**Background articles to passive aggressive behaviour**

What is Passive Aggressive Behaviour?

Written by listed counsellor/psychotherapist:

[**Andrea Harrn MA MBACPCounsellor/Psychotherapist and Clinical Hypnotherapist**](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/counsellor_22165.html)

[](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/counsellor_22165.html)

Passive aggressive behaviour takes many forms but can generally be described as a non-verbal aggression that manifests in negative behaviour. It is where you are angry with someone but do not or cannot tell them. Instead of communicating honestly when you feel upset, annoyed, irritated or disappointed you may instead bottle the feelings up, shut off verbally, give angry looks, make obvious changes in behaviour, be obstructive, sulky or put up a stone wall. It may also involve indirectly resisting requests from others by evading or creating confusion around the issue. Not going along with things. It can either be covert (concealed and hidden) or overt (blatant and obvious).

A passive aggressive might not always show that they are angry or resentful. They might appear in agreement, polite, friendly, down-to-earth, kind and well-meaning. However, underneath there may be manipulation going on - hence the term "Passive-Aggressive".

Passive aggression is a destructive pattern of behaviour that can be seen as a form of emotional abuse in relationships that bites away at trust between people. It is a creation of negative energy in the ether which is clear to those involved and can create immense hurt and pain to all parties.

It happens when negative emotions and feelings build up and are then held in on a self-imposed need for either acceptance by another, dependence on others or to avoid even further arguments or conflict.

If some of this is sounding familiar don’t worry – we all do some of the above from time to time. It doesn’t make us passive aggressive necessarily nor does it mean your partner is.

Passive aggression is when the behaviour is more persistent and repeats periodically, where there are ongoing patterns of negative attitudes and passive resistance in personal relationships or work situations.

**Some examples of passive aggression might be:**

**Non-Communication**when there is clearly something problematic to discuss

**Avoiding/Ignoring**when you are so angry that you feel you cannot speak calmly

**Evading**problems and issues, burying an angry head in the sand

**Procrastinating**intentionally putting off important tasks for less important ones

**Obstructing** deliberately stalling or preventing an event or process of change

**Fear of Competition** Avoiding situations where one party will be seen as better at something

**Ambiguity** Being cryptic, unclear, not fully engaging in conversations

**Sulking** Being silent, morose, sullen and resentful in order to get attention or sympathy.

**Chronic Lateness**A way to put you in control over others and their expectations

**Chronic Forgetting**Shows a blatant disrespect and disregard for others to punish in some way

**Fear of Intimacy** Often there can be trust issues with passive aggressive people and guarding against becoming too intimately involved or attached will be a way for them to feel in control of the relationship

**Making Excuses** Always coming up with reasons for not doing things

**Victimisation** Unable to look at their own part in a situation will turn the tables to become the victim and will behave like one

**Self-Pity** the poor me scenario

**Blaming** others for situations rather than being able to take responsibility for your own actions or being able to take an objective view of the situation as a whole.

**Withholding**usual behaviours or roles for example sex, cooking and cleaning or making cups of tea, running a bath etc. all to reinforce an already unclear message to the other party

**Learned Helplessness**where a person continually acts like they can’t help themselves – deliberately doing a poor job of something for which they are often explicitly responsible

Passive aggression might be seen as a defence mechanism that people use to protect themselves. It might be automatic and might stem from early experiences. What they are protecting themselves from will be unique and individual to each person; although might include underlying feelings of rejection, fear, mistrust, insecurity and/or low self-esteem.

Patterns of unassertive and passive behaviour may have been learnt in childhood as a coping strategy possibly as a response to parents who may have been too controlling or not allowing their child to express their thoughts and feelings freely. To cope, a child might adopt a passive-aggressive behaviour pattern.  For example if a child was ridiculed, put-down or punished for openly expressing their feelings or disagreeing with their parents the child would learn to substitute open expression for passive resistance - agreeing with what mum or dad said in order to be a “good child” or not speaking out honestly or at all. If there was a consistent pattern within the family of punishment or rejection for asserting themselves the child would learn to become highly skilled at passively rebelling. An example of a child rebelling might be around toilet training, withdrawing from family conversation, choosing subjects at school to please parents and then not working hard, around eating and mealtimes - all causing worry and upset to the parents who may have no idea their behaviour is a contributory cause to the problem.

