

Afraid to Rage: The Origins of Passive-Aggressive Behavior

How unresolved fear and anger can lead to passive-aggression.

At one pole of communication stands passivity: not speaking out for fear of adverse consequences. At the other end stands aggressiveness: voicing negative sentiments without restraint or regard for their effect on others. In between passivity and aggression lies the golden mean: asserting one's thoughts and feelings, wants and needs, while at the same time showing appreciation and respect for the other's viewpoint.

Assertiveness, the ideal compromise between the extremes of passivity and aggression, is part of our natural endowment—our "universal personality," as it were. When we first come into the world, and even before we become verbal and can articulate what's going on inside us, we possess the rudimentary ability to communicate. Innately, we know how and when to smile, to yawn, to express surprise, anger or trepidation and, indeed, to convey a broad variety of emotional distress through crying—even wailing (as many a parent can woefully testify). We're not yet able to employ language to identify our particular frustrations, or consider the likely reactions of our caretakers, but we're unconstrained in letting our feelings be known.

The Problem

It's manipulation, and no one likes it. Figure out what's making you fume—and speak up instead.

If we grew up, however, in a family that couldn't, or wouldn't, attach much value to our basic needs and wants, our natural impulse to assert ourselves became suppressed. If when we talked directly to our parents about our desires, we were derided as selfish, of thinking only of ourselves, we learned that it simply wasn't acceptable to want what we wanted, need what we needed. Similarly, when we repeatedly received the message that we were a burden (or "just another mouth to feed"), we learned that if we voiced our wishes we were endangering a parental bond *already* experienced as tenuous.

The same is true when we received the message that we were an inconvenience, or too demanding, or didn't *deserve* whatever it was we were requesting. And if our parents were outright angry with us, yelling at us whenever we straightforwardly expressed our wants, the very *thought* of continuing to voice them may have filled us with anxiety. Moreover, if we communicated *our* anger at their denial and their reaction to such assertiveness was scary or punishing, we would have learned to keep our anger strongly bolted inside, afraid to express that which would surely come back to haunt us.

We therefore may have felt required to cultivate a certain attitude of passivity and acquiesce to whatever lesser role our caretakers chose to assign us. After all, as children we all struggle in one way or another to experience our bond with our parents as secure. Any behavior felt to *threaten* this bond would need somehow to be eradicated. Of necessity, then, we'd have to renounce many of our basic wants and needs. How could this *not* be the case when we felt criticized, attacked, maybe even rejected almost every time we asserted ourselves? It would likely have seemed that we had no choice but to give up what we wanted—or maybe even teach ourselves not to want whatever regularly led to our parents' denial or disapproval.

But, of course, fundamental needs and wants—whether for comforting, encouragement, support, or some material item that might at least symbolize our importance to our parents—never really disappear. They simply go into hiding. Fearing the repercussions of making our needs known, we keep them tucked away, secret from those who might be disgruntled by our asserting them. While feeling compelled to censor their expression, however, we may nonetheless feel this deprivation keenly. But at least as frequently, we go from suppressing the *expression* of these needs to *repressing* them entirely. Because experiencing these wants and needs can itself get connected in our minds with parental disapproval or rejection, we may well feel obliged to obliterate even the awareness that they exist.

Passivity—or *non-expressiveness*—is the inevitable result. Tragically, we may forfeit all consciousness of our most basic needs just to avoid the anxiety linked to them. After all, when we're young, asserting anything that might threaten our dependency on our parents would, almost literally, feel hazardous to our survival. And as children we intuitively grasp our profound inability, independent of our caretakers, to care for ourselves. On our own, we would surely die. So we have no choice, if we are to secure this most vital connection, but to adapt to *their* preferences—and repress our own.

Yet our needs—however unattended to, and however unaware we may train ourselves to be of them—persist. And somewhere inside us there is anger that our parents do not love us enough to make these needs the priority they can't help but be for us. For nine months in the womb *all* our basic needs were addressed—automatically. How, then, could we not have entered the world with a certain sense of entitlement? So deep inside us we rage for that which we now feel deprived of. Although we may have repeatedly received the message that we didn't deserve whatever it was we longed for, somewhere inside us we felt we *did* deserve it.

The (Pseudo-) Solution

So how does this unrelenting frustration—and this inexpressible rage—get resolved? As children, how can we safely discharge these powerful feelings of being denied what our infant self must feel is its birthright—in a sense, as entitled to as mother's milk, made for its own nurturance?

Obviously, it's not safe to vent such rage directly. We'd be called selfish, bad, out of control. And we'd likely be yelled at, or even punished physically—another reminder that our bond with our parents was fragile and easily ruptured by any blunt expression of anger. It's only reasonable that we'd be afraid to overtly let our frustrations be known. For it's way too anxiety-producing to take what feels like our survival into our own hands, to offend those on whom we most depend.

And so—and all of this could be unconscious—we're emotionally desperate to find a viable way of letting out our frustrations, our hurt and indignation that our needs have been slighted or dismissed by those responsible for our care. Because it's impossible to annihilate our anger, the felt urgency to release it only gets stronger over time, even as we endeavor to suppress it. Periodically, we must find a way of alleviating this negative emotional build-up without causing serious damage to a relationship already perceived as precarious.

