

10 Things Passive Aggressive People Say

Your early-warning system for hidden hostility.

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Is there someone in your life who consistently makes you feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster? Do you know a person who is friendly one day but sulks and withdraws the next? Does a family member or friend consistently procrastinate, postpone, stall, and shut down any emotionally-laden conversations? Are *you* sometimes that person? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, chances are you may be interacting with a passive aggressive person(link is external) or showing signs of passive-aggressive behavior yourself.

In *The Angry Smile: The Psychology of Passive Aggressive Behavior in Families, Schools, and Workplaces, 2nd ed.*(link is external), passive aggression is defined as a deliberate and masked way of expressing covert feelings of anger (Long, Long & Whitson, 2008). It involves a range of behaviors designed to get back at another person without him recognizing the underlying anger. These 10 common passive aggressive phrases can serve as an early-warning system for you, helping you recognize hidden hostility when it is being directed your way:

1. "I'm not mad."

Denying feelings of anger is classic passive aggressive behavior. Rather than being upfront and honest when questioned about his feelings, the passive aggressive person insists, "I'm not mad" even when he or she is seething on the inside.

2. "Fine." "Whatever."

Sulking and withdrawing from arguments are primary strategies of the passive aggressive person. Since passive aggression is motivated by a person's belief that expressing anger directly will only make his life worse (Long, Long & Whitson, 2008), the passive aggressive person uses phrases like "Fine" and "Whatever" to express anger indirectly and to shut down direct, emotionally honest communication.

3. "I'm coming!"

Passive aggressive persons are known for verbally complying with a request, but behaviorally delaying its completion. If whenever you ask your child to clean his room, he cheerfully says, "Okay, I'm coming," but then fails to show up to complete the chore, chances are he is practicing the fine passive aggressive art of temporary compliance.

4. "I didn't know you meant *now*."

On a related note, passive aggressive persons are master procrastinators. While all of us like to put off unpleasant tasks from time to time, people with passive aggressive personalities rely on procrastination as a way of frustrating others and/or getting out of certain chores without having to directly refuse them.

5. "You just want everything to be perfect."

When procrastination is not an option, a more sophisticated passive aggressive strategy is to carry out tasks in a timely, but unacceptable manner. For example:

- A student hands in sloppy homework.
- An individual prepares a well-done steak for his or her spouse wife, knowing the spouse prefers to eat steak rare.
- An employee dramatically overspends the budget on an important project.

In all of these instances, the passive aggressive person complies with a particular request, but carries it out in an intentionally inefficient way. When confronted, he or she defends the work, counter-accusing others of having rigid or perfectionist standards.

6. "I thought you knew."

Sometimes, the perfect passive aggressive crime has to do with *omission*. Passive aggressive persons may express their anger covertly by choosing not to share information when it could prevent a problem. By claiming ignorance, the person defends inaction, while taking pleasure in a foe's trouble and anguish.

7. "Sure, I'd be happy to."

Have you ever been in a customer service situation where a seemingly concerned clerk or super-polite phone operator assures you that your problem will be solved. On the surface, the representative is cooperative, but beware of the angry smile; behind the scenes, he or she is filing your request in the trash and stamping your paperwork with "DENY."

8. "You've done so well for someone with your education level."

The backhanded compliment is the ultimate socially acceptable means by which the passive aggressive person insults you to your core. If anyone has ever told you, "Don't worry; you can still get braces, even at your age" or, "There are a lot of men out there who like plump women," chances are you know how much "joy" a passive aggressive compliment can bring.

9. "I was only joking"

Like backhanded compliments, sarcasm is a common tool of a passive aggressive person who expresses hostility aloud, but in socially acceptable, indirect ways. If you show that you are offended by biting, passive aggressive sarcasm, the hostile joke teller plays up his or her role as victim, asking, "Can't you take a joke?"

10. "Why are you getting so upset?"

The passive aggressive person is a master at maintaining calm and feigning shock when others, worn down by his or her indirect hostility, blow up in anger. In fact, the person takes pleasure out of setting others up to lose their cool and then questioning their "overreactions."

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