Type D personalities, people with a Type D personality are at increased risk for coronary artery disease because of the stress associated with the inhibition of emotional expression.

Infrequent complainers also are at heightened risk for depression relative to more frequent complainers (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986). Although one might assume that people who rarely complain are not dissatisfied, we know that this is not necessarily the case. Individuals can be very dissatisfied, yet still inhibit expressing their dissatisfaction in the form of a complaint. However, in the absence of complaining, the dissatisfied individual may ruminate about his or her discontent, blowing it up into something much larger than is warranted, with an accompanying increase in depression (Ogden & Von Sturmer, 1984).

In addition to the physiological detriments associated with inhibiting complaints, people who withhold expressions of dissatisfaction may find other, more maladaptive outlets for the expression of their dissatisfaction (Kowalski, *in press*). A prison inmate offered the following insight into just such an outcome:

I've always noticed that complaining in a prison setting caused big problems. If the guys kept in their complaints, they tended to end up in mental health wards. If they were too vocal in complaining, they ended up on lock up. Therefore, there is no legitimate outlet for complaints in this deviant, closed society. Not counselors, preachers, guards, etc. If you complain to fellow prisoners, they brand you as a weakling or a sissy. Not a stand up man. If a prisoner complains about any perceived situation to the outside (media persons, etc.), they are told stop your whining, you were sent to prison to be punished. So, . . . I can see why the return rate to prison is so high. Instead of voicing any complaints, they would tend to 'act out' this suppressed rage when released. (Kowalski, *in press*)

In addition to improved affect, another personal benefit of complaining involves allowing people to regulate the impressions that others form of them, a process termed self-presentation or impression management (Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). People have a vested interest in controlling the impressions that others form of them. Those who make favorable impressions will be liked, accepted by others, and sought after for relationships. On the other hand, people who make unfavorable impressions will

be disliked, rejected, and ostracized. Thus, much of what people do and do not do, including choosing to or not to complain, they do and do not do in the service of self-presentational goals.

Complaining can be used to achieve self-presentational goals in several ways. First, complaining allows people to convey to others information about their personal attributes (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Kowalski, 1996). For example, because, by definition, complaining implies that people, products, or services are not up to one's standards, people may complain to convey to others that they are discriminating in their tastes. I may, for instance, complain about the wine at a restaurant to convey to others my sophistication at wine tasting.

Second, and even more commonly, people might complain for self-presentational reasons as a means of saving face (Barsky & Klerman, 1983; Kowalski, 1996; Mechanic, 1972). People who engage in undesired behaviors or fail to engage in desired behaviors risk making negative impressions on others. To avoid creating undesired impressions, people may complain to provide an excuse for their behavior. For example, an individual may complain about his or her health or fatigue to provide an excuse for poor performance on a test, at work, or in sports. If I am concerned that I may not run as well as you in a 5K race, I may preemptively complain about soreness in my ankle to explain my performance in the event that I lose the race. This allows the complainer to save face and to maintain a favorable self-image. Interestingly, in a correlational study, self-esteem correlated positively with the propensity to complain, such that more frequent complaining was associated with higher self-esteem. Thus, complaining may provide an ego-protective function that allows people to maintain or even enhance their self-esteem (Cantrell & Kowalski, 1994).

Third, complaining about a person with whom one is dissatisfied may increase insight into the causes and consequences of your dissatisfaction with that person. Research on people who have disclosed traumatic events to others shows that, as a result of the revelation, people often become psychologically distanced from the trauma and, thus, more objective in their perceptions of the event (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Kowalski, 1999; Pennebaker, 1990). In addition, according to Kennedy-Moore and Watson (1999, p. 25), "[the] expression [of distress-related emotions] diffuses negative emotional experience and/or distress-related physiological arousal," decreasing the likelihood of negative escalation cycles in relationships. To the extent that complaining produces similar reactions, individuals who express their dissatisfaction might be expected to change their perceptions of people or events, producing more positive affect. For example, an objective examination of another person's dissatisfying behavior may lead the complainer to reframe that individual's behavior, thereby reducing negative feelings toward the individual.

Relational Benefits

Within close relationships, complaining also can be beneficial. Many complaints are expressed to call others to account for their behavior (Kowalski, 1996, in press). "You are always late getting home!" "You never do your chores around the house when you say you will!" Often such complaints are expressed in the form of a question to indicate that a response is expected: "Why are you always late getting home?" or "Why do you never complete your chores when you say you will?" In this way, the complainant expresses dissatisfaction in a way that will hopefully yield a satisfactory answer to his or her question. If the complaint brings an end to the other person's annoying behavior, then interactions between the two individuals proceed more smoothly, and peace is restored or further conflict prevented from escalating (Kowalski, in press).

