

Coping with a passive-aggressive:

One of the most common male personality styles we find in dysfunctional marriages is that of the passive aggressive. Passive aggressive personalities are people who express their resentments and anger in passive and indirect ways. Because their negative feelings are expressed passively rather than directly, it makes it very frustrating for you to figure out what these men want or how they feel. The passive aggressive man defies and resists your efforts to change things without ever doing directly. He can be summarized as being the kind of person who says “Yes” but means “No”.

In a dysfunctional marriage he engages in a lot of obstructionism to prevent you from getting your way or to prevent him from having to give in. He has a desperate fear of being controlled and, as a result, seeks to obstruct your efforts to influence him. His paranoia about giving-in or even co-operating means that he seems to obstruct your most benign attempts to get him to co-operate with you. If you ask him to do something he may well agree, but he will not say when he will do it and will subsequently find some reason not to do it. In this way the passive-aggressive type is always making excuses for not fulfilling promises or agreements. He may even make up some story so as not to give into you.

It is extremely difficult to get a passive-aggressive type to give a clear answer to anything. Most responses have qualifications, confusions, or hypothetical problems that frustrate you to such a degree that you will end up doing it yourself. When you do you are then subjected to his criticism for not trusting him or for undermining him. If you decide to wait for him to do it you know that it will not be done or else only half done, which leaves you feeling that you should not have asked him in the first place.

The passive-aggressive man feels victimized a lot of the time. He protests that you treat him unfairly rather than owning up to his own lack of responsibility. He very easily sets himself up as the hapless victim of your excessive demands and outbursts. Reneging on his responsibilities and playing victim is a role he fills so well and you feel that there is little you can say or do that is not turned against you.

Arguing or fighting with a passive aggressive type is desperately frustrating because you never get a clear answer or response. He is adept at changing the subject, going off on tangents, or presenting a defense that is as confusing and irrational as to make you exasperated. As someone said of Bertie Ahern, it's like playing handball against a haystack! The passive aggressive man creates confusion.

He will nearly always forget to do things. When it comes to time-keeping he will typically be late. This pattern of forgetting, being late, half doing things means that he can always claim good intention and blame you for your impatience or intolerance. When he is found out, or cannot avoid taking some blame, he then typically goes into a sulk. This can be moods of prolonged irritability and bad humour. If you ask him what is wrong he will typically say “Nothing!” but he will mope about the house or else make the atmosphere at home terribly unpleasant as he punishes you for confronting him about something.

Underneath all of this irritating and provocative behavior lie a range of fears. Not least of all, the fear of responsibility. Passive-aggressive types fear taking full responsibility for things because it leaves them open to criticism or failure. The passive-aggressive is unable to handle such responsibility and its consequences. So he will manipulate situations so that he always feels 'done-to' rather than being a 'doer'. He hates taking responsibility because if he does it prevents him from playing the victim, a role he has become attached to. He therefore experiences positive influence as someone trying to control him and he will therefore resist even the most harmless of requests or demands – even from his children.

At the same time he is strangely needy. Though he will rarely admit his dependency on you, he realizes that without you his weakness would be exposed. In many ways he dreads that you will discover this weakness and dependency within him – so he always tries to keep you on the back foot by being defensive.

In truth we are all, at times, passive-aggressive. We all resort to manipulation and indirect ways of getting our way. But when it is a constant way of being it becomes seriously problematic in relationships. Men tend to be more passive-aggressive than women, tending to resist by defiance more than direct self-disclosure.