

ARE YOU PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE?

Article by: Cheryl Sol

Sometimes we forget – it's as simple as that. And then at other times forgetting, getting things in late or not complying in some way or another has a different meaning.

Lets look at it another way. When we are teenagers we can be 'otherwise'. I am talking about behaviour that is aimed to irritate people in authority like parents. For instance the times when we are asked to pick up the towel on the bathroom floor and say "yes" but don't do it, then when mom gets really annoyed we can get a sense of satisfaction from being able to get her riled while at the same time believing that we are hard done by because we were going to do it when she stopped nagging.

Many assertiveness and social skills courses explain the difference between passivity on one hand i.e. being a doormat, not being able to say no and easily being taken advantage of, and aggressiveness on the other hand. We all know examples of aggressiveness. Then in between is the better solution which is assertiveness i.e. being able to state how you feel, and what you need or want in a way that does not insult others, violate their rights or force them into what they do not want.

However aggressiveness can be expressed in a more subtle form than shouting, swearing, being short with someone and all the more overt behaviours and attitudes that we recognize.

Passive aggression or passive resistance is a form of aggression and can be very powerful. It can make people react strongly while you keep your calm. However it is still a way of communicating anger that is problematic.

People who cannot deal openly with conflict or disagreements are often passive aggressive.

If someone asks you to do something and you don't know how to say "no" if it's not convenient or if you don't want to do it, you just don't do it or "forget". Then you can feel okay because you have not had to deal with them. But it's not useful in the long term. You have not learned to communicate more openly and honestly and the other person will be left feeling frustrated, confused or angry.

If you are passive aggressive you will often appear to be the "nice guy" or "nice girl" but the people close to you will often be frustrated with you. You may not understand why as you may not even be aware of your behaviour. People who are PA are usually not aware of their anger in the way that people who are aggressive are. They may in fact even deny that they are angry, but the behaviour communicates something different.

If our verbal communication gives the opposite message to our non verbal communication i.e. behaviour, it is usually the non verbals that are the most truthful.

If I say I am really relaxed in a situation but I am fidgeting and biting my nails or looking tense - which are you going to believe? More likely the non verbal behaviour which is not at all relaxed.

Similarly if you are passive resistant, your verbal behaviour is YES, I am helpful, I am agreeable, I don't find anything not okay with what you are doing etc, but your non verbal behaviour is different. Your non verbals say I do not want to help you, I do not hear you, I do not take you seriously i.e. I am annoyed with you, disinterested in you, not willing to comply with you or please you.

Why passive aggressive behaviour is so powerful is that you can stay calm while the other person usually becomes angry and expresses the anger you don't. You can feel the moral upper hand or stay feeling like the nice one while they are losing it.

It is also not useful as adult behaviour. It is developmentally similar to toddler or teenage power struggle behaviour.

Cheryl Sol
Clinical Psychologist
M.A. (Clin. Psych.)

At both stages we are testing out and finding greater independence and creating frustration for others in the process.

As adults we need to find ways to recognize and express our emotions that have a chance of a better outcome. We need to recognize what kinds of people evoke feelings of resistance or rebellion or anxiety about expressing ourselves.

Alternatively you are left with stuckness, increased conflict and limited personal growth.