This is where the loss of personal integrity—in a word, *lying*—enters the picture. And we lie to ourselves, as well as to our parents. In essence, this is what passive-aggression is all about: "acting out" our grievances, behaviorally *protesting* what is experienced as unfair, while yet contriving to protect the relationship we really can't afford to jeopardize. Surreptitiously, we find ways to sabotage, undermine, deceive, betray. In a way, we retaliate against our caretakers by doing to them much of what we feel they've done to us. We disappoint, withhold, disengage, make up excuses, and blame others for our own mistakes and misbehaviors. In multiple ways we resist cooperating with our parents' directives. We deny what *they* need—but always with an explanation that (at least partially) gets us off the parental hook. "We just forgot," "we didn't mean to," "we really didn't understand what was asked of us," "we had no idea it'd turn out that way," "it was just an accident," "it really wasn't our fault," and on and on and on.

Beyond this—unless our passive-aggression is a lot more passive than aggressive—we manipulate. Oh, how we manipulate! Like con-artists in training, we look for all the possible ways to address our needs and desires without coming out and requesting them directly. We become masters of indirection and subterfuge. Feeling so powerless in our relationship with our parents, we attempt to "grab" this power passive-aggressively. We might, for instance, sneak money from our father's wallet to buy the school lunch we wanted, tossing into the garbage the dried-out baloney sandwich our mother prepared for us earlier.

At some point we may have to pay a price for our various "accidental" errors and misdeeds. But if we've covered our tracks reasonably well, our parents can't be entirely sure just what happened, or what our actual motives were. So any punishment we receive is likely to be substantially less than had we been honest in the first place.

In effect, our parents—in their inability, or unwillingness, to adequately take care of our dependency needs—unwittingly *taught* us to become manipulators and liars. Had we, alternatively, learned from them that being assertive and direct would more effectively address our needs, it's likely we would not have devised such an unhealthy arsenal of devious tactics. Additionally, if our self-interested machinations were clever enough (or unconscious enough), we may end up fooling *ourselves* just as much as we fooled them. In this case, we never have to acknowledge our vindictive motives of rebellion or retaliation. For having to acknowledge such acting out of our frustrations and resentments might cause us to become more anxious (and possibly guilty as well).

Present-Day Defenses—and the Challenges We Face

By way of qualification, I'd like to emphasize that what I've been describing is to some degree exaggerated. I've wanted to illuminate what I see as a universal personality phenomenon—that is, I think *all* of us, in various ways, display certain passive-aggressive tendencies. In addition, only rarely are parents so unsupportive and withholding

that we end up as adults with full-blown passive-aggressive personality disorders. Still, I believe it's useful to suggest that many of the barriers that prevent so many of us from taking full responsibility for our behavior, as well as from communicating our needs and wants directly, derive from old (and no longer appropriate) childhood "survival programs."

If, for instance, we became at some point hyper-sensitive to our parents' negative evaluations, we're likely as adults to want to blame others for problems that may be primarily of our own doing. In this way, we circumvent the criticism we might otherwise receive—and the associated anxiety such blame might re-awaken in us.

Our avoidant tendencies, too, may have originated from our past when we learned to do whatever was necessary to avert conflict. Dependent as we were on our parents, it may have felt too dangerous to risk antagonizing them. So to keep our anxiety manageable, we endeavored to minimize angry confrontations. Given our parents' unreliability in meeting our needs, we probably didn't want to depend on them *at all*. But since we had to, we also had to restrain ourselves in our dealings with them. And so—again as adults—we may reveal a self-defeating tendency to avoid any problematic discussion that, to us, might become distressingly contentious.

Whatever passive-aggressive traits we may have are strikingly akin to what is known in psychology as *hostile dependency*—and both terms are similarly oxymoronic. Since we could never trust that our parents would respond positively to our needs, now grown up we're *still* not comfortable being in situations of dependency. But if, nonetheless, we're saddled with unmet dependency needs from the past, we inevitably bring these needs—as well as our *ambivalence* about these needs—to all our close relationships. So if we give mixed messages to those we're involved with (ultimately leaving them hurt, confused, or even outraged by our hostile-dependent reactions to them), it's because we've never resolved our internal conflict about being dependent in the first place.

It's important to realize that passive-aggression is not necessarily less aggressive simply because it's passive. Essentially, passive-aggression is an *indirect* form of aggression—not necessarily a *milder* form of aggression. Consequently, even as our unmet dependency needs from childhood may compel us toward relationships that offer us the *hope* of being comfortably dependent on another, our un-discharged anger toward our parents (who frustrated these needs initially) may prompt us to dump these still unresolved feelings on anyone who might actually be disposed to care for us. But whether or not we're empathic enough to be aware of it, being late for a date (or breaking it at the last minute) with some lame excuse can still be extremely hurtful to another—as can a sarcastic remark thinly masked as an attempt at humor. In both instances, we might claim innocent intent, but we've nonetheless managed to draw blood. And finally our innocence must be seen as questionable.

Assuming we're willing to take responsibility for whatever predisposition we may have toward passive-aggressive behavior, we need to make peace with whatever we felt deprived of when we were growing up. We need to find ways (with or without professional intervention) to release and resolve old anger and resentment. We need to finally accept that our parents, given their own particular resources and limitations, gave us as much as they could. And we need to recognize that in our lives as adults we can't continue to punish others for what they failed to give us. We need to solicit, and carefully attend to, feedback from those who've reached out to us—and, indirectly, been rebuffed in return. And we need to locate, confront and overcome the deep-seated anxiety that created our tremendous ambivalence about close relationships in the first place.

If, finally, we are to evolve into better, more compassionate human beings, we need to develop for others precisely the empathy and understanding we ourselves never received in growing up.