

Do you have a passive aggressive partner

In couples therapy sessions, focus is often taken up with hearing and seeing aggression and anger being played out. Passive aggression on the other hand is harder to identify often staying under the radar just bubbling away.

Passive aggressive behaviour is defined as “behaviour that is seemingly innocuous, accidental or neutral but that indirectly displays an unconscious aggressive motive “. Passive aggression is a way of expressing negative feelings such as annoyance or anger indirectly rather than directly. This kind of behaviour can be very harmful to relationships and can often lead to heartache and loneliness if misunderstood and not addressed.

How does Passive Aggression show up in a relationship?

When a couple have a healthy relationship with anger, they can usually feel it and tell each other what’s upsetting them, discuss it and find a resolution and move on.

Passive Aggression can be very subtle and often difficult to put your finger on. It just lurks around waiting to show up in many ways. It usually presents from someone who is unable to express their hurt feelings and anger openly and honestly so resorts to dishonesty and a lack of authenticity. They act passively but express aggression covertly.

Does this cycle feel familiar?

A passive aggressive partner can try and block whatever it is you want. Their unconscious anger gets projected onto you and you get angry and frustrated with them. Your fury is theirs but rather than owning it they calmly ask why you are getting so angry and blame you for the anger they are provoking. Ongoing passive aggressive behaviour like this perpetuates resentment in a relationship and ultimately erodes it.

Some examples of Passive Aggressive behaviours in a couple relationship:

- Denial
- Fault finding and veiled threats.
- The cold shoulder/silent treatment.
- Use of sarcasm or back handed compliments.
- Avoiding responsibilities for tasks
- Saying “I can’t “but meaning “I won’t” .
- Saying “Yes” but meaning “no”.
- Procrastinating and deliberately forgetting to do things.
- Pretending things are fine when you know they aren’t.
- Purposely push your buttons by doing things that will cause issues.
- Deliberate criticism and name calling.
- Refusing to discuss their partners concerns.

At times we can all engage with some of these behaviours but when there is a consistent pattern of multiple symptoms, its more than likely you are dealing with a passive aggressive partner.

As a couples therapist it's important to be aware how passive aggressive behaviour can show up towards me in a therapy session which can be extremely useful to share with a couple. For example, a client may decide to withhold payment without giving any explanation and will often find an excuse when asked about it, rather than be honest about their feelings. Equally a client may not like how a session may have gone one week and decide to cancel without any explanation.

Why we behave passive aggressively?

There are often several reasons that contribute to passive aggressive behaviour:

- Raised in an environment where passive aggression was learnt as acceptable perhaps as a response to care and affection not showing up that much.
- Growing up in an environment where anger was not an emotion that was accepted or validated, so developing passive aggressive behaviour may have been a way of gaining some kind of control.
- Being bullied as a child or facing discrimination because of being part of a minority group may make you feel you have no voice. Instead of being assertive and expressing emotions reverting to passive aggressive behaviours is an alternative.
- Feeling stressed and/or depressed.

Strategies on how to deal with a passive aggressive partner

Passive Aggressive behaviour can be difficult to identify and to deal with. Consider these ways of dealing with a passive aggressive partner:

- Respond rather than react. Try not to respond with anger to passive aggressive behaviour. Take a moment to pause and take a deep breath instead of lashing out and escalating the conflict.
- Communicate your feelings of what you are experiencing to your partner in a calm, clear, assertive way, not in the middle of an argument or when emotions are high.
- Don't blame or criticise your partner. Use the "I" word to share your feelings and stick to the facts.
- Show interest in understanding together where this behaviour may have come from and be specific about the changes you would like.
- Noticing a partner's behaviour – can you take time out to find out what may be going on for them rather than going straight to anger.

If these strategies do not help improve the situation with your partner, it may be time to seek out professional help from an experienced Emotionally Focused Couples Therapist (EFT) who will help you understand and make sense of your emotions and how they are linked to your behaviour. EFT helps change on-going negative cycles of arguing and conflict by helping couples understand their more vulnerable emotions.

EFT focuses not only what happens between two partners, but it also encourages each partner to develop greater self-awareness of his or her own emotions and behaviours.

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