

Complaining in everyday conversations

October 8 2014, by Robin Lally



Complaining has become so pervasive that it creeps into conversations from the dinner table to the workplace.

When was the last time you went through an entire day either not complaining or hearing a friend, colleague or family member whining about one thing or another? More likely than not the answer is probably never.

"Complaining is just one of those very pervasive activities," says Jenny Mandelbaum, a professor in the in the Department of Communication in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers. "No matter what people may say, everyone complains, it is part of human nature."

Mandelbaum and her colleague Galina Bolden, an associate professor,

investigate social interactions between individuals and co-teach a Byrne Seminar, "It's not Fair! Complaining in Everyday Conversation". Created for first-year students, the class examines the good, the bad and the ugly of the common kvetching that has become second nature to most of us.

Those in the small class of 10 students meet for three hours over a five-week period and have the opportunity at the beginning of each class to get whatever they want off their chest: Dorm rooms that are too hot. Noisy students congregating outside their rooms late at night. Broken down cars. Overwhelming academic and personal obligations. Whatever their complaint, these new college students have the opportunity to vent, often times, about the same topic.

"Many times when people start complaining, the complaint can all of a sudden become a topic of conversation and even lead to some new friends being made," says Bolden. "That's because complaints bring people together through a common experience."

Although [social science research](#) indicates that being a regular complainer – or hanging around them – is not good for your brain or overall physical condition and can wreak havoc on your personal life and career, the practice is so prevalent that it creeps into social interactions from the workplace to the dinner table, the professors say.

In the Rutgers Byrne seminar – which introduces incoming undergraduates to the basics of how to conduct academic research – students are encouraged to become careful observers and more aware not only of the complaining they do but also of the complaints that swirl around them every day.

Kara Monaco, 18, a first-semester student taking the one-credit course, said she hadn't thought about the topic much before. "But now, when I hear someone complaining, I think we really do complain a lot," she

says.

Mandelbaum and Bolden work with students by analyzing video and audio recordings. From dinner party arguments over whether or not the baked potato is too hard to a friend complaining about a broken down car or someone making a customer service complaint, the messages in these naturally-occurring conversations provide [students](#) with a better understanding of the act, how we react when the complaint is lodged at us personally and what we think when we hear someone else complaining.

They say complaints are fraught with social complexities: Should you complain behind someone's back? What is the best way to make a direct complaint? Can complaining ever be positive? What is the person complaining looking to achieve?

"Sometimes all the person wants is to be understood," says Mandelbaum. "They just want someone to listen."

Understanding this is key, they say, because ignoring a complaint or complainer is practically impossible. It is better, they insist, to consider the implications and consequences of complaining and learn how to produce and react appropriately to these situations in both your personal and professional lives.

"This class has made it easier for me to understand that I can change the wording when I'm talking to friends so it won't sound like I'm complaining," says 18-year-old Allyson Wagner.

Provided by Rutgers University

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