

Is Bitching Good for You?



We all love a bit of goss – but we often tend to feel a bit guilty afterwards. Time to relax, says **Jaime Waddington – psychologists are claiming that having a bit of a rant is actually good for us!**

One of the reasons *Mean Girls* resonated with so many of us was because we all saw a bit of ourselves in the characters. I'm not talking about deciding whether butter is a carb, or wearing pink on Wednesdays – I'm talking about their kneejerk stab-in-the-back bitchiness. Because let's face it: we all bitch.

Whether it's having a moan about an irritating friend or criticising the boss in front of your colleagues, there's nothing quite as soothing as letting off steam behind someone's back. Yet sometimes that eagerness to tear someone down can leave a nasty taste in your mouth, and a feeling in your heart that some things are better left unsaid.

But what if I told you psychologists have discovered that a good bitch isn't just therapeutic – it's a crucial part of human bonding?

It's human nature

Despite bitching's dodgy reputation, evidence suggests we need to stop feeling bad about it. 'When we talk about someone behind their back, the reward is the feeling of emotional closeness in the moment with the person with whom you are gossiping,' says Johannesburg clinical psychologist Chantal da Cruz. 'The emotional connection is achieved by being open and vulnerable, and by possibly receiving validation and empathy. It's also satisfying – you feel a sense of community and belonging in the moment.'

That bond tends to be even stronger when the information is negative. Why? Because it's more risky to share a negative view, so the trust between you and that person becomes even greater.

Bitching is not a new social phenomenon by any means, going way back to when we first evolved from primates and developed the ability to speak. Gossip replaced grooming (the bonding ritual of primates) as an important way for individuals to interact. Robin Dunbar, a professor of evolutionary psychology at Oxford University, believes

conversational speaking is a uniquely human phenomenon in which at least two-thirds of the topics can be defined as gossip. 'Gossiping is just chatting with people and keeping up to date with the social world in which you live. So, gossip is what makes us human,' he says.

It makes sense: language is, after all, our primary way of socialising. It allows us to communicate, it brings us together, and it helps us form relationships. If you can talk to someone with ease, you're bound to form a relationship with them. And the best friendships start with chats – talking about a common interest or about mutual friends or colleagues.

Before you take this news to the extreme and go on a bitching extravaganza, remember that, like anything, gossiping can be damaging when taken too far. 'Taken to extremes, [bitching] can be harmful,' Dunbar says. 'But I think its primary function is to maintain the stability of the little community to which you belong by establishing a collective view. If so-and-so is behaving in a way you think is wrong, you hope that, eventually, they'll get to hear of it through the group.'

It's social currency

'If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me,' writer Alice Roosevelt Longworth once said. It's a great quote ▶

– but if we look deeper into it, we start to wonder what we actually gain by listening to gossip. When someone spills the tea to us, we gain social capital. Even if we have no intention of using that info in a destructive way, and have zero desire to taint a person's reputation, the mere act of *having* the information makes it incredibly satisfying.

What's even more satisfying is sharing it. 'When we know something other people don't, we have a strong urge to tell them and break our isolation as the secret-keeper,' says Da Cruz. Scientists at the University of Pavia in Italy have also discovered that the brain releases significantly greater proportions of the hormone oxytocin when we gossip than when we engage in other forms of conversation. Oxytocin is often described as the pleasure hormone: it's released when we're aroused, during and after sex, during mother-child bonding, or when we touch one another.

However, what is gained by bitching is ultimately what makes it so dangerous. 'There are many reasons that motivate people to gossip,' says Da Cruz. 'These vary from wanting to understand and figure out how we feel about social events to actually wanting to hear others' opinions and solutions to assist in our own processing. Or they could be more self-centred motives such as power and status.'

This is where things can go horribly wrong. An Ann Landers advice column once characterised gossip as 'the faceless demon that breaks hearts and ruins careers'. When we bitch for selfish reasons – or share lies or presumptions to get ahead – we get into trouble.

Be gossip-wise

Sharing intimate information with another person is a sign of trust. Whether you choose to trust the person with whom you are sharing the information or trust yourself to keep the information to yourself is within your control. 'Gossiping often contains an element of judgment, breaking down the trust between the two people involved,' says Da Cruz. 'It's a case of, "If you can judge *her*, then you might judge *me*."'

If you're looking to spill the beans, keep the words of Jo'burg clinical psychologist Ingrid Nagaya in mind: 'Gossip that's untrue, harmful and instrumental in creating doubt rather than building trust moves a meaningful relationship beyond reach.'

Now that social media and e-mail are involved, bitching has become much more complicated.

In fact, it's pretty much always a bad idea to send a snarky e-mail – you never know whose hands it could end up in. But whether it's digital or not, we all need to be more conscious of the way in which we share information.

'You need to become more aware of the impact and the consequences – short- and long-term – that gossiping has on your relationships,' says Da Cruz. 'Become more selective in what you share and how, as well as the intentions or motives behind it. Most importantly, you need to remember not to add the element of judgment when talking about or sharing the secret you feel you are carrying.'

Be kind, be considerate and try to understand why people do what they do – and why you are doing what you're doing.'

When trying to figure out how to bitch in the right way, Nagaya's advice is that you remain 'intentional'. 'Be true to yourself and the people you represent in your discussions,' she says. 'Make sure that you express facts as facts, rather

8 RULES FOR GOOD GOSSIP

- 1 Be selective with whom you choose to gossip.
- 2 Try to identify your need and how gossiping will resolve it.
- 3 Make sure it is not vindictive or revengeful.
- 4 Try to talk about things without adding the element of judgment.
- 5 Stick to the facts.
- 6 Do not gossip on social media.
- 7 Look at the consequences for the other person of gossiping about them to the person you're gossiping with.
- 8 Consider the person you're gossiping with. Will they need to be a secret-keeper? Do you need to find someone more objective?

than replicating opinions as facts. Use gossip to inspire others around you to be a better version of themselves. Lend credibility to people who truly deserve it in order to build up their reputation. Don't follow the masses in their opinions of the popular. Decide for yourself – and use your voice as your agency to spread *good* gossip.' ■

How to Deal with Gossip

Those who represent you in a particular way may be envious or jealous, or find you intriguing or a threat. Try not to take it personally – if you do, you're at their mercy.

Centre yourself and reflect on whether there is any truth to what's being said about you. If there is and you feel that it is an area of development, figure out how you can learn that skill. **If there's no merit to the gossip**, confront the source – and consider seriously the space they currently occupy in your life.

If it's someone you trust, perhaps it's time to rethink that particular relationship. All relationships in your life should be mutually beneficial. **If you don't have a close relationship** with the source, reflect on why it's important for you to deal with it at all. It may have nothing to do with you.