



# Passive Aggressive Behavior: Sources and Solutions for Library Workspaces

**LibraryWorks**

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# What we are covering



- What is Passive Aggressive Behavior?
- What causes Passive Aggressive Behavior?
- Reframing conflict and anger

- Gender & passive Aggressive behavior
- Setting Boundaries
- Enabling
- Q&A and Resources



**Passive Aggressive  
Behavior is an adaptive  
response to a  
maladaptive situation.**





# What is passive aggressive behavior?

Passive Aggressive behavior does not make you a bad person

A coping mechanism and/or (mal)adaptive response

Way to express feelings in a way that SEEMS non-hostile

A survival mechanism



# Communication styles



**AGGRESSIVE**-blustering and bullying, insults, reactive and threatening, they snap easily, overbearing domineering, winning is everything to these individuals



**PASSIVE**- are not good at expressing their needs or opinions, apologetic, retiring, concerned with pleasing people



**PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE**- passive communicators may be unaware of their statements and the effect they have, mutterers, their words say one thing and expression says another, frequently sarcastic



**ASSERTIVE**- direct and clear, constructive and collaborative, nonreactive and respectful, good listeners



# Anger, aggression and assertiveness

- These three words are lumped together but are different. However, they all involve a “no.”
- Assertiveness is the acting of making a stance with confidence
- Aggression is directly confrontational behavior. You can be aggressive without being angry and vice versa.
- Anger is the emotion generated by feeling passionate about an issue and making a stance





# Examples of passive aggressive behavior

Never Say NO or  
Always say YES

Heavily  
Sarcastic

Negative  
Outlook

Inaction/stalling

Frustrated and  
Irritable

Chronic Feelings  
of Victimhood

Withholding  
praise

Speaking behind  
someone's back

Acts of revenge





# What causes passive aggressive behavior?

From childhood to the workplace



# Influences in childhood

- One caregiver dominates
- Influences of older siblings, friends & others
- Unrealistic standards from parents and others
- Childhood abuse
- High conflict or conflict avoidant household
- Authoritarian upbringing, through family or societal structure





**CULTURE:** Studies show that cultures that value group vs. individual values can influence passive aggressive behaviors.

**RELIGION:** Growing up in an authoritarian or rigid religion can increase passive aggressive behavior

**CULTURE/ETHNICITY:** Children who are taught to be submissive to elders and not express anger can develop passive aggressive behavior

**FAMILY:** Child abuse, neglect and harsh punishment

**BIOLOGY:** Biological issues such as depression, anxiety, ADHD, ODD, and more

**Other influences**





# Gender & passive aggressive behavior

Why do women exhibit more passive aggressive behavior?



“Researchers found ‘significant but very small gender differences’ in boy’s and girl’s expression and experience of emotions, but significant differences in how their emotions were treated by others.”

*FROM AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF CHILDHOOD AND EMOTIONAL  
REGULATION:*

*--Rage Becomes Her by Soraya Chemaly*



“It’s okay—even expected—for men to express anger. But when women have a negative emotion, they’re expected to express their displeasure with sadness.”  
*Dr. Kerri Johnson, Professor of Communication Studies, UCLA*

Anger is an  
“approach”  
emotion.

Sadness is a  
“retreat”  
emotion.



# Repressing anger hurts us

- Women who repress their anger are 2x as likely to die from heart-related disease
- Women are 3x more likely to develop autoimmune diseases
- People who ruminate on negative feelings instead of expressing causes a higher risk of substance abuse





# WOMEN HAVE A REASON TO BE ANGRY. BUT CAN'T EXPRESS THAT ANGER.

- Starting at a young age, girls around the world do 30% more unpaid work than their brothers, increasing to 50% during adolescence
- Boys are more likely to be paid for their work at home
- A household with children does not affect a man's sleep, but increases a woman's sleep interruptions by 46%
- In the U.S., 65% of women reported being harassed
- If women's unpaid caregiving were included in the US GDP it would make up between 30-50% of it
- *From: Rage Becomes Her by Soraya Chemaly*





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# Reframing Conflict

It's OK to be angry



# Benefits of Anger



Spurs you to action



Angry people are more optimistic than depressed people



Anger provides self-insight



Anger can help negotiate



Anger can help relationships



Anger inspires and motivates people for behavioral and social change





# Setting Boundaries

Boundaries are important in passive aggressive relationships



“Boundaries are the  
invisible lines that draw  
our self-identity.”

