

The Secret World of Passive Aggression

Procrastination is a friend of ours. Unfortunately, it also is a behavior of people who are passive aggressive. *The Angry Smile: The Psychology of Passive-Aggressive Behavior in Families, Schools, and Workplaces* was not written on an impulse or on any publisher's deadline. We have been studying the psychology of passive aggression for more than 4 decades as part of our clinical and educational work with troubled youth, anxious professionals, conflicted parents, contradictory spouses, hostile coworkers, and resistant bosses.

Our interest in passive aggression began in 1962, when Nicholas accepted a position as the director of Hillcrest Children's Center, a psychiatric residential treatment program for children and youth with emotional disorders in Washington, DC. We lived on campus and related daily with the students and staff, whom we got to know intimately. The strength of this treatment program was the professional competence of the residential and educational staff and their ability to manage the aggressive and violent outbursts of the troubled children. We often commented on how kind-spirited and therapeutic the staff were and on the high degree of skill they exhibited in controlling their counter-aggressive feelings, particularly when children yelled, cursed, spit, and tried to hit them. It seemed to us that the staff functioned at their very best when the children were behaving at their personal worst. The staff managed to show kindness and tolerance for deviant behavior for all of the children, except for one 12-year-old student named Jason.

Jason was an exceptionally intelligent, attractive, well-groomed, middle-class student who had a perpetual sarcastic smile on his face. Jason never lost his self-control or showed any explosive behaviors. He did not scream or swear at the staff, and at times he was downright pleasant and cooperative. But when Jason made a personal decision not to follow a rule or staff directive, he would quietly and systematically become oppositional, which would frustrate the staff. Jason had the rare diagnostic skill of being able to identify each adult's Achilles' heel, and he purposefully behaved in a way that played on their unique vulnerabilities. One by one, he succeeded in stirring up intense counter-aggressive feelings in each competent staff person. Jason was the student that staff deemed most difficult, and the one they most wanted to punish.

How was it possible that this quiet, bright, preadolescent boy could cause so much frustration and anger within and among a sophisticated staff? We did not have an answer in 1962, but today the answer is obvious: Jason was a troubled boy with a classic passive-aggressive personality.

Because of Jason's patterns of behavior and the staff's unusual reactions to him, we decided to learn more about the dynamics of passive aggression. The psychiatric literature on passive aggression in 1963 was limited. As a result, we developed ongoing seminars on passive-aggressive behavior and invited colleagues, parents, and teachers who were interested in this topic. The only requirement for participation was their willingness to discuss and write up their experiences and observations on passive-aggressive behavior at school and home.

Prior to the first edition of this text in 2001, we conducted more than 50 seminars on passive aggression around the United States and collected over 1,200 personal examples of passive-aggressive behavior in school and at home. As we analyzed these examples, a new and exciting theoretical explanation of passive-aggressive behavior emerged.

In the past 7 years, a new generation of *Angry Smile* seminars has been born, thanks to interest in the book and to our close ties with Life Space Crisis Intervention trainers, who began offering their own series of seminars. A whole new crop of experiences and examples—along with frustrations and emotion—flooded in. The seminar stories convinced us that there was still more of this phenomenon to explore and that any revision of our text would have to include adults as well as children, and workplace scenarios along with those of school and home.

What Motivated Participants to Attend Our Seminars

As we talked with our seminar participants, many of them told us they were curious to know if they were teaching, living, or working with someone who was passive aggressive. The participants also were interested to discover if they were themselves passive aggressive. We said they could get a glimpse of insight by answering these two diagnostic questions:

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION 1: Is there a person in your life who irritates and frustrates you in insignificant and endless ways, so that over time you have a spontaneous urge to choke this person? If a name comes quickly to mind, the chances are you have identified a person with passive-aggressive behavior.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION 2: Do you get pleasure and satisfaction from consciously thwarting and quietly getting back at others? Do you find yourself habitually procrastinating, sulking, forgetting, being intentionally inefficient, plotting hidden revenge, or even spiting yourself just to hurt others? If so, you probably have identified yourself as a person with passive-aggressive behavior.