Although providing a means of calling others to account for undesired behavior, complaining, like many other aversive interpersonal behaviors, also may be used to express relational solidarity (Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). There are three ways in which complaining may be used to indicate relationship solidarity. First, complaining may be used as a form of relational intimacy. Although at times they may complain to total strangers, people more typically complain to their friends or relationship partners. In this way, they are conveying a level of intimacy and trust in the relationship. We trust close friends or partners to listen to our complaints in a responsive, nonjudgmental fashion.

Second, complaining may be used to socialize people into a group. When people behave in inappropriate or counterproductive ways, others may complain about the untoward behavior as a means of bringing it in line with accepted standards. For example, we may complain to people who are annoying us to get them to stop the annoying behavior and, thus, restore peace to the relationship. Or, we may complain about our spouse's inappropriate behavior to prevent him or her from continuing to behave in ways that will make undesired impressions.

Third, complaining may allow people to assess a friend's or partner's commitment to the relationship. People who are not invested in a relationship are not generally influenced by another's complaints. For example, if you complain to me about my behavior, I am unlikely to change unless I have a vested interest in maintaining my relationship with you. Thus, you can use complaining to judge my commitment.

To examine possible relational benefits of complaining, Kowalski and Cantrell (in press) conducted a study in which participants were asked to think about a person with whom they were moderately to extremely dissatisfied. After a few minutes, they were randomly assigned to one of three groups. One third of the participants were instructed to write their complaints about the individual with whom they were dissatisfied as if they were writing to a third party. Another third of the participants were instructed to write their complaints about the individual as if they were addressing the individual in a letter. The remainder of the participants were simply asked to write about what they did yesterday (control condition). After the writing exercise, participants completed a questionnaire that measured their perceptions of the other person and their relationship with him or her.

Participants who wrote their complaints to the person with whom they were dissatisfied reported more favorable reactions to that individual. Relative to people who wrote about what they had done the previous day or who expressed their dissatisfaction to a third party, people who wrote a letter to the person with whom they were dissatisfied indicated that they liked the person more and that the other individual liked them more, rated the individual more positively, and perceived their relationship with the other person more favorably.

Four explanations may account for these findings (Kowalski & Cantrell, in press). First, expressing dissatisfaction directly to the source would have a higher likelihood of producing changes in the other individual's behavior than would complaining to another individual. In support of this, participants who wrote to the target of their complaint expressed more behavioral complaints, complaints involving specific behaviors of the other, than any other type. Presumably, these behavioral complaints reflected the source of participants' dissatisfaction. The mere prospect of behavioral change in the other could in itself have altered the complainer's perception of the individual.

Second, the specificity of behavioral complaints (such as those expressed most frequently by participants who complained directly to the individual with whom they were dissatisfied) may create fewer negative reactions to the individual than general statements found in attitudinal complaints, complaints reflecting global affective feelings of dissatisfaction (such as those expressed most frequently by individuals in the third-party

condition). In other words, targeting specific behaviors as the source of dissatisfaction does not imply that people hold generally negative perceptions of the individual producing dissatisfaction.

Third, people who complained directly to the individual with whom they were dissatisfied may have experienced a greater cathartic release as a result of complaining than people who expressed their dissatisfaction to a third party. Anyone who has ever written a letter expressing their dissatisfaction with another, even if they subsequently tore the letter up, can attest to its cathartic value. A reduction in negative emotionality should be reflected in more favorable ratings of the target of the complaint, as was the case in this study.

Furthermore, data from the study indicated that people complain differently when they complain directly to the source of their dissatisfaction as opposed to some other person. A text analysis of participants' complaints revealed that individuals who wrote about their dissatisfaction to a third party expressed more negative emotionality and used more references to the other person than participants who complained to the source of their dissatisfaction. It is possible that people are less confrontational when expressing their complaints directly to the person who is producing their dissatisfaction. They tend to choose their words more carefully and perhaps select only certain key problems to express. In this way, they can still express their dissatisfaction, but in a way that does not engender excessively negative feelings in the other individual and that does not produce conflict within the relationship.

Interpersonal Benefits

In addition to its personal and relational benefits, complaining also may be interpersonally beneficial, serving as a social lubricant (Kowalski, in press). Complaining can serve as an icebreaker that makes it easier for people to establish relationships initially. Particularly when exposed to novel situations and people, often people feel uncomfortable, nervous, and anxious. For example, feeling anxious and uncertain, people in waiting rooms may complain about the temperature in the room or the long waiting time. Used in this way, complaining allows people to start conversations with others with whom initiating conversation might otherwise be difficult. Complaining provides a script for an interaction that would otherwise, at least initially, be scriptless. Even when interacting with close others, silences during conversations can be eradicated through complaining.

