



*You can't please everyone and your father.*

De La Fontaine

*It was the first beautiful spring day after a long, cold and dreary winter. The sky was blue with a few sheep clouds and it was nice and warm. There was a light breeze, the birds were singing and it smelled fresh and fruity everywhere. It was all just right. The terraces were crowded and the town filled with the murmur of contented smiling people. It smelled sweet and blissful all around us. We felt everything come alive again and we could not and but sniff deeply and enjoy.*

*Until the first guest started complaining. 'Pooh, how hot is it, isn't it? Is this heat starting already? Boy, what a misery. Pfff! The lady seemed completely unaware of the spring miracle occurring around her. I very kindly pointed out that she was welcome to look around her: the weather was fan-tas-tic, everyone was enjoying themselves! And it occurred to me at that same moment that this form of complaining really shouldn't be allowed. She should be formally be- rised.*

We all complain a lot. Your neighbor complains that your cat was digging in his yard yesterday. Your partner complains that you didn't take out the garbage bags. Your boss complains that your assignment is not finished on time. Your co-worker complains about your boss complaining. Your friend complains about politics in the Netherlands. The politicians complain about each other. Everyone complains about everything and everyone: the weather, your partner, your health, the state of the world, the euro, not enough money, and other people's lots of money. It is never good.

Complaining is part of being human, you might say. Is that so and should we resign ourselves to that? Yes and no!

The American clinical psychologist William Doyle Gentry distinguishes a number of basic ingredients for happiness: security, satisfaction, overview, rest, pleasure, gratitude and well-being. In a prosperous and well-ordered country like the Netherlands, these ingredients are there for the taking, you might say. Yet we complain because we feel unsafe and dissatisfied. Because we are so busy that we lack an overview and cannot find peace. We complain because we lack pleasure. We are easily ungrateful and defy our well-being by living unhealthily. And then we complain about that again.

So yes, complaining is inseparable from the human species, even in the Netherlands. Yet research by the Brit-

se psychologist Adrian White that in the list of the world's happiest countries, the Netherlands ranks fifteenth out of a total of 178 participating countries. So we have been officially declared happy by the we- tology. But you only have to stand in a bus shelter or at a coffee machine for a few minutes to realize that we are nonetheless complaining incessantly. Apparently, the fact that we are happy does not guarantee the absence of complaining!

Complaining is part of it, but no, we should certainly not resign ourselves to it. There are benefits to complaining, of course. It is a relief to grumble when your favorite sports team has lost. Especially when the Dutch team plays a poor game on the way to the World Cup. Then we all grumble. And it feels good to let off some steam when your colleague has taken a turn for the worse. Sometimes we just need to vent. But complaining too much is counterproductive. Professor Martin Seligman, the well-known American happiness expert, researched this. He discovered that complainers live shorter lives, are sick more often, are less successful and have fewer friends. You can also see it in complainers: their face often looks like thunder before the complaining has even started. They don't get any prettier. Not to mention, you and I suffer from all that complaining. It makes you gloomy on the spot. Complaining is contagious.

Fortunately, you can do something about it. In this book I describe what complaining is, what causes it, how you can measure it, how you can actively combat the typical complaining culture in our country, but also how you can reduce your own complaining. In this book I show you how to turn negative energy into positive energy, how to turn complaining into *anti-complaining*.

Anti-complaining is easier than you think, and the more people do it, the better it works. Anti-complaining is contagious. Every complaint that is parried with an anti-complaint has a bonus: the eyes of your interlocutor shine again and the corners of his mouth lift. So you pump positive energy back into your environment, so to speak. And that only makes people more beautiful.

### **The choice is yours!**

As a crisis manager and interim project manager in large companies, it is my daily work to solve problems. I am the flying keeper who is flown in when projects have stalled and no one knows how to proceed.

I invariably begin my work by listening to the stories of the employees and managers involved. And, of course, their stories teem with complaints. After years of listening, I have learned three things:

*Disrupted collaborations and crises, when you compare them, seem very complex and different. However, this is an illusion: they are essentially all simple and the same.*

*The cause of a crisis rarely, if ever, has anything to do with a failing machine (the technology) or a faltering method (the process). The cause almost always has to do with poorly sa- ming people.*

*Complaining solves nothing. Whining and whining only ruin the atmosphere, spread negative energy and reduce the chances of finding a solution.*

Over the years I have learned that by addressing unnecessary complaining I can drastically improve the mood. If I address notorious complainers and encourage them to think positively again, they often take the initiative themselves to solve the underlying problems. And by treating both the employee and the manager equally in this, the result is equally positive at all levels of the partnership.

I wrote this book for everyone who complains and wants to improve his le- ven. But also for everyone who is annoyed by the complaining of others. This book is suitable for you if you want to understand the annoying and harmful effects of complaining behavior and do something concrete about it.

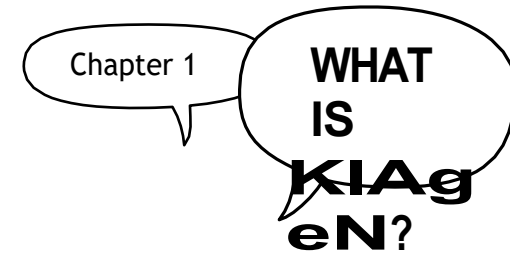
Are you someone who sometimes harbors feelings of dissatisfaction, but nevertheless wants to change? Are you someone who would like to do something about the complaining of others? Are you someone who just wants to feel better and smile more often? Then this book is for you. You will understand what complaining is, where it comes from and what you can do about it. Take advantage of all the tips and tricks. You will see that you can turn into an optimistic anti-complainant and thus have a positive influence on your environment.

