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From Attitude to Gratitude: This Is No Time for Complaints

By [JEFFREY ZASLOW](#)

David Hirsch hasn't forgotten the unhappy phone calls he used to get from clients back in 1998 and 1999. A director at Credit Suisse Private Banking USA in Chicago, he was carefully investing clients' money in blue-chip stocks, earning them 15% to 20% in annual returns.

But that was a time when some investors were earning 50% or even 100% returns in tech portfolios. Some of Mr. Hirsch's clients pulled their money, grouching that he wasn't serving them well.

Today, though his clients' portfolios are down 35% or more, "I'm not getting complaints," Mr. Hirsch says. "People aren't asking, 'What did you do to my portfolio?' They're asking, 'What do we do from here?' "

There may be a positive byproduct of our troubled times: a decrease in the urge to complain. People who still have jobs are finding reasons to be appreciative. (It feels unseemly to complain about not getting a raise when your neighbor is unemployed.) Homeowners are unhappy that home values have fallen, but it's a relief to avoid foreclosure. And yes, our portfolios have plummeted, but most of us can say that at least we didn't invest with Bernie Madoff.

Even if grumbling is only on hiatus, it's clear that in many quarters, we're seeing a return to Depression-era stoicism and an appreciation of simpler things.

Job satisfaction is actually up, according to a December 2008 survey by Yahoo! HotJobs. Almost 38% of respondents said they were "very satisfied" with their jobs, compared with 28% in 2007, a likely sign that people are grateful they're still employed. And every week now, we hear reports of workers accepting pay cuts or furloughs without complaint -- some of them acts of solidarity to protect jobs elsewhere in their companies.

There is also a growing "noncomplaining" movement that touts the belief that whining doesn't work as a strategy, and that happiness can be found through rituals such as writing in "gratitude journals."

Will Bowen, a minister in Kansas City, Mo., is on a mission. His nonprofit organization, A Complaint Free World Inc., has distributed almost six million purple bracelets emblazoned with the group's name. When wearers find themselves complaining, they're asked to switch bracelets to their other wrists. The goal is to go 21 days without having to switch.

Granted, it's not easy for many of us to fully shake the all-American inclination to complain. Stereotypes are rooted in truth. A lot of young people grumble due to a sense of entitlement. A lot of older people are crotchety because they've been complaining all their lives. (Down in Florida, my mother describes condo-association bickering as "nitpicking in paradise.")

But Rev. Bowen believes the bad economy may be the antidote we need to re-evaluate our lives. "In good times, people often take for granted what they have, and whine about what they don't have," he says. "Bad times make people more grateful."

Rev. Bowen is sponsoring a complaint-free cruise in April, and is also taking 30 congregants to Tanzania this summer to help rebuild a birthing center. "We'll be meeting people who are so happy with so little," he says. "It can't help but reframe our perspective."

Jon Gordon, a leadership trainer and author of "The No Complaining Rule," has collected research showing that gratitude reduces stress and improves health. Every morning, he takes a gratitude walk and thinks positive thoughts. He offers seminars to help people "change a complaining voice to an appreciative heart."

Some people today may be smartly cutting back on complaining because they recognize it can be detrimental to their careers, says Sherene McHenry, a professor of counseling at Central Michigan University. "It isn't safe or wise to complain at work these days. When determining who to let go, nonunionized companies first get rid of complainers and those who are difficult to be around."

Ultimately, you can't control the economy or whether you're laid off. And it's easy for the experts to rhapsodize about gratitude. But there are merits to tempering your complaints.

Dr. McHenry encourages us to write down three things we're grateful for every day -- no matter how simple they might seem. "Some days," she says, "the list might be as basic as oxygen, food and shelter."

Email Jeffrey Zaslow at jeffrey.zaslow@wsj.com

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