No Need to Stew: A Few Tips To Cope With Life's Annoyances

When Seth Shepsle goes to Starbucks, he orders a "medium" because "grande" -- as the coffee company calls the size, the one between big and small -- annoys him.

Meg Daniel presses zero whenever she hears a computerized operator on the telephone so that she can talk to a real person. "Just because they want a computer to handle me doesn't mean I have to play along," she said.

When subscription cards fall from magazines Andrew Kirk is reading, he stacks them in a pile at the corner of his desk. At the end of each month, he puts them in the mail but leaves them blank so that the advertiser is forced to pay the business reply postage without gaining a new subscriber.

Life can involve big hardships, like being fired or smashing up your car. There is only so much you can do about them. But far more prevalent -- and perhaps in the long run just as insidious -- are life's many little annoyances.

These, you can do something about.

To examine the little weapons people use for everyday survival is to be given a free guidebook on getting by, created by the millions who feel that they must. It is a case study in human inventiveness, with occasional juvenile and petty passages, and the originators of these tips are happy to share them.

"They're an integral part of how people cope," said Prof. James C. Scott, who teaches anthropology and political science at Yale University, and the author of "Weapons of the Weak," about the feigned ignorance, foot-dragging and other techniques Malaysian peasants used to avoid cooperating with the arrival of new technology in the 1970's. "All societies have them, but they're successful only to the extent that they avoid open confrontation."

The slow driver in fast traffic, the shopper with 50 coupons at the front of the checkout line and the telemarketer calling at dinner all inflict life's thousand little lashes. But some see these infractions as precious opportunities, rare chances for retribution in the face of forces beyond our control.

Wesley A. Williams spent more than a year exacting his revenge against junk mailers. When signing up for a **no** -junk-mail list failed to stem the flow, he resorted to writing at the top of each unwanted item: "Not at this address. Return to sender." But the mail kept coming because the envelopes had "or current resident" on them, obligating mail carriers to deliver it, he said.

Next, he began stuffing the mail back into the "business reply" envelope and sending it back so that the mailer would have to pay the postage. "That wasn't exacting a heavy enough cost from them for bothering me," said Mr. Williams, 35, a middle school science teacher who lives in Melrose, N.Y., near Albany.

After checking with a postal clerk about the legality of stepping up his efforts, he began cutting up magazines, heavy bond paper, and small strips of sheet metal and stuffing them into the

business reply envelopes that came with the junk packages.

"You wouldn't believe how heavy I got some of these envelopes to weigh," said Mr. Williams, who added that he saw an immediate drop in the amount of arriving junk mail. A spokesman for the United States Postal Service, Gerald McKiernan, said that Mr. Williams's actions sounded legal, as long as the envelope was properly sealed.

Sometimes, small acts of rebellion offer big doses of relief.

"I've come to realize that I'm almost addicted to the sick little pleasure I get from lashing out at these things," said Mr. Kirk, 24, a freelance writer from Brooklyn who collects and returns magazine inserts.

When ordering a pizza from Domino's, Mr. Kirk says he always requests a "small," knowing that he will be corrected and told that medium is the smallest available size. "It makes me feel better to point out that their word games aren't fooling anyone," he said.

The Internet offers a booming trade to help with this type of annoyance-fighting behavior. For example, shared passwords to free Web sites are available at www.bugmenot.com to help people avoid dealing with long registration forms. To coexist with loud cell phone talkers, the Web offers hand-held jammers that, although illegal in the United States, can block all signals within a 45-foot radius.

Mitch Altman, a 48-year old inventor living in San Francisco, said that in the last three months he has sold about 30,000 of his key-chain-size zappers called TV-B-Gone, which can be used discreetly to switch off televisions in public places. "When you go to a restaurant to talk with friends, why should you have to deal with the distraction of a ceiling-mounted television?" Mr. Altman said.

Some Web sites specialize in arming people against online annoyances. The site www.slashdot.org posted the name and the mailing address of one of the worst known spammers, encouraging people to sign the spammer up for catalogs and other junk mail to be sent to the spammer's home. Mr. McKiernan of the Postal Service said that this tactic also appeared to be legal, but might constitute harassment.

Some groups are more frustrated than others. In 2002, Harris Interactive, a market research group based in Rochester, conducted a phone survey called the Daily Hassle Scale that asked 1,010 people to rank the aggravations they faced in a typical day. The survey found that poor people and African-Americans suffer the most stress from the everyday annoyances such as noisy neighbors, telemarketers and pressure at work, but it did not explain why.

Sometimes, the resistance to these frustrations is organized.

Work slowdowns are methods commonly used by labor unions to apply pressure without actually striking. During the Solidarity movement in Poland, people expressed their disapproval of the government-run news media by taking a walk with their hats on backward at exactly 6 p.m. when the state news program started. When the government noticed the trend, it issued curfews, but people then put their televisions in their windows facing outward so that only the police walking

the streets would see the broadcasts.

"You have to remember, in Poland during those years showing up drunk at work was seen as a patriotic act because people hated the bosses so much," Professor Scott said.

But even on less coordinated levels, shared frustration is often the augur of counter cultural trends. Mr. Shepsle said he took great solace in discovering his irritations with Starbucks' lingo summed up on a popular T-shirt in Chicago. The shirt, which mocks the pretentiousness of a certain Chicago neighborhood, features two names. Next to Lincoln Park it says "Tall, Grande, Venti." Next to Wicker Park it says "Small, Medium, Large."

"It's nice to know I'm not alone," said Mr. Shepsle, 28, who works for a theater company in Manhattan.

Most people participate in this sort of behavior on some level, Professor Scott said, adding that his own habit was to write "England" rather than "United Kingdom" on letters he sends to his British friends. He described this as his way of disregarding British claims to Wales and Scotland.

"As a tactic, it doesn't amount to much except a way to provide a tiny and private sense of satisfaction," he said. "But that's something."

Copyright 2005, The New York Times Company
Record Number: 108DA8C7DCDE1251