



DEFEATING MEDIOCRITY: A CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTINE LEWICKI

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Christine Lewicki is the founder of the company O Coaching Inc., based in Los Angeles, California. Author of the bestselling book *I Quit Complaining* (with more than 300,000 copies sold), Christine is also a certified leadership coach, speaker, and Mastermind group facilitator. As a global entrepreneur, her clients hail from the United States, Canada, Asia, and Europe. Several media outlets, alongside her respective clients and peers, have constantly commended her work at O Coaching. Christine takes part in a wide array of panels, radio programs, and television shows; she was interviewed on France Inter, Europe 1, RTL, RMC, Sud Radio, Radio Bleue, France 2 and Direct 8 and 6, and her articles have been published in the French press, including *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Marie France*, *Top Santé*, *Psychologie Magazine*, and many others. More can be learned at her [website](#). She is being interviewed by Grégoire Canlorbe.

Grégoire Canlorbe GC): Your passion is to help “ordinary people” create “extraordinary lives.” You write, “by cultivating modesty, we end up cultivating mediocrity.” What is the origin of our all-too-common psychological docility towards the limiting ideal of modesty, which hinders us from honing our talents and obtaining personal achievements? What rituals and concrete resolutions do you recommend to help us escape our comfort zones?

Christine Lewicki (CL): We very often impede ourselves from developing our unique personality and renouncing what animates us deep down in our hearts because our parents and our respective societies have inculcated the importance of modesty. We are also ultimately taught to make ourselves small. We, therefore, gradually lose that connection that renders each and every one of us unique; and when there comes a time to finally disclose it—when we need to know who we truly are, when we want to know what we can bring to this world, we find ourselves distraught.

What is often named a “comfort zone” is something I would rather label a “mediocrity zone,” because the “comfort” that is referred to here is the one felt when nurturing an exaggerated form of modesty. It may seem paradoxical, but despite the frustration and the anger resulting from a life of not reaching our high expectations, there is still something reassuring and satisfying in a humble and easy life, even if it is very often too bleak.



Christine Lewicki.

I would say that the first thing that makes our "mediocrity zone" comfortable is the reassuring feeling of being accepted by a group. Handling our lives often means distancing ourselves from a few people, which means asserting who we truly are rather than embracing the image others have formed about us. Moving forward in our projects, formulating our own ideas—these increase the risk of being mocked, harassed, envied, or even excluded by others. Taking the lead in our life sometimes requires leaving behind the image others have of us, and thus, the comfort of social cohesion.

What makes the mediocrity zone that appealing and captivating is that it is also easier to remain passive, to give our dreams up, to satisfy ourselves with what we already have, even if it does not fully make us happy or content. Maintaining control of our lives, achieving projects that we hold dear, inspiring cooperation and respect are all appealing things, but they demand courage and work. Oftentimes, we tend to avoid overthinking and changing anything in our barely satisfying lives.

In addition, it is comfortable to be able to point the finger at the culprit and consider ourselves as victims of other people's nastiness, lack of comprehension, or simply bad luck. This approach is comfortable because it erases our responsibility. By assuming at the outset that "it is always someone else's fault" if our dreams do not come true, if life is boring, if the unexpected is annoying, we likewise

give up having more power in our own lives. We admit that we do not feel capable of turning around the established order in our existence and that is it easier and more tempting to wallow in the idea that "it is never our fault anyway."

To escape one's comfort zone requires going through three concrete resolutions: first, accept to be more independent of the people around us; second, renounce the pleasure of living a passive and convenient life that does not necessitate effort and overcoming challenges; and finally, stop running away from responsibilities and blaming others for our misfortune. I frequently claim that brilliant and talented individuals were once mediocre and hesitant to change their habits. Going out of one's comfort zone is never easy, but it is worth the trouble.

GC: In your book [*I Quit Complaining*](#), which has also been a bestseller in France, you describe complaining as a toxic habit, which impedes us from becoming the best version of ourselves. You invite your readers to get rid of this poisonous attitude—and to start by taking up the challenge of not complaining at all for 21 days in a row. Could you remind us of why you make the case that complaining is detrimental, psychologically and socially speaking? What are the forms of anger that help us acquire the actual power to inspire respect, foster cooperation, and unleash our potential?