Once the participants' laughter subsided, we became serious and focused on the complexity of teaching, working, and living with passive-aggressive behavior. We are grateful to the hundreds of graduate students, teachers, parents, and other professionals who participated in these seminars. Without their enthusiastic support and examples, this book never would have been written, and we would still be wondering why Jason was such a frustrating student for all of us.

Lack of Professional Interest

Every aspect of life in the 21st century seems to be studied, reported, and filed onto the World Wide Web. From microanalysis of DNA particles to cosmic evolution, nothing seems too small or too large to escape extensive scientific curiosity and scrutiny. Nothing, that is, except the study of passive aggression.

This bold statement is supported by a current literature search that included the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC) database and PsycARTICLES. ERIC is the major educational research database of our country. ERIC reviews more than 700 professional educational journals each year for the database. PsycARTICLES, from the American Psychological Association (APA), is a definitive source of full-text, peer-reviewed scholarly and scientific articles in psychology. The database contains more than 100,000 articles from 59 journals.

We ran a literature search on aggression and passive aggression using both databases over a 20-year period, from 1987 to 2007. Because passive-aggressive interactions are so anecdotally common, we assumed we would discover a rich history of studies on such behaviors in schools through the ERIC database. However, from 1987 to 2007, there were 2,796 professional articles and studies on aggression compared to just three articles and studies on passive aggression in schools. Using PsycARTICLES, we found similar results: 772 articles on the topic of aggression, compared to seven articles on passive aggression—only one of which had been published since the turn of this century.

What accounts for this surprising finding? It is certainly not the case that passive aggression is a rare behavioral pattern or that it does not cause legitimate psychological discomfort. Based on our professional experiences, workshops on passive aggression, and daily interactions with the public, we intuitively know that passive-aggressive behavior abounds in our society. Beyond intuition, a 2008 Google search brings up about 270,000 links to passive aggression in 0.09 seconds (compared to 17.5 million links for aggression in less than 1 second). While these Internet links do not carry the weight of scientific study, they do give strong evidence to support the pervasiveness of passive-aggressive behavior and of the millions of laypeople whose frustration with this behavior drives them to seek helpful information.

The obvious conclusion from the literature searches, however, is that the psychological study of passive aggression has eluded widespread professional scrutiny. And really, given its covert nature, perhaps this should be expected. Passive aggression is not the in-your-face force that aggression is, nor is it the immediately debilitating blow of depression. It simmers beneath the surface, settling under the skin of its victims over the long term—ever present, maddening, and most often out of view to the naked eye.

A Brief History of the Mystery of Passive Aggression

The term *passive aggressive* was first coined by army psychiatrist William Menninger during the Second World War. Colonel Menninger noted a troublesome pattern

of behavior among soldiers, in which they followed orders but did so with benign disobedience. Coping with strict regimentation and a climate of conformity, soldiers resisted orders or carried them out to the letter of the law—ignoring the spirit of the command completely. They obeyed authority to its face but were ready to turn their backs at the first chance. Menninger labeled soldiers who displayed this pattern of just-below-the-surface hostility as passive aggressive. It has been accepted since then that the military—and any other organization (e.g., school), entity (e.g., family), or workplace that provides limited opportunities for self-expression or personal freedom—is ideal for eliciting passive-aggressive behavior.

The Veterans Administration first began using the label *passive aggression* as a clinical term for its patients. In the first edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, published in 1952, the passive-aggressive personality was described. In the editions of the *DSM* that have been published to date, the debate over the true nature and classification of passive aggression is chronicled. First dubbed a personality style with three distinct subtypes, it was changed to a singular style of "hidden hostility" in *DSM-II* (1968), debated as a defense mechanism and almost omitted from the *DSM-III* (1980), classified as Axis II Personality Disorder (though still relegated to Appendix B as an item for further study) in *DSM-IV* (1994), and finally published (in the appendix) as a provisional diagnosis with the added term *negativistic* in the *DSM-IV-TR* (2000) (see Table 1.1).

