

How Negativity and Complaining Literally Rot Your Brain

By Dr. Travis Bradberry

Rodent studies have long shown that stress can have a lasting, negative impact on the brain. Exposure to even a few days of stress compromises the effectiveness of the neurons in the hippocampus—an important area of the brain responsible for reasoning and memory. Weeks of stress cause reversible damage to neuronal dendrites (the small “arms” that neurons use to communicate with each other), and months of stress can permanently destroy neurons.

Evidence of the same effect in humans has long been scant. However, recent improvements in MRI resolution mean scientists can now see the same effects of stress in people. Stress is a formidable threat for those of us who want to think clearly, reason effectively, and have a decent memory.

Negative People Are Stressful: Just Ask Little Harry



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Most sources of stress are easy to identify. If your non-profit is waiting to land a grant that your organization needs to function, or you are working on the biggest project of your career, you're bound to feel stress, but the unexpected sources of stress are the ones that can take you by surprise and harm your brain. Recent research from the Department of Biological and Clinical Psychology at Friedrich Schiller University in Germany found that exposure to negative emotional stimuli—the same kind of exposure you get in the presence of complainers and otherwise negative people—caused subjects' brains to have the same emotional reactions that they experienced when stressed. Your brain gets sucked into a negative emotional state when exposed to negative people, and—just like a stress response—the longer you endure this state the worse it is for your brain.

Since stress and negativity lurk everywhere, use the following strategies to help protect your brain.

1. Set Limits with Complainers

Complainers are bad news because they wallow in their problems and fail to focus on solutions. They want people to join their pity party so that they can feel better about themselves. People often feel pressure to listen to complainers because they don't want to be seen as callous or rude, but there's a fine line between lending a sympathetic ear and getting sucked into their negative emotional spiral. You can avoid this only by setting limits and distancing yourself when necessary. Think of it this way: if the complainer were smoking, would you sit there all afternoon inhaling the second-hand smoke? You'd distance yourself, and you should do the same with complainers. A great way to set limits is to ask complainers how they intend to fix the problem. They will either quiet down or redirect the conversation in a



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productive direction.

2. Squash the Negative Self-Talk

Sometimes you absorb the negativity of other people, and other times you create it for yourself. There's nothing wrong with feeling bad about something, but your self-talk (the thoughts you have about your feelings) can either magnify the negativity or help you move past it. Negative self-talk is unrealistic, unnecessary, and self-defeating. It sends you into a downward emotional spiral that is difficult to pull out of. You should avoid negative self-talk at all costs. Be wary of the following two types of negative self-talk in particular and try the alternatives:

i. Turn *I always* or *I never* into just *this time* or *sometimes*. Your actions are unique to that particular situation, no matter how often you think you mess up. Make certain your thoughts follow suit. When you start treating each situation as its own animal and stop beating yourself up over every mistake, you'll stop making your problems bigger than they really are.

ii. Replace judgmental statements like *I'm an idiot* with factual ones like *I made a mistake*. Thoughts that attach a permanent label to you leave no room for improvement. Factual statements are objective and situational, and help you focus on what you can change.

3. Quit Focusing on Problems—Focus on Solutions

Where you focus your attention determines your emotional state. When you fixate on the problems you're facing, you create and prolong negative emotions and stress. When you focus on actions to better yourself and

your circumstances, you create a sense of personal efficacy that produces positive emotions.

4. Get Some Sleep

A good night's sleep makes you more positive, creative, and proactive in your approach to problems. Being well rested helps you deal with your own negativity, and gives you the perspective you need to set limits with complainers and negative people.

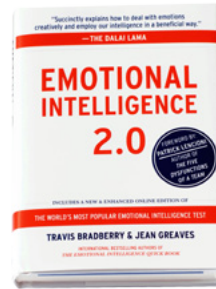
There's a reason the squeaky wheel gets the grease—complainers are hard to ignore. Whether you or they are the source of your stress, apply the strategies above, and you'll remove the power that complaining and negativity hold over you. 🌱 *September 2012*

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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company, Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.



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