

**The Passive Aggressive Male**  
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Gentleman: Ever wonder why you're driving people crazy?

These are some of the things that passive-aggressive man says:

- "Nothing. I'm just thinking."
- "No, why do you ask?"
- "Angry?"
- "I don't hate it."
- "I won't stop you."
- "What's the problem?"

These are some of the things that a passive-aggressive man does:

- Has a new lock put on the front door and forgets to give his wife the key.
- Calls an early staff meeting and shows up forty minutes late
- Talks on the phone for an hour when he knows that his girlfriend is trying to call.
- Hears about passive-aggression and decides that it doesn't apply to him.

These are some of the things that a passive-aggressive man can find tough:

- Meeting deadlines
- Firing people
- Getting angry
- Saying no.

This is what a passive-aggressive man fears:

- Himself

So let's talk about my friend Moe. *(Yes, the choice of the pseudonym for the composite character of Moe, no less than for those of Larry, Curly, Stan and Ollie, which follow, can undoubtedly be construed as a passive-aggressive act).*

Moe is utterly charming, but Moe is never in one place for long. He moves through his life like a knight on a chessboard—two steps forward and one step to the side, the one step to the side always the tricky one, to avoid the closeness. Closeness is very hard for Moe. He's got a lot to hide.

Moe is forty and single. Sex has never been a problem for him, but talking to women always has. Moe has slept with every kind of woman they make, but his elusiveness tends to have a leveling effect on them. Otherwise intelligent women date him and find themselves saying things like, "a penny for your thoughts." They all end up convinced that if they'd just been somewhat different, they could have made him "open up" (another phrase they never used before). They feel as if they've failed.

Moe is a good friend, but he is a classic passive-aggressive. “Why can’t women understand baseball?” he asked (rhetorically) over Sunday brunch the other day. There was a table of maybe eight people, all men except his girlfriend and me. “Men don’t want to talk about the game,” Moe went on happily. “You can watch a game that goes into extra innings with a guy and never says two words to him. Women are always asking whether Lenny Dystra’s married.”

All the guys laughed. But I saw the look on his girlfriend’s face. In the incredibly short space between two sips of his bloody mary, Moe had managed to:

- 1) Make himself a victim.
- 2) Blame it on his girlfriend
- 3) Make her feel ridiculous
- 4) Look swell to the guys at her expense.

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#### SITUATION 1

Your archrival at the office gets promoted.

Passive Response:

You say, "That's great, pal," and pledge to work with him.

Aggressive Response:

You carve your initials into his new credenza and quit.

Passive-Aggressive Response:

You say, “That’s great, pal,” but tell everyone else he’s been kicked upstairs and you’re happy he’ll finally have time with his kids.

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I think I should pause at this point to say that I’m not writing this story because I want to pick on Moe. At times it will seem as if I’m picking on Moe, because a passive-aggressive caught in the act is not such a handsome sight.

But passive-aggression is better than Moe.

It’s at least as big as Moe and Larry.

Larry is thirty-two. He was born to be used in a piece like this.

It is hard to believe that Larry didn’t know what he was doing. There was a gap between his girlfriend and him the size of Asia Minor, but he thought it was just the distance between “I love you.” and “will you marry me.” He thought that getting closer had to mean getting married. She thought it meant him falling backward, trusting that she’d be there.

Her calls for “intimacy” (a word that he detested) were getting on his nerves. For a week he tried to steel himself and have The Big Talk. But he didn’t want to hurt her, and he didn’t want her to

hate him. Then she got the flu—a bad stomach flu—and didn't want to see him until she was feeling better.

Three days later, Larry had mellowed a bit, and he was wondering whether maybe they could work it out somehow. The plan was that he would cook dinner for her—something bland, like pasta.

So Lucy sat in the living room while Larry pattered in her kitchen. He hummed and buzzed merrily, dumping, oh a little cayenne pepper, and hmm, a little garlic salt, a few onions, and virtually her whole spice rack into the sauce. The sauce was so hot that it could have been used to kill large pests.

She took a bite of the pasta.

“What it is it?” she said. “Do you want to break up?”

And he hadn't known until that moment how much he still wanted out.

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#### SITUATION 2

You've had a fight with your mistress, and she wants to make up by making love

Passive Response:

You break out the Listerine.

Aggressive Response:

You tell her that unlike the other men she's slept with, you're not some guy who can be turned off and on like a windup toy.

Passive-Aggressive Response:

You do it, but you're thinking about someone else, and then you fall asleep.

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Chances are that if you've heard the word passive-aggressive, you've thought it was a put-down. As a popular epithet, passive-aggressive has become a male chauvinist pig of the Eighties, and sometimes it's simply used as a synonym for schmuck. Consider: A woman gets into bed wanting to make love to her husband. He's out for the count, he's snoring. In the morning, she accuses him of using sleep as a means of escape. She calls him a passive-aggressive. He may be a passive-aggressive. He may also have needed a nap.

Passive-aggressive sounds a lot like manic-depressive, so it's logical to think that it describes behavior that alternates between extremes. That's not what it is. Passive-aggressive behavior is both extremes at once: aggressive behavior that hides behind a curtain of passivity.