However, are you already a born optimist? Then you will undoubtedly recognize your ideas and lifestyle and may be able to sharpen them up a bit. Regardless, for the anti-complainers among us, this book will be a feast of recognition.

Remember: the choice is yours! You can spend your life complaining, or join the growing group of optimists who prefer anti-complaining!

*That same spring evening, I took another walk along the edge of the neighborhood. The air was pregnant with the energy of that first super spring day. The sun streaked low over the houses, painting the surroundings in pastel shades. I got talking to a slightly older woman. "What lovely weather, isn't it?" I said, smiling. She looked a little misty in the distance and said, 'Yes, but I hear it will be over by mor- gen. It's going to rain! Again I experienced a light-*

to shock. "Yes, but ma'am," I suggested, "it's beautiful now anyway! I pointed out to her the sunlit landscape, the birds in the air and the smell of all the sweetness of spring. 'Yes, but still...' she said without a moment's hesitation. 'Yes, but still! Sigh. It's never any good!



*Being satisfied with little is hard, being satisfied  
Being with many is impossible.*  
English proverb

### **About grumbling and whining, nagging and sickening**

Everyone complains, but some people seem to have more right to complain than others. If someone dear to you died at a young age, you have every right to complain that this is terrible: after all, he had his whole life ahead of him. If you get burnt potatoes in a restaurant, it is perfectly normal to report it; after all, you are paying good money for them. But if you enter a supermarket and there is a long line at the checkout, you do not have the right to sigh loudly about the delay. We all have to wait sometimes.

So there are big differences between complaints. What is complaining really?

Complaining is so widespread that a thousand and one synonyms for it have been developed over the years: object, grumble, grieve, moan, lament, lament, mope, grumble, simmer, whine, jeuzelen, jemie, grumble, grunt, groan, crumble, kumble, moan, yawn, re- clam, siepen, stone, support, mourn, fret, urmen, sigh, lament, moan, drunken, drunken, thirsty, threshing, drooling, jerky, hannesen, mayhem, languor, temen, teuten, bran, sigh, sick and said, pity, babble, chicaner, thunder, thunder-jokes, thunder-stones, ramble on, push on, saw through, dremble, drunken, drench, fuss, creep, has-been, has-been, has-been, has-been, has-been, jeuzelen, jengelen, kanenbraden, kli- ren, fiddling, klloothannesen, kwijlen, kieskauwen, lemme, leuteren, lijmen, lazeren, melkken, mieren, mieteren, moeskop- pen, malen, neulen, neuzelen, peeuwen, reutelen, semmelen, talmen, twisten, urmen, ziegezagen, zavelknopen en zag.

According to Van Dale, to complain is: "to express pain or sadness or to express dissatisfaction. Grief after the death of a dear family member clearly belongs to that "expression of pain or sadness. Grumbling at the supermarket clearly belongs to "expressing dissatisfaction. It is complaining for the sake of complaining itself.

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**NoToirE klagErs**

In everyday life, we all know them: the typical nitpickers, vinegars and sacherines. Meet:

**THE sacHEy neighbor**

The moment he sticks his soured head over the fence, you already know: there will be no spontaneous com- pliment about your blooming magnolias or your sparkling begonia flowerbed. And indeed: it is again about your cats digging in his garden. And it's about your children who could be quieter. There is another lamentation about how difficult it is to be on welfare. Your explanation that there are really more cats in the neighborhood than just yours and that the children use the playground in front of the house is of little use. The grumpy neighbor needs to get rid of him and you are in the way.

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Thus, according to the editors of Van Dale, there are two clearly distinguishable forms of complaining. In this chapter I describe these two forms in more detail: lamenting and whining. In addition, I will distinguish a third form: lamenting or complaining.

I have omitted collective protesting as a possible fourth form from the scope of this book, and I also do not discuss the phenomenon of gossiping. I will explain why.

### **Weeping**

*Grieving is venting and wanting to share concerns, distress and pain in order to vent one's heart, seek attention and obtain, maintain or strengthen a bond (for example, in illness, accident, dying and death).*

Weeping I do not treat in depth in this book because it is simply a healthy, useful form of complaining that one should not fight. It is an important social characteristic of the human species. In times of adversity, people start to complain. Especially when there is deep personal suffering. We grieve in misfortune, illness, the dying process and death. No problem or conflict needs to be resolved, but it is a potent to get attention, sympathy, support and hope.

