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Passive aggressive behaviour

We've all heard the phrase in books and films before, but what does it really mean to be 'passive aggressive'?

We often give this name to people who are particularly difficult, stubborn, unreasonable, or 'tight-lipped'. These people try hard to keep their real feelings inside but end up revealing them in subtle, under-hand but often far more destructive ways. Sometimes this can be accidental but more often than not, passive aggression is a perfectly intentional form of behaviour.

On this page

[Origins of the term](#)[How does passive aggressive behaviour develop?](#)[Types of passive aggressive behaviour](#)[Signs you have a passive aggressive personality](#)[How to deal with passive aggression](#)[How to become less passive aggressive](#)[Counselling for passive aggressive behaviour](#)[What should I be looking for in a counsellor or psychotherapist?](#)

Origins of the term

The term 'passive aggressive' first originated at the end of World War II, when a Colonel from the U.S War Department used it to describe the 'immature' and 'difficult' behaviour of some of the young soldiers. These soldiers would become intentionally unresponsive and carry out tasks they didn't want to do sluggishly or ineffectively. They did this in order to preserve an element of independence in an incredibly uniform environment.

Passive aggressive disorder was once a widely accepted form of personality disorder (personality disorder: A mental health problem characterised by long-term, deeply ingrained behavioural patterns which significantly affect how a person thinks, feels and interacts. having a personality disorder can make socialising difficult and prevent a person from forming stable, long-lasting relationships with anyone.) and it was even included in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Disorders (DSM IV), the globally recognised catalogue of all medically accepted disorders.

A number of years ago, experts decided that passive aggression was so common and so strongly related to a host of other mental disorders, that it didn't warrant the status of 'disorder' by itself. Passive aggressive disorder has since been edited out of the DSM and is now commonly referred to as passive aggressive *behaviour* instead. Most of us are guilty of displaying passive aggressive behaviour occasionally in our day-to-day lives. It is, after all, a simple way of avoiding conflict.

Observe the following situation: Your housemate persistently leaves his dirty washing up in the sink for other people to clean up. There are four different ways to approach the situation:

Option 1. Ignore it, do nothing and hope he stops.

Option 2. Talk to him about it, let him know you don't like it.

Option 3. Shout at him, threaten him with eviction and generally intimidate him into doing it.

Option 4. 'Accidentally' break his favourite mug. If he cares that much about it, he should wash it up and put it away.

The option you choose will differ according to the kind of person you are.

1. The 'passive person' off-hands powers to others, steps back and allows him or herself to be directed by

other, more assertive people. Option 1. is a good example of passive behaviour. If you choose this option, your housemate is unlikely to ever change his habits because he has no idea how you feel about the situation. You will simply have to learn to live with his dirty crockery.

2. The 'assertive person' maintains a good balance between understanding his or her own needs, and accommodating the needs of others. Option 2. is a good example of a fair, assertive and effective approach to the situation. If you are firm and fair, your housemate will be more likely to listen to you, respect you and make the effort to change his habits.

3. The 'aggressive person' is power hungry and ego-centric. He or she has little or no regard for other people's desires or opinions and wishes to meet goals forcedly, regardless of any hurt feelings. Option 3. is a good example of aggressive behaviour- if you adopt this approach you will be likely to get what you want, but you will also jeopardise the relationship you have with your housemate, as well as putting yourself at risk of future retribution.

So where does passive aggressive behaviour come on the scale? Don't be distracted by the 'passive' element of this term. Passive aggression is more often than not, even more destructive than plain old aggression. Sometimes a quick, impulsive punch on the arm can be more easily forgiven than twenty years of quietly brewing resentment.

How does passive aggressive behaviour develop?

What makes different people act differently in certain situations? Why do some of us choose to ignore or avoid situations and others choose to tackle them head on? Experts believe that the route of our behaviour rests in the lessons we learned naturally during childhood.

One study discovered that people who had parents who were more controlling were more likely to become closed-off, withdrawn and cold in their adult relationships.

