

Say's reading materials for Group B

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Dear Therapist: My Sister Is a Chronic Complainer

I want to have a good relationship with her, but I feel overwhelmed by her negativity

LORI GOTTLIEB

Editor's Note: Every Monday, Lori Gottlieb answers questions from readers about their problems, big and small. Have a question? Email her at dear.therapist@theatlantic.com.

Dear Therapist,

My adult sister is a thoroughly unhappy person, but according to her, it is because no one in her life treats her well: Her children don't call and visit enough; her friends don't want to spend enough time with her and talk too much about themselves when they visit; she is a widow and is lonely, but none of her friends will fix her up with a man; her boss treats her poorly, etc.

When we get together, her "conversation" with me is a litany of complaints about her life, and I'm concerned that this is the case with others, as well. Needless to say, suggestions from me about changes she can make fall on deaf ears, and I've learned pretty much to keep my mouth shut and listen. However, this does not result in a great relationship, because I dread spending time with her.

Recently, I lost my temper after a three-hour car ride of complaints and told her I thought she should do something to help herself and stop blaming everyone else. This was met with a torrent of tears and protestations. I can see that she does not have a lot of self-confidence, and blaming her situation in life on others is easier than doing something about it. Is there any way I can help her and also maintain a good relationship with her?



BIANCA BAGNARELLI

Dear Anonymous,

Of course, we all go through tough periods in our lives, and many people find it helpful to talk with friends or family about their struggles. But it sounds like your sister has become what therapists call a “help-rejecting complainer.” For help-rejecting complainers, complaining is a way of being. They find comfort in going on ad nauseam about their plight, while giving excuse after excuse about why any suggested course of action won’t make matters any better. They don’t want help; they want your sympathy, and validation for their perception that they’re being treated unfairly and that there’s nothing they can do to improve their situation. And since they

aren't interested in solutions or talking about something else, help-rejecting complainers tend to sap the energy of people who care about them.

Why do some people do this? Many people who relate in this way suffer from an underlying depression, and depression distorts their thinking and makes them feel helpless. People who are depressed also tend to feel lonely, unheard, or unseen, particularly in their pain. They want to connect with others, but if they are also help-rejecting complainers, that can create a vicious cycle. They push people away, then they don't feel heard, so they complain even more, which pushes people farther away. But for the complainer, this is actually a reward: She's just gotten something else to complain about.

To break this cycle, there are a few things you can do. First, pointing out that her negativity might be pushing people away won't help. Help-rejecting complainers don't see themselves as negative people; they see everything out there as negative, and they're simply reacting to it. (That's why if you suggest therapy, which can be very effective for help-rejecting complainers, she'll reject that suggestion, too.) What your sister wants most is to feel heard, so when she complains about her children or friends or boss, the best thing you can do is validate what she's saying, but in a particular way. Instead of just saying, "Oh, that's too bad that your children don't call enough," your job is to over-validate her position.

For instance, you can say: "Your children are so ungrateful. I can't even imagine what it's like to have such utterly selfish children." Or: "Your friends are horrible for not wanting to see you more often. And they sound like absolute narcissists, talking about themselves instead of asking after you. I'm so sorry you have such inconsiderate friends." Or: "It's unconscionable that your friends won't set you up on dates. They have absolutely no regard for how lonely you are. If the situation were reversed, I know you'd be setting them up on dozens of dates with eligible men you know." Or: "Your boss should be fired. I can't believe that HR doesn't have a file of complaints. It's terrible that there's absolutely nothing you can do

to make things better at work. I feel so bad for you that you have to spend the rest of your life in a miserable job.”

Now, the key here is to say this with not a trace of sarcasm—try to sympathize by remembering that your sister truly feels this way. And if you can do that, she will hear her complaints reflected back to her, which will make her feel understood. And once she feels understood, there’s not a lot more to say, and she won’t feel the need to go on and on to get you to hear how miserable her life is. Even better, by over-validating, you’re helping her to hear her complaints differently, and as a result, she may argue with you like this:

“Well, my kids should definitely call more, but they’re not always selfish. In fact, for my birthday they did this nice thing where ...” Or: “Yes, my friends can talk too much about themselves, but I don’t think they’re actually narcissists.” Or: “It’s frustrating that my friends don’t set me up on dates, but now that I think about it, I guess if the situation were reversed, I’m not sure I’d know many single men to introduce them to.” Or: “My boss is awful, but I don’t know if I’ll be there for the rest of my life. I mean, maybe one day I’ll leave, but it probably won’t be for another 10 years.”

Yes, she’s still complaining, but once you stop challenging her belief system, she’ll stop trying to up the ante to get you to see how miserable she is. Moreover, once she hears a heightened version of her complaints, she’ll likely feel the need to correct you—in essence saying, “Yes, all of these people and circumstances are very bad, but they’re not as bad as you described them.” And if she does, remember not to switch to the positive. Don’t say, “Oh, good, I’m glad it’s not that bad.” Instead, continue to be the sympathetic complainer by saying: “Okay, well, it still sounds pretty bad to me.” And then move on to other topics.

If you over-validate her every time she complains, eventually she’ll stop trying to seduce you with her misery, and you’ll stop wasting time trying to give suggestions to someone who’s not interested in changing. And then, sometimes, something magical can happen: Eventually (and this could

take a long time), she might realize she's not as trapped as you are saying she is, or as she feels.

Now, it's also possible that even with your over-validation, your sister will continue to incessantly complain. In that case, you can set a compassionate boundary. It might go like this: "You're my sister and I love you very much. I know you're suffering, and it breaks my heart to see you in so much pain. I wish I could help you, but I think I make things worse by offering suggestions that you don't find helpful. If I can help you with something specific, please feel free to ask. But I don't think that me listening to what's bothering you is helping, because nothing changes after I listen. So I think we should talk about other things from now on."

And then whenever she complains, remind her of your limit and redirect the conversation. She'll either spend less time around you or find someone else to complain to—but in either case, you'll have created a healthier relationship between you two and also helped her, even if she can't yet see it.

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LORI GOTTLIEB is a contributing editor at *The Atlantic* and a psychotherapist based in Los Angeles. She is the author of *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*.