



“UGH, SHE’S BEING SO PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE”

Ever said that about someone? Are you sure what it means? (FYI, it’s not just a synonym for *annoying*.) Here’s how to identify and tackle the issue head on—just in time for some cozy holiday togetherness.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING: Your friend texts you a question and, after you answer, writes, “Thanks for texting me back. I know how busy you are.” Your coworker apologizes for forgetting to invite you to a meeting. Your mother-in-law says, “Great job on that turkey!” All good, right? So why do you feel punched in the gut? Because maybe those seemingly nice comments weren’t nice at all. Maybe you’ve been hit with a passive-aggressive jab—a hurtful action (or, in some more complicated cases, an inaction) in disguise. Feeling off about an exchange may be a sign that your friend’s text *was* dusted in sarcasm, your coworker *purposefully* left you off the meeting invite, and your mother-in-law thinks that you have the turkey-roasting skills of an eight-year-old. “Passive-aggressive behavior is sugarcoated hostility,” says Scott Wetzler, Ph.D., the author of *Living With the Passive Aggressive Man*. “It appears innocuous, but underneath there is a lot of anger. It’s meant to hurt.” Worse, it is nearly impossible to call out the perpetrator, who can squirm away with a simple “You’re so sensitive!” or “Oh, come on, it was a joke.” And by the end of the exchange you are convinced that you’re the crazy one. It’s murky waters. Let’s wade in together, shall we?

Written by Sharlene Breakey

Illustrations by Anna Parini

Passive-aggressive behavior: the definition

It all starts with being angry—about the past, about a perceived injustice (true or not), about being treated unfairly. According to Signe Whitson, a coauthor of *The Angry Smile*, there are four ways to express anger. (We'll get to the fourth—most healthy—way later on.) The first is plain old aggression, “when you openly trample on other people, putting yourself first,” she says. Next there is being passive, when people just withdraw. The third is being passive-aggressive, which, contrary to what you may think, isn't a combination of the first two. Rather, it's a covert way of expressing anger. It goes beyond the classic backhanded compliment. It's the coworker who agrees to help you on a project, then doesn't do the work; the friend who consistently arrives late for lunch dates; the spouse who tells you to pick the takeout, then complains about your choice; the teenager who says he'll take out the trash but leaves it; the roommate who brings home your favorite flavor of ice cream right after you've said that you're trying to lose weight. “It can be as simple as ‘forgetting’ to send someone a holiday card, just to make her feel bad,” says Katherine Crowley, M.Ed., a coauthor of *Mean Girls at Work*. In each scenario, there's an underlying lack of care and an intent to wound, even if it's not obvious.

Why do we act this way?

The main reason: We're afraid to express anger. And when we tamp it down too far, it finds a way to come out sideways. “There is a taboo against anger. It's not considered a healthy emotion, even though you can't navigate life successfully without it,” says Andrea Brandt, Ph.D., the author of *8 Keys to Eliminating Passive-Aggressiveness*. “Some people grow up in households where they can't express feelings openly—maybe it's abusive or just frowned upon—so they learn to do it in hidden ways,” says Wetzler. In fact, the term was first used clinically during World War II to describe soldiers who weren't directly defiant, knowing they could face retribution, but who found ways to avoid following orders. With kids—who are struggling to express frustration or anger in the face of authority (their parents)—passive-aggressive behavior can show up in a number of ways: stalling, sarcasm, or plain old eye rolls. It's all an attempt to release pressure without overt rage.

Insecurity is another driver of passive-aggressive behavior. Dread—of harming relationships, of being perceived as “not nice,” of getting fired—can cause us to toss off a Teflon-coated sarcastic e-mail or a backhanded compliment. And for women, being passive-aggressive can be a sneaky way to be competitive when straight-on aggression may result in unfair labeling. “For survival purposes, women learn to tend and befriend, so in competitive environments it can be harder to proclaim, ‘I'm going to beat you,’” says Crowley.

WHO, ME? PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE?

“Many passive-aggressive people don't realize what they're doing,” says Andrea Brandt, Ph.D., the author of *Mindful Anger, a Pathway to Emotional Freedom*. Could that be you? If you frequently feel inadequate, frustrated, irritable, or depressed, it's easy to want to undermine the self-esteem of others. Ask yourself a few questions: Do I have a hard time saying no, then ignore the work after I agree to take it on? Do I feel as if people in authority are trying to thwart me—and does that make me want to cut them down to size? Does my need to be thought of as a nice person make direct confrontation difficult? Yes, yes, yes?

Try the following tactics.

RECOGNIZE your anger. “Emotions like anger are felt by our bodies first—our heart beating faster or a heaviness in our chest,” says Brandt. Give yourself space before reacting.