CL: When we complain about the coffee machine that does not work, about the e-mail that does not open, about a partner not answering phone calls, an employer lacking empathy or professionalism—it first has a concrete physical consequence in that it consumes a lot of energy. At the end of the day, we go to bed exhausted and drained. In addition, this habit illustrates how we are on automatic pilot and allow the victim's position to take control of our daily life. By adopting this systematic position, by reacting mechanically as a victim to everyday hazards, our cognitive mechanisms get directly affected.

Steven Parton, the author of [*"The Science of Happiness: Why complaining is Literally Killing You."*](#) explains that the habit of complaining alters our brain's synapses and is even more damaging to our mental health than we think. Within our brain exist synapses, which are little zones in between two neurons or nerve cells assuring the transportation of information from one cell to the other. The space where these synapses are located is an empty space called the synaptic cleft. Every time we have a thought, a synapse sends a chemical product through the synaptic cleft towards another synapse, creating hence a "bridge" on which an electrical signal can pass while transporting the relevant information at stake.

The problem—as explained by Parton—is that every time this electrical charge is launched, the synapses get closer together to reduce the distance the electrical load has to travel through. The brain creates its own circuit and changes physically to facilitate the sharing of electrical signals and help the thought's activation. Therefore, having a thought makes it easier for the brain to channel another thought, which means that ultimately our minor complaints enhance other complaints subconsciously. These synapses brought closer day after day make a person an unpleasant and embittered individual, who is a slave to everyday hazards and always ready to point a finger at others due to his or her misfortunes.

As our complaints multiply, we bring closer the pair of synapses that represents them. When we are confronted with an ordinary frustration in our daily life and we must choose an appropriate reaction, the winning thought will be the one having the least distance to go through, the one that creates the most quickly a bridge between the synapses. As a result, we are trapped into a spiral of negativity that we passively allow to control us and make us miss the potential richness of our own lives. We embody the role of the victim, which constantly spreads its control on our reactions to events.

There are, however, healthy forms of anger. It is possible to live and express anger without it becoming a complaint, without having to adopt the position of the victim. I would say that a healthy manifestation of anger can be identified thanks to two things. Anger must first come from a deliberate choice of letting oneself fully feel the emotion, the choice of letting it express itself inwardly, instead of trying to contain or ignore it. Once one unleashes and then decreases the anger and everything surrounding it—disappointment, confusion, hatred—once one has let the storm abate on its own, it is then possible to step back and avoid making bad decisions.

To live one's anger in a healthy way is also being able to address others without conveying a victimizing discourse. It is being able to tell the other that "this is not what I want, and I would like it to change." The main principle is to emphasize the "I" rather than the "You" in the discourse. "I disagree, and I would like it to be otherwise": this is the way to inspire cooperation and incite others to take our needs into account. This position is completely different from blaming others—"You annoy me!" "You did not understand anything," "It is always the same thing with you," "I've been asking that a hundred times!".

By confining yourself to a discourse emphasizing the "you," you maintain the victim's position. Why? Because this approach does not allow us to think of ourselves as equal to the one we consider guilty. Instead of inciting cooperation, we let the other decide whether to ignore our request or take it into

account. The other party is not encouraged to respect us, and even worse, the solution of the problem is put in his or her hands. To take care of our quality of life starts by giving up our comfort zone, a humiliating position, when interacting with other people. It starts by avoiding this mentality of victimhood and accusation. The challenge is certainly difficult. But sooner or later, if we hold on to it, our efforts will be rewarded.

We have on average 60,000 thoughts on our minds every day. That corresponds to around 40 thoughts each minute. 95% of these thoughts are the same as the ones of yesterday or even the day before, and 80% of those thoughts are, by and large, negative. However, scientific research also shows that positive thoughts work as efficiently in the opposite direction, which reveals that to stop complaining, we must celebrate our everyday life, assert our personality, and call for others' respect is anything but pointless. In fact, this allows us to work our cerebral muscles, our synapses, and nurture them with seeds of serenity, pride, and optimism that will allow the development of our mental and social well-being. The scientific phenomenon works both ways. By consciously doing an effort for three weeks, or 21 days, we can gradually readjust our brain and launch a virtuous circle.

