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SAVI® : Focus on Square 1 – Complaints **by Drs. Juli and Rolland Fellows**

SAVI®, the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction, was created and developed by Anita Simon, Ed.D. and Yvonne Agazarian, Ph.D. References to SAVI® are used with permission.

Many of us have a love-hate relationship with complaints. We love to complain and yet we hate to hear others' complaints. Complaints can be satisfying to the person who's complaining, but they undermine the morale of an organization. People who are the target of repeated complaints, such as customer service or technical support staff, may begin to feel depressed or apathetic and not realize the source of those feelings.

In a clinic setting, patients often complain because they are overwhelmed emotionally and are looking for something to target, because they don't have the skills to express themselves differently, or because the healthcare system reinforces their helplessness about getting what they want. It can be additionally frustrating for staff because patients with a complaint often don't see that they have some responsibility for the problem. A patient who forgot yesterday's appointment and came in on walk-in today complains "I've been waiting two hours". Another patient who didn't follow the instructions on taking her medicine complains that "This medicine didn't do me any good" If this happens often, the healthcare staff may lapse into the same complaining behavior.

Anita Simon, co-developer of SAVI®, says that complaints are messages "in code" about what we want to be different in the real world. Complaints contain two kinds of information. The first is that we are displeased about something in the world. This information is obvious in the words of the complaint. The "hidden code in the voice tone of a complaint is the person's assumption that nothing can be done about the disappointment. This "nothing can be done" is conveyed by the whiny tone. (It may help to think of whining as anger through a small hole.) The whiny discharge of our feelings is what makes complaining feel so satisfying. Complaints allow us to vent uncomfortable feelings without requiring action or risk on our part. Imagine the dialogue below.

Person A: Here's another stack of charts in the wrong place. Those nurses just don't care that we're the ones held responsible when they can't find something.

Person B: Yea, yesterday I found some lab reports under the phone book. And the doctors are even worse. They leave stuff everywhere.

Person A: They all take us for granted, like we're their mothers or something. Always waiting on us to clean up after them!

Clearly both person A and person B don't like it that doctors and/or nurses don't put papers in their designated place. What's disguised but powerful is the message that this problem will never get any better and there's no use trying. If the situation is hopeless, persons A and B don't have to take any responsibility for problem-solving. They can keep doing just what they're doing without having to take risks to give direct feedback. They don't have to change their behavior in any way. No wonder complaining feels good – it lets us off the hook while letting us unload our fear or anger about the problem!

Anyone who's ever tried to problem-solve with a person who's complaining quickly gets the "hopeless" message. Here's an example of someone making proposals to a person who's complaining.

Person A: Here's another stack of charts in the wrong place. Those nurses just don't care that we're the ones held responsible when they can't find something.

Person B: Have you tried talking to them?

Person A: That's no use. It works for 5 minutes and then they're back to their bad habits.

Person B: You could go to the supervisor.

Person A: She's too busy to care about our little problems. The way they load her down with work, she could work 18 hours a day and still not get it done.

In both examples the listener soon feels like complaining and feels a sense of hopelessness. The challenge for the listener is to avoid jumping into the complainer's world, but rather to step back and listen. Next month we will explore ways to listen for the person's wants, their disappointment, frustration sadness or fear about not getting their wants, and how to respond to angry hopelessness. It is through green light behaviors that you connect to the other person. In connecting you create the possibility of helping the other person look at their assumptions about the event and open them up to the opportunity for problem-solving or truly facing the loss in their disappointment.