THINK before you speak. “If you feel something bad welling up, just don't say anything,” says author Katherine Crowley. Take a deep breath and walk away. Given time and an alternative outlet (say, a long walk), the anger will dissipate.

TALK it out with someone else. Find your spouse or a friend—someone safe—so you can vent before your emotions take on an unwieldy life of their own.

MAKE AMENDS. If you do say something jabby, ask yourself, “Did I do that to hurt them?” If the answer is yes, be honest and apologize.

What we should be doing instead

The best response is to tackle anger the fourth way: assertively. And, sigh, it's the hardest. “I tell people to make friends with their anger, to consider it a basic part of being human that ebbs and flows,” says Whitson. Only after you feel in control, understanding your anger or insecurity, can you respond assertively but calmly—with respect for the other person. Of course, that's if *you* are the one being passive-aggressive. (If you're not sure, see box, above.) But what if you're on the receiving end? It's bound to happen—especially at this time of year. “Passive-aggressive behavior flourishes during the holidays, when everyone's stress is peaking and the jockeying between family members is endless,” says Crowley. To help, here are seven common situations with appropriate reactions and responses. (Good luck.)

IN-LAWS

CLASSIC SCENARIO: You're prepping a holiday meal, and your sister-in-law is "keeping you company" in the kitchen. In other words, she's hovering, wineglass in hand, and commenting on the "unusual" spices you add and the "cute" little paring knife you use to chop the celery. "I'd be lost without my Cuisinart," she says, while you tediously slice Brussels sprouts into slivers by hand.

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON:

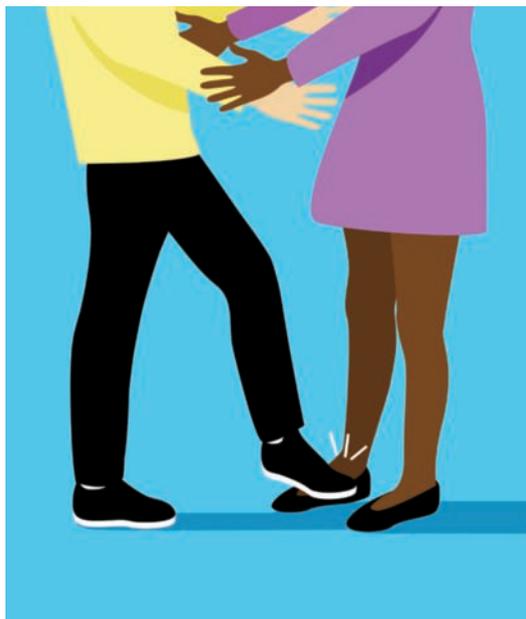
Whether it's the scenario above or your mother-in-law saying, after you mention a promotion at work, "That's so great—I'm just sorry the hours keep you away from the kids," the culprit might be insecurity. (Might be. Or the person may simply be mean-spirited, but your reaction is the same.) Perhaps your sister-in-law is unhappy in her job—but very good at cooking!—or your mother-in-law is jealous of your relationship with her son.

HOW TO REACT: First talk yourself off the cliff. "In the face of a veiled attack, attacking back is a no-win," says Laura Markham, Ph.D., the author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*. "I like to say, 'Stop, drop'—and by that I mean any agenda you might have—'and breathe.' Try to assume the best, that the person has good intentions, but that you also have no need to defend yourself." That way, you are less likely to respond sarcastically or defensively. Go for confidence and kindness. "By not continuing the covert attacks, you shift the whole tone of the conversation," says Markham. Try something like "I've been meaning to ask you about that food processor of yours. I'm sure it's much faster." Or to your mother-in-law: "I wonder about the hours, too. But right now I feel like this is right for our family."

Then, Markham suggests, you can add something genuinely nice, such as "Maybe you could give me a demonstration sometime" or "You did an amazing job with your kids" before offering a smile. "If you can do that and mean it, you all win," she says. You've maintained your integrity. If you don't think that you can swallow your bile, change the subject. "Say, 'Oh, I have to bring the garbage out to the garage,' then bolt," says Markham. Or prearrange a signal with your husband so that he can swoop in.

YOUR SPOUSE

CLASSIC SCENARIO: For weeks, your husband has promised that he will take down the pumpkin novelty lights strung up on the porch for Halloween. It wasn't so bad through the fall, but now it's after Thanksgiving. Fed up, you post a shot of your



In the face of a veiled attack from a mother-in-law, never attack back. Stop, drop (meaning, your agenda), and breathe. This gives you time to remember that you have no need to defend yourself.

orange, glowing home on Facebook, captioned sarcastically: *It's so nice of Jon to leave these lights as a bit of a change for Santa, don't you think?* When you get home, the lights are down, and he has added a reply: *Public shaming. Nice touch.*

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON: This one is tricky—because both of you behaved badly. "Promising and then failing to remove those lights is actually passive-aggressive," says Whitson, even if it just seems like lazy behavior. "But so is your response." Your husband has some deep-seated annoyance or anger that's driving him to ignore your request. You are angry and using sarcasm instead of telling the truth. A funny back-and-forth can lighten the mood, but it's not solving anything.

