PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS: Symptoms, Causes and Cures

SYMPTOMS: Passive-Aggressive behavior implies the unconscious (out of the person’s self-awareness) expressions of anger toward others or self. For example, there is no benefit at all of being habitually late, so people who do so are likely being passive-aggressive. They hurt the people who are waiting for them and depending on them. It also is a way to hurt one’s self. Students who turn things in late, are late to classes, miss class because they accidentally slept late, or wait until the last minute to study for exams, hurt only themselves by doing so. They likely get poorer grades or even flunk out and miss out on the career they wanted. Here are a few more examples of passive-aggressive behavior. A husband is asked to paint a few rooms in the house on his day off and paints the windows shut. In his own mind, he is doing it to save money by preventing cold or hot air from leaking in or out. But actually, it is unconsciously a way to punish the person asking him to do so by making it ridiculously impossible to open and shut the windows when desired. A teenager is asked to mow the lawn, but unconsciously leaves multiple streaks of missed grass. This punishes the parent who asked him to mow the lawn by doing it poorly. A passive-aggressive person is a nice person who intends to be good person but hurt others or himself without being aware of doing so and without being aware of the extent of repressed anger motivating his behaviors. Tardiness, pouting, procrastinating, being overly dependent, blaming others, and inefficiency are all passive-aggressive traits.

CAUSES: The roots of passive-aggressive behaviors are mostly ingrained by the 6th birthday. When a child grows up with an overly controlling parent and becomes overly dependent on that parent for decision-making and/or to meet his needs, the child dares not express anger toward the overly controlling parent for fear of rejection or reprisal. Instead, the child will almost certainly learn to express anger toward the parent in typical passive-aggressive ways without knowing he is expressing anger toward that parent. Substance abuse is very common in dependent children and young adults. Losing things all the time can be an ADHD trait, which is genetic and not passive-aggressive, or can be a passive-aggressive trait in those who are not ADHD but still lose things habitually; it is an expression of unconscious toxic shame or rage toward self, usually for false guilt like not living up to the unrealistic expectations of the controlling parent. For example, a girl who has an overly controlling mother will, as an adult, constantly have conflicts with female authority figures or even female friends, even when those women are being kind to her. She will blame other women for imagined or real conflicts, without being aware that it is merely scape-goating other females by releasing her unconscious rage toward her mother by hurting those in her life who symbolize her mother. She may even do this to her oldest daughter if she has one, even if the daughter has older brothers and younger sisters. She will be a lot tougher on the oldest daughter for reminding her of the faults she does not see in herself, and as a scape-goat to receive the repressed anger toward her own controlling mother. She will get along fine with male friends and authority figures but not females. She will like her pastor but hate his wife. She will pit females in the church or at work against each other and cause splits, but all for self-righteous reasons she thinks are godly.

PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE CASE STUDIES: A young boy grew up with a very controlling and selfish father who insisted the boy go to the college the father had graduated from, get an MBA like the father had, and become a business executive like the father had. The boy was not allowed to develop his own interests as he grew up, only the interests of his father. The boy could not express his anger when denied over and over again to do reasonable activities that did not fit with the father’s design for the boy’s life. So the boy grew up, went to his father’s alma mater, and landed a good job (arranged by the father, of course) while working on his MBA at the same time. He completed all the courses for his MBA.
but did not turn in the final project needed to pass the last course he took, even though he had excellent grades to that point. An MBA was required by the young man's employer in order to move up the ladder, but the young man never got one because he kept putting off turning in his final, very easy, project. The school bent over backwards to help the young man, giving him a three year extension to turn in the minor project in order to get his MBA. The man kept intending to do it but kept putting it off. So, he never got his MBA and never got promoted. This was, of course, a passive-aggressive expression of anger toward his father.

A passive-aggressive woman who hates her abusive father has an unconscious need to justify her rage toward all men by bringing down any male who seems to be really kind and righteous. Proverbs 5 does a great job of describing such a “strange woman,” who has seductive speech and sweet kisses but a knife to stick in the back of the man she seduces to bring him down. Sometimes such women will seduce their pastor to prove that even he is good for nothing, “like all men.” This does not justify the pastor giving in to the temptation and having an affair, but some pastors who fail in this way are basically good men who may have a passive-aggressive failure script to rise to a top job spiritually and then fail in order to get even with self, parents or significant others toward whom he feels unconscious anger of which he is not even aware. To some extent, probably every human alive has some degree of a failure script, since none of us is perfect.

THE CURE: The Bible tells us that if the truth sets us free, we will be free indeed. An excellent, well-trained Christian counselor who understands these and other spiritual and emotional dynamics, can gently point them out to the client and lead the client to a place emotionally where the client may choose to gain insight into repressed anger and other emotions. If the client gets in touch with repressed emotions, realizes God not only forgives him but is also pulling for him to succeed and become independent of control and manipulation by others, then the client can learn to make healthy choices in his life rather than letting his unconscious dynamics make all the choices for him. I work every day at a Day Program in the Dallas area where depressed and broken people come for intensive care, seven-hours a day for about three weeks. During that time, we dig and probe and use various professional and spiritual techniques to get them in touch with repressed emotions. We get them to grieve, forgive others, forgive themselves, and move on in their lives with insight into the things they were blind about beforehand.

If you believe you might be struggling with some passive-aggressive behaviors, I encourage you to seek counseling. You can also read my latest book, FINDING PURPOSE BEYOND OUR PAIN (Thomas Nelson, 2009), which goes into great detail differentiating the pains we set ourselves up for or could prevent with insight and wisdom, and the pains in life that are inevitable that we can nevertheless grow from.