



# What Happened When I Didn't Complain for 30 Days

Mary Carlomagno January 6, 2016

Mark Twain once said that “habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time.” I have lived by these words, coaxing change in my life by giving up 12 indulgences and conveniences (chocolate, shopping and cellphones among them), one per month for a year. Then I literally wrote the book on my experiences. As I sacrificed something I liked month to month, I unfortunately adopted complaining as a coping mechanism. It was time to stop the carping and rebalance my life, so that’s how I came to accept another month-long challenge: I would not complain for the entire month. Or at least I would give it my best effort.

By the end of day one, I was prepared to denounce Twain's approach and fling him down said steps. But deep down I knew he was right: Ritualistic practices for this exercise required the same level of effort, and the same step-by-step progress, as a concert pianist preparing for a performance. As my childhood flute teacher once said, practice does not make perfect, it makes permanent,<sup>3</sup> something I proved when I kicked my four-cup-a-day coffee habit cold turkey.

Like my coffee challenge, complaining was an ingrained habit. This was most apparent when my kids returned to school for the fall semester; coffee and complaining are early-morning musts on many schooldays. The first day presented a gantlet of obstacles, from my kids' finicky eating habits to constant clothing changes, despite preparation well ahead of day one: a bag packed with a healthy lunch, new school supplies in tow and an apple for the teacher.

I was ready for everything except the complicated drop-off system for parents who drive their kids to school. Before I could say, "Hope you had a nice summer," a wave of panic and insecurity took over. I told my husband, "The car drop-off queue is totally flawed!" What I thought was a simple declarative statement did not resonate in that manner. Yes, I had strayed into... (cue scary music)... The Complaint Zone.

As most parents would agree, the complaint urge begins early in the day. For me, it starts with that step into the shower, when exuberant children play peek-a-boo with the curtain. From the outside, this sounds sweet, planting a memory of the cute faces of my 5- and 7-year-olds. But during the reality of the moment, I told them, "Just give me five minutes, for the love of Pete!"

During my trying month, I realized that smartphones and other computers are the ultimate complaining enablers. These devices make it far too easy to launch a text blast or even (novelty alert!) place a call to gripe to my BFF about the cable man not showing up during his four-hour

window. You can multiply that exponentially if you join in the gazillion social media conversations ranging from religious viewpoints to reality television diatribes to sports. The opportunities to voice opinions in online forums are endless. (Were we all more content before Facebook invited us to vent all over the walls? Or is it simply a natural human impulse to opine on everything that crosses our screens?)

An empty cupboard necessitated my leaving the computer. I sought solace at the supermarket, where the bread aisle turned out to be a trap. Before I could put the brakes on my tongue, I muttered about the high sugar content in bread. A fellow complainer who supported my bread assessment voiced my next thought: “There is sugar in everything,” she said. Complaining not only loves company but is also contagious—and self-fueling.

Once I started complaining, I couldn’t stop: forgotten passwords, misplaced homework assignments, those widowed socks that never find a mate, to name a few.

After struggling through much of this 30-day challenge, a lightbulb finally went on: *If I don’t start complaining, I won’t have to stop.* If I moved through the perfunctory tasks of the day concentrating on finishing them quickly, I reduced the window for whining.

I also found a way to manage my now-reduced urges: I replaced my complaining with something therapeutic, the music of Buddhist monks. And guess what? My day went better. I boarded the happy-mommy train and made all the usual stops—cheerleading practices, birthday parties, soccer games and Cub Scout meetings—amid the chanting of om, namaste and shanti with zero complaints. The mellow sounds served as a relaxation device and as a reminder that neither Buddha nor Krishna nor Gandhi would scream at someone who cut them off in traffic. Like these spiritual teachers, I was living in the moment.

Finding that contented state enriched my life. And the month of no complaining had a bonus for my husband and kids: They were happier, too.

## What is Your "Complaining Type"?

A certain degree of complaining is inevitable, but when it becomes habitual, it can negatively affect your mood and those around you. As Lao Tzu said, "The journey of one thousand miles begins with one step." Your first step is to determine what kind of complainer you really are.

- **Superior Steve**

Steve stands in line at the checkout and mumbles under his breath to others that the cashier is incompetent and slow. Steve may think he's in control, but he is really a victim giving the play-by-play on a situation that won't change unless he reports the problem to the store manager.

- **Donna Downer**

Donna uses complaining as a conversation starter the way most people use hello. Complaining helps people unite over a common enemy and can often lead to bonding, but when Donna types take this too far, they become social pariahs. She sees herself as creating something positive over this shared disdain, but others just want to run for cover.

- **Venting Veronica**

Meet up with her, and you have signed up for Monday morning quarterbacking on everything from a reality-show faux pas to her significant other's slovenly housekeeping. She is that negative friend who can't wait to unload all of life's problems on you. Sessions with her do little besides fostering an environment of feeding on the flaws of others.

## • Bobby Blamer

Bobby doesn't view himself as a complainer, nor does he ever see any fault in his own actions. He spends his time blaming every mishap, mistake or accident on anyone he can find. In that legend in his own mind, Bobby does no wrong.

If you see yourself in one or more of these profiles, pause before you speak. Then filter your words or keep your thoughts to yourself. Take responsibility for your actions and refrain from being a black cloud. Others will appreciate it, you'll radiate more sunshine and less gloom, and you'll strengthen (instead of weaken) your relationships.