HOW TO REACT: "Managing your own anger is a part of the process when you're dealing with a passive-aggressive person, especially when it's your spouse," says Whitson. Start by apologizing for your post. Even if he laughs it off, you need to forge ahead; explain that you wrote what you wrote because he made you feel unimportant. "These kinds of interactions—trying to shame someone jokingly on Facebook—chip away at a relationship," says Whitson. "Dealing directly, openly, and, most important, offline is healthier for you." (Not to mention

for your friends, who are probably uneasy at peeking through a too-personal window.) Then use the incident as a segue to get to the root of it all: “When you say that you will do something and then don’t, it makes me wonder if a part of you is angry with me for making the request in the first place.” If he denies this, Whitson says to accept it as part of the process. “If you continue to gently but directly confront situations, he will be less comfortable reacting in his usual manner,” she says. Wetzler agrees: “The more you address anger in a businesslike, noncharged way, the better off you’ll be in the future.”

OLD FRIENDS

CLASSIC SCENARIO: A friend, who wants to hang out more than you typically can, texts a question. You answer, though not instantly, and you also chattily ask how her new puppy is. She responds with a cool “Thanks for getting back to me. I know you’re busy.” Feeling guilty, you make a lunch date, even though work is crazy, and she arrives 45 minutes late. Your blood boils as you remember the other times she’s pulled this—but then she comes out with so many excuses and sweet apologies that you figure you must be overreacting.

WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON: Is chronic lateness passive-aggressive behavior? In this case, yes. You aren’t living up to your friend’s expectations, and she’s using subtle ways—or innocuous texts—to make you feel bad.

HOW TO REACT: “Passive-aggressive people make you doubt yourself,

but you need to remember that you didn’t do anything wrong,” says Judith Orloff, M.D., the author of *Emotional Freedom*. Your busyness is not the issue here. Don’t bring up her behavior at lunch. As long as your own emotions are roiling, it’s too easy to dole out doses of sarcasm and end up feeling lousy. But resolve to set some boundaries later. “The reality is, sometimes passive-aggressive friends aren’t even mad at you. They’re just mad and taking it out on you,” says Orloff. Say something like “Your last text was pretty curt. Do you think that’s because you were upset that it took me a while to respond?” According to Whitson, “The more you shine a light on the anger, the less likely she will respond that way the next time.” Or say, “I know you had problems that made you late, and I get it. But my schedule is busy, too, and I would so appreciate it if you could be on time next time.” If she shows up late again, be even firmer: “I love you, but if you can’t be on time, we’ll have to stop making plans for a bit.” Says Orloff, “When we set clear limits with friends, everyone ultimately appreciates it.”

YOUR FAMILY

CLASSIC SCENARIO: As you’re about to scoop some gooey marshmallow-topped sweet potatoes onto your plate, your mom says, in front of everyone, “Honey, you are looking so slim and beautiful. Maybe you want to skip those?”

WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON: Who knows? Jealousy of your youth? An attempt to retain some power over your life as you become an independent adult (more likely)? Habit? Getting into the subject, though, sends you right back to middle school. “Even when you’re age 30, the smallest things your

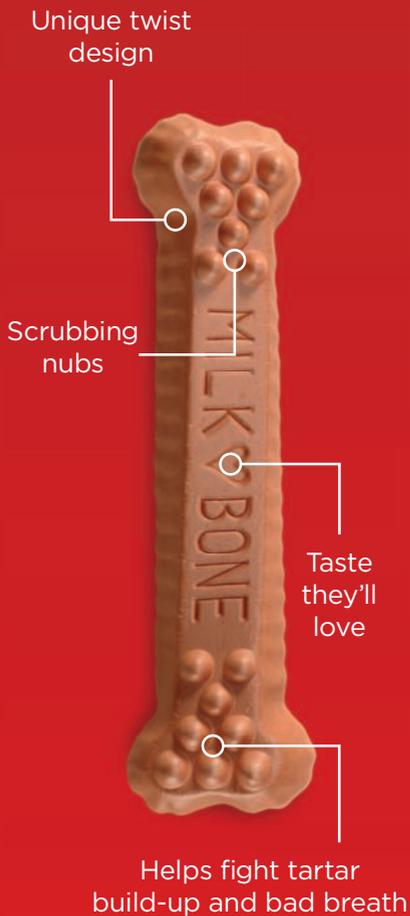


family members say can trigger those old feelings,” says Whitson. But that doesn’t mean that you have to lie down and take it.

