

# How to Deal with Chronic Complainers

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It's hard to be positive and productive when you have someone complaining in your ear all day. Chronic complainers believe the world is out to get them, but the truth is that they may not even know that they complain so much. Here are some helpful tips for handling those that have a penchant for informing everyone about their hardships.

## The Difference Between Negative People and Chronic Complainers

When somebody is constantly complaining, it's easy to think that they just have a negative outlook on life in the same way that a pessimist might. The truth is, chronic complainers are a whole different breed. They may not have a negative outlook on life at all, but they still want you to know that nothing is ever quite good enough. Guy Winch, Ph.D. at Psychology Today [explains the difference](#) perfectly:

***Optimists see:** A glass half full.*

***Pessimists see:** A glass half empty.*

***Chronic complainers see:** A glass that is slightly chipped holding water that isn't cold enough, probably because it's tap water when I asked for bottled water and wait, there's a smudge on the rim, too, which means the glass wasn't cleaned properly and now I'll probably end up with some kind of virus. Why do these things always happen to me?!*

Negative people in general are [notoriously difficult to deal with](#), but the chronic complainer requires a separate approach. In fact, as Winch further explains, *they* don't even see themselves as negative people. In their mind, the world is what's negative, and they only know one way to respond to it. Chronic complainers may even be relatively positive people who don't actually know how to express themselves in a positive light, so it's important you approach them the right way.

## How to Survive a Conversation with a Complainer

We all have to deal with these people every day, unfortunately. This section is about ways to get through the conversation at hand, and we'll cover the long term later on. If you're [forced to work with a chronic complainer](#) or have a family member you just can't shut out, these tips are the next best thing to getting them to stop. If possible, you never want to enable this kind of behavior if you can help it, but sometimes you just have to make it through a conversation alive.

### Listen and Nod

Because validation is the key to shutting down a complainer initially, you need to show that you care about what they're saying. As grating as it might be, do your best to show that you're actually hearing what they're saying. Geoffrey James at Inc. breaks it down into [a simple display](#) everyone is capable of:

*Even if the complaints seem ridiculous and pointless, do not roll your eyes, fidget, or check your email. Instead, nod your head and say things like, "I hear you," or, "That must be really tough." In most cases, complainers wear themselves out in five minutes or less, unless you're stupid enough to add fuel to the fire by suggesting a solution. Don't: At this point, you'll always get a response like, "But that won't work because ..." and the complaining will last that much longer.*

A lot of the time, chronic complainers are the way they are because they don't have anyone to vent to. Sometimes a good venting session is enough for them to get it all out and move on. They want to be heard and—even if it doesn't matter—they want to be treated like a real person. You don't have to say a single thing that actually helps or goes against them. Just listen, nod, and show that you're validating their issues.

## **Validate, Sympathize, Deflect, Redirect**

Now that you've shown them you're listening, you're ready to deploy the ultimate weapons for shutting chronic complainers down. Validation is the number one priority, but once you've done that, it's time to sympathize.

Express sympathy as best you can and try to make it as authentic as possible. People can tell when sympathy is fake, and with complainers that can lead to an "oh great, you think I'm just whining" attitude. It's also imperative you avoid any kind of sarcasm. You might think their complaint is stupid—and maybe even a little funny—but sarcasm will be noticed and create more problems.

Most of the time, validation and sympathy are enough to soothe any chronic complainer, but there are still some things you can do for the really tough cases. Deflection is a way for you to respond to them without shutting them down or telling them they're wrong. Sue Shellenbarger at The Wall Street Journal [recommends these deflection examples](#), courtesy of author and speaker [Will Bowen](#):

- **If they're complaining about a specific person:** "It sounds like you and he have something to talk about."
- **If they're complaining about a something else:** "That's terrible. I don't know how you deal with that."
- **When all else fails, give them a different kind of attention:** "What's going well for you?"

Similar to deflection is the method of redirection. Essentially, you're changing the subject of the conversation without making it obvious that you don't want to hear their problem for the millionth time. Guy Winch writes in Psychology Today that using the task at hand as the focus for redirection is simple, yet effective:

*For example, "The printer jammed on you again? Gee, that's incredibly annoying! I know it's hard to shrug off those kinds of things but I hope you can be a trooper because we really have to get back to the Penske file..."*

Many chronic complainers will snap out of it and get back to what they're doing. They have no intention of actually doing anything about their problem—complaining is a habit—so a simple redirect is all it takes to shift their mindset back on to something else.

## Keep Advice Brief and to the Point

Many chronic complainers are wrapped up in the notion that hardship is just a part of their life. They aren't usually looking for advice despite the fact that they want to share their problems all the time. Even if you gave them a good way to solve their problem, they would probably not be very happy to hear it. If they ask for advice, it's best to keep it short and sweet.

