

Passive-Aggressive Behavior

People with passive-aggressive behaviors show hostility and aggression in passive ways. Their aim is to resist job and social demands. Examples of passive-aggressive behaviors are:

- “Forgetting” to do something on purpose
- Making a habit of putting off or being late with social and/or job tasks
- Failing to do one’s share of the work or doing sub-standard work on purpose
- Having a constant negative attitude
- Criticizing authority figures, not openly, but in subtle ways

The goal of passive-aggressive behavior is to frustrate the wishes of others and make others angry. This anger is most often directed at bosses, roommates, spouses, parents, teachers, or anyone who has power or authority. But, sometimes, people are not aware that their behavior is purposeful.

What leads to passive-aggressive behavior? Some researchers think that these behaviors stem from certain childhood experiences. They believe that parents who were aggressive and exercised complete control over their child did not let the child express himself or herself. This may have pushed the child into adopting passive-aggressive behavior patterns to cope. If, for example, the child openly disagreed with the parent and was punished for doing so, the child learned to substitute passive resistance for active resistance.

A person who shows a lot of passive-aggressive behavior can have a Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder. A person with this disorder:

- Is irritable, defensive, and resentful
- Lacks self-confidence
- Has a hard time getting pleasure from relationships with others
- Feels others are making unreasonable demands on him or her, but thinks he or she is doing a better job than what they are given credit for
- Blames others for his or her problems
- Is not aware that his or her self-defeating behaviors are part of their personality

Questions to Ask

Do you do four or more of the following and does this cause a good deal of unhappiness and problems in your life?

- Passively resist doing routine social and work-related tasks
- Complain that others do not understand or appreciate you
- Act sullen and argue with others
- Criticize and scorn authority figures (parents, spouse, teachers, bosses, etc.) without reason
- Express envy and resentment toward persons better off than you
- Exaggerate and complain a lot about your own problems

YES



NO



See Self-Help on next page

Passive-Aggressive Behavior. *Continued*

Self-Help

- Take an assertiveness training course – these are offered at many hospitals, colleges, high schools, churches, and community education programs. Assertiveness training can help you express your feelings in the proper manner instead of using “hidden aggression.”
- Stand back and try to look at your problems in an objective way. Determine if your own actions contribute to your problems, not the actions of everyone else.
- Confront your problems. Make your needs, desires, and feelings known to others instead of holding them in. Do this for one problem at a time. For example, if you stall on doing a project:
 - Break it down into smaller parts.
 - Make a check list to complete each part and check each item off as it is completed.
 - Give yourself a meaningful reward with each item checked off.
 - Focus on pleasing yourself with each completed task, not making someone else mad if the task is not done.



Passive-aggressive behavior is often seen in people who have not learned how to express their feelings, needs, and desires to others.

- Seek professional counseling if Self-Help do not improve your problem. You may need the help of a skilled therapist to help you get in touch with the underlying anger and pain which causes you to act in a passive-aggressive way.

What You Can Do for a Friend or Relative

- Learn to recognize the signs of a Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder. (See bulleted items listed before “Questions to Ask” in this section on previous page.) If you think that your friend or relative may have this disorder, encourage them to see their physician or counselor. Do so in a caring and assertive way. Let the person’s physician know about your observations if you are the person’s parent or spouse.
- Encourage the person to take an assertiveness training course or other course that teaches effective ways to communicate.
- Don’t make excuses for your friend’s or relative’s behavior. Don’t do their work for them or “bail them out” when they do not take care of their own responsibilities.



Seek professional counseling if self-help tips don’t work.