*Marketing manager Peter's very elderly mother died on Sunday. She was buried on Thursday. Although he could hold back his tears am- per, Peter spoke candidly at the funeral about his mother's long and painful illness. A week later, he returned to work. At first he was addressed and consoled by many colle- gues. They listened to his narrative, genuinely involved in his grief.*

*Over time, Peter noticed that people's attention waned when he started talking about his mother. He kept telling how tired his mother had been when she received the bad news about her illness, how hard she had fought, how difficult it had been to get back on track. Wim, with whom he had worked for seven years, stood up and said, "Well, it's not easy. It's hard, I understand, but life goes on! Well, I have to get back to work, I'll see you soon.*

Not everyone understands (and keeps) grieving people. Grieving, over time, is sometimes perceived as nagging. Even in grieving, there is a socially desirable "end to the pain," regardless of the actual feelings of the person grieving. The environment signals that it has been nice. You should go back to "normal. If you don't, grieving turns into whining. Fair? No, the collective hardly takes into account the individual; some mourn longer than others. Socially, culturally and psychologically evaluated laws of manners determine the boundaries between the various forms of complaining and our mutual behavior. Laws that, unfortunately, not everyone abides by.

### **Deplore or complain**

*To lament or complain is the substantiated, purposeful and positive critical reclaiming of poor service, incorrectness and injustice, as well as having arguments, conflicts and disagreements.*

Like grieving, complaining is legitimate because it has a purpose. And as with grieving, when you complain, you don't have to count on your environment being forever understanding.

If the bookstore has delivered the wrong book after a long wait, you may complain and say you are sorry; after all, you had been looking forward to that book. Let them correct the mistake, but don't nag endlessly about it. It was a mistake, that can happen. Making mistakes is human. If you keep complaining, nagging becomes nagging, and that doesn't make you popular.

*Marcel ended up in a wheelchair after a serious car accident. He will never be able to walk again. Because he is the main breadwinner in the family with three children, the family income drops considerably. It has a huge impact on the family and its surroundings. Much support comes from family, friends and colleagues (the family grieves and the environment consoles). Marcel fights the other party through a lawsuit (Marcel regrets and complains). However, Marcel himself is not entirely free of blame either. A complicated legal proceeding ensues, lasting years.*

*Marcel fights against the odds and goes from bad to worse. His wife can no longer stand it, leaves him and takes the children with her. Those around him can no longer keep up with the amount of misery (the willingness to comfort them decreases). He loses the legal case, but appeals, against the advice of his advocate. To anyone who will hear, he complains about the legal system and the injustice of life. He loses*

*the appeal and the case is closed, but Marcel becomes bitter, alienated from his surroundings, lonely and bogged down in his complaining (complaining has become whining).*

Complaining is useful: you stand up for yourself, for example, when a deal is not kept, an agreement is breached or a bad service or product is delivered, whether business or personal. This can range from returning burned potatoes in a restaurant and disagreements in the relational sphere (arguments!) to legal wrangling over warranty terms, business transactions or employment law. And everything in between. But always remember that lamenting can become whining unless you handle it tactically.

*You are having a nice dinner and your tablemate gets burnt potatoes with his main course. He complains about it to you in a whisper (the beginning of nagging, or whining instead of regretting). You respond alertly, "Well, then just say so, won't you?" (You suggest complaining.) Your tablemate responds dismissively, "Well um, no, I'd rather not. But what a tent, that they dare to serve such a thing!" (The nagging is intensified.) You propose to make a claim on behalf of your table companion in an attempt to turn the nagging into a legitimate claim. 'Yes, that's fine. You do it...' You make a tidy complaint to the waiter (by first complimenting the meat, which is excellently prepared), who then apologetically serves the potatoes.*

*still serves up correctly. The circle is complete, nagging is effortlessly promoted to regretting and the complaint is successfully reclaimed. And who knows, maybe next time your less assertive table companion will complain himself...*

Complaining or claiming is subject to limits. You may complain in the short term for obtaining justice or improving your personal relationship. But if you go on wanting to be right for too long or without justice, complaining will backfire. Especially if you do it in the wrong manner, such as by picking a fight. Complaining is only really successful if you do it with a positive attitude. You have to be goal-oriented and determined in character, but you also have to show respect for others and be courteous, just as when arguing. Unless, of course, your goal is to end a relation, because then a lot of different rules and laws apply! If you keep re-claiming in the wrong way or for too long, it automatically turns into nagging and whining (the ge- drag degrades), with all its consequences.

Claiming in the sense of standing up for your rights also has a strong relationship with self-awareness and self-determination, as well as decisiveness, decisiveness and assertiveness (standing up for yourself). By the way, these are aspects of personal leadership that run like a thread through this book. If you want to become anti-assertive, they will come in very handy.

## **Whining and whining**

*Whining and whining is complaining for the sake of complaining itself, complaining without wanting to do anything about the cause. It is complaining with no real purpose; it leads nowhere.*

The third and final manifestation of complaining is nagging and whining. This is what this book is all about. While the first two forms of complaining are (can be) lawful, whining and whining is by definition an unlawful form of complaining. It has no legal basis and it is not socially accepted. It simply serves no purpose other than that it may be pleasing to the complainant himself. Then complaining has become an unlawful personal purpose.

The study by British psychologist White, quoted in the introduction, shows that the Netherlands is fifteenth on the list of the happiest countries in the world. It is a list of 178 countries in total; we score a 9 on the happiness scale. We are happier than, for example, the USA (place 23 = 8.7), Germany (35 = 8.0), England (41 = 7.7) and France (62 = 6.5). Much happier than China (82 = 5.4), India (125 = 3.0) and Russia (167 = 0.6). But surely the most unfortunate is Burundi, lonely and alone in that poor one hundred and seventy-eighth place. Surely one must be heavily burdened with life there.



