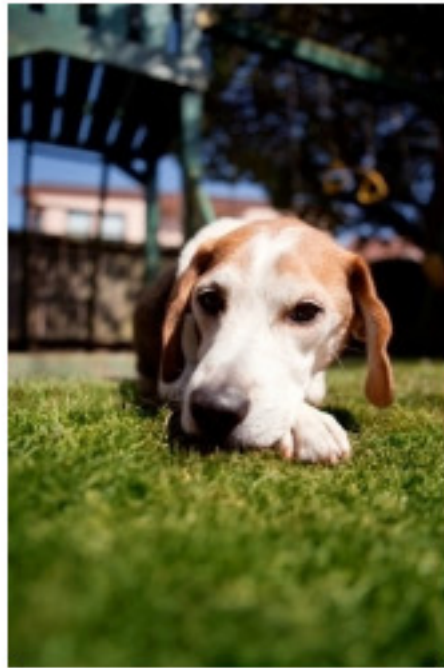



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How to Complain Effectively In Any Situation



Thinkstock

September 1, 2011

By Vanessa G. Ahern for [Woman's Day](#)

Life may give you plenty of opportunities to gripe, but knowing the right way to complain and get a positive result in return can be tricky in most everyday situations. Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., author of *A Happy You: Your Ultimate Prescription for Happiness*, says that by being assertive when an issue arises, you can strike a balance between passively keeping your complaints to yourself and screaming about cold coffee. Ask yourself if the aggravating situation will matter in a week or a month, suggests life coach Valorie Burton,

founder of Coaching & Positive Psychology Institute and author of *Where Will You Go From Here?* If the answer is yes, then learn how to complain effectively by following this situation-based advice.

Your neighbor's dog does number two in your yard... again.

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If you're tired of finding surprises left by [Fido](#), then before approaching your neighbors for the first time, give them the benefit of the doubt in order to avoid a huge confrontation. Try saying, "You guys are probably unaware of this, but your dog has been doing his business all over our yard. Any ideas on how we can keep him out?" Guy Winch, Ph.D., author of *The Squeaky Wheel*, says they are more likely to comply if they don't feel that they are to blame. However, if they insist that it can't be their dog, but you are certain because you saw him commit the deed, then you should let them know. "If the idea of a confrontation is intimidating, you can tell them in writing," suggests Winch. Drop off a simple note stating, "I just wanted to clarify that I saw Rover 'fertilize' my yard several times. I'm letting you know because I assumed you were unaware of what he was doing and I would like to make sure it doesn't happen again."



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A close friend told someone a secret you shared in confidence.

When it is a matter of trust, you really want to use the word "disappointed" instead of "angry" so the guilty party won't counter with something you did in the past that angered her, advises Winch. "Disappointment is more powerful, gets to the heart of the issue, and puts the burden on the other person." Try saying, "I was disappointed to hear that you mentioned Jeff's diagnosis to the receptionist." Realizing she betrayed your trust, she'll most likely apologize for the lapse in judgment. However, if she tries to shift the blame ("You didn't tell me it was a secret"), then it's probably safe to assume that she can't be trusted in the future to keep a confidence.



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Your mother-in-law takes control of your party planning.

Dealing with your [husband's mother](#) can be a very tricky situation, so start with the positive by showering her with compliments, and then return the focus to you. Burton says this strategy will make her feel good while also giving the impression that you want to take over for your own pleasure—not because she is being overbearing. Try saying, "You throw amazing parties, and I know this probably is a snap for you, but I've got lots of ideas and have been looking forward to this for a long time." She should step back and respect your enthusiasm, but if she replies with, "Can't I help with anything?" then tell her you just want her to relax and enjoy the party, and then invite her to a post-party coffee recap a few days later.



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Your husband is chronically late.

Tensions can flare when it comes to hurt feelings, so keep it short and simple. Focus your complaint on one recent incident, getting to the root of the issue without letting it turn into a broader criticism. Say something, like "Maybe we should try a few different time-management techniques, so you don't end up running late, because it ends up stressing us both out." Winch strongly recommends having another talk with him if he dismisses the complaint as much ado about nothing: "I don't say things are important to me all the time, so when I do, I expect you to take them seriously. I promise to do the same when you bring something you feel is important to my attention."



