

Put a brake on whingeing

By Ruth Ostrow

I HAD a fight with a friend recently. She had rung me up with a plethora of grievances and I dutifully listened making all the appropriate noises: "Oooh", "Oh no", "Mmmm", "Ahhhhh", "He didn't!", "She wouldn't!". "Poor thing." Though I listened patiently for 10 minutes, I started to feel a twinge of anger.

First, because in our last 10 conversations I'd offered practical advice on how to remedy those dilemmas, so I was beginning to feel like a lump of paper receiving a diary entry.

Second, because I think that the way you complain is as important as the complaint. A bit of whingeing is always great for a friendship. US linguist Deborah Tannen described it as "trouble talk" and explained in her masterpiece, *You Just Don't Understand* (Random House), that most female relationships are based on it.

Women in particular love to bombard each other with gripes about husbands children, lovers -- or the pressures of combining all three. It's the harmless and often entertaining stuff that makes the world go around. It's pure intimacy.

But I believe there are silent rules. Whinges have to be amusing, in that the teller of grizzles has to add a slight sense of irony and good humour to the story or alternatively make it dramatic and compelling. There is nothing worse than a boring whinge-teller.

Then there are whinge quotas, usually confined to two or three whinges each, per call. And ideally whining should not take up more than 60 per cent of the conversation leaving room for the equally valuable art of gossip.

We are all whingers. Whingeing and whining is one of life's great pleasures -- be it between girlfriends or in the pub over beers and tears. Wallowing in self-pity is exquisite and a very under-valued emotional state. Listening to other people wallow is equally enjoyable, particularly if the whinge is nothing too serious and can make you feel better about your own life. Many times after listening to the litany of terrible things other friends' husbands have done I have bounded off the phone and scooped mine gratefully into my arms.

One girlfriend's husband made her carry his exercise bike up six flights of stairs, another made a pass at her friend in front of her. My favourite is one who recently fell asleep while frying chips. She came home to find him drunk and unconscious on the couch with black soot all over his face and the kitchen ruined.

Other people's whinges about spouses, children and parents can put your life in perspective. Mother grizzles are my favourite. I have recently been dining out on the story of a friend's mother who has become so senile she gave him a handbag and earrings for his 45th birthday. And similarly I have elicited much enjoyment from listeners as I have recited my own daily dramas. Being a hypochondriac, medical ailments are my specialty.

Like the bull-ant bites I'm now sporting. While trying to do the Buddhist thing and save the creature, it crawled out from the tissue and bit me countless times, hence my fingers are throbbing, purple balloons. Meanwhile, my daughter has

turned red from something she caught at day care called "slapped cheek syndrome" and looks like a giant strawberry. My story of the two of us swollen up like Tweedledum and Tweedledee has had my girlfriends laughing all week, which has lightened my load. Griping and laughter is a magical combo.

But enough is enough. From now on, I am setting up whingeing rules. First, the whinger has a responsibility to try to resolve most gripes in a set time -- by seeking counselling, ringing the plumber, going for a medical check-up -- to make way for new and more interesting whinges. And I'm establishing a whingeing safety limit because, even though I love a good gripe, at a certain point whingeing does become damaging.

In other words, too much whingeing is disempowering because by repeating something over and over it becomes true. You see your husband or wife as inadequate, you start to truly feel a sense of rage about life being unfair.

Whingeing can be as potent as self-hypnosis. And your friends reinforce your "version" with their responses. So I'm lowering content to 30 per cent complaints each conversation.

But I've realised self-whingeing has been the most damaging of all. I'm sick of that whiney voice in my head that is continually reminding me how difficult, impossible and hard my life is. "I'm so tired, I'm so tired," I hear it nagging me as I get up in the morning.

"I can't do this. I'm not good at this," it pleads pathetically as I vacuum the carpet, sit at the computer or try to program the video. These internal voices create a self-fulfilling prophecy, so I'm reigning in the "inner nag".

The phone rings. "My husband is wonderful. I feel fabulous!" I bluster enthusiastically to a girlfriend down the line, as part of the new me. After a few minutes of listening to my unbridled joy, she starts making hideous choking sounds like she's going to be sick.

Okay, I admit it. "Untroubled" talk is going to take a bit of getting used to. Perhaps a bucket by the phone is advisable during these learning days.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

As a Christian who accepts Jesus as my saviour I'm finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile my libido with my faith. I am male in his 40s, very happily married, but my wife has a lower libido than myself. I am filling the gap by reading erotic literature, plus the occasional visit to a massage parlour. As relatively mild and harmless as these sexual peccadillos are, I am getting increasingly uncomfortable that they are interfering with my relationship with God. How do your other readers who have deep spiritual beliefs reconcile them with a healthy libido? Name withheld on request, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

Your column (6/11) reminds me of a magnificent statement made by the late Dr Viktor Frankl in his inspiring book, *Man's Search for Meaning*: "It's not a question of being rich, famous or successful, but Life is a question of being a decent person." Rachael Falk's father was short on kindness, caring and consideration, and, as a result, both he and his family suffered for that deficiency.

Bill Gold

Barton, Canberra, ACT

Dear Ruth,

Re your article From Coven to Couch (30/10): To declare your "kinder-coven" to be loosely affiliated with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn is akin to saying the local hoods at the shopping centre are loosely affiliated with the Mafia. I am an active member of the "craft" and, just like any spiritual searcher, resent my serious efforts to get to know my God/Goddess trivialised condescendingly.

Blessed be.

Dean Gray

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