A good listener is what we seek in our parents, friends and romantic partners as subconsciously; the term is associated with being a good person. Unfortunately, most of the listening we are required to do comprises of negative thoughts, complaints and a whole lot of whining from our loved ones. And while every good relationship indeed relies on effective communication, did you know that exposing yourself to excessive complaining can damage your brain permanently? Yes, being a good listener comes with a price!

According to the New York Times best–selling author [1], Trevor Blake, exposing ourselves to just half an hour of complaining can hamper the part of the brain responsible for problem solving. In his book titled Three Simple Steps: A Map to Success in Business and Life, Trevor mentions that listening to someone complain, actively or passively, begets negativity. In other words, the more you listen to someone criticise or complain the more negative you become about yourself. This includes the most trivial of situations, such as a friend crying over the death of their favourite television character or your mother scolding your domestic helper for excessive holidays. The slightest bit of negativity is likely to make one irritable and difficult to please.

It has been found that amygdala is important in the perception and production of negative emotion [1]. And emotion related behavior like fear response [2]. A prolong increase in signal change is observed in amygdala when people maintain the negative emotional response [3]. The pathophysiology of Post-traumatic stress disorder is associated with greater activation within the amygdala during non-conscious fear processing [4].

Amygdala pairs a memory with a stressful event and stores it in the brain so we can either avoid or deal better with the event in future.

Complaining or listening to complain activates a stress hormone called cortisol in the body which is responsible for shrinking or stopping the generation of neurons in part of the brain called hippocampus [5]. Hippocampus is involved a part of the brain responsible for problem solving and memory.

Hence it is advisable to avoid negative stimulus to stay away from the stress induced cortisol cycle which can lead to negative emotions like fear, anxiety and aggression.

Of course, this doesn’t deter us from whining or maintaining distance from those of our loved ones who whine chronically. “As a supervisor, I encourage my residents to talk to me about their problems,” says Dr Qurat-ul-Ain, a neuro-psychiatrist at the Agha University Hospital (AKUH) in Karachi. “But if someone complains on a daily basis, they are more likely to have an underlying, cognitive dysfunction, mood or personality disorder,” she adds. Dr Qurat-ul-Ain further explains that many of these people have external fears such as being mugged, social anxiety or being disliked in an extended family set up. Such things are out of their control and therefore, they resort to complaining, as a means to vent out pent-up frustrations.

Hena Jawaid, a senior instructor of psychiatry at AKUH, shares a similar view in that she believes constant crying or complaining is unhealthy and may impede rational judgement and thinking. She explains that since the onset of the online culture, social media websites like Facebook and Twitter provide more opportunity for youngsters to complain, promote emotional protests and seek attention, all of which contribute to whining. “Usually a whiner is in a perpetual conflict with his/her inner self, unable to show the aggression, resentment and anger they feel,” explains Dr Hena. She also adds that the failure to vent out on oneself propels the negativity outwards.

However, if we make an active effort, we can help our loved ones by understanding the nature of their conflict, personality,
childhood experiences and social status. Helping them in the area where they find themselves at a loss will make them feel more at ease. As for ourselves, these simple steps can help maintain our sanity:

1. **Getting away:** Whenever you think someone is getting ready to whine, distance yourself and find a quick escape. And in case you find yourself still listening to their grumbling passively, block your mind out from that moment. In other words, disconnect completely.

2. **Offer a solution:** Of course, disconnecting doesn’t mean we desert those close to us. Whenever possible, we should try to solve their issues and if we have no advice to share, ask them what they would like to do.

3. **Accept and appreciate:** We can’t help another if we are unable to help ourselves. It may be hard but it is important to make an active effort towards mending our flaws. A positive change will make us happier in the long run.

4. **Take up a hobby:** Spending time on activities we enjoy will not only make us happy, it will also provide a much-needed outlet for aggression. Exercise in particular, has been proven to release human growth hormone [6] and endorphins, a hormone found in the brain which makes us feel happy.

Lastly, we must remember that we have the power to focus our thoughts in any direction. Mastering the ability to channel them in positively will keep emotional negativity at bay and make us more cheerful.

**References**


5. Sapolsky RM (1992) Stress, the aging brain, and the mechanisms of neuron death. The MIT Press. [Link](https://goo.gl/Xa5ZSu)