A rich debate about passive aggression will likely continue, be it with the publication of the *DSM-V* or with our work here. We do know that passive-aggressive behavior is at once puzzling and pervasive. Researchers may differ on its classification, but receivers of passive-aggressive behavior unite in their confusion over what to do, how to respond, and even how to recognize it before relationships are damaged beyond repair.

Confronting History's Mystery

The Angry Smile: The Psychology of Passive-Aggressive Behavior in Families, Schools, and Workplaces offers a road map for effectively navigating the convoluted and obstacle-laden pathways of engagement with a passive-aggressive person.

School

For schoolteachers, aides, administrators, and crisis counselors who, from September to May, feel their professional skills being chipped away daily by a charming but manipulative student, we offer relatable examples and practical strategies for reclaiming their classrooms.

Home

For mothers, fathers, grandparents, and caretakers of children who procrastinate, "forget," blame others, avoid responsibility, and win by losing as a way of life, this book will shed light on how these patterns have formed and what can be done to alter them.

Table 1.1

Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder Features

The essential feature [of passive-aggressive personality disorder] is a pervasive pattern of negativistic attitudes and passive resistance to demands for adequate performance in social and occupational situations that begins by early adulthood and that occurs in a variety of contexts. This pattern does not occur exclusively during Major Depressive Episodes and is not better accounted for by Dysthymic Disorder. These individuals habitually resent, oppose, and resist demands to function at a level expected by others. This opposition occurs most frequently in work situations but can also be evident in social functioning. The resistance is expressed by procrastination, forgetfulness, stubbornness, and intentional inefficiency, especially in response to tasks assigned by authority figures. These individuals obstruct the efforts of others by failing to do their share of the work. For example, when an executive gives a subordinate some material to review for a meeting the next morning, the subordinate may misplace or misfile the material rather than point out that there is insufficient time to do the work. These individuals feel cheated, unappreciated, and misunderstood and chronically complain to others. When difficulties appear, they blame their failures on the behaviors of others. They may be sullen, irritable, impatient, argumentative, cynical, skeptical, and contrary. Authority figures (e.g., a superior at work, a teacher at school, a parent, or a spouse who acts the role of a parent) often become the focus of discontent. Because of their negativism and tendency to externalize blame, these individuals often criticize and voice hostility toward authority figures with minimal provocation. They are also envious and resentful of peers who succeed or who are viewed positively by authority figures. These individuals often complain about their personal misfortunes. They have a negative view of the future and may make comments such as, "It doesn't pay to be good" and "Good things don't last." These individuals may waver between expressing hostile defiance toward those they view as causing their problems and attempting to mollify these persons by asking for forgiveness or promising to perform better in the future.

Associated Features

These individuals are often overtly ambivalent, wavering indecisively from one course of action to its opposite. They may follow an erratic path that causes endless wrangles with others and disappointments for themselves. An intense conflict between dependence on others and the desire for self-assertion is characteristic of these individuals. Their self-confidence is often poor despite a superficial bravado. They foresee the worst possible outcome for most situations, even those that are going well. This defeatist outlook can evoke hostile and negative responses from others who are subjected to the complaints of these individuals. This pattern of behavior often occurs in individuals with Borderline, Histrionic, Paranoid, Dependent, Antisocial, and Avoidant Personality Disorders.

Note. From *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fourth Edition—Text Revision* (pp. 789–790), 2000, Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association. Copyright 2000 by American Psychiatric Association. Reprinted with permission.

Close Adult Relationships

For adult children of passive-aggressive parents, husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, best friends, and anyone involved in a relationship with an often sullen, biting sarcastic, resentful, endlessly excuse-making person who shuts down openly hostile discussions by turning up the stereo or muttering, "Fine" from behind his newspaper, we will show you how to modulate your own emotional responses to and turn down the heat of a passive-aggressive conflict.

Workplace

And for those both high and low on the office food chain—employees and bosses who are at the receiving end of intentionally inefficient work, frequent hard drive crashes, late arrivals, conveniently timed sick days, nasty (and endless) e-mail exchanges, and hidden agendas, *The Angry Smile* offers techniques for stopping the perfect office crimes of passive aggression.

