

THE LONELY COMPLAINER: How to vent more effectively.

Do you ever feel really frustrated? Life happens, and everything seems unfair. Nothing seems to be going right, and all you want to do is vent.

Who hasn't been there? Who hasn't been cut off in traffic? Who hasn't been asked to do something unreasonable every now and then? Who hasn't been inconvenienced and/or hurt by someone else?

Are what we hope to gain from venting and what might actually help us to overcome a negative experience two completely different things? It might surprise you to learn that the answer to this question is a resounding "Yes."

Everybody experiences anger, frustration, loneliness and fear. When it happens, we want someone to share our sentiments in order to justify our feelings and thus provide emotional support. Seeking validation is our brain's way of trying, in those first few moments after a shocking event, to internalize what actually happened. And we might think that a little validation is all we need.

But what do we really hope to achieve by venting? Does it help us to move on? Or do we merely continue to harbor negative feelings, albeit with a sense of justification?

In fact, when another individual shares our emotions, it amplifies them. It doesn't help us to work them through.

Simply put, we want to feel understood. This helps us to manage our emotions and begin to heal. The reverse is also true; when people feel misunderstood, their negativity tends to escalate.

Scientists are still trying to understand this phenomenon. But we do know that empathy is a basic element of human life – an intuitive capacity with which we are all born. As human beings, we are also innately able to express ourselves. It is essential that we acknowledge our innate capacity to express and to understand emotions.

Still, most people struggle with self-expression. If it's so natural, why is it so challenging? Is it really that difficult to communicate?

Well, it's actually harder than one might think, especially when dealing with anger.

Anger is a strange emotion. It's complicated because it almost never exists in a vacuum. Usually, it includes feelings of pain as well as anxiety – and anxiety does strange things to our thinking process. Many emotions could affect our cognitive ability, but none is quite as taxing as anxiety.

We have all experienced feelings of fear, anger and frustration. What happens in this highly stimulated state is that our brains become flooded with emotion; we become overwhelmed.

How many people can really analyze a situation when they're nervous? How many are able to say the right thing when they're angry? How many can express themselves calmly and rationally when feeling irritated and frustrated?

When stimulated by anxiety, we cannot think clearly. Our brains have an automatic "fight or flight response" to protect us from anxiety-inducing situations. Our biological reaction is either to react in self-defense or to flee. Anxiety's purpose is not to help us to express ourselves; its job is to protect us.

Think about our ancestors on the African plain, coming face-to-face with a saber-toothed tiger. We could not have survived as a species if, when threatened, we had stopped to think about how to articulate our fears. Human beings exist today because they had developed this instinctual fight-or-flight response.

The dilemma is that in modern times, most threats are no longer life-threatening – and yet our response to anxiety has not changed much.

Our ability to moderate anxiety has everything to do with how we perceive threats. We must utilize all of our thinking powers when faced with anxiety in modern times. And that's where things get complicated – but it's also where the solutions lie.

This brings us back to our original topic of venting. It's necessary to consider what could actually improve our situation versus what we might be craving, emotionally, at the moment. If we remember to express ourselves more clearly and to articulate our feelings, rather than just recounting events, the listener might better understand and respond with empathy, which is what we want. If we don't deliver our complaints in feeling terms, we will likely be met with something other than the understanding we crave – silence, defensiveness, or frustration. This is because expressing thoughts about events invites debate, whereas expressing feelings invites understanding.

In other words, we need to throw the ball so that our listener can catch it. If we throw it way out in left field, we can't expect to win. But if we throw it directly to the listener and explain exactly how we're feeling, we significantly increase the chances that he or she will catch it and communicate back to us with understanding. And thus the intensity of our emotions diminishes, the volume is turned down and we begin to feel better. This is actually what we want – to have our anger diminish. And it is only through feeling understood that we will have this experience.

It seems that the anger instinct to protect ourselves is the opposite of self-expression. Yet empathy can be achieved only when feelings, rather than anger, are communicated. Next time the venting urge strikes, try expressing your feelings rather than recounting the events of a situation. Expressing our complaints in feeling terms will go a long way towards helping us get the support and understanding we are seeking.
