



HOW TO DEAL WITH PASSIVE- AGGRESSIVE PEOPLE

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"Just checking to see if you got my last email"

"Wow. I'm so impressed that you don't seem to care that you're carrying extra weight and will just walk around in those shorts."

"I'll just do it myself."

"I didn't hear you, that's why I didn't put away the dishes."

"Somebody left the milk out.... Again!"

Yup. I'm sure you've been on the other side of this conversation at some point or another. Whether it's a backhanded compliment, a guilt trip, martyrdom, or that sarcastic comment, it's always annoying and frustrating to deal with someone who's being passive-aggressive.

Or maybe you've gotten the cold shoulder freeze out or the shoulder shrug (huh? I don't know what you're talking about) or someone who just procrastinates on doing what you've asked.

No matter how it shows up, passive-aggressive behavior gets in the way of any connection, intimacy, or trust. My goal today is that you'll walk away with a better understanding of what's really going on when someone acts this way and some actionable tools to do something about it. Listen up if you're ready to stop feeling frustrated and stuck and start feeling empowered.

What you should know about passive-aggressive behavior:

To deal with someone who's being passive-aggressive, you first have to truly understand what's really going on.

When someone is passive-aggressive, they're letting you know a few things:

1. They're angry but don't want to talk about it. Yes, the person acting this way is absolutely pissed off about something but

Doesn't realize it because they don't recognize their own feelings

Knows they're upset but is seriously conflict-avoidant and doesn't want to "get into it" with you or

They know they're angry but don't think they have a right to feel angry (which brings us to the second thing you should know)...

They've got low self-esteem. Down deep, they've never felt worthy of asking for or getting what they want. Since identifying their feelings, wants, and needs is actually a skill they've never practiced, acting passive-aggressively becomes their default. They simply don't know how to ask for what they want.

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Because they feel bad about themselves deep down, they want you to feel like poop and inferior too. Making you feel that way gives them a sense of superiority (albeit briefly) so they feel more secure.

3. They learned it from their family. Being passive-aggressive is often indicative of a particular family culture. If it's all they saw their parents doing, it's all they know how to do. Again, effective communication is a skill they never learned or had role modeled for them, and being this way is a habit they don't know how to break.

How Can I Be Sure Someone's Being Passive Aggressive?

Way back when I started in the mental health field, there was actually a diagnosis called Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder! They apparently got rid of it because the symptoms were a lot like those of other personality disorders like narcissism and borderline.

The American Psychological Association defines Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder as:

"A personality disorder of long-standing in which ambivalence toward the self and others is expressed by such means as procrastination, dawdling, stubbornness, intentional inefficiency, 'forgetting' appointments, or misplacing important materials. These maneuvers are interpreted as passive expressions of underlying negativism.

But, of course, not everyone who procrastinates or forgets where they put something important is being passive-aggressive (or every single person over the age of 45 would be passive-aggressive).

So, how do you know? There are six main things to watch for:

1. Pay attention to how you feel. If your partner is saying one thing, but you feel another, then pay attention to this mixed message and "trust your gut."
2. It feels mean. If they're giving you "feedback" but it never feels loving and might even feel downright rude, dismissive, and highly critical.
3. They tell you you're crazy. A big sign is when the other person is clearly upset but denies any anger, frustration, or sadness.
4. They're not satisfied and keep bringing up an issue even after it's been resolved. Since they're not saying what they really need (and likely won't even know) they'll agree to something but they're unhappy about it so keep poking at you later about it. They say one thing ("It's fine – I totally get it") but then act out in some way because they're really NOT fine with it but don't realize it. They end up with a ton of resentment and frustration and you can't understand why.

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6. They mask anger with other things too. If someone is consistently acting like a victim, withholding (praise, love, attention), pouting, unreliable, or sarcastic, they just might be passive-aggressive.

Tips for Dealing with Passive-Aggressive People

Once you've identified what's happening, you're going to want to do something about it. The key is to have clear boundaries and consistency.

1. Call them on it but with questions, not statements! Don't call someone passive-aggressive but say something when you're feeling those mixed messages or like something else is going on. Do you want to be correct or effective? Correct is telling them what they are. Effective is asking them questions so they can have an "aha" moment and change their behavior.

Ask them what they're feeling in a moment and really listen to their answer. Keep asking questions to understand what they're really saying and needing. Help them ask for what they want from you.

2. Help them identify their anger. As I said earlier, being passive-aggressive is all about unresolved anger. They've spent a lot of time covering up or avoiding this emotion so helping them identify it when it happens is big. They're like fish who don't know they're wet so asking questions when you see it is key.

For example, ask them the last time they felt angry. If they say "never" there's an issue because EVERYONE gets angry. You might need to use the words frustrated, anxious, or resentful if they can't identify ever being angry. Sometimes this is a wake-up call for people in itself.

Remember, they might have physical ways they can notice their anger if they don't see it emotionally. Ask them what they feel in their body at that moment. Do they feel hot or cold somewhere? Is there any tension or shaking?

Lovingly remind them that covering up or running away from their anger won't make them less angry, it'll make them less happy!

3. Hold boundaries with loving intent. If your partner is always late, create a boundary around what you will and won't accept and stick to it, WITH LOVE. It's not, "Fuck you, I'm leaving." It's "Hon, I'm leaving the house at 6:00 on the dot if you're not ready, no worries, I'll meet you at the restaurant."

Keep in mind that you can be super respectful, loving, and kind and you still might get a defensive, angry response. Your job is to take a breath and stick to your loving boundary anyway.

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4. Say how you feel. If you've been following my stuff for any length of time, you know that I sometimes struggle with my relationship with my mom, who can be very passive-aggressive. So, when I visited her in Florida last year and she said, "I'm amazed at how comfortable you are walking on the beach in a bikini at your age" I took a breath and said (as lovingly as I could), "It hurts my feelings when you comment on my body and I'd appreciate if you didn't."

She became defensive and told me I didn't know how to take a compliment. I told her again, as calmly as the first time, that I didn't care what she meant, it's hurtful when she comments on my body, and that I wouldn't continue to spend time with her if it continued. Guess what, she apologized (poorly) and stopped.

The cycle of passive-aggressive behavior continues because the desired response happens. Change how you react consistently, and you'll see changes in how they act.

5. Tell them to ask for what they want. If your partner says, "Oh, you're leaving for work already?" Don't apologize or just run out the door. Instead, stop and ask them what they want. They'll likely say, "Nothing, I was just wondering." Then you need to respond with, "Your comments always mean something. If there's something you want or need from me, I can't read your mind, so you need to ask for what you want. If you don't want anything, I'd appreciate you not making these comments, they make me angry/hurt my feelings/etc."

6. Don't take it personally. When you react, it creates more of a problem and a cycle that becomes a hard habit to break. Don't let them make you angry. This isn't about you – it's about them. The calmer and more patient and loving you are, the better the outcome will be.

Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of 4. Hold your breath for a count of 7. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of 8.

Get rid of that energy and move on.