Skills You Will Learn

In the pages that follow, you will

1. come to understand the development of passive-aggressive behavior, from its childhood origins to its troublesome manifestations in school, at home, in close adult relationships, and in the workplace;
2. increase your awareness of the reasons why people of all ages use passive-aggressive behaviors and distinguish between situational and pathological passive aggression;
3. examine five distinct levels of passive-aggressive behavior and recognize how behavior in school, home, and the workplace falls within these levels; and
4. come to understand the Passive-Aggressive Conflict Cycle, our paradigm for explaining the circular and escalating behavior between a passive-aggressive person and his or her unsuspecting target.

We know that anyone who picks up a book such as ours has an intellectual thirst for theory but also a practical hunger for answering the question, “Now, what do I do?” What makes *The Angry Smile* so valuable is the cognitive road map it provides for not only understanding the nature of passive-aggressive behavior but also effectively confronting it. To challenge passive resistance, you will learn to use the following:

- The 5-step process of Benign Confrontation with children and adults, in school, at home, in close adult relationships, and in the workplace. Through real-world examples, we will show you how Benign Confrontation can be used effectively at all five levels of passive-aggressive behavior.
- Skills for recognizing the red flags of passive-aggressive behavior. Those who become adept at recognizing this troubling pattern early on do not get caught up in the Passive-Aggressive Conflict Cycle, which jeopardizes academic success, damages relationships, and brings down careers. For easy reference, we will provide symptom checklists and important intervention notes throughout the text.

The Need to Clarify Psychological Terms

Any attempt to bring the dynamics of passive aggression to the surface needs to begin with a clarification of related terms and concepts. Unfortunately, there is

ample psychobabble in popular literature regarding emotional and behavioral terms. Pop psychology distorts the importance of meaningful psychological terms and significant diagnostic distinctions. Before moving further with our findings, we present the following psychological definitions in an effort to clear away ambiguity and sharpen our focus on the study of passive aggression.

Anger

Anger is a basic, spontaneous, temporary, internalized, neurophysiological *feeling* usually triggered by frustration and consciously experienced as an unpleasant personal state. Anger ebbs and flows in our daily lives. It is a real, powerful, and natural emotion, but it does not always reflect an accurate perception of the precipitating event.

Rebecca was angry at her father for making her fold the laundry. Following his request, she angrily yelled, "You make me do everything around here!" She slammed the dryer closed and stormed out of the room.

Aggression

Aggression is one way the feeling of anger is expressed in *behavior*. Aggression usually is a spontaneous and unplanned act. It often takes the form of an impulsive action. Aggressive behavior is destructive because it aims to depreciate, hurt, or destroy a person or an object. Aggression can be an automatic response to mounting pain and anxiety that is expressed by yelling, cursing, threatening, or hitting others.

Al is a supervisor with a reputation for getting the job done. He delegated a large assignment to novice worker Katherine, who failed to turn the work in on time. When the responsibility was placed on his shoulders during a quarterly interdepartmental meeting, Al stood up at his seat and was verbally aggressive to Katherine, cursing her skills, lambasting her intelligence, and suggesting that she be fired on the spot.

Hate

Hate is a focused or laser-beam *feeling* of anger. Hate is a feeling that has a specific target in mind. It is most often triggered by feelings of embarrassment, revenge, and prejudice. Hate is like frozen anger that rarely melts. Hate can be learned and passed on from one generation to the next. Hate can take the form of personal, racial, national, religious, political, or familial hatred.

In algebra class, Mrs. Ross called on Michael to go to the blackboard to demonstrate the solution to an equation. Michael struggled with math and was intensely uncomfortable standing up in front of his peers. He believed Mrs. Ross knew this! His entirely body stiffened, he clenched his fists, and he felt hatred toward his perceived ruthless teacher.

Hostility

Hostility is a conscious and deliberate *behavior* motivated by hate and intended to depreciate, hurt, or destroy a person or object. Unlike aggression, the act of hostility does not have to occur immediately or impulsively; it can take place a day, a week, a month, or even a year later. Hostility is a personal vendetta often motivated by revenge.

