The Passive-Aggressive Personality
By Dr. Sidney Langston

The passive/aggressive personality is one of the most common psychiatric disorders. Its exact prevalence is difficult to estimate because of the number of subclinical and borderline cases and the number of cases with definite disability who fail to seek professional attention.

A passive/aggressive person habitually reacts negatively to the express wishes of others, but usually demonstrates this resistance covertly rather than openly. The term "passive/aggressive" implies two assumptions about the cause of this type of recurring negative behavior:

1. The individual is afraid, unable, or unwilling to express aggression openly; or
2. The person has a pervasive feeling of hostility toward others.

Passive/aggressive individuals are usually inwardly aggressive. Outwardly, they express their aggressive tendencies through a passive facade. Inwardly, they desire control over the events that affect their lives, but they fear that if they show this desire openly, they will be put down.

This fear creates a strong defensiveness and outer phoniness, which eventually turns into anger. However, passive/aggressive individuals fear being vulnerable, so they repress their anger and express it in subtle, nonverbal, crafty ways.

How the Passive/Aggressive Personality Develops:
The passive/aggressive personality develops when a child is being reared by at least one controlling parent. The second parent is often absent from or inactive in the home. This usually involves a domineering and controlling mother and an absent, weak or passive father (who may exhibit much different traits at work). Such parents overprotect their child, make excessive demands on him, respond to him with mixed reactions of acceptance and hostility and fail to meet his basic trust and dependency needs.

All of this fosters a helpless and clinging attitude in the child and inhibits the development of independence. Expecting other people to gratify all his needs, the child grows up dependent on others to protect him and aid him in daily responsibilities. He tends to have a low tolerance for frustration and stress.

This personality type develops as an expression of resentment against excessive parental demands. The parents usually do not allow the child to openly express hostility. The child then learns to meet unfulfilled needs and to vent anger and depression through more subtle means of rebellious behavior.

Such children soon learn that negative behavior (nail biting, bed-wetting, eating problems, procrastination, pouting, obstructionism, stubbornness and intentional inefficiency) will at least get them attention. Passive/aggressive children also may cause problems at school, violate rules and fight frequently with other students. By their teenage years they may lean toward an antisocial personality, engage in delinquency, drug usage, and theft or other misdemeanors.
Often the passive/aggressive assumes a role of chronic submissiveness and compliance, but beneath the unassuming facade may be a great deal of hostility and resentment. They find it difficult to say “no,” and they dislike making major decisions. They catch themselves making excuses for delayed decisions and behavior.

Problems surface in their relationships with authority, with society's demands and with the needs of others in close, personal contacts. Feeling helpless, unwilling to be alone or make decisions, they look to others—usually to just one other person—for direction and to take responsibility on their behalf. They learn to accomplish their goals through passive manipulation.

**The Balanced Passive/Aggressive**
The balanced passive/aggressive tends to serve and submit wholeheartedly and effectively to authority.

**The Unbalanced Passive/Aggressive**
Unbalanced passive/aggressives tend to be stubborn, uncooperative, negativistic and frustrating when others ask something of them. Their favorite phrase is “yes, but . . .” When given advice, they usually set out to show that it won't work for them by following a “failure script.”

Unbalanced passive/aggressives can also be overbearing, inconsiderate, late and careless in their work. They have a basic problem with anger or hostility, outbursts of temper, low self esteem, an unrewarding domestic life, tenuous friendships, little awareness that benefits must be earned and not just received and an ambivalent relationship with their mothers (protective or punitive).

**Patterns of Behavior Often Exhibited in Passive/Aggressive Personalities:**

**Obstructionism** – A passive/aggressive woman, for example, who is angry at her husband over an incident that happened on Saturday night, may be obstructive on Sunday morning by being late in getting ready for church, especially if her husband is compulsive about being on time. Without being consciously manipulative, she may be unable to find her lipstick or shoes, causing a delay, and passively expressing her aggression toward him.

**Pouting** – After a disagreement, a passive/aggressive person will pout and walk away. Frequently, the only comment will be, “I don't want to talk about it.”

**Procrastination** – A passive/aggressive son, when asked by his mother to mow the lawn, may express his hostility by putting it off or “dragging his feet.”

**Intentional Inefficiency** – When the son can no longer get by through procrastination, he may exhibit intentional inefficiency, another method of passively expressing aggression. He mows the yard, but intentionally does a poor job. If, as a result of that inefficiency, he is relieved of the task, he has learned how to avoid responsibility.

**Addictive Behaviors** – Rebellious behavior may later come in the form of excessive eating, drinking, smoking or the use of addictive substances. A majority of cases of both drug addiction and alcoholism stem from a passive/aggressive personality disorder. According to research and clinical findings in treating hundreds of alcoholics and drug addicts, more than half have strong passive/aggressive traits. The addictive habits do not have to involve
substance abuse. Sometimes they are habits such as eating only certain kinds of food, sleeping more than ten hours a night, spending too much time alone, preoccupation with reading or any introverted activity which prevents them from spending time with others. These all result from the passive/aggressive’s lack of willpower in caring for his personal problems and the resulting dependency on others to solve his problems.

A sense of inadequacy and falling short of the traits they believe are needed for approval creates increasing psychological pressure, for which a person eventually will seek an outlet. When a healthy outlet cannot be found, the passive/aggressive will resort to an unhealthy one. People involved in any addictive habit are looking for some type of relief from current or long-term psychological stress.