It's also possible that they'll reject your help after they ask for it, insisting that your advice is useless or "not relevant" to their problem. This can be extremely annoying, but if you can recognize it, it's easy to keep from wearing yourself out looking for options. When you recognize a help-rejecting complainer, [ask them how they intend to fix their problem](#). They'll either start thinking of ways to address the issue or leave it alone because they realize that nothing can be done.

## If You Want to Disagree, Do It Right

Most the time it's ill-advised to disagree with a chronic complainer. Disagreement removes any sentiment of validation you may have been trying to convey and can lead to an argument. Still, sometimes a chronic complainer is [so completely out of bounds](#) that someone needs to blow the whistle.

If you want to be the brave one to do it, there's a safe-ish method you can use. Chrissy Scivicque at Forbes recommends [asking this simple question](#):

*"Do you want my opinion?"*

*Human nature makes most people inquisitive enough to say, "Yes" to this question. And then, the person has given permission. They're in control of the conversation. They have asked to hear your thoughts on the subject. At that point, let the person know that you have a different point of view, but don't try to convince them. Make it short and sweet: "I hear what you're saying but I see it differently."*

Now you can disagree without feeding the fire. They've asked for your opinion and you've given them exactly what they asked for. Express how you feel and stay true to it. It might be uncomfortable at first, but eventually they'll move to complaining to someone else when they realize you aren't an ally on the subject.

## Tips for Dealing with Complainers Long-Term

It's important to consider the fact that you can't change somebody's behavior on your own. The chronic complainers are the only ones that have that power. What you can control, however, is how you handle them over time. Here are some ways to save some of your sanity and patience down the road.

## Don't Ever Tell Them That Things "Aren't So Bad"

Chronic complainers are seeking validation in their complaints, not someone telling them they're wrong. Trying to cheer them up with a half-baked pep talk won't help them see what can be done or make things better. Alexander Kjerulf at The Chief Happiness Officer Blog recommends avoiding any kind of [cheer up strategy](#):

*As in "Oh, it can't be that bad", "Come on, cheer up" or the perennial favorite "Time heals all*

*wounds". Saying things like this shows the complainer that you're not taking their pain seriously. When you tell a complainer "it's not that bad", he will often complain even harder to convince you (and himself) that his problems are very serious indeed.*

In the same vein, you never want to suggest that they're overreacting to what's troubling them. Doing so could lead to them finding other things to complain about in order to convince you things really are as bad as they're saying. Now, instead of hearing one complaint, you have five more qualifying complaints inbound to back up their case.

## **Don't Ever Complain About the Complainers (or With Them)**

It's also a very bad idea to complain about them. It can be hard not to when somebody is really bad, but at a certain point you become a complainer yourself. This can be especially damaging if you get caught in the act or if they hear about it through the grapevine. You'll have a chronic complainer that also dislikes you, and that is not a good mix.

At the same time, joining in and complaining along with them isn't as helpful as it would seem. You might think that you're validating their complaint by chiming in, but it can also increase the likeliness that their problem will never be solved. They'll think that their problem isn't just theirs to deal with and assume that someone else might fix it. On top of that, you're encouraging them to continue complaining through your own example. No type of complaining is the answer to complaining.

## **If It Gets to be Too Much, You Need to Draw the Line**

It gets frustrating hearing the same complains over and over while they reject your advice, so it's important to set your boundaries with chronic complainers. Ultimately, you are not responsible for the happiness or well being of others. Dr. Rick Brinkman at Self Growth suggests you [draw the line](#) when things go too far. He uses a fictional woman named Cathy for his example:

*Tell her you like her, you want to support her, and that what you are about to share is because you care about her. Then tell her that you will no longer listen to how bad things are. If she wants to complain or be negative, that's her choice - but you will not be around for the ride. If you hold that line (and if your complainer enjoys your company), she may be inclined to talk about something that is not complaining or negative. Be sure to reward her change of behavior by thanking and appreciating her when she is positive.*

Be strict while enforcing this change and keep a positive attitude. They'll know that you're not upset and they might see that their complaining really has gone too far. Also, if you have the ability, avoid talking to known chronic complainers. There is no reason for you to waste your time with someone who is constantly making you unhappy. People like that can turn a great day into a downer in a matter of minutes, so be strong, and do not engage—repeat, do not engage.

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Chronic complainers are not inherently bad people by any means, but they do need guidance. They can be annoying, disruptive, and rude, but it's possible to keep your cool and help them along the way. Remember that even chronic complainers sometimes expose real problems and other legitimate issues, so you should always give them the chance to explain. Follow up by validating, sympathizing, deflecting, and redirecting, and you'll be all set.