According to psychologist Doyle Gentry, everyone has the innate talent to experience happiness. There are no people on this planet who are incapable of feeling joy, contentment, peace of mind and well-being, he says. Unlike its counterparts anger, sadness and fear, happiness is a positional emotion. Happiness is what binds us together and is the basis for any kind of civilized behavior.

### **Ultimate complaining**

Paul Ekman is professor emeritus of psychology and has traveled all over the world in his 40-year career. He found the same smiling faces everywhere. His research has helped us understand that emotions are not learned: we are born with them. You can learn how to get a grip on happiness. But to do so, we must first address the behaviors that stem from anger, sadness and fear. Because while we can fight light to moderate complaining very well with stimuli, nagging and whining sometimes takes on malignant forms. It becomes persistent, more chronic.

According to Professor of Social Psychology Roos Vonk, some complainants do indeed open the cesspool quite often. Their stream of complaints is the same every time. No thought is given to a solution. And that is what you want as a listener," says Vonk. Complaining has to have a function, otherwise we quickly get tired of it.

Everyone knows such chronic complainers. They are looking for an outlet. These hopeless cases often have a very poor grasp of what their moaning triggers in others. Spark says their so-called "self-monitoring" is out of control. I call this ultimate or heavy complaining.

### **Protest**

Yes but, you will say, what about protesting? Isn't that also a form of complaining? That's right, and I equate a protesting individual with a complaining individual. However, the collective protesting that I am referring to here is the group protesting in the case of social injustice or labor conflicts, for example. It is then used as a strategic or tactical means to achieve a goal; one can think here, for example, of protest marches or protest movements. Nevertheless, I leave protesting out of the equation. Protesting in itself is a positive form of complaining that cannot be "mirrored" in the sense of anti-complaining. After all, what is the opposite of collective protesting? Doing nothing and resigning oneself to the conflict situation? That can never be the intention!

Whether you are going to protest nuclear weapons, health care cuts, or the planned mass layoff at your employer, protest is actually an organized collective lament. You complain together about the same issue in the hope that the sum of all the complaining individuals will create a crunch-

tiger signal than the actions of smaller groups of individuals.

Peaceful protest against the established order will sometimes, but certainly not always, be successful. However, it is pleasant: for a moment you have a common enemy and that puts your personal complaint temporarily on the background. Moreover, it creates a sense of belonging within the group, just like losing a soccer match to the world championship. After all, shared sorrow is half sorrow! I will come back to this sense of belonging later.

### **Gossip**

But then why not address the phenomenon of gossip? According to the dictionary, gossip or backbiting is "talking about others in an unfavorable way," it is "light-hearted chatter. We gossip when we take pleasure in telling others what we think we know about someone. And we also exaggerate it, Van Dale adds. It is a form of slander. If you say you never gossip, you are lying, says journalist Renate Zoutberg. Everyone gossips about others. In itself, there is nothing wrong with that. It can even be healthy, because you get to know your peers and it creates a bond. But you have to watch your step! You have to be able to sense what you can and cannot share and you have to be able to estimate how someone else will deal with your information.

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### **NoToirE klagErs**

In everyday life, we all know them: the typical nitpickers, vinegars and sacherines. Meet:

### **THE gEsTrEsT maNagEr**

He takes himself deadly seriously, has absolutely no sense of humor and is so tightly bound to his own deadlines that all that comes out is a monotonous grumble. It's never good and the whining is mostly about the daily pressure, the lack of understanding from "upper management" for the problems on the shop floor and his own disappointment in that same workplace.

floor. The stressed-out manager complains about backlogs, overdue reports and departmental staffing. He is closer to crying than laughing and the tie is so tight around his neck that oxygen deprivation is imminent. He has a tendency to constantly look over your shoulder and also to envy the talents of his fellow workers (and yours in particular).

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"Gossip is simply a common way of manipulating others and playing them off against each other," says communication expert Frank van Marwijk. He distinguishes only

liefs twelve types: the chatterbox, the sensationalist, the flap-out, the manipulator, the clicker, the branieschopper, the evil-speaker, the sniffer, the collector, the braggart, the quiet enjoyer and the humorist.

When we gossip, we bend toward each other. We start whispering, because it's actually kind of exciting to gossip. And of course the person in question is not there - that is not the intention! We purposefully want to spread rumors and private information. Gossip goes from mouth to mouth and does not benefit from concrete facts. Unchecked gossip automatically gets worse.

Like grieving, gossiping is inseparable from the human species. It has similarities and some overlap with our topic, but it differs from complaining in an important sense: those who complain seek comfort, satisfaction and attention. Those who gossip seek sensation, chaos and self-affirmation. The latter in particular contains the overlap. The different reasons for complaining or gossiping are really too far apart, which is why I will leave the subject aside.

### **The top ten most popular complaint topics**

People complain everywhere, at home and at work. Whining and nagging can even spread from one environment to another, and the more environments involved in complaining at the same time, the deeper the grumbling can take root.

