

# EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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## Anger Expressed Covertly Is Both Infuriating and Destructive to a Relationship

Some people just can't admit that they're angry. Anger is one of the basic emotions which touches all of our lives to one degree or another. Indeed, a person who is incapable of experiencing anger would certainly be at a disadvantage in trying to survive. Used constructively, anger helps us to protect ourselves. It motivates us to solve problems and to resolve conflicts with other people. Anger is an emotion that tells us there is something wrong out there and we want to make it better.

Anger can serve a positive function in our lives, but so many of us have heard just the opposite message. How many times have we heard: "Don't be angry." Or "good people don't get angry." Or "healthy people don't show their anger." Or "love and anger are opposite emotions." Then there is the classic line: "If you loved me, you wouldn't be angry at me." None of these statements is compatible with emotional health. The clue is to accept your anger and learn how to express it constructively.

Passive-aggression is certainly aggressive behavior, and it is laden with anger. It is a form of hostility disguised as innocence and passivity. This type of hostility is found frequently in relationships, especially troubled



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relationships, because the passive-aggressive individual finds a convenient and available target for his or her anger in a partner. Even though passive-aggression is expressed most frequently and virulently in a relationship, this form of aggression is also seen in interactions between friends or on the job. The passive-aggressive person usually will claim not to have any anger at all. But when anger is finally brought to the surface, it is usually blamed on the partner (or a friend or a boss) who is accused of being controlling and demanding. Rather than acknowledging his or her behavior as angry, the passive-aggressive individual plays on the excuse of being the misunderstood victim. The other person is always the persecutor. Communication between partners in a passive-aggressive relationship is usually blocked off, distorted, and ultimately very destructive to both people individually and to the relationship itself.

*T*he passive-aggressive individual will often show signs of being angry, but will never truthfully say why he or she is angry. This leaves it up to the partner to guess at the reason and this leaves the passive-aggressive party holding all the control. Sometimes the passive-aggressive person will provoke the partner to an angry response, and then goes on to blame the partner for having a problem with anger. For example, Mary has her parents over for dinner at 7:00 and John has promised that he will be there ... but when he shows up two hours late, claiming that he had a last-minute meeting with a business client, and Mary dares to show justifiable anger at his behavior, John blames her for failing to support his work and for allowing her anger to be out of control. "Why can't you just work with me when I have things to do? Why do I always have to put up with your anger? You've got a real problem. You always need to be the one making the demands. I'm tired of the way you blow up at me for nothing." John, of course, presents himself as the innocent victim, and rather than looking into his own behavior will project the blame onto Mary and make her the problem.

*H*ow does a person get to be passive-aggressive? Certainly we are taught from an early age not to express our anger, but this hardly explains the severity of the problem in some people. Most passive-aggressive people experience a conflict

over dependency. Rather than going through the normal developmental sequence in childhood of separating from one's parents and then forming one's own identity with encouragement and support from the parents, the passive-aggressive person has formed a dependent relationship with a parent who has never really supported the child's need to grow and experience life independently. The child continues to cling to the parent for support which is never really forthcoming and is simultaneously angry when the support for independence is never as consistent as it should be. When the child tries to express anger, it is never validated. So he or she learns to hold in overt expressions of anger for fear of damaging the dependent relationship with the parent. At the same time, the person learns ways of staying in control and experiencing some measure of independence by expressing anger passively. And what better way to get back at another person than by being late for an appointment, or never completing a promised project, or pouting and never saying what the problem is, or encouraging another person's need for closeness and intimacy and then never coming through? These patterns are learned in childhood and then carried through to relationships in adulthood.

*U*ltimately passive-aggressive people are both afraid of being alone and unable to achieve full independence as an adult. And that is the conflict: they want dependence and they fear dependence; they want independence and they fear independence. A passive-aggressive partner fights dependence by trying to have control over you. They are out of touch with their feelings and lack the tools for appropriately expressing emotions. They are guarded and feel fragile emotionally. To let you into their world of feelings seems like a dangerous thing to them, so you are always kept at a distance, never to be trusted. Privately they feel inadequate ... they either feel that other people are controlling them or they have to be in control of other people, one or the other.

