

Cycle of Passive Aggressive Behavior



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Passive aggressive behavior is an attempt at conflict resolution that actually does not resolve the conflict.

The term passive aggressive essentially means communicating dissatisfaction or unhappiness about something in an indirect way.

People in this cycle believe that direct expressions of anger should be avoided so they express themselves passive aggressively. Read the cheat sheet below to better understand the cycle of behavior that occurs with passive aggression so that you and your partner can begin to communicate anger in a healthy (and direct!) way.

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STAGE 1

During the first stage, the passive aggressive person begins to build up of those feelings of anger and acknowledges that it isn't safe to express them directly. The reason a direct expression feels unsafe could be a result of childhood learned behavior where judgment or punishment would ensue if anger was expressed.

STAGE 2

Stage 2 of the passive-aggressive conflict cycle is a stressful situation that triggers irrational thoughts informed by early life experiences. For example, if an instructor asks a student to pass out the workbooks and that student has a prior history of being asked to do things and not being appreciated for it, the student might fall back on this history in the current situation. Instead of feeling honored by being asked to help, the student might feel resentful because the request has triggered a pre-learned response.

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STAGE 3

Stage 3 occurs when the passive-aggressive individual denies his or her anger, which can lead to projecting negative feelings onto other people and building resentment towards others.

STAGE 4

Stage 4 of the cycle is to engage in passive-aggressive behavior. This can include: sulking, pouting, procrastinating, denying feelings of anger, withdrawing, carrying out tasks inefficiently or unacceptably, and exacting hidden revenge.

STAGE 5

The 5th stage of this cycle is the response of others. People tend to react negatively to passive-aggressive behavior and, often, this is what the aggressor is counting on. This reaction reinforces the dysfunctional behavior and the cycle continues.

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This cycle is not uncommon and having a better understanding of it can save a relationship from being stuck in an unhealthy (and highly ineffective) pattern of communication. Learning to be assertive and express your anger authentically and appropriately will free you to create deeper, healthier and happier relationships.

With Love,

Terri Cole