**Passive Aggression in the Workplace**

In the workplace a passive-aggressive employee or employer may use these techniques as a form of control and/or intimidation. The worker might sulk, make faces, scowl inwardly when given jobs to do or may agree politely and then take ages to do them. By doing so, he they are showing annoyance in the hope they will not be asked to do those tasks again. Employers can also use passive aggression when confronted with employee problems, turning a blind eye, not facing facts or dealing with genuine cases of bullying and intimidation. This avoidant behaviour can be very damaging to individuals and teams of individuals within organisations.

**Consequences of Passive Aggressive Behaviour**

In being passive aggressive you are not giving yourself or others an opportunity to listen to what you think or feel

When on the receiving end of passive aggression, you can feel confused, upset, offended, guilty and frustrated. You may think you’ve done something wrong, but have no clear idea what it was

It avoids communication in a very negative way

It creates insecurity in all parties

It creates a bad atmosphere between people

It is a form of conflict where either both or one party cannot engage sensibly in the issues

It avoids the real issues

It creates negative feelings and resentments in an unassertive way

**Tips to help you overcome the effects of passive aggressive behaviour**

If you have got this far in the article then passive aggression is an area of interest to you and possibly a problem in your life or the life of someone close to you.

Five tips for overcoming your own passive-aggressive behaviours:

* Become aware of the underlying feelings causing your behaviour
* Become aware of the impacts of your behaviour and how your desire to defeat others, get back at them or annoy them creates yet further uncomfortable feelings for yourself
* Take responsibility for your actions and reactions
* Try to not feel attacked when faced with a problem but instead take an overall objective view of the situation
* Learn to be assertive in expressing yourself. You have a right to your thoughts and feelings so communicate them with honesty and truth and strengthen your relationships

Five tips for coping with the passive-aggressive behaviour of others:

* Become aware of how passive aggression operates and try to be understanding towards your partner
* Explain to your partner how their behaviour towards you is affecting you. Communicate calmly without blaming – i.e. talk about how you feel and what you think without using language that will enflame the situation more. For example you might say “I feel upset by your behaviour” rather than “you’ve done this or that”.
* Be aware of your responses to others and yourself– do not blame yourself for the behaviour and reaction of others
* Be honest about your part in the situation
* If the aggressive behaviour of others continues to affect you in a negative way, set clear boundaries around yourself – rules for what you will and won’t accept. Stay strong and focused and get on with your life in a positive way.

**The Secret To Dealing With Passive-Aggressive People (Huffington Post)**



Ah, passive aggression. The best way to handle conflict.Not.

There's a reason why passive-aggressive behaviour gets such a bad rap. Not only is it supremely frustrating for both parties involved, but it's also incredibly unproductive to the passive-aggressive person -- because his or her needs aren't actually ever acknowledged or addressed.

And for the target of the passive aggression, experiencing this kind of behaviour can "make you feel like a crazy person," explains Scott Wetzler, Ph.D., vice chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences at Montefiore Medical Center and author of [*Living With the Passive-Aggressive Man*](http://www.amazon.com/Living-Passive-Aggressive-Man-Aggression-Boardroom/dp/0671870742). "You're being told what's happening isn't happening, and there's something very withholding about the interaction. You know something is going on, and he's denying it."

At its heart, the behaviour "really is a **sugar-coated hostility**," Wetzler tells HuffPost. "So instead of someone who’s actually going to assertively reject something you ask them for, these folks ... indirectly don't do what's expected of them."

Passive-aggressive behaviour, while expressed in many different ways, has the same roots: There is an underlying **fear and avoidance of direct conflict, yet a feeling of powerlessness and helplessness**. The result? An unspoken power struggle, that can appear in several different ways. Some potential manifestations:

* Sarcasm
* The silent treatment
* Withholding of intimacy
* Withholding of praise
* Being critical
* Sabotage
* Running late
* Not doing something that's asked of him/her

Sometimes these passive-aggressive behaviours are intentional -- because the passive-aggressive person wants the other person to engage in conflict first -- but other times, it's not intentional at all, says California-based therapist Andrea Brandt, Ph.D., author of [*8 Keys to Eliminating Passive-Aggressiveness*](http://www.amazon.com/Keys-Eliminating-Passive-Aggressiveness-Mental-Health/dp/0393708462) and [*Mindful Anger: The Emotional Path To Freedom*](http://www.amazon.com/Mindful-Anger-Pathway-Emotional-Freedom/dp/0393708942). "They **find people who enable them**," Brandt explains to HuffPost. They act passive-aggressively toward people who won't call them out, she says, and who have very weak boundaries.

