Handling Passive Aggressive Behaviour

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Have you ever worked with a sniping, sarcastic co-worker who was an expert in undermining you? Have your customers made smart comments or cut you down to size with churlish remarks? Have you had to endure the sulking silence of a colleague who played mind games? These are all examples of passive-aggressive tactics.

Passive-aggression is a way of communicating hostility covertly. Passive-aggressive people use body language and verbal retorts to express their aggression. Passive-aggressive behaviour stems from feelings of powerlessness. It is a way of expressing anger – but not in a healthy way.

Difficult people who communicate in passive-aggressive ways aim to look innocent and docile. But in fact they are intending to be mean or to hurt you. Most passive-aggressive people do not realise that their feelings of anger or hurt have been repressed repeatedly. For them, feeling inward anger is a normal state. Their repressed feelings of being annoyed lead them to constantly feel bitterness. This is why they resort to abusive tactics like sarcasm and biting jokes. Passive-aggressive co-workers and passive-aggressive bosses can be a nightmare to work with. They can’t handle conflict and they turn small problems into major psychological wars.

What is passive-aggressive behaviour?

Passive-aggression is a way of communicating hostility covertly. It is a uniquely human form of behaviour, which taps into our ability to assign meanings to words and patterns of behaviour. For example, a dog can’t bark sarcastically, but a human can speak sarcastically.

Examples of passive-aggressive behaviour can be traced back thousands of years. Satirical cartoons dated to 1150–1070 B.C. have been found in Egypt, for instance. These make fun of the rich by showing animals engaged in the activities wealthy people enjoyed during ancient times. The term ‘passive-aggression’ was first used by an army psychiatrist, Colonel William Menninger during World War II. He used it to describe soldiers who expressed defiance “by passive measures, such as pouting, stubbornness, procrastination, inefficiency and passive obstructionism.” Menninger believed that passive-aggression was a reaction to stress.

Passive-aggressive people use their body language and voice tones to express their negative feelings indirectly. Often, they resort to passive-aggressive behaviours when they experience feelings of powerlessness. Passive-aggression is an unhealthy way of expressing anger. Typical tactics employed by passive-aggressive people include sarcasm, biting jokes, agreeing to something, then backing out at the last minute, sulking, taking ages to complete a simple task, deliberately making mistakes or breaking things ‘accidently.’

Most people operating in passive-aggressive mode aim to look innocent and docile, whilst attacking you. They intend to be mean or to hurt you, but they won't admit this. They can generate a lot of emotional confusion, because their tactics are so covert. If you’re constantly exposed to spite-based tactics, you’re likely to end up feeling confused, distressed, offended, guilty or frustrated. Sometimes you might wonder if you’re being too sensitive or are totally misinterpreting what’s happening, because a passive aggressive person sets you up to feel disoriented. Don’t be fooled by these tactics.

Checklist for recognising passive-aggressive behaviour

Passive-aggressive behaviour is often driven by the same emotion as aggressive behaviour: anger. The difficult people who resort to passive-aggressive tactics feel angry and resentful – about what, exactly, may remain a mystery. It is possible their anger is legitimate, but as passive-aggressive co-workers don’t openly express their feelings, this can be hard to tell. Sometimes their annoying behaviour is aimed dead centre on the target; in these cases passive-aggressive people may have other malevolent
reasons for masking their feelings. Whatever their motivation, the targets of these toxic people are the ones who really suffer.

Passive-aggressive people are often lonely, miserable and isolated. This is why these difficult and annoying people defend their personal needs and beliefs at your expense. Rather than taking responsibility for their own situation, the passive-aggressive person will blame you for their negative feelings. They are experts at rationalisation, saying things like “She deserved to be told off” rather than admitting that they have behaved inappropriately.

Passive-aggressive people often resent authority figures such as bosses, teachers, or more successful colleagues. They feel that these people are more powerful than they are – and they resent this. So they fight back by sabotaging and undermining. The aim of their manipulative behaviour is to feel more personally powerful.

You’re likely to be dealing with a passive-aggressive communicator when someone frequently:

- Makes sarcastic comments
- Uses nasty jokes to put you in your place
- Agrees to do something, then claims to forget their promise
- Makes a fool of you in front of other people
- Deliberately withholds information or resources you need to meet your commitments
- Sulks
- Gives you the cold shoulder or cuts you out of conversation
- Takes ages to complete a simple task – just to annoy you
- Deliberately makes mistakes
- Breaks things ‘accidentally’
- Spreads malicious rumours
- Tries to set people up against each other in order to generate conflict
- Uses body language (such as rolling their eyes) to nonverbally express contempt
- Glares at you or ‘gives you the evil eye’
- Avoids you or ignores you
- Is frequently late for meetings where other people must wait for them

**How to deal with passive-aggressive behaviour**

Passive-aggression can seem tough to handle because it is involves manipulative, offensive communication. Passive-aggressive people are expert manipulators and game-players. So you need to be observant and alert when dealing with them. Remember that the key game played by a passive-aggressive person is the game of disguise. Passive-aggressive people disguise their anger, disguise their shame and disguise their fear. They smile as they attack. They pretend to be nice, while they’re plotting to shame you. And they act as though you’re the one with the problem. But you don’t have to go along with their annoying tactics.