The study¹ consisted of 56 couples who had been together for at least 2 months. Each person was asked questions about their childhood, such as how often they got into trouble for carelessness, how often they broke their parents' rules and how sensitive they were to rejection, failure and embarrassment. Researchers used the answers to these questions to identify the more 'cautious' among the participants. All couples were then asked to keep a diary detailing any relationship problems, arguments, thoughts, moods and actions. Upon inspection, the researchers found that the participants identified as more cautious were also more likely to deal with relationship issues by closing off, giving 'the silent treatment' and withdrawing from the problem at hand - making them, to all intents and purposes, passive aggressive people.

Controlling parents

Children can often be demanding, inquisitive and excitable. For extremely busy, stressed, or distracted parents, coming home to an excitable or emotional child can be very wearing. Often it can be easier to ignore persistent demands and questions, and even easier to shout at them to be quiet, or to send them to their room out of the way. Some parents believe enforcing strict rules aids development and creates a more resilient, rounded and disciplined person.

From a child's point of view, outside stresses, anxieties and parenting principals are irrelevant. A child has no idea if his father's bosses are piling on the pressure, or if the debts are mounting up and the bills can't be paid. To a child, a parents' anger is direct, personal and indicative of some sort of failure or disappointment. Children generally crave the approval of their parents. In a child's world, the parental figures are all-knowing, all-seeing authority figures- the literal be-all and end-all of life. To be put down, ignored or shouted at consistently can often be a very traumatic experience for a child.

Repression instead of expression

Eventually, the child begins to believe that what they have to say must be worthless and irrelevant, so they stop saying it. When their emotions are met with anger (parents often say 'don't answer back', or 'don't be cheeky' when their children stand up to them), they learn to bottle them up. As children grow into adults, these lessons stay with them. They may learn to fear speaking out in case their words are met with rejection or conflict, and they will eventually adopt the lesser role their parents (usually unintentionally) enforced. Essentially, passive aggressive behaviour stems from trying, and failing (in our eyes), to please our parents.

Secretive behaviour

Of course, hiding our desires and opinions won't simply make them go away. Instead, we will naturally learn different, non-verbal and indirect ways of channelling how we really feel about things. This repression can be quite damaging and will often create a more introverted, secretive character who is more likely to lie, manipulate people, or 'act out' the person they think they should be. For example, an adolescent who isn't allowed to go out

for lunch with her friends might sneak the money from her father's wallet and tell him she's doing homework at a friend's house.

Resentful feelings

This dishonesty and secretiveness is bound to make a child feel guilty. After all - we still want to please our parents. We've simply learned that the easiest way to keep them happy is to appear docile and accommodating, while simultaneously finding covert ways of acting out desires and expressing emotions. Eventually, we begin to resent having to be so secretive. These feelings of resentment tend to stay with us throughout adulthood and manifest as a resentment for all authority figures, who we can't help but associate with all the times our ideas, jokes, opinions and desires were ignored or criticised.

Types of passive aggressive behaviour

Passive aggressive behaviour can vary in severity, frequency and intentionality.

When a person with a passive aggressive personality is given a task to do that they don't agree with, they will appear positive and agreeable, but inside they may be fuming or despairing. Instead of making a fuss, they will find other ways to vent their frustration. These include:

Intentional ineffectiveness

Imagine you are given a task by your boss that you sincerely disagree with. He has backed you into a corner and you can see no way to argue without jeopardising your job or your working relationship. So, you intentionally approach the task with laziness. You make subtle mistakes that are noticeable enough to aggravate your boss, but not severe enough to warrant punishment. This gives you a sense of power and satisfaction in an otherwise powerless situation and is essentially an underhand way of implying that you didn't care for the task he asked you to do.

Intentional lateness and forgetfulness

If you are a passive aggressive person, you may have learnt from an early age that going head to head with a controlling person is a recipe for failure. Unless you happen to be very effective at communicating, persuading and gaining the approval of others, you will have had to have found other ways of stating your power over controlling people. One passive aggressive technique is to exaggerate the characteristics you know they find irritating. Controlling people tend to be neat, proactive and organised. One way of demanding their attention is to be intentionally messy, forgetful and unorganised. For instance, if a particularly domineering friend invites you to the cinema at a certain time, and insists on reminding you again and again to turn up on time, you're likely to feel like you're being backed into that old corner you are so familiar with. One way to exercise your own control over the situation is to turn up five minutes late. Although the domineering friend will see this as a blatant disregard of her carefully made plans, a passive aggressive person will see it as a small victory.