-Andrea Brandt, EIGHT KEYS TO ELIMINATE  
PASSIVE AGGRESSIVENESS



# What are Boundaries?

- Boundaries can be physical, attached to ego or about self-image
- Those who demonstrate passive aggressive behavior typically have weak boundaries and don't respect other people's boundaries
- Those with weak boundaries are easily persuaded





# Healthy vs. Weak Boundaries

## HEALTHY

- Flexible and adaptive to the person or circumstance
- Ask assertively for what they need and/or say no
- Understand their own needs and feelings
- Can separate their own feelings from other people's feelings
- Don't tolerate any abuse

## WEAK

- Boundaries that are rigid, intolerant, black and white and intended to isolate
- Fear that they cannot express their true feelings because they might be abandoned  
Always say yes, or always say no. Get taken advantage of or take advantage of others





# Enabling

**Are you encouraging passive aggressive behavior?**



# Are you an enabler?

## DO YOU?

- Bail the person out of tough circumstances
- Make excuses for their behavior
- Keep quiet to “keep the peace”
- Have a hard time saying no
- Deny there is a problem with the behavior
- Apologize for things that aren't your fault



# Traits of enablers

- Can be emotionally needy
- Might have grown up in an environment of conflict
- Sometimes grew up in homes where they had to be the “fixer” or like “little adults”
- Have a need to feel wanted and indispensable





# PLANNING



## STRATEGIES

FOR DEALING WITH PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN  
EMPLOYEES, YOUR BOSSES AND AS AN INDIVIDUAL



# Develop a healthy detachment

Set limits

Let others solve their own problems

Try not to take things personally

Take the most compassionate view of when people communicate to you

Develop healthy outlets to release anger. What do you love to do? Hobbies?

Express empathy but do not take ownership of their problem i.e. "That's tough."

Step away with love



# If you know you have passive aggressive behavior



What are reasons that you may be demonstrating passive aggressive behavior?



How can I stay optimistic and positive in the face of adversity?



How can I be more honest and direct with others?



# OTHER TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Think about forgiveness a different way. Our passive aggressive behavior can come from feeling taken advantage of, betrayed, hurt. If we forgive in a way that is self-sacrificial that doesn't help. And forgive nothing unless you are ready, and don't feel shame if you don't.
- Challenge gender binaries. Understand the gender stereotypes involved in how we perceive other's emotional expressions.
- Provide outlets for people to express their feelings at work. Passive aggressiveness can come from feeling humiliated, condescended to, overwork and stress. Is the workplace the problem?



# Dealing with a passive aggressive boss

- This is a very difficult situation, if you can get out: do.
- Try to find healthy outlets and safe spaces.
- Document problem behavior, take it to HR if necessary.
- Don't stoop to their level. It legitimizes the passive aggressive behavior.
- Take it one day at a time.





# Passive Aggressive Bosses need OVER-Communication

- Clarify everything. “I want to make sure I understand you.” “What does a successful outcome look like to you?” “When do you need this due?” etc.
- When calling out behavior, do it in a form of a question. “I noticed in our last meeting you commented about our team’s project. Were you joking? I want to make sure we’re meeting your goals. “I wasn’t sure if you were joking. If you have concerns, can we talk about it?”





# Dealing with a passive aggressive employee

- Communicate in writing as much as possible
- Bring witnesses into difficult conversations if possible
- Don't tolerate passive aggressive behavior- call it out
- Be direct in your communication
- Set clear goals during performance evaluations







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# Discussion

Share your story

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<https://rogers-whitehead.com>



# Resources

8 Keys to Eliminating Passive-Aggressiveness by Andrea Brandt

Living with the Passive-Aggressive Man: Coping with Hidden Aggression from the Boardroom to the Bedroom by Scott Metzler

Bright-sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America by Barbara Ehrenreich

“One angry woman: Anger expression increases influence for men, but decreases influence for women, during group deliberation.” Salerno, Jessica M.; Peter-Hagene, Liana C. *Law and Human Behavior*, Vol 39(6), Dec 2015, 581-592.

The Angry Smile: The Psychology of Passive Aggressive Behavior in Families, Schools and Workplaces by Jody and Nicholas Long and Signe Witson

Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger by Soraya Chemaly