Alicia expected to get a high-profile promotion at work. Her boss had done everything but hand her the new job description. When a less experienced colleague got the promotion instead, Alicia felt professionally humiliated. For the next 6 months, both her boss and the promoted coworker felt the full force of Alicia's hostility. From open acts of sabotage to behind-the-scenes work obstructions, Alicia let her emotion be known.

Rage

Rage is the runaway *feeling* of anger or hate. Rage is the primitive beast within us, which erupts whenever we feel helpless. A rage reaction usually occurs when a person's coping skills are stripped away and the person has no other way of responding to what he or she perceives as an overwhelming situation of psychological or physical threat.

Six-year-old Benjamin is repeatedly abused by a family member. He feels defenseless to stop the abuse and believes his parents know about it and are failing to protect him. Frightened of the abuser, Benjamin does nothing to fight back during his childhood but carries with him into adulthood a righteous rage. During periods of high stress or even in routine interactions, when thoughts of his abuse are inadvertently triggered, his rage erupts onto unsuspecting and undeserving others.

Violence

Violence is the destructive *behavior* through which a person expresses intense feelings of anger and hate that have turned into rage. Violence is like a volcano. It does not target any person. It is out-of-control behavior that erupts and injures everyone in its path. Very often, the victims of violence just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Samantha and Miguel have a stormy marriage. When times are good, they say they are deeply in love and committed to their marriage. However, when arguments break out—and they often do—a pattern of domestic violence emerges. Both partners express their anger and rage by throwing heavy items, punching walls, pushing each other, and screaming at their children.

Passivity

The passive person communicates his or her needs, wants, and feelings in an indirect, emotionally dishonest way. Through passive *behaviors*, passive individuals allow their own rights to be violated because of their personal belief that their needs

are not worthy of consideration or that their feelings are not as important as those of others. Passive behavior may take the form of poor eye contact or hesitant speech and often results in the passive person feeling even greater anxiety, helplessness, and internalized anger.

Tasha is bullied by her classmate, Blair. She is pushed, publicly ridiculed, and often excluded from peer group events. Tasha's parents have encouraged her to assertively stand up for herself by making the teacher aware of the situation or by telling Blair to "knock it off." Instead, Tasha's passive nature prevails. When her teacher tries to help, Tasha waves her off saying, "I don't mind." She answers Blair's shoves with offers to do the tormentor's homework. Through such actions, she conveys the clear message: "Tease me again. I won't stand up for myself, and I'll even come back for more because what I want most is to be accepted by you."

Counter Aggression

Counter-aggressive *behaviors* are the common cold of the anger world. They occur when a nonaggressive person interacts with other people who are aggressive or hostile and, in a sense, "catches" their anger, as they would an airborne disease. By acting on counter-aggressive feelings, the normally "healthy" person mirrors the behaviors of the person who had the original anger bug. Both end up behaving badly.

Mrs. Davis asks the class to sit down in their seats. Everyone sits but Zachary, who looks her straight in the eye and says, "You can't make me!" Mrs. Davis stands up at her own desk and repeats her instruction in a slightly raised voice.

"I said *no!*" Zachary replied loudly.

"If you want to be a troublemaker, then you can stand all day, Michael," she yells, marching over to his seat and taking his chair back to her desk at the front of the classroom.

Counter-aggressive behaviors can be identified because they are based on "you" messages:

"You make me mad."

"You are always so incompetent."

"You better apologize."

"You never use your head."

Counter-aggressive behavior usually attacks the personality of the other person and guarantees that interpersonal conflict will escalate.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is learned *behavior* that is used to express anger in a verbal, nonblaming, respectful way. Assertive behavior clearly sets the limits of what a person is willing to do or not do in an interpersonal situation. Unlike passivity and aggression, assertive behavior does not depreciate or cause harm to either person. It is a healthy way of defining the boundaries of one's personal reality.

Assertive behavior is an effective way of making friends with one's personal anger so that behavior becomes constructive rather than destructive. In contrast to counter aggression, assertiveness is based on using "I" messages:

"I want to share with you that I am having difficulty dealing with your lateness. I become irritated when you promise to meet me at noon but are late. Three times this week I have had to wait for you for at least 30 minutes."