Sulkiness

Instead of putting up a fight or arguing back, a passive aggressive person is likely to become sullen, cold and withdrawn. For instance, imagine you noticed that your partner gave someone at a party a long appreciative look. Instead of confronting your partner, you feel deeply jealous and sad and show this by closing off emotionally. Your partner has no idea why you have suddenly become so rigid and unresponsive, which in turn causes them to feel defensive and tense. This kind of behaviour can very easily spiral into a long-term standoff that brews and festers and grows into something far more destructive than it ever should have been.

Signs you have a passive aggressive personality

Passive aggressive behaviour is triggered by a desire to please people and can include reasons such as:

- trying to keep the peace
- trying to avoid mistakes
- trying to preserve self-respect
- trying to appear more confident and authoritative
- being unable to express emotions very well
- being afraid of rejection
- being afraid of criticism
- feeling worthless.

However, because by nature passive aggressive people are unwilling to expose their true feelings, it can be hard

to understand the routes of their behaviour. These behaviours often come across instead as:

- stubbornness
- contrariness
- bitterness
- closed-mindedness
- unreasonableness
- being difficult
- frustratingly forgetful
- cold
- lazy
- careless
- manipulative
- secretive
- sly.

How to deal with passive aggression

Do you recognise any of these passive aggressive personality traits in yourself or other people? If so, you might be wondering how to deal with them. There is no 'one way' of dealing with passive aggression because tactics vary from person to person and situation to situation. The following advice is only general and you are strongly advised to contact a counsellor or psychotherapist for professional support.

Passive aggressive partners

Being in a romantic relationship with a passive aggressive person can be very difficult. Loving relationships require honesty, openness and trust to work in the long-term. These are all characteristics that many passive aggressive people struggle with. In relationships, people with passive aggressive personalities tend to be:

- unreasonably scared of rejection or abandonment
- cold, defensive and unresponsive
- secretive and withholding
- mistrustful and suspicious
- grumpy, on edge and easily aggravated.

As we now know, these behaviours are indicative of underlying insecurities and fears that can't be expressed properly. Dealing with this kind of behaviour takes a lot of understanding and patience and can be very tiring for a romantic partner. There is no one way to deal with passive aggressive people because everyone is different and every different situation requires a different approach. Passive aggression is not like a disease, there is no one 'cure'.

If you suspect that your partner is a passive aggressive person, however, the first thing you are advised to do is learn what passive aggression is. Once you understand the reasons for your partner's difficult behaviour, you can approach the issues sympathetically rather than forcefully or vindictively.

It may help to consider the following general advice:

Don't feel like your partner's behaviour is a personal attack on you - remember that passive aggressive people often fear rejection. Your partner may love you dearly but remain distant due to an anxiety that you will leave them.

Be patient - anger or aggression will only force your partner further into his or her shell.

Don't be overbearing - remember that passive aggressive people are often resentful of authority. Show them that you respect their opinions and ideas and eventually they will learn to believe that they are truly valued by you.

Let them simmer - if your partner kicks off over a seemingly small matter, accept that their frustration probably has nothing to do with the matter at all. Wait until your partner has calmed down and then try to approach the

real problem face on.

Talk about it - be frank, be open and be blunt. Passive aggressive behaviour is usually reinforced by parents who punished extroverted behaviour, or who kept their own emotions bottled up. Your partner may find your honest attitude refreshing and liberating. If you can try to understand and tackle passive aggression together, your relationship can only become stronger.

Passive aggressive colleagues

Passive aggressive behaviour in the workplace can be extremely destructive for productivity and general morale. Managing an individual with passive aggressive tendencies can be a huge and often frustrating challenge for any team leader or manager, for the fundamental reason that passive aggressive personality types tend to resent authority.