Used in this way, complaining provides a way of bonding with others and even potentially creating coordinated social action. Earlier, I discussed the social contagion of complaining, primarily a negative effect of complaining. However, complaining in a way that makes others aware of their own dissatisfaction can be beneficial when the state of affairs is truly dissatisfying. For example, people in communities whose water supply is threatened by contaminants can present a united front through their joint complaints.

Financial and Material Benefits

Finally, complaining also may be materially lucrative. People who complain to companies about poor service or product defects can receive credits, new products, or coupons good toward the purchase of future products. For example, a recent article in my local newspaper was titled "Complaints can pay, cable customer finds" (1999). The customer repeatedly complained to the company about his inability to receive several cable channels. In response to his persistent complaints, the customer received a bill credit. In yet

another example, a woman who admitted to being a chronic complainer when it came to poor service or poor product quality said that she had received free airline tickets, hotel rooms, and meals in response to her complaints ("Don't get mad," 1997). There are even books available that highlight the benefits of complaining. In *The Joys of Complaining*, Griegson (1998) provides "the complainer's guide to getting even more."

Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this article, the positive psychology movement has pushed for psychologists and researchers to take a fresh look at human behavior, with a focus on that which is positive and satisfying rather than that which is negative and dissatisfying. However, in its emphasis on subjective well-being and factors associated with it, positive psychology has neglected to focus on the positive features of negative interpersonal behaviors. As suggested by Kowalski (1997), every cloud has a silver lining, and aversive interpersonal behaviors are no exception. There is, indeed, positivity in the negativity. After all, if there were no redeeming features to aversive behaviors, personally or interpersonally, then their frequency of use would diminish.

Complaining is certainly no exception to this. The sheer frequency with which people complain highlights the fact that it must have redeeming features. Despite all of the personal and interpersonal risks associated with complaining, people continue to express dissatisfaction daily, even hourly. As outlined in this article, complaining has a number of benefits that affect people personally, relationally, interpersonally, and materially. This is not to say that every instance of complaining, or any other aversive interpersonal behavior for that matter, is necessarily beneficial along one of these four dimensions. And, as with most things, to be effective, complaining should be expressed in moderation. Used sparingly, complaints typically have an underlying positive focus to them. Perhaps this is why, even in the midst of their expressions of dissatisfaction, the majority of people report being satisfied with their lives (Myers, 2000).

References

- Alberts, J.K. (1988). An analysis of couples' conversational complaints. *Communication Monographs*, 55, 184-197.
- Aliske, M.D., Braun, J.C., Glor, J.E., Klotz, M.L., Magee, J., Sederholm, H., & Siegel, R. (1992). Complaining behavior in social interaction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18, 286-295.
- Barsky, A.J., & Klerman, G.L. (1983). Overview: Hypochondriasis, bodily complaints, and somatic styles. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 140, 273-283.
- Bem, D.J. (1972). Self-perception theory. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 6, pp. 157-162). New York: Academic Press.
- Berne, E. (1964). *Games people play*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Birney, B. (1992). *Oh, bother! Somebody's grumpy!* New York: A Golden Book.
- Cantrell, C., & Kowalski, R.M. (1994, October). What type of person complains? Paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Southeastern Social Psychologists, Winston-Salem, NC.
- Carver, C.S., & Scheier, M.F. (1981). *Attention and self-regulation*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Complaints can pay, cable customer finds. (1999, August 25). *Waynesville Mountaineer*.
- Coyne, J.C. (1976). Depression and the response of others. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 85, 186-193.
- Coyne, J.C., Kessler, R.C., Tal, M., Turnball, J., Wortman, C.B., & Greden, J.F. (1987). Living with a depressed person. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 55, 347-352.