Listening to all the complainants I encounter, I can discern five fruitful grounds for complaint:

#### *Complaining about yourself*

Here, man complains about problems with sleeping and resting, eating and drinking, income, cost of maintenance and le- ver, housekeeping, personal care, health, spirituality and religion. Here man complains particularly about himself and regularly about others. But also about his place in the (local) world and his impression of its condition. And about general topics such as the weather, politics, traffic jams, public transportation and television.

#### *Complaining about your family*

Here people complain about problems with partners and offspring, parents, brothers and sisters, other relatives or direct blood relatives. And about the families and in-laws of others.

#### *Complaining about your work*

Here people complain about problems in work and career, their own salary and pay, the salary of others, traveling for work (and being in traffic jams) and studying for work. Of course, it could also say "school" or "education.

#### *Complaining about your friends*

Here people complain about problems with good and less

close friends, colleagues, acquaintances and other acquaintances. And about friends of others and the human relations of them.

#### *Complaining about your free time*

Here people complain about the lack or quality of their own time (personal time), hobbies, free evenings and weekends, days off and vacations. But also about the best- ding of other people's free time.

What are we actually grumbling about with so much eagerness? A *hot topic* is the increased loutishness in the Netherlands. For example, Dutch society has had its fill of "loutish Holland. This was shown in a market survey by the research bureau Multiscope. Eight out of ten respondents agree with the statement that anti-social behavior has increased over the past five years. Causes are a lack of attention, the lack of clear boundaries and too few tough measures. But increased individualism is also an important cause.

These are the main annoyances, according to the survey:

- 1 Leading
- 2 Waste dumping
- 3 Dog Poop
- 4 Tailgating
- 5 Spitting on the ground
- 6 Loud music from cell phone, mp3 or car radio

- 7 Hangouts
- 8 Multi-smoking
- 9 Loud cell phone calls in public
- 10 Not getting priority

What I find disturbing in the survey is that the Dutchman is apparently not a hero at offering a rebuttal to anti-social behavior. People avoid situations and do not take action. Only a minority of about a third say they intervene where they can. It is a fine example of complaining about a phenomenon without wanting (or being able) to offer a solution.

Long before the term "loutishness" began to supplant the term "rude" or "antisocial," we were of course eagerly complaining about a wide variety of topics. You have to live like a hermit not to recognize the following top ten complaining subjects:

#### **Complaint topic 1 - The weather**

The weather is a worldwide phenomenon with a very large common denominator: nobody can influence it. This subject of complaint par excellence, which we can all very clearly do nothing about, is the most grateful source of our whining and moaning. But at the same time, it also provides us with a common enemy. We all suffer it again.

but it is comforting if we can grumble about it together. It will be fun under the umbrella after all.

Our fascination with weather undoubtedly finds its ear- leap in prehistoric times. The moment we left our cave, we were immediately mercilessly exposed to the weather. There was no escape, but of course we had to hunt and gather. And of necessity we did so outside. Not only did we suffer from the weather. So did our neighbors. And they also had to hunt. So I imagine a drizzling mor- gen in prehistoric times when two cavemen stick their noses into the wind and the chilly humidity slaps them in the face. Shivers run down their spines and they wrap their bearskins around their shoulders once more. They look at each other, then up, growl and grunt a little, nod in agreement, then shrug, put the spear to the shoulder and make a dash for the hunting grounds. That one growl could just have been the very first common complaint about the weather.

### **Complaint topic 2 - Work**

If we assume a normal work week, a simple calculation shows that of the  $7 \times 24 = 168$  hours, we spend about thirty percent on work. Just consider: if we add another ten hours or so to a nomi- nal workweek of forty hours, we will be able to do the same.

len to get to work at all, we already have 50 hours to deal with:  $50 / 168 = 30$  percent. It gets even worse when we realize that in that same week we also need about  $7 \times 8 = 56$  hours to recover from all that effort during our much-needed sleep. If we do not count these rest hours as "consciously available" (after all, we are "unconscious"), the percentage we spend on work is even higher:  $50 / (168 - 56) = 45$  percent. As soon as we work even a little overtime or are stuck in traffic jams, we go well over half that. No wonder our work is a subject of thanksgiving! Before you know it, we put more time into work than into our own family, relatives, friends and hob- by's.

Not so long ago, the "new way of working" became popular. Laptops, cell phones, high-speed networks and flexiplaces now make it possible to do our work online anytime, anywhere. It would save travel time, boost productivity and provide more opportunities to restore work-life balance. We think we can work less and achieve results more "efficiently and effectively. In practice, however, we actually work more. And then we complain about it. Global research among 25,000 IBM employees shows that employees who can work flexibly from home only feel that work has a negative impact on their work-life balance after 57 hours. If you just work at the office, you get that ge-

feel after only 38 hours. So new workers are actually working much longer hours and therefore spending less time with family, relatives, friends and hobbies. That may be a good deal for the employer, but it does lead to complaining from the employee's loved ones.

### **Complaint topic 3 - Money**

I will come back to this in detail in chapter 2, but we can't seem to get enough of it: money, money and more money! If greed is one of the greatest deadly sins, then that explains why it bothers us so much. We never have enough, we think our colleagues deserve more (but they don't) and there just doesn't seem to be a level on which we can sail on with a satisfied smile. Not to mention, since the introduction of the euro, we are convinced that everything has become at least twice as expensive. It's a shame!