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You catch your babysitter texting when she should be watching the kids.

Though it's probably not likely that the children are in any danger, you should take this as a sign that you need to clarify your expectations of her [job](#), while also letting her know that you understand why she is texting. By using this empathizing strategy, you are showing her that you are in tune with her life, prompting her to listen as well as take action, explains Lombardo. Try saying, "I know your friends are important to you and that you like to keep in touch with them, but I'd prefer it if you reserved your texting for when the kids are asleep." If she becomes defensive or is taken aback by this complaint, then you can say, "I'm sure you understand how, if you were a mother paying someone to take care of your children, you would want the babysitter to be focused on them and their safety," suggests Lombardo. If she has been an amazing babysitter up until this point, then make sure you reinforce how much you appreciate what she has done in the past with a recent example of how she has helped your kids.



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You are not thrilled with a new haircut.

More often than not, there is still something that can be salvaged when a haircut has gone awry, so a contentious conversation isn't going to help.

Instead, try a non-threatening approach that clearly expresses what you want:

"Well, I was hoping for more layers. I don't know if this cut really complements my face like my old style did. Do you have any styling tips?"

Your stylist's goal should be for every client to leave happy so that they're

more likely to return, but if she says, "I really think it looks perfect," at least

she will know how you feel about it—and you'll know to look for a new stylist.



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You spot a mouse scurrying under the table at one of your favorite restaurants.

"The [erroneous] assumption that we make, and that is part of our complaining psychology, is that the manager is fully aware of everything that is going on. Alert the manager. Don't complain to the hostess," says Winch. Even if the vision of a mouse or an unhygienic practice has scared you into never coming back, a constructive complaint could benefit the restaurant (and your community's health). "Restaurant managers know complaints to health authorities can close them down. However, if the manager or owner does not take your comment seriously, you should file a formal complaint with the local health authorities," adds Winch.



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A sales associate, real estate agent, server or other service person is being rude.

Chances are that his rudeness has nothing to do with you—he's probably just having a bad day or is preoccupied with his own life drama—so you shouldn't take it personally. Try defusing the rudeness with a little empathy or small talk. If you are really put off by his attitude, then ask a manager or department head if someone new can help you. "That sales guy and I don't have good chemistry. Is someone else available? I have a lot of questions." If the next employee is rude and the rudeness runs rampant in the store, then remember that this is their issue, not yours, insists Lombardo. You can choose to ignore their behavior or take your business elsewhere—but don't let their behavior ruin your day.



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Someone volunteers you for a project without your consent.

Before fuming at the nerve of that person, think about her motivation; maybe she thinks you are the best person for the task or that you need the exposure. "I appreciate you thinking that I'm a good fit for a project, but I'm overwhelmed now, and I can't take on any new projects" is what Lombardo recommends you say. This type of response will prevent her from trying to guilt you into something you don't want or have time to do. If she replies by noting that your experience and connections are really needed, try saying, "I would not want to work on something that I could not give my all, because it could make things worse." You can help her come up with a solution, but be committed to your decision, even if someone ends up angry because of it.



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A co-worker is spreading rumors about you.

There's nothing worse than finding out the rumor mill at work is revolving around you, so be assertive and confront the source of the gossip. Lombardo suggests starting the conversation by asking, "Is this an OK time to speak?" This way you are being respectful and will know she isn't pressed for time (which could make her more defensive). Be objective and interested—rather than angry and hurt—when you are speaking with her so you can get to the heart of the matter. Try saying, "I heard through the grapevine that there are some things being said about me that aren't true. And I was surprised to hear your name associated with these comments. I can't imagine you would really say these things. Can you help me understand what is going on?" Even if she puts the blame on others or plays dumb, your complaint isn't going to waste. Lombardo says that regardless of her reaction, you have planted the seed that you will not allow others to spread nasty rumors about you. She will (hopefully) think twice about doing it again.

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