Very often, when a passive person is learning to communicate emotion more effectively, he or she first swings too far to the aggressive side, and when the aggressive person is first attempting to tone down his or her emotional rhetoric, he or she errs on the side of passivity. Assertiveness is the essential middle ground between the ineffective communication extremes of passivity and aggression. Its ideal situation in the center, however, should not cause it to be confused with passive aggression, which we will examine next.

Passive Aggression

Call it *hostile cooperation*, *sugarcoated hostility*, or *compliant defiance*. Call it all of the above. Along with these synonymous phrases, the term *passive aggression* is an oxymoron. Passive-aggressive behavior does not alternate between passive behavior and aggressive behavior, but rather combines them simultaneously into one behavior that is both confounding and irritating to others.

Passive-aggressive behavior exists in all civilized cultures and at every socioeconomic level. It is a deliberate and masked way of expressing covert feelings of anger. Passive aggression involves a variety of behaviors designed to get back at another person without the other recognizing the underlying anger. In the long run, passive aggression is even more destructive to interpersonal relationships than is aggression, and, over time, all relationships with a person who is passive aggressive will become confusing, discouraging, and dysfunctional.

Passive aggression is motivated by a person's fear of expressing anger directly. The passive-aggressive person believes life will only get worse if other people know of his anger, so he expresses anger indirectly. The passive-aggressive teenager might veil anger by smiling and saying, "Hey, Dad, no problem about not letting me use the car tonight. It's no big deal. I'll call Cindy and see if she'll go out with me another Saturday night." Inside, the teen seethes with anger and plans to make sure his father can't locate his car keys before his Monday morning business meeting. The passive-aggressive spouse who doesn't want to be bothered with household chores might conceal her anger by saying, "I'll do it in a minute" and then waiting so long that her spouse does the chore. Her response when confronted is feigned shock along the lines of, "I didn't know you wanted me to get it done immediately."

We believe the passive-aggressive person derives genuine secondary pleasure out of frustrating others. For this reason, we call this pattern of behavior "the angry smile." Regardless of the term used, people who are passive aggressive often

- deny or repress feelings of anger;
- withdraw and sulk;
- send hidden, coded, and confused messages when frustrated;

- create minor but chronic irritation in others;
- are overtly cooperative but covertly uncooperative;
- procrastinate or carry out tasks inefficiently;
- can be evasive and secretive;
- project angry feelings on others;
- are quietly manipulative and controlling;
- create a feeling in others of being on an emotional roller coaster;
- cause others to swallow their anger and eventually blow up; and
- make endless promises to change.

Counter–Passive Aggression

When reacting to aggression, a person may behave in a counter-aggressive way. When reacting to hostility, a person may behave in a counter-hostile way. Likewise, when reacting to passive aggression, a person may behave in a counter–passive-aggressive way. In Chapter 10, we will present the Passive-Aggressive Conflict Cycle and explain in detail the dynamics of how persons responding to passive aggression frequently end up mirroring the troublesome behavior and getting caught in a circular and endless cycle of passive-aggressive conflict.

A mother becomes impatient with her son's passive-aggressive pattern of “missing” the bus so that he can use the family car to drive himself to school. On the morning of an important soccer tournament, she “forgets” to wake him on time so that he is late and not able to meet his team in time for the game.

Like atomic waste, counter-aggressive, counter-hostile, and counter–passive-aggressive behaviors are all toxic. Unless a person learns to manage and dispose of these behaviors in a healthy way, he or she will end up contaminating his or her well-being.

A Positive Outcome

As we taught our theory of passive aggression to seminar parents and professionals, we were gratified by their quick insight into the psychology of passive aggression and their sense of personal empowerment to deal with passive-aggressive behaviors. These empowered adults no longer felt like confused victims but acquired the psychological awareness and skills to alter their responses to passive aggression. Many participants commented that their lives became less emotional and more stable. They reported that they were able to identify the anger behind another person's passive-aggressive behavior. Most important, the participants were no longer programmed to fulfill the other person's irrational belief that adults and authority figures are critical, demanding, and at times out of control. We believe you will experience these same feelings of insight and empowerment as you read this book.