However, research shows that money does not make people happy, or does so only to a very limited extent. However, that does not stop us from considering money as one of the most rewarding sources of complaint.

Greed does bad things to human beings. The more money we get, the more we spend. The more we spend, the more money we need. But how about this: truly "rich" we become only when we stabilize our spending pattern at some point and the increased income does not

spend more on the same things, but on other things. So don't finance that bigger house, that third car or that major renovation, but rather pay off debts, do backlog maintenance and work on relationships. Only very rich people can be blasé about having power, wealth and prestige. But that's because they have it. Because very rich people complain proportionally as much about the problems with money as less wealthy people. Having (a lot of) money is absolutely no guarantee of a complaint-free life.

### **Complaint topic 4 - Holidays**

We work our asses off all year long and then finally we go on vacation! What should be a source of relaxation, rest and new experiences, regularly turns into a vale of tears, followed by whining and moaning to our heart's content. Just take a look at the top ten causes of arguments on vacation that the site [zoover.nl](http://zoover.nl) collected: irritations due to fatigue, wrong expectations of the vacation destination, disagreements about expenses, jealousy, disappointing sex, alcohol abuse, aggravated driving, bad weather and arguments when pitching the tent! More than enough to bother the hearing when we return. But the following year we'll just do it all over again.

*I experienced the most extreme form of vacation complaining while listening to a particularly morbid nitpicker at a party. This wealthy entrepreneur had gathered around him an interested group of louse-terers. He spewed a litany of tales of misery over this group: the accommodation was much too small, the price proportionally much too high, the distance to the beach too great, the swimming pool was not private but had to be shared with other guests, the rental car was worthless and so on and so forth. Only at the end of the story was it revealed that this gentleman was not the victim of a rogue travel agency. Because then there would still be something to complain about. No, this vinegary vacationer had booked this vacation all by himself! He could have stayed in a castle with lackeys, so to speak. This meant that all the subjects of his complaints were initiated by himself. It was the ultimate form of self-flagellation: choosing poorly himself and then whining and whining about it. Bizarre.*

### **Complaint topic 5 - Family**

You probably tend to immediately read "in-law lie" here. After all, we realize all too well that we cannot choose our in-laws ourselves. It comes automatically and completely free with the partner, so we can 'complain' to our heart's content. But we don't choose our own family either! It comes to us just as automatically and completely gratis as soon as we have emerged from our diaper and weaning phase and the hormonal effects of puberty begin.

to feel. The only thing we hopefully still have some control over is the choice of our own partner and whether or not there will be offspring. But even that apparent self-choice is a grateful source of complaining behavior: there is plenty to grumble about in one's own family as well.

Arguing about in-laws can get so bad that it can even result in divorce for real, relationship therapists have told me.

Relationships with in-laws are traditionally difficult because of their interference in the marital life of the children and grandchildren, because they have too high expectations, and because they envy or condemn daughter-in-law or son-in-law. According to experienced couples therapists, what you should not do as a parent-in-law is: condemn, disrespect, argue, blame, compulsively convince, force, complain, personalize and outburst. What you should do as a parent-in-law is: respect, discuss, get expectations clear, set boundaries, think in terms of solutions, positively change and let go.

The latter approach is almost one-to-one similar to anti-complaining, about which more in the next section.

### **Complaint topic 6 - Health**

We are bombarded to death with the mantras: eat a variety of foods, relax on time, don't smoke, drink in moderation and work regularly.

roads. The advertisements in the magazines and on TV are full of tanned, healthy, super slim and muscular men and women who want to sell us one beauty product after another with their incredibly white teeth. We naturally want to be that handsome and healthy too, but unfortunately we are too busy doing other things to live the same life as these role models. Meanwhile, we accumulate a kilogram of excess weight every year, and after twenty years we obviously have no way of getting those twenty kilograms off. Our lifestyle is a fattening assassin. And we moan and groan about it.

A survey by the Landelijk Informatie Netwerk Huisartsenzorg shows that the family doctor is the most popular doctor. Collectively, all family doctors in the Netherlands have 105 million contacts with patients per year. In all those contacts (telephone and personal consultations) they hear about 126 million complaints! That's over 10 million complaints per month or about 2.5 million complaints per week, 35,000 complaints per day or about 14,000 per hour, 7/24. What are all these complaints about?

Topping the list is high blood pressure (5.4 million complaints per year), followed by diabetes (3.4), the pill (2.3), unspecified diseases (2.0), insomnia (1.8), depression (1.6), asthma (1.5), contact eczema (1.5), cystitis (1.4) and cough (1.3). Many of these complaints are well-founded, of course, but surely not all. And you can imagine that

of all these health complaints a good deal of whining and complaining reaches the patient's immediate environment first and only then the doctor. This is a good task for politics: stimulate the citizen's anti-complaints and reduce the workload of the doctor. Yet another million saved.

### **Complaint topic 7 - Traffic**

Every year, the National Police Agency compiles a Traffic Erger Top Ten based on a national survey. This is the top ten of 2010:

- 1 Tailgating
- 2 Not alcohol- and drug-free behind the wheel
- 3 Aggressive driving behavior
- 4 Unnecessary left-hand driving
- 5 Obstructive slow driving
- 6 Prolonged overtaking maneuvers
- 7 Nuisance when merging and exiting
- 8 Passing traffic jam over emergency lane
- 9 Obstructing when changing lanes
- 10 Improper use of turn signal

Interestingly, traffic jams are no longer even in the top ten. Traffic jams are apparently already seen as an inseparable element of travel. Given the massive complaining about traffic jams, it is probably an *über-error* for which a top ten falls short.