HOW TO REACT: Do not engage. Simply say, “Thanks, but I really like them,” as you take the scoop. Then pass the dish to your table neighbor, striking up a conversation as you do this. “If you don’t give the passive-aggressive family authority any juice, it ends things,” says Orloff. “She does this to disempower you, but she can’t if you stay feeling good about yourself.” That said, it helps to prepare. Assume that some family member is going to say something annoying or hurtful and you’ll be less likely to take the bait. It might also help to figure out beforehand where zingers may come from. So when your mom comments on your hair or your uncle snidely mentions your marital status, you’ll be ready with a simple, shut-it-down comment, and you might even enjoy the challenge



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of managing the situation properly. After the holidays are over, you can revisit any offending comments by saying, in the least condescending tone you can muster, something like “You know, when you say stuff like that, it embarrasses me, and I don’t think you mean to do that.”

KIDS

CLASSIC SCENARIO: Before a family gathering, you ask your teenage daughter to help wrap presents, and she says, “Sure—in a minute.” A half hour later, she’s still binge-watching season five of *Gilmore Girls*, so you ask again. Again she says, “Sure—in a minute” (exasperated and snippy this time). Half an hour later, you’re still waiting.

WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON: Yes, this is passive-aggressive behavior. “It mushrooms in adolescence because teens are trying to develop autonomy while still relying on—and resenting—your control,” says Wetzler. It’s not necessarily defiance; it’s confusion. Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., a coauthor of *The Joys & Oys of Parenting*, says, “When teens are uncooperative, often it’s because they don’t know how they feel—about relatives, about how much to participate, about the present that they bought. They are trying to figure things out.” And instead of laying all of their emotions bare, and possibly getting angry, they release the pressure in other ways.

HOW TO REACT: Consider this an opportunity to help your teen become an assertive adult, not a passive-aggressive one. In a light-hearted tone, help her to recognize her inner conflict by saying, “You seem torn about all of this holiday stuff.” When she fires back with “Because you are annoying me!” follow with “I know this time of year can be overwhelming, and Gran is

probably going to criticize what you wear, but family traditions are important. Let’s promise to help each other through the rocky parts, OK?” Not only will you help her untangle her emotions but you will also send the message that it’s normal to be bothered by family interactions. And take heart: When handled appropriately in happy households, adolescents’ passive-aggressive behavior almost always disappears. “Once they get a sense of their own autonomy, kids outgrow it,” says Wetzler.

Of course, parents can’t always respond like saints. So the next time your 16-year-old rolls her eyes at you, Brandt says, it’s perfectly fine to call her on it: “That feels disrespectful. Is there any way you could say what you meant by putting that in a sentence?”

COWORKERS

CLASSIC SCENARIO: You are deep into a project when you take a couple of extra days off for Christmas. Despite letting everyone know that you are working through your vacation and that you should still be on every e-mail chain, you hear from a colleague that, in your absence, the project moved to a new stage without your input.

WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON: One of two things. The culprit may be vying with you for credit and deliberately cutting you out. “Technology makes passive-aggressive behavior easier. You can keep people out of the loop by pretending that you forgot to add them or by claiming there was something

wrong with their reception,” says Crowley. Or it could be a simple mistake.

HOW TO REACT: Treat the situation as a simple mistake, even if your gut says it's not. Firing off a sarcastic e-mail will only make you look unprofessional. “It also doesn't work to confront the person with something like ‘You always do that. Clearly you have a problem with me,’” says Crowley. A passive-aggressive person will rarely admit to the behavior, so in the end you may look like the crazy one. If possible, handle the situation face-to-face. Go to your coworker and firmly say, “I'm sure it wasn't your intention to leave me off that chain. Going forward, please remember to include me on all e-mails about the project.” Turn it into a simple business transaction.

BOSS

CLASSIC SCENARIO: You ask for a new project, and your boss hits you with “You know this requires 200 percent, and you've got so much on your plate! You are Supermom with those three kids! What do you think about Meg overseeing the project with you?”

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON: Make no mistake, your boss is implying that you can't handle the job. Go ahead and get in touch with your anger, but use it wisely.

HOW TO REACT: You don't want to roll over. Neither do you want to yell that she's not paying you enough to hire a full-time nanny. Instead, offer a compromise. In a calm, assertive manner, say, “I hear you have concerns, but it won't be a problem. How about we keep in close contact, and if you have problems with my work, you can let me know. I'm always open to feedback.”



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