Sometimes people are passive-aggressive because of how they grew up, Brandt says. For example, people who grew up in a family where one parent is dominant and the other is subservient may be more likely to engage in passive-aggressive behaviour. "They learn that powerful and volatile people cannot be approached directly, but it's OK to lie to them, or keep secrets to get what you want," she explains. "For example, we've all heard this: 'We won't tell your father.' That's passive-aggressive behaviour."

While everyone exhibits passive-aggressive behaviour from time to time -- all you have to do is think about the last time you said "yes" when you meant "no" -- there are some types of people who seem more likely to engage in it. People who are avoidant and afraid of conflict are more likely to be passive-aggressive, as are people who are low in self-esteem and self-confidence "because you've never been given permission to have your feelings, especially your anger," Brandt says.

**So how can you best deal with a passive-aggressive person?**

**1. Identify the behaviour for what it is: hostility.** "The big thing there is to recognize the phenomenon, the behaviour, for what it is -- to see it as a kind of hostility and not be fooled by the innocuousness, the sugar-coatedness of it," Wetzler advises. "Once you recognize it's a sign of hostility, it emboldens you to deal with it."

The biggest mistake people make is to be lenient. Once you give in to passive-aggressive behaviour, you lose your options, he explains. "It's critical to see it as a power struggle, and then use the typical tactics one might use in a power struggle."

**2. Set limits -- and then follow through.** Make it clear that you won't tolerate being mistreated, Wetzler says. If a person is constantly late and it bothers you, make it clear to the person that next time she is late meeting you for a movie, you're just going to go in without her. "That's a kind of limit-setting," Wetzler says. "It's also [a way of saying], 'I'm not going to pay the price for your behaviour.'"

**3. Talk specifically -- not generally.** If you're going to confront a passive-aggressive person, be clear about the issue at hand. A danger of confrontation is that statements turn too global -- phrases like "You're always this way!" won't get you anywhere -- so it's important to confront the person about a specific action. For instance, if the silent treatment is what gets on your nerves, explain that a specific incident where you were given the silent treatment was considered a hostile move. "Call a spade a spade," Wetzler says.

**4. Practice assertive communication.** There's aggressive communication, there's passive communication, and there's passive-aggressive communication. None of these is as effective as assertive communication, Brandt says.

Assertive communication means being assertive and nonreactive, yet respectful. "You have a sense of confidence, you're collaborative, [there's a sense that] you both want to resolve the problem, in a 'win-win' sort of way," she says. It's also important to listen and not inject accusations or blame into the conversation. "It's not just about getting your way, but taking the other person into consideration as well. Acknowledge the person and validate their feelings, which doesn't mean you have to agree with them."

**OK, so everyone can be passive-aggressive sometimes. When you find yourself resorting to this behaviour, how can you stop?**

**Mindfulness, mindfulness, mindfulness**, says Brandt. By listening to your body and how you're feeling, you can identify when you're disconnecting your actions from what you think or feel (which is how passive aggression gets stirred up in the first place), she says.

Getting people to recognize that the behaviour is **a form of self-sabotage** is also key. "They don't link the fact that they didn't get the project in on time, or the fact that they didn't get the promotion, with their passive-aggressive behaviour," Wetzler says. "They think, 'Oh, the boss is being arbitrary and unfair,' but [don't] think it has to do with their work."

It's also important to recognize that the emotion of anger -- at its root -- is not a bad thing. "Anger has many positive qualities: It tells us when something is wrong, it can help you in terms of getting you to focus, evaluate your values and goals and strengthen your relationships and connections," Brandt explains. So when you feel anger about something, it's OK to express it and directly address it with whom it concerns (using assertive communication, of course).

In that same vein, **confronting fear of conflict** can go a long way in minimizing passive aggression. In fact, in trying to tamp down on this behaviour, you might actually experience *more* conflict, Wetzler says. "Hopefully that overt conflict can be negotiated and resolved, but it'll be increased because what's swept under the rug [ends up being surfaced] because there actually is a disagreement with something," he explains. "So now you have to have it come to the surface and hash it out. So to some degree, it's being more assertive, willing to engage in confrontation and conflict and being more willing to do things that are constructive that actually may take effort."

Ultimately, stopping passive-aggressive behaviour comes down to **figuring out what *you* want**, and tuning out all the rest. Some people are so overly aware of what other people think and expect of them, so they just go along with it -- at their own expense. "They're not thinking of what they actually want; it's all about the other party's agenda ... they're not willing to say, 'But this is what *I* want.'"

The solution, then, is to listen to your *own* voice. "[Turn] down the volume on the external voice," Wetzler says. "Then you have a sense of direction."