The very first traffic jam in the Netherlands occurred on May 29, 1955, Whit Monday, at the Oudenrijn interchange. Back then it was quite a sight. Now, on an average weekday there are about 200 kilometers of traffic jams at the peak of the morning rush hour. We experienced the busiest morning rush hour ever on February 8, 1999, with 975 kilometers of traffic jams due to a thick layer of snow and slipperiness. Besides personal frustration, traffic jams also have painful macro-economic consequences: according to employers' organizations, the annual loss of production due to traffic jams runs into billions. We complain about it, but we now consider it "normal".

Then just take public transportation? Not if you want to avoid complaining. Public transport does not seem to be a good alternative for the grumbling Dutch, because traveling by train and bus also causes a lot of annoyance. Omroep MAX inventoried the top five annoyances: poor hygiene, delays, dirty means of transportation, poor information in case of delays and the cancellation of bus and train rides. Whichever form of transportation you choose, it is an inspiring cesspool for vinegar-sayers. We would almost forget to look at the things that go well in traffic.

### **Complaint Topic 8 - Politics**

During a World Cup, we are all temporary experts and referees at the same time. But in politics

we are all permanently politician, administrator, judge and executor all in one. Because no matter who comes to power: it is never good. The Netherlands is ruined by bickering and nitpicking about the course being followed or to be followed. No minister is good; we denounce the decision-making process and hate its effects. We complain about it until we are blue in the face but often fail to actually sit in the politician's chair. For once, think in terms of solutions instead of problems. How would you handle it? This complaining topic would have a lot more positive energy if we were all forced to think about solutions after expressing concern and emotion.

*Discussions about politics are inevitable. No party goes by without someone shouting something about a well-known minister. We cannot have a cup of coffee for five minutes without someone being indignant about the political state of affairs in the Netherlands. Not so long ago I had to listen to a colleague complain about politics in the Netherlands for a long time. The reason was the irregularities that had been observed in the west of the country during the municipal elections. Soon the story became generalizingly negative. Words like "banana republic," "decline," and "immigrants" soon mixed into the vocabulary. The Netherlands was being 'swamped', their own city was 'degenerating', it was time that 'something was finally being done'... The feeling crept up on me that if you were to take all this literally, you would have to do something about it.*

*Holland was in a very bad way. Nothing was right, we were going down as it was, and there was really no glimmer of hope or relief in the story.*

*In my attempt to move toward a solution (by focusing less on the emotion and impossibilities and more on the facts and possibilities), it soon became clear that he was not interested in any of that. This person was not at all willing to sit in the minister's chair. He just wanted to put his foot down! While I looked for a solution, he became visibly irritated; he did not want to look for a solution, he wanted to complain. Comforting was the remedy here. I stopped "thinking along" and switched to moving along, repeating and nodding. To my conversation partner's complete satisfaction.*

### **Complaint topic 9 - Television**

It used to be annoying if you missed a television program. You couldn't talk about it and were a bit lost. Perhaps it is my nostalgic nature that makes me think that back then we only shared our enthusiasm for the TV shows of yesteryear. Nowadays we seem to be mostly irritated by what the flat screen brings us.

Through the Internet, especially through social networking sites such as Twitter, people enthusiastically complain about advertising breaks that are too long, irritating and loud, the background music chosen to accompany a programme, rapid picture changes and restless images, the

glut of American programs, obvious bedriegery and scams, poor dubbing of children's programs and familiar goofy face-pulling Dutchmen vying for attention and making a public fuss.

*You don't find out how sad the present-day television offerings are until you have completed a few rounds of fruitless zapping. As the zapping pace quickens, you notice that not only do the corners of your partner's mouth foam, but little pieces of your own brain begin to die off. There is, of course, a very simple remedy for so much emptiness, and that's that little button usually found on the top right or left of the remote control: standby! Put your TV on standby, get yourself out, get up and walk! To the bookcase, your musical instrument, brush, quill or your dog's leash. At least the decision to do something else (and more useful) prevents your herself from shooting into complaining mode, after which the evening is really ruined.*

### **Complaint Topic 10 - The**

#### **Hospitality Industry "Was**

*everything satisfactory?" "Yes, it was!*

*'Did it taste good?' 'Yes, fine!'*

Liars we are! Our cappuccino tastes like water to-that the machine is poorly maintained, but we say

none of it. We order our steak raw and we get it cooked through, but we chew happily on. We actually need a megaphone to get the attention of the serving staff, but we tip at checkout anyway. What is that anyway?

Omroep MAX not only investigated annoyances about public transportation, but also about the hospitality industry - complaining is apparently a favorite pastime within their target audience. MAX viewers complained about prices that were too high, music that was too loud, annoying or wrong, long waiting times, uninterested staff and poor hygiene. So there is a lot going wrong in the catering industry, we pay big money when we go out to eat and we complain about it. But we never complain!

