

Help! My Partner Must Be Passive Aggressive

Passive aggressive behavior is a very difficult challenge for couples. If you are in a loving relationship with a passive aggressive partner, any situation has the potential to go from the trivial to emotional combat.

A passive aggressive person will break agreements without warning and have quicker excuses than a four year-old caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

The passive aggressive person will break agreements and then howl they can't live up to the exacting standards of their partner. They try to make others' unreasonable standards, rather than their unreliability, the focus of the problem. The spouse is caught in a bind. If the spouse keeps bringing up broken agreements, they are constantly nagging. But if they don't, they are condoning irresponsibility. It's no-win dilemma for the spouse.

Another reason the passive-aggressive person is hard to live with is their hypersensitivity to actual or perceived criticism. Especially when they don't follow through with promises.

This is a problem that affects both partners, but in different ways. The passive aggressive person generally feels they are under assault and no matter what they do, they cannot please their partner.

The other partner believes they cannot depend on the passive aggressive mate to reliably follow through.

Couples depend upon teamwork. When one partner is passive aggressive, the roles and responsibilities of team members are unclear and the team is weak.

What causes this aggravating problem?

Most passive aggressive folks have two things in common:

1. A highly critical parent or parents, resulting in a high sensitivity to being judged on performance.

"I don't like anyone telling me what to do, including myself," said Bill, who has a passive aggressive personality. This is not an easy mind-set for a spouse to live with. All in all, nobody is happy.

2. A lot of painful disappointments in life. This results in a coping mechanism that severely restricts hopes and desires.

Minimizing desires is a subconscious attempt to avoid getting hopes up and then dashed since that disappointment triggers a warehouse of painful disappointments stored in the emotional brain. It becomes easier for passive aggressive people to say what they don't want than what they do want.

It's like running life's race with your shoelaces tied. But the frustration of living a life of pinched desires leaks out in being "obstructionistic" – to their spouse, therapist, boss, and anyone else that might have a say, or at least a suggestion, about what they should do.

Passive aggressive behavior can show up in other subtle ways. Hard core passive aggressive people rarely initiate doing leisure joint activities, buying things for themselves, going places, celebrating special occasions, planning surprises, giving compliments, and buying gifts for others.

What role does the spouse play?

It takes two to break this pattern. So it's best if you both understand not only your partner's contribution to the problem, but yours as well. Partners of passive aggressive people share a common trait – a strong tendency to over-function. You feel a sense of responsibility where your partner is often oblivious.

But it doesn't stop there. This feeling of responsibility pervades your life. You're drawn to responsibility like iron filings to a magnet.

Your approach to life makes you a hard worker, responsible volunteer, and an admirable contributor to society. At home you take charge. But it's a huge personal detriment that results in physical and/or emotional depletion. As you begin to run on fumes you become more furious at your passive aggressive partner for being unreliable and insensitive.

With a little encouragement, you might admit to over-functioning and then quickly add, "But I have to do it this way because I can't depend on my partner."

Now here's the hard part (gulp—this will be difficult). It's important for you to pull back from being so conscientious. You must do a better job of self care. You have probably been trained since childhood to take on responsibility beyond your age. Doing so has meant neglecting important aspects of your own interests or desires.

Self care means more than bubble bath and ice cream. It means talking to your partner about not only the standards you impose on them but the demanding ones you place on yourself. Ironically your partner can help you with this. They are aware of how you drive yourself. They've noticed the never-ending "to do" list you try to complete before you can relax.

If you think you can't possibly let up at home, ask your partner and family if they think that you and they might be better off if you chilled out a little more. I think you'll find that the rest of the family will want to support you in this endeavor.

What can the spouse do?

Your marching orders are not easy, but here they are.

1. First and above all else, remember many passive aggressive people don't pursue their own desires directly. It is difficult for them to identify their core wishes. Tell your partner that you would like to help them get more out of life. Say you'd like to have some discussions about what would make them happier. This might be tough because by the time you have this discussion, you might be very, very angry.

Your partner will be surprised by your interest in making them happier. Many passive aggressive husbands expect their spouses to deprive them of personal time for activities such as watching football, playing poker with the guys, or working in the garage. Let him know that you are on his side, not against him.

2. Leave the bossy, nagging, and judgmental part of yourself out of the conversations for the next few weeks. Passive aggressive people are especially sensitive to being nagged.

3. Give your partner lots of strokes for delivering on their promises. Tell them what it means to you when they do it. Most passive aggressive people grew up in an environment where they were deprived of positive, loving strokes. Your expressions of appreciation will help more than you may ever know.

Yes, I imagine a part of you is asking, "Why should I have to give appreciation when they are just doing what they should be doing in the first place?" Or "Why should I give them compliments for being a grown up? They should have learned this long ago."

Well, you're going to do this because it will give *you* relief sooner by helping them change faster.

Working as a team, you will create a better relationship and a better individual life.

Guidelines for the passive aggressive person

These guidelines are simultaneously obvious and difficult – it's important for you, the passive aggressive person, to promise less and deliver more.

Ironically, you probably want to want to please your partner. It's difficult to say "no" to them. I bet you don't like the expression of disappointment on your partner's face. So you agree and hope somehow you can deliver.

Trust is the foundation for a relationship that grows. The fastest way to rebuild trust is to deliver more than promised. The way to do that is to tolerate the disappointed reaction and then deliver like crazy.

Here's something else that will help a lot. Take some initiative. Do more than deliver on your promises. Your partner likely has trouble being nurtured and relaxing. Think of ways to take a load off them. Come up with ideas to nurture them. Think of things you can do that will make them feel loved, valued and appreciated.

If you come up with a really short list, then take that as clue – you're being clueless. Put some good energy into figuring this out. As a last resort – ask your partner for suggestions. And then do them! And don't get discouraged when your initiatives are met with reluctance. It's going to take a while for your partner to get accustomed to being nurtured.

Working as a team, you will create a better relationship and a better individual life, too.

It is not easy. It is not effortless. It often will not be enjoyable to break these patterns. But your lives are definitely worth it. Good luck.