



Could you stop complaining for 21 days?



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How long do you think you could go without complaining? An hour? A day? How about three whole weeks without airing a single grievance?

Six years ago, Will Bowen, a Kansas City pastor, challenged his congregation to do just that — stop complaining for 21 days. In order to make the task easier, he passed out 250 rubber bracelets to the men and women in his church. Whenever they complained, they would switch the purple bracelet from one wrist to the other and restart the challenge at day one.

Almost immediately the idea caught on, and since then it has become a worldwide movement, with more than 10 million people in 106 countries ordering the bracelets from Bowen's nonprofit organization, A Complaint Free World.

Bowen said the idea came to him while teaching a series on prosperity.

"What I find is that people say they want to be more prosperous, they want more in their lives, but they complain about what they have," Bowen said.

Though most people like the idea of giving up complaining, it's more difficult than it sounds. It takes most people 4 to 8 months to complete the 21 days, Bowen said.

"It's just difficult," Bowen said. "I like to joke that complaining is like bad breath: You notice it when it comes out of somebody else's mouth, but you don't when it comes out of your own."

Kansas City engineer Don Perry, 57, said it was months before he reached the goal, even with the support of his wife, who undertook the challenge along with him.

"I didn't realize how much I complained until I started thinking about what I was saying, so it was kind of an eye opener about how much complaining I did and how negative I was in general," Perry said.

In Bowen's view, there are five reasons for complaining, for which he likes to use the acronym GRIPE: Getting attention, Removing responsibility, Inspiring envy, building Power, and Excusing poor performance.

Sometimes a person's motives for complaining can be as simple as connecting with others, such as grouching about the weather to a stranger in the elevator, he said. In similar situations, Bowen suggests instead talking about things that are positive or going well in your life.

"I find that happy people don't talk about what's wrong and what's negative," he said.

Dr. Guy Winch, a psychologist and author of "The Squeaky Wheel," disagrees that complaining itself is the source of unhappiness. In fact, suppressing one's grievances and frustrations can have a negative impact on a person's health, he said.

"The best thing psychologically is not to squelch complaints period, but to choose the ones that matter and to resolve them," Winch said. "It's not about extremes, it's about balance."

According to Winch, the problem is not complaining, but the fact that people are doing it the wrong way. Rather than directing a complaint at someone who can resolve a problem, we tend to grumble to others instead. That only helps increase our negative feelings about the situation.

"When we walk around with a lot of dissatisfactions and frustrations, even if they are small, that does effect us psychologically," Winch said. "It makes us feel disempowered, it makes us feel helpless and it makes us feel victimized."

Conversely, when we address a problem directly and successfully resolve it, whether calling customer service to correct an error on a phone bill or constructively telling a spouse about something that's bothering us, it boosts our self esteem and helps build stronger relationships, Winch said.

Complaining then, is "actually a really important thing, in the sense that when you do it correctly, when you are effective, it's quite empowering," Winch said.

Though A Complaint Free World's 21-day challenge may be extreme, Perry can attest to the way it's made a difference in his life.

"I think I have a better attitude," Perry said. "I have a better understanding of what I'm saying and how it affects people and how it affects me. It affects my happiness level, and I know my family saw a big difference in my behavior, so that was a big plus."

As a mark of his commitment, Perry still wears the purple band six years and several bracelets after first taking on the challenge.

"It's a good reminder," Perry said. "I miss it if I don't wear it."