- Dattore, P.J., Shontz, F.C., & Coyne, L. (1980). Premorbid personality differentiation of cancer and noncancer groups: A test of the hypothesis of cancer proneness. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 48, 388-394.
- Denollet, J. (1991). Negative affectivity and repressive-coping: Pervasive influence on self-reported mood, health, and coronary-prone behavior. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 53, 538-556.
- Denollet, J., Sys, S.U., Stroobant, N., Rombouts, H., Gillebert, T.C., & Brutsaert, D.L. (1996). Personality as independent predictor of long-term mortality in patients with coronary heart disease. *Lancet*, 347, 417-421.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R.S. (1986). Stress process and depressive symptomology. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 95, 107-113.
- Griegson, J. (1998). *The joys of complaining*. London: Robson Books.
- Higgins, E.T., & Rholes, W.S. (1978). Saying is believing: Effects of message modification on memory and liking for the person described. *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology*, 14, 26-39.
- Howes, M.J., & Hokanson, J.E. (1979). Conversational and social responses to depressive interpersonal behavior. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 88, 625-634.
- Ingram, R.E., Cruet, D., Johnson, B.R., & Wisnicki, K.S. (1988). Self-focused attention, gender, gender role, and vulnerability to negative affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, 967-978.
- Joiner, T., Coyne, J.C., & Blalock, J. (1999). On the interpersonal nature of depression: Overview and synthesis. In T. Joiner & J.C. Coyne (Eds.), *The interactional nature of depression* (pp. 3-19). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Jones, E.E., & Pittman, T.S. (1982). Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. In J. Suls (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 1, pp. 231-262). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Katz, J., & Joiner, T.E. (2001). The aversive interpersonal context of depression: Emerging perspectives on depressotypic behavior. In R.M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Behaving badly: Aversive behaviors in interpersonal relationships* (pp. 117-147). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Kelley, H.H. (1979). *Personal relationships: Their structure and processes*. New York: Wiley.
- Kelly, A.E., & McKillop, K.J. (1996). Consequences of revealing personal secrets. *Psychological Bulletin*, 120, 450-465.
- Kennedy-Moore, E., & Watson, J.C. (1999). *Expressing emotion*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kowalski, R.M. (1996). Complaints and complaining: Antecedents, functions, and consequences. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 179-196.
- Kowalski, R.M. (1997). Aversive interpersonal behaviors: An overarching framework. In R.M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Aversive interpersonal behaviors* (pp. 215-233). New York: Plenum Press.
- Kowalski, R.M. (1999). Speaking the unspeakable: Self-disclosure and mental health. In R.M. Kowalski & M.R. Leary (Eds.), *The social psychology of emotional and behavioral problems* (pp. 225-247). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Kowalski, R.M. (in press). *Offensive encounters: Complaining, teasing, and other annoying behaviors*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kowalski, R.M., & Cantrell, C. (in press). Intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of complaints. *Research in Social Psychology*.
- Kowalski, R.M., & Erickson, J.R. (1997). Complaining: What's all the fuss about? In R.M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Aversive interpersonal behaviors* (pp. 91-110). New York: Plenum Press.
- Leary, M.R. (1995). *Self-presentation: Impression management and interpersonal behavior*. Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark.

- Leary, M.R., & Kowalski, R.M. (1990). Impression management: A literature review and two-factor model. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107, 34-47.
- Mechanic, D. (1972). Social psychologic factors affecting the presentation of bodily symptoms. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 286, 1132-1139.
- Myers, D. (2000). The friends, funds, and faith of happy people. *American Psychologist*, 55, 56-67.
- Ogden, J.A., & Von Sturmer, G. (1984). Emotional strategies and their relationship to complaints of psychosomatic and neurotic symptoms. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 40, 772-779.
- Pennebaker, J.W. (1990). *Opening up*. New York: Avon.
- Pennebaker, J.W. (1993). Social mechanisms of constraint. In D. Wegner & J.W. Pennebaker (Eds.), *Handbook of mental control* (pp. 200-219). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Pyszczynski, T., Hamilton, J.C., Greenberg, J., & Becker, S.E. (1991). Self-awareness and psychological dysfunction. In C.R. Snyder & D.R. Forsyth (Eds.), *Handbook of social and clinical psychology* (pp. 138-157). New York: Pergamon Press.
- Sheldon, K.M., & King, L. (2001). Why positive psychology is necessary. *American Psychologist*, 56, 216-217.
- Snyder, C.R., & McCullough, M.E. (2000). A positive psychology field of dreams: "If you build it, they will come . . ." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19, 151-160.
- Strack, S., & Coyne, J.C. (1983). Social confirmation of dysphoria: Shared and private reactions to depression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, 798-806.
- Wegner, D.M., Schneider, D.J., Carter, S., III, & White, L. (1987). Paradoxical effects of thought suppression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 5-13.
- Williams, K. (1997). Social ostracism. In R.M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Aversive interpersonal behaviors* (pp. 133-170). New York: Plenum Press.
- Yalom, I.D. (1985). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.

Copyright of Journal of Clinical Psychology is the property of John Wiley & Sons Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.