GC: When it comes to our vitality at all levels, we all seem to go through phases of ebullition and numbness, including women. At the peak of their exuberance, women exhibit a conquering energy, a sense of control, and an insatiability that even Robert Palmer celebrated in his song "Hyperactive." "She's got a date for lunch in Singapore, holds stock in I.B.M. and hates Dior. Well, she puts her make up on at 6.00 a.m. She goes to work, gets home, then puts it on again. And it's a mystery how wild that girl can be. She's got so much energy. She's such an expert at surprising me. She's hyperactive when she starts to dance. She's so attracted to a wild romance. And I'm persuaded by her argument. She's hyperactive." How do you think a keen understanding of the psychical cycles of women helps them multiply the richness and magic of their everyday life?

CL: It is true that sometimes, we wake up in the morning with the feeling that everything is possible, and we indeed accomplish a lot during this kind of day. While on the other hand, some days we stand on the other end of the spectrum: we are barely optimistic and see the glass half empty rather than half full. We even lack energy, ideas, and creativity to overcome the challenges we are beset with.

It may be a hormonal cycle or just simply "the cycle of life," but the reality of daily life is that we all, men and women, go through those ups and downs. And I think it is an illusion to assume that we can always be in excellent form. It is rather a strength to be able to accept having good and bad moments. When

we hit rock bottom, I advise that we accept to embrace it fully: let anxiety, boredom, or frustration pass through, as I was saying a little earlier about anger.

I also recommend taking care of our flame deep down inside and carefully avoiding it from being put out while going through a bad time. To achieve that, we need activities and rituals, daily meetings with ourselves, as I see it, to nourish this flame and revive our blaze even when we feel disappointed. It may be dance, yoga, outdoor walks, meditation but also krav maga, climbing, drawing, being passionate about manga, spending privileged moments with one's cat.... one can think of a wide array of examples! It is up to each one of us to find the occupations that allow our inner light to shine every single day of our life, and not only during relatively positive moments.

GC: When it comes to the practice of meditation, it is sometimes said that a number of perverse effects are linked to an excess in indolence and passivity. For instance, Thomas Jefferson did not hesitate to warn one of his friends that his "love of repose [would] lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around [him], and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues." Do you think that an excessive or clumsy practice of meditation may indeed lead to such a state of inner, psychological inertia?

CL: I have to admit that I have never heard of this before, according to which meditation would lead us to become "lifeless." The reason why meditation is popular today is precisely that we have never been asked to pay attention so much. We are harassed, that is, on our phones and screens, by emails, Facebook messages, tweets. We are stimulated by a lot of different things that demand our attention: the media, reality shows, the school our children attend; clients, friends, or family.

In the numerical era, never has it been easier to ask persistently for someone's attention. We are being asked about everything on all sides, so much so that we do not know where our priorities stand anymore. We are like chicken whose heads have been chopped off. Meditation is what helps us reconnect with what serves as an inner compass. What we truly need today is to sort out all those requests, all the possibilities, and information surrounding us to know where to direct our attention to. Meditation affords us this opportunity to prioritize, which is paramount to our well-being and daily performance.

The idea is not to meditate for the sake of meditating, but the contrary. It is not about going through “transcendental” spheres but instead coming back to the playground that life is. Meditation allows us to reconnect with our inner compass, and it thus gives us a sense of direction. It does not transform us into lifeless people, but on the contrary, helps us to be the architects of our respective lives.

GC: Thank you for your time. Would you like to add anything?

CL: I have noticed that nowadays personal development is a fashionable subject: more and more people and companies have been interested in it. It is a wonderful opportunity to uplift humankind. More and more people buy personal development books, attend lectures on the subject, or watch videos. Yet what I have also observed is that many of these people still feel frustrated or stuck because there is an initial obstacle that they have not yet overcome, which is their position as victims in life.

While we stay in that dynamic/attitude—pointing the finger at those we find guilty and holding others accountable for our daily miseries, we cannot gain control of our lives. Once will stop considering ourselves as victims, however, then we will be able to take advantage of the lessons taught in the books that we read, the videos we watch, and the lectures we attend. The doors will finally be open and our lives will be transformed.

The French version of this interview appeared in *Agefi Magazine*.

Featured image: "Clytie," by Frederic Leighton, painted ca. 1895–1896.

