

# Complaining Is an Underrated Health Strategy

Why saying the hard thing out loud, to the right people, isn't a character flaw — it's backed by real clinical research.



Not performance. Not forced positivity. Just two people telling the truth about what's actually going on.

WHAT WE'RE USUALLY TOLD: "Well, have you tried..." "Just focus on the good stuff!"

**"Complaining, to the right people, is not a character flaw. It's data."**

— Kristin Lindsley, founder of The Lab

Kristin didn't get that from a productivity book. She got it from watching her own hardest complaints turn into her biggest breakthroughs — a friend's offhand tip about alcohol wipes for nausea, a doctor's visit where she finally stopped minimizing her exhaustion and ended up on medication that changed her life. **Neither of those moments happens if she keeps performing "fine."** Turns out the research backs her up.

## What the Research Shows

### Naming it changes your body, not just your mood

In a landmark review of expressive-writing research, patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis who wrote honestly about their emotions just 15–20 minutes a day, a few days in a row, showed measurable gains in lung function and physician-rated disease severity. People with HIV showed immune improvements comparable to antiretroviral therapy; people with cystic fibrosis spent significantly fewer days in the hospital.

Baikie & Wilhelm, *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* (2005)

### Expression beats endurance

Among patients with chronic rheumatic disease, higher emotional expression was directly linked to lower psychological distress. The researchers found that actively expressing what a disease is doing to you is fundamentally different from passive, avoidance-based coping — and it's the avoidance that predicts worse outcomes, not the expressing.

Zangi et al., *BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders* (2009)

### "Fine" has a cost

In a study of 135 cardiac patients, suppressing illness-related emotions was tied to higher psychological distress, while expressing and reframing those same emotions improved well-being. Separately, in women newly diagnosed with breast cancer, anger suppression specifically predicted higher depression scores — independent of anxiety levels or diagnosis severity.

Karademas, Tsalikou & Tallarou, *Journal of Health Psychology* (2011); Li et al., *BMC Women's Health* (2015)

## The room is the variable

Venting isn't automatically good for you — it depends on who's in the room. A 2022 study found that for people with a lot of existing support, frequent unstructured venting could make things worse over time. But for people without much other support to draw on — exactly the population chronic illness tends to isolate — venting was genuinely protective, measurably lowering anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Trần, Szabó, Ward & Jose, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (2022)

*That last finding is the entire design principle behind The Lab.*

## How The Lab Puts This Into Practice

Every week, a thread goes up in The Lab called **What Sucks Today**. It's built for exactly what the research above points to: venting that's witnessed, not performed into a void and not politely redirected toward silver linings. Three rules keep it working instead of turning into a free-for-all.

- 1 **Say what you need.** Posting a complaint? Say up front whether you want advice or just want to be heard. Sometimes you just need to say the damn thing out loud.
- 2 **Follow the lead.** Responding to someone else's post? Hold the advice unless they asked for it.
- 3 **No Sadness Olympics.** Every complaint is valid. Nobody's handing out medals for Most Miserable.

### FROM "WHAT SUCKS TODAY"

*"Today I had a second mammogram because the first one showed I have 'dense breast tissue' (?!), and I did NOT super enjoy having the sonogram tech go over the same spot for about ten minutes capturing a bazillion pictures. Spoiler alert: not cancer! But it still sucks being in a room with someone who literally cannot tell you the one thing you actually want to know."*

— Kristin, in The Lab

Chronically ill people are sitting on an enormous amount of hard-won, trial-and-error knowledge — and most of it never gets shared, because so many of us have been trained to keep our complaints small and palatable. **The Lab is where that training gets undone, on purpose**, with just enough structure to keep it useful instead of a pile-on.

**Come complain. On purpose. With people who get it.**

*A Skool community for chronically ill people doing real, hard, weird problem-solving together.*

**Join The Lab → [skool.com/the-lab/about](https://skool.com/the-lab/about)**

### SOURCES

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2. Zangi, H.A. et al. (2009). Emotional distress and coping in patients with rheumatic disease. *BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders*.
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4. Li, L., Yang, Y., He, J. et al. (2015). Emotional suppression and depressive symptoms in women newly diagnosed with early breast cancer. *BMC Women's Health*, 15, 91.
5. Trần, V., Szabó, Á., Ward, C., & Jose, P.E. (2022). To vent or not to vent? The impact of venting on psychological symptoms varies by levels of social support. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 92.

Prepared for The Lab. For context and community use — not medical advice.