Sadly, passive-aggressive behaviour is all too common. It happens everywhere. You’ll see it in the workplace, at home, in shops, in schools and in your family. To deal with passive-agression you need to hold the perpetrator accountable for their actions. So you need to hone your observation skills.
Active listening and acute observation are key skills when you’re dealing with passive-aggressive co-workers. Make sure you pay attention to their body language and their tonality. Once you have detected what makes their message offensive, you will be ready to expose and deal with the passive-aggressive behaviour.

If you watch the passive-aggressor’s body language closely, you’ll see that it is used to subtly convey contempt. Gestures and facial expressions are used to undercut any ‘pleasant’ words spoken by the passive-aggressive person. Notice the small actions they use to express disdain— for example sneering or rolling their eyes when you talk. Also pay attention to a passive-aggressor’s voice tone. This is what makes their message offensive. For example, they might sound sarcastic as they say “You look nice today.” It is their voice tone which creates the sarcasm.

Here are some key tips for staying in control when dealing with passive-aggressive tactics. They have been used by thousands of people to sort out passive-aggression.

**Keep the lines of communication open**
Remember that passive-aggressive people want to shut down the conversation. Don’t let their problem behaviour side-track the conversation. Point out that differences of opinion are normal and that you are willing to talk about them. Ask the difficult person outright if they are annoyed or upset.

**Stay calm and assertive**
Yes, passive-aggressive behaviour is very annoying. But you will only fuel passive-aggression by reacting aggressively or by resorting to passive-aggressive tactics yourself. Calmly point out that you have noticed the abusive behaviour and do not like it. Use an I Statement to do this. For example, “I notice you rolled your eyes when you said my report was very interesting. This gave me the impression you didn’t like it. Do you have any specific feedback you want to give me?”

**Exposé their games**
Passive-aggressive people are playing games. They hide behind incongruent messages and ambiguous statements. Their nasty message is conveyed by their tone of voice or body language, so it seems hard to deal with. The key to success is exposing the passive-aggressive person’s tactics. Repeatedly use statements which begin with “I get the impression.” In this way you can address their difficult behaviour without resorting to aggressive tactics. Your aim, of course, is to be assertive while dealing with toxic or annoying people who resort to passive-aggression. Download Difficult People Made Easy for more details on how to do this.

**Acknowledge their good behaviour when it happens**
Even the most toxic people will behave positively sometimes. Make sure you catch them doing something right. Remember that behaviour which is rewarded will be repeated. By acknowledging positive behaviour, you help boost the difficult person’s self-esteem. And the higher their self-esteem, the less they will need to resort to passive-aggressive tactics.

**Avoid being baited into game playing**
Never respond sarcastically to a passive-aggressive attack. This is what difficult people want you to do. Refuse to enter into verbal arguments or power struggles. Difficult people with spite-based behaviours are chronically negative. They enjoy engaging in power games because these make them feel superior. Walk away rather than playing the game.

**Draw attention to passive-aggressive tactics**
Let the difficult person know you are aware of their game and won’t be playing. Do this by saying describing exactly what the difficult person is doing or saying. Spell out the impression their problem behaviour creates. Then tell them how you expect to be treated. For example “When you fold your
arms and turn away, I get the impression that you’re trying to say you don’t want to talk to me. Since we work in a team, we need to talk professionally and politely about our work. In future, I’d like you to look at me when I ask a question.” Setting boundaries in this way is an effective and practical way to deal with annoying, problem and toxic people.

Report the problem

Passive aggressive behaviour is a tactic frequently used by workplace bullies. It is definitely not appropriate workplace behaviour. If you feel you are being bullied and cannot resolve the situation by yourself, take steps to report the problem to someone who can help you. This could be your supervisor, manager or Human Resources team.

There are specific phrases you can use to ensure that your report of bullying is taken seriously. These include:

- I feel threatened when [name] says/does this
- [Name]’s behaviour opens the company to the risk of legal action
- I understand we have a policy of zero tolerance of bullying. So I would like to report...
- I believe this behaviour is creating a risk of harm to members of the team
- This behaviour is causing problems with our team dynamics

Find out how to handle specific passive-aggressive tactics NOW

The behaviours passive-aggressive people use to gain power over you are varied. They include sarcasm, going slow, deliberately making mistakes and making offensive jokes. No matter what behaviour a passive-aggressive person uses, they will come across as covertly hostile. But there’s a solution.

Buy your copy of Difficult People Made Easy now to discover how to deal with passive-aggressive tactics such as: being sarcastic, lying, gossiping, sulking, going slow, manipulating your feelings, saying ‘yes’ when they mean ‘no’ and attention seeking behaviour.

About the author of this tip sheet

This tip sheet was written by Australian people skills expert, Eleanor Shakiba. Eleanor has written over ninety training courses and produced a series of audio programs to help professionals excel at work. In 2011 she branched into video production. She also provides one to one coaching and group training services in the corporate sector.

Eleanor's qualifications include a degree in Anthropology, Graduate Certificate in Adult Education, Graduate Diploma in Counselling and accreditation as a Master Practitioner of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). Eleanor is passionate about ‘creating success stories’ with professionals like you.