People Pleasing – Because they need so much nurturing and cannot tolerate criticism, passive/aggressives seek to please those on whom they depend. The threat of any loss brings on anxiety. Unable to handle any personal tension, they seek an infantile and blissful state. They suffer anxiety when separated from their parents, sometimes developing a phobia to school and making a fuss to stay home. A passive/aggressive personality is often developed by the youngest child of the family, or by the youngest child of his or her sex. When passive/aggressives grow up, they may perform well when told what to do, but still have difficulty in making decisions. Most of them feel inferior and unable to measure up to standards of independence and make mature choices on their own. They were taught, often unconsciously by their parents, to depend on others to make hard decisions and take action for them.

Finding a Balance
All individuals with passive/aggressive tendencies can work on problem areas if they decide they really want to change, genuinely commit their motives to Christ and persevere in relinquishing old patterns. If you are passive/aggressive, you can:

Remove Your Blinders – A passive/aggressive needs to acknowledge hidden emotions such as anger, fear and the hidden desire for control. This involves realizing that you are in a battle against deception and denial within yourself. You might find it helpful to memorize Romans 2:16 and Proverbs 28:13.

Turn Your Emotions over to God – This invites surrendering your deepest emotional secrets to God and requires the inner searching of the Holy Spirit. Through this you can overcome some of your deepest personal fears and replace them with trust in God. In most cases the barrier to your emotional stability is the desire to control. Because of this, you impose a long inner list of “shoulds” and “oughts” on family and friends. If you can replace the desire for control with the attitude of accepting others as they are, you will diminish your inner personal stress.

Turn Actions over to God – It is necessary to allow God to scrutinize every motive and to “coat” every action in your life. Determine how your hidden anger is expressed. It is also healthful to resolve to use your knack for being clever and persuasive in unselfish ways.

Become Independent and Learn to Make Your Own Decisions – This involves taking full responsibility for personal behavior and not blaming things on someone else. For example, you can learn to become more tidy and stop expecting others to pick up your messes.
Learn to Like and Appreciate Yourself in Christ – You must realize you are created and loved by God and can find happiness and fulfillment through a life-commitment to Him.

Learn to Refuse the Easy Way out – You can learn to refuse the easy way out of painful situations and to develop willpower or self discipline rather than setting yourself up to fulfill a “failure script.” God sets a standard for us that is higher than we would ever set for ourselves, and yet He promises that we can attain it by achieving our full potential and allowing Him to use His power through us.

Overcome Selfishness – This can be done by helping others and getting involved in their lives.

Why Assertiveness?
Why is assertiveness the option of choice in dealing with conflicts in our relationships?

First, assertiveness is efficient in getting problems resolved. Of all other options, assertiveness is the most likely choice to get the job done and to enhance the relationship. When we “react” passively, the problem has not been dealt with and the conflict obviously doesn't go away. When we handle conflict aggressively, the conflict might get “resolved” for the moment, but the way it got resolved (at the expense of another’s feelings and rights) often leads to further rebellion and conflict down the road. Passive/aggressive behavior is also inefficient in solving a conflict because it is indirect and deceitful (Eph. 4: 25, 26, 29, 31 & 32).

Second, assertiveness is the only option that helps build self esteem in the relationship. When we handle things passively, aggressively, or passive/aggressively we really aren't acting in a manner that is worthy of respect. Acting assertively, with each person treated with dignity, raises the self esteem of each person involved. The assertive person's self esteem rises because he is acting in a manner that is worth respecting, and the person on the receiving end feels better about himself because he is being treated respectfully and as if he really matters.

Assertive behavior is the option of choice because it is more efficient and helps to raise the self esteem of everyone involved. It was the behavior that the Lord Jesus Christ manifested in His own life. The paradox, though, is that while assertiveness is the best route to go in dealing with conflict, it is the least practiced. Why?

Why Don't We Act Assertively?
While there are many reasons we avoid being assertive, the main reason is that most of us have a high need for approval. We don't stand up for ourselves because we feel the person with whom we are being assertive will dislike or reject us in some way.

The truth of the matter is that assertiveness will be met with disapproval by others at times. Anytime we dare to stand up for how we feel or what we believe is right, the potential is there for others to resent us for doing so and put us down in some way.

The life of Christ is a perfect example of assertiveness. He assertively told His parents He must be about His Father's business. He assertively confronted the disciples when they got out of line. He often was quite assertive with the rulers and leaders of His time. The assertive style of Christ led to some strong reactions at times, even to the point that He was put to death. But He didn't back off just because some people didn't like what he was saying or
doing. We need to accept the fact that we will not be liked or accepted by everyone all the time. We can ask the Lord Jesus Christ to make us resilient people.

The need for full approval that many of us carry around inside ourselves is a very serious stumbling block to being assertive. Christians especially struggle with this because they have misconstrued the Bible to say that a “true Christian” lets people run over him and does it with a smile. Many Christians have a strong “standing up for yourself is selfish and sinful” tape in their minds that keeps them from being assertive. While meekness is an important Christian trait, boldness is just as Scriptural and is evident in the lives of many Biblical characters.

**Until we come to grips with why we need approval from others so badly, we are likely to keep “stuffing” what we really feel and fail to be assertive. This leads to feelings of low self worth and confusion about who we really are. The stakes are high. It is important that we work on our need to please everyone all the time and the lack of assertiveness that this creates within us.**

References:


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