*A*ny relationship involves two people, and both are responsible for its success. How does one get involved in a relationship with a passive-aggressive

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person in the first place, usually without realizing it? The passive-aggressive person can appear to be very attractive at first. After all, he or she is able to contain anger, appears to be strong and capable on the surface, is loyal, and can read your needs very well. When the passive-aggressive behavior becomes a problem, you may even think about leaving the relationship, but you are always drawn back in again (after all, the passive-aggressive person, having never achieved full independence as an adult, ultimately fears being alone ... and is very good at making sure the relationship continues). When you get blamed for things, it may strike a right-sounding note if you struggle with your own guilt issues or have problems with your self-image. You may even have a need to take care of another person who struggles with his or her own problems, and this is a perfect situation for the passive-aggressive individual who needs to form a dependent attachment to someone. It is even possible that you had a passive-aggressive parent or sibling so that finding a partner with this pattern may seem like an easy transition, something you know well and are good at. If you are in a relationship with a passive-aggressive person, it is easy to complain at length about his or her behavior, but you need to examine your part in the situation. What have you done to perpetuate the problem and what can you do to make things better?

Passive-aggressive relationships are difficult to deal with, but help is available and change is possible. When you start to make the necessary changes in your relationship, the passive-aggressive partner may fight you even more. But if you set firm limits and respect yourself, the situation is likely to change for the better. There may not be a complete transformation, but your relationship can be much better. You are invited to make an appointment to start this process.

### What Is the Behavior of a Passive-Aggressive Person?

Here are some of the obvious ways in which a person expresses anger or aggression passively. (Of course, a passive-aggressive person will display some of these behaviors only part of the time and some of them may not apply at all.)

***Lateness and Forgetfulness:*** One of the traits of passive-aggressive behavior most difficult to tolerate is the person's tendency to be late for appointments or other scheduled events. Being late may reflect both the person's need to have the control in a situation and underlying feelings of inadequacy. And there is always an excuse...like, "I forgot what time it was"...when the person wants to explain away his or her actions or avoid an obligation.

***Procrastination:*** The passive-aggressive person will commit to a project or deadline...and simply never get it done or else complete the task much too late. Other people who depend on the work being done, meanwhile, become infuriated.

***Sending Mixed Messages:*** The person seldom communicates clearly and unambiguously, so that he or she can't be pinned down. For example, "Maybe we can go out for dinner Friday night," could be a plan or maybe just a suggestion or perhaps it's just a way to keep you guessing. If you make a definite plan to go out, then the person can come back and say that he or she was just thinking out loud, and if you don't make plans, then you are blamed for never coming through.

***Pouting, Sulking and Lying:*** When the passive-aggressive person fails to keep promises and is confronted, a common response is to sigh, to withdraw from interacting, and to act as if they are being blamed unfairly. If they must give a response, there is often a fabrication of reality involved...and it is masterfully done. Open, constructive communication is virtually impossible when the other person is emotionally unavailable or deliberately distorting reality.

***Feeling Victimized:*** When you finally put your foot down and expect a firm commitment, then you are the one to blame for trying to be controlling and demanding. The passive-aggressive person acts as if he or she is the helpless victim.



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## HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH A PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE PARTNER?

Depending on the nature of your relationship and your values, you ultimately have two choices in dealing with a passive-aggressive partner. You can either repair the relationship or you can end it, and of course the former is usually the preferred option. Here are some tips to follow in containing passive-aggression:

1. **First**, it is important to recognize the problems in your relationship as stemming from passive-aggression. It is often helpful to enlist the help of a trained therapist who can objectively assess the situation.
2. **Look at your own behavior** in the relationship to see what part you may play in perpetuating your partner's passive-aggression. This may take a great deal of self-examination. Then work to change your behavior. This may mean taking an entirely different approach on your part. After all, what you have been doing in the past probably hasn't worked.
3. **Understand what motivates your partner's passive-aggressive behavior.** And try not to be judgmental. Understand how your partner grew up, what anger means to him or her, and how your partner is actually fearful of being alone, expressing anger openly and becoming intimate.
4. **Set clear limits.** Explain to your partner that you want him or her to be responsible, live up to promises, and be more open. Then you have to constantly enforce these limits. Take a sympathetic approach in doing this, and try not to be vindictive or authoritarian.
5. Teach your partner that **expressing anger is acceptable.** Healthy couples may fight as much as those in unhealthy relationships, but they fight fairly. Learn how to make an argument productive by using constructive communication techniques. If your partner feels empowered there will be no need for him or her to use passive-aggression.

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