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# When Complaining About Your Spouse Crosses the Line

*Griping about some marital issues is completely natural. Until it isn't.*

By Virginia Pelley May 04 2018, 2:38 PM

Complaining is perfectly natural. Even the most Ned-Flanders-y of husbands gripe to friends about their spouses now and then, and for a variety of reasons. They might have a serious complaint or problem they're not sure they can share with their partner yet. They might merely be trying to fit in while hanging with their particularly whiny bros. Or they might just need to vent about their wife's habit of always leaving Starbucks cups and SoulCycle water bottles in the goddamn car.

But despite what you might've read in internet listicles enumerating the relationship complaints you should "never" share with your friends (such as about money or your sex life), there isn't really a broad, easy benchmark to determine whether a complaint is appropriate or "healthy." For one thing, some cultures and religions frown upon sharing details of a marriage, so what might be a record-scratch, TMI-wife complaint to one guy might not raise an eyebrow in another. It might also depend on what you and your partner consider unsharable marital information.

There are some parameters, however, to help you figure out if your bitching is providing you with a healthy emotional release or could be revealing cracks in your relationship foundation.

“It’s not easy to be in a couple, and bitching about little things to other partnered people is probably a good way to let off steam,” says Aline Zoldbrod, Ph.D., a psychologist and couples therapist in Boston. “No one is perfect, and getting social support and validation for the stresses of staying in a relationship past the lust stage is going to make life feel better.”

Venting about your spouse can have psychological benefits, notes Matthew Traube, MFT, a psychotherapist in San Luis Obispo, California. In fact, he says, weird things can happen if you stew and obsess about issues that might feel less weighty if you shared them with a trusted friend.

“When we don’t get to express how we feel, it can almost be pathological to sit with our own thoughts,” Traube says. “We might start feeling worse because we’re filling in blanks with what we think is happening with our spouse, but those assumptions might be inaccurate.”

The mind is complex, and verbalizing issues can create a kind of mental road map to link thoughts together, he explains. If those thoughts aren’t expressed, they remain obscure and might make us feel uncomfortable emotionally. Labeling or identifying how these thoughts relate to other elements of our lives helps create a sense of control so things don’t feel as chaotic, he says.

In other words, a trusted confidante can talk you off the ledge during a gripe session about your spouse, helping you figure out whether your complaint is legitimate or you're being kind of crazy and unreasonable.

"It can be helpful when someone can test the waters and see if what they're thinking or feeling is valid," says psychologist and Harvard University lecturer Holly Parker, Ph.D., author of *If We're Together, Why Do I Feel So Alone?: How to Build Intimacy with an Emotionally Unavailable Partner*. "Or they might be looking for advice in terms of how to respond. A friend can help you figure out 'Am I making too much of this, or too little?'"

As a social species, we're hardwired to share with other people, studies suggest. Having a support network in place in which you can safely share your feelings – even, or maybe especially, in the form of complaints – is so important that increasing a client's social support is one of Traube's first priorities as therapist, he says. A good social network can consist of a close friend or family member or a mix of a few trusted people.

Therapists also provide an outlet for people to express themselves in healthy ways. The key is that your confidantes are people you can trust who won't take sides or pressure you to leave the relationship if you're angry or upset (barring serious problems that merit immediate bailing, such as if you're being abused by a spouse), Traube says. In addition to making you feel better by normalizing issues or helping you to crystallize a problem, working through negative feelings about your partner with a friend might help diffuse a situation before you take your anger out on your partner.

“No relationship is perfect, so getting constructive feedback is helpful,” Traube says.

But here’s the rub: In order to be helpful, the person you complain to needs to be a good listener and as impartial as possible, not someone who hears one bad thing about your partner and suggests you get a divorce: “You don’t want a friend to exacerbate a problem or lead you in a direction that’s unhelpful,” Traube says.

Note that “impartial” doesn’t necessarily mean passive, however. An Arizona University study found that when people complained about a supervisor to someone who merely agreed with them, they stayed angry and felt less hopeful about the situation. But when the listener responded by reframing the complaints in a more mindful way, asking questions such as, “What was your part in it?” or suggesting that they brainstorm a solution, people tended to be less angry and more forgiving about the person they complained about.

You also want to be thoughtful about what you share because friends might influence the health of your relationship more than you realize. Two-thirds of the subjects of a 2010 study said their behavior had an impact on the outcome of a friend’s relationship.

In addition, friends can dislike partners for different reasons, so they’re not perfect gauges of the health of your relationship, Parker says. And although talking about relationship problems with friends tended to be less stressful than discussing the same issues with a partner, researchers at East Carolina University found, they also concluded that discussing problems with others only improved the quality of the relationship when subjects also talked about those problems with their partners. When subjects shared more with their friends than they did with their partners, it tended to harm their relationships.

And although it might be helpful in some ways to get pressing problems off your chest, complaining about heavy issues to people outside your marriage has obvious drawbacks. Your confidantes are only human, with biases and preconceptions. So unless you're complaining to someone outside your social sphere, such as a therapist, what you reveal might color your friend or family member's opinion of your spouse. You might eventually forgive your spouse for cheating, for example, but your friend might take his resentment on your behalf to the grave. A 2014 study found, in fact, that telling others about bad things their partners did had the effect of making them less invested, committed and satisfied in their relationships.

Before unloading complaints about your spouse on someone, it's a good idea to ask yourself what you hope to get out of airing the grievance. And try to dig a little deeper than "I just need to vent!" Some people tend to complain more than others, so it can be useful to take a step back and consider whether you bitch about your spouse like you bitch about your commute or childcare costs, or whether griping is unusual for you and there could be deeper relationship issues afoot.

If you have a tendency to complain, you won't just complain about your partner, you'll complain about lots of things, Parker says: "So before complaining, it can be worthwhile to ask if this is just something you do, or is there something about this person, or something coming up for you that you're truly upset about?"

For example, it's a trivial thing that your wife leaves Starbucks trash in the car, but if it really pisses you off, ask yourself why. Do you feel you'll be ignored if you tell her how much it annoys you? Are you angry because you *have* told her how irritating it us but she continues to do it, a pattern that has popped up elsewhere?

Take stock after griping, too, Parker says. Do you feel a greater sense of clarity and have a better idea of how you want to move forward with your partner, or are you leaving more angry? It might initially feel good and validating to have a friend agree with you that your wife did something crappy, but you might go home seeing your partner in an even more negative light than before.

Look at your use of language, too. Happy couples generally complain about each other only rarely, Parker says, and when they do, they tend to be specific, sticking to events, not a partner's character. In other words, there's a difference between complaining that when you were cooking for a huge dinner party, you were annoyed when your wife forgot to pick up the most important ingredient you needed, and saying, "She is so airheaded and inconsiderate, it drives me f**ng crazy."

Being mindful about why you're complaining can keep you from veering into "microcheating" territory as well.

"Bitching can be really dangerous if you're getting to the point that you feel alienated in your relationship or are not attracted to your partner anymore," Zoldbrod says. "If you're bitching to someone to whom you are attracted, that's a pattern that often presages having an affair."