Many people become passive aggressive because they were put down or suppressed as children. This sense of resentment stays with them throughout adulthood because they find it difficult to shake the deeply embedded connection between authority and those old feelings of worthlessness.

How to recognise a passive aggressive employee:

- feels under-appreciated
- lacks accountability, places blame on others
- procrastinates or misses deadlines when they don't agree with a task
- appears grumpy or irritable but won't say why
- uses notes or emails to communicate in difficult situations.

How to deal with a passive aggressive employee:

- understand that they are wary of conflict
- understand that they have learnt to feel inferior
- set out clear expectations and boundaries from the offset so they understand that their inferior role is not a personal attack but a professional requirement
- reward good work
- show appreciation and let them know they are valued
- try to give them an element of choice and control in the work they do
- have regular meetings to give them a chance to open up and discuss things they may have been bottling up.

How to become less passive aggressive

Remember that passive aggression is not a disorder. Most of us display passive aggressive behaviour now and then, it is simply one of the many ways we learn to deal with conflict. In some situations it is appropriate to keep emotions and opinions bottled up- if we were all outgoing, aggressive personality types, nothing would ever get done. Whether you think you are passive aggressive or not, the most important thing is that you remain *aware* of your behaviour, you identify the reasons behind it and you explore acceptable and effective ways of expressing it.

Next time you feel secretly outraged or frustrated, take a moment to ask yourself why. Once you understand exactly what you find so irritating or unfair about a situation, you can begin to form a reasonable answer in your head. From here, you can start exploring different ways of addressing the situation.

If, for example, the problem is that you noticed your partner spending a lot of time texting an unknown number that you suspect to be an ex, you need to consider your options. You may be tempted to brew moodily in the corner for the next few weeks, or you may even feel the need to send your own ex a message in retaliation. This kind of behaviour will only cause more problems. The only way you are going to get to the bottom of the situation is to breach the subject with your partner. Remember:

Tackle it casually - it is easy to sound accusing if you have spent time imagining the worst.

Be honest, tell them you are worried they will leave you. This lack of trust needs to be addressed, whether it's your own unreasonable doubt or their track history.

If they are texting their ex, ask them why and tell them you don't think it is acceptable behaviour.

Forcing yourself to be frank, honest, sympathetic and tactful is always going to reap healthier rewards than being cold, defensive and vindictive. More often than not, other people will have no idea why you are upset about something. They are likely to think you are a difficult person to be around and find it hard to warm to you. This can be very upsetting and many passive aggressive people aim to change the way they interact with other people.

Changing such deeply embedded behaviours can often be extremely difficult, especially if they were picked up during childhood. Seeking professional help from a counsellor or psychotherapist is recommended, especially if your passive aggressive behaviour is affecting your career, relationships or family life.

Counselling for passive aggressive behaviour

Counselling for passive aggressive behaviour can often be an extremely delicate process. This is because people who display this form of behaviour do not react well to being ordered to think in a certain way or reveal certain details about themselves. Remember, passive aggressive people often spend their whole lives denying or repressing their true feelings and opinions. Often, they will go out of their way to expose the source of authority as ineffective or incompetent.

Some counsellors and psychotherapists believe that in order to tackle our behaviours, we must revisit our childhoods. We must learn how we became the people we are today and identify the events that triggered certain insecurities, fears and anxieties. Once we understand these, we can start to let them go and accept that the bad with our parents do not have to set the groundwork for all future relationships.

Journal Therapy allows clients to observe their own thoughts moment by moment in order to identify thought patterns which trigger certain behaviours.

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Should I be looking for in a counsellor or psychotherapist?

There are no official rules or regulations stipulating what level of training a counsellor dealing with passive aggressive behaviour needs. There are however several accredited courses, qualifications and training available to counsellors to improve their knowledge of a particular area, so for peace of mind you should check to see if they have had further training in issues regarding passive aggressive behaviour.

If the passive aggressive behaviour is causing issues within a relationship/family, you may wish to seek couples/family counselling sessions.

More articles on Passive aggressive behaviour



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