Whispering, we share the distress with our tablemates, but when the serving staff appears, we almost look up in shame. It is one of the most interesting discrepancies in the world of complaining: getting bad food and bad service, but saying nothing about it and smilingly tipping. Okay, we "never" return to that establishment, but the hospitality industry itself does not learn from it.

*The most extreme form of bad service I have experienced occurred at an eatery. The four of us were eating there on a Friday after a long work week and we were enjoying the prospect of a nice weekend. The lady who had been assigned to our table was clearly having a fit. She was not to be had at the table,*

*her face was on thunder and her reactions were gruff and irritated.*

*In the service industry in general and in the hospitality industry in particular, 'having a bad day' is taboo: you are not allowed to have a bad day (or at least not show it). The lady in question had yet to learn this, because she had already halved her tip several times during the evening. However, the devil was in the tail. For dessert I ordered a coffee and latte ('separately and without ice please') and waited in suspense. The li-keur came with ice cream and I kindly pointed it out to her. With a loud sigh she snatched the glass out of my hand.*

*When I looked back, I saw that she was using her fingers (!) to scoop the ice out of the glass, place it back on the tray and then just come back with it. That, of course, was the straw. A stern but justified complaint was in order here. It turned out to be the last straw for her as well, as she burst into tears.*

*As it turned out, her boyfriend had broken up with her that night and she was stressed out. She had not been able to cancel because her colleague was ill and she "had" to work. Fortunately we were able to work it out amicably with the restaurant owner and comfort her a little. There were extenuating circumstances, but she did not get a big tip out of it.*

## **Anti-complaining for beginners**

Fortunately, not everyone is whining and zani- ken all the time. Don't even think about it! There are also people who are very positive and naturally good at anti-complaining.

*By anti-complaining, I mean turning negative forms of complaining into positive behavior.*

I will initiate you into anti-complaining by describing this approach using the three main manifestations of complaining: grieving, lamenting and whining. So, as one might predict, anti-complaining is the opposite of these: comforting, praising and inciting.

## **Grieving and comforting**

*Comforting is showing compassion, pity, sharing one's concerns, suffering and pain, empathizing, having empathy (being able to empathize with the feelings of others) in response to grief such as accident, illness, dying and death.*

An anti-complainant provides comfort because he is pleasant company for the grieving complainant who is precisely looking for comfort in his surroundings. When there is grieving, the anti-complainant sympathizes. The complaining is repeated and returned. No

concrete solutions offered (there are none), but there is support and comfort. When we grieve ourselves, we benefit from the comfort others give to us. We like to receive unconditional support from those around us. This strengthens the bond between us.

## **Regret and praise**

*Praise is the giving of compliments in response to a service rendered, a product delivered or a pleasant (personal or business) relationship, always prior to deploring or recla- ning something or someone.*

An anti-complainant will not deplore or complain about something without first offering compliments. After all, there is always something posi- tive to be found in the service or relationship. You first lay a soft carpet, so to speak. This is pleasant for both the recipient of the complaint and the one making the complaint, the anti-complainant. For the former, the complaint is pleasantly captured in a positive context. The admissibility of the complaint is increased, so to speak. For the latter, a pleasant concomitant also awaits. Like giving presents, praising something or someone can give a very nice feeling, even if a complaint is voiced right after.

## **Whining and prodding**

*To excite is to distract, reverse or relativize the complaint. But also: emphasizing the good, the happy, the beautiful, the hopeful by enthusing, always looking for the positive things, the nice aspects or the advantages of a situation. You excite by actively helping to find the causes of nagging and removing them.*

An anti-complainer excites someone to help others get rid of complaining in creative ways. The whole principle of anti-complaining revolves around dispelling gloomy thoughts, creating positive energy and putting the reasons for complaining into perspective. It encourages awareness and gives the complainer hope. Even when nagging and whining threaten to become heavy in weight, a helping hand can be offered. Inciting is literally meant to "nudge," to give a nudge and a wake-up call. But it also protects the anti-complainant from overexposure to negative energy.

## **Ultimate anti-complaining**

Have you ever gone back to a store just to tell them how satisfied you are with the product you purchased? Have you ever spontaneously said to someone, "Gee, you look great today! Have you ever spontaneously said

walked up to the DJ at your favorite pub to tell him he always plays so nicely? When was the last time you told a garbage collector or cleaner how important and meaningful you think his work is?

Such positive actions can be seen as the ultimate form of anti-complaining. Whereas nagging and whining have the complaining as their goal (it is complaining for the sake of complaining), the ultimate form of anti-complaining could be called praising for the sake of praising. So complimenting for the sake of complimenting.

Ultimate anti-complaining is not linked to a complaint or to a specific action, deed or event. You are making an unselfish compliment, so to speak. Unforced and spontaneous. It is the opposite of ultimate or heavy complaining!

People usually react very surprised to this form of praise. In everyday life, we don't hand out so many shoulder pats anymore. Just try it! We don't expect it and that says quite a lot about the way we treat each other. Ultimate anti-complaining is the lid that closes the anti-complaining jar. You can be carefree anti-complaining because unfettered complimenting does all parties good. It's a matter of giving in to your spontaneous impulses. So I would say: do something crazy! Give a spontaneous compliment! Make someone happy for the rest of the day. Small effort, big fun.