Like a lot of the terms that have gotten borrowed from shrinks—paranoid, schizo, manic, psycho—passive-aggressive can take on a sort of one-size-fits-all-frustrations shape. The textbook

passive-aggression is a personality disorder. So it's not a disease, like schizophrenia, with rigorous boundaries and understood with treatment. Among the official symptoms there are plenty of traits—forgetfulness, tardiness, stubbornness, to name a few—that appear in nonneurotics too. Doctors seem to agree that it is rare to find someone who's passive-aggressive in every aspect of his life. So like greed and bad cholesterol and other signs of the times, a passive-aggression problem is a matter of degree.

On the tamest end of the spectrum, passive-aggression can really be thought of as politics: you say one thing and mean another. When George Bush turned to Michael Dukakis during the second debate and told him how much he admired his family's closeness and how it had led him to want to use the Bush family in his own campaign, the outward effect was magnanimous. The subtext was: "Hey look, you dwarf, I'll show you family. I'm killing you in the polls."

Of course, professional situations call for this kind of politics all the time. To acknowledge every frustration at work would not just be dumb but obnoxious—and arguably far more damaging than some quiet sedition and well-placed quips. There is that old adage about attracting more flies with honey. A passive demeanor, consciously chosen, can be a ruthless weapon, and it would be ludicrous to suggest that it's always a sign of some hidden problem. It's the unconscious use of passivity to mask a hidden aggression that gets men into trouble. That's what passive-aggression is, and that's what wreaks all the havoc.

Employees who work for passive-aggressive bosses, women who fall in love with passive-aggressive men, children of passive-aggressive parents, student of passive-aggressive teachers: there is an entire subset of the population that walks around feeling like Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*. A friend of mine says she knows she's with a passive-aggressive man when she feels that the seams in her stockings are crooked. According to Dr. David L. Hart, a Jungian who's been in practice for thirty years, "with a passive-aggressive man, you'll always be attacked in very subtle ways, but you won't quite understand why. That can be seriously detrimental to your mental health. The passive-aggressive gets in his jab and then, like the squid, he disappears in a cloud of black ink."

Hart has become something of an expert on the topic. Not only has he given seminars at the Jung Society on the passive-aggressive male, but he's a self-confessed out-of-the-closet former passive-aggressive himself. "In my first marriage," he says, "I'd be sitting there innocently, minding my own business and my wife would be telling everyone, 'He's driving me crazy.' I didn't have the faintest idea what she was talking about."

Dr. Scott Wetzler, a clinical psychologist, says that it is often the "victims" of passive-aggressive men who convince them that they need treatment. "Passive-aggressive men don't walk into the office saying, 'God I'm so angry,'" Wetzler explains. "They don't know what the problem is. Usually they come in because they're so boggled up at work that it is causing a problem with the boss, or because their wives or girlfriends tell them that they're driving them up the wall."

Of course, the damage is hardly restricted to the frustration that passive-aggressives cause the people who live and work with them. Wetzler recalls one patient whose passive-aggressive traits were so intense that they verged on the suicidal. Wetzler's patient was a diabetic who kept

forgetting to take his insulin. Ultimately he went into shock and nearly passed out while driving to a session. Failing to take his medicine was a seemingly passive act that masked a huge self-destructive impulse: an inwardly turned aggression.

In less dramatic ways, passive-aggressive men are hurting themselves all the time. Apart from the trouble they have with functioning normally in some part of their lives, they can be so willing to keep the peace that they seem to lack all conviction. Says Hart, “this kind of man can almost cancel himself out. He’s not at home in the world, no matter how he seems to act.” Dr. Richard W. Firestone, a Manhattan psychoanalyst in practice since 1957, thinks the problem is as basic as a loss of potential growth. “The passive-aggressive is jammed,” Firestone says. “He’s not experiencing the talents, or the people, or the chances for love that may be right under his nose. The true harm for him is in not really living.”

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### SITUATION 3

Your wife accepts an invitation to have dinner with her ex-husband

Passive Response:

You put on a clean shirt.

Aggressive Response:

You tell her she can’t go, you won’t go, but you’d be happy to send a dead fish.

Passive-Aggressive Response:

You go, but you come late, and you say you’re not hungry.

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No kind of trend is easy to measure, and a phenomenon whose very nature demands guardedness and secrecy is particularly tough to pin down. But even if numbers can’t reflect it, the popular culture does. When it comes to expressing aggression, the men we’re seeing in TV shows and films—especially those created by and for the postwar generation’s sensibility—would make Ralph Kramden weep.

Think of Bruce Willis in *Moonlighting*. Everything with him is subterfuge, subtext, even sublimation. Maddie gets married without telling David, and David just disappears:

- Maddie: are you upset? I mean it’s ok if you are, I mean, I suppose you have a right to be. I just wish you’d tell me.

- David: I’m not upset.

- Maddie: I mean it’s really ok I you are. I mean, I absolutely understand.

- David: I’m not upset.

- Maddie: I mean, I would be. I would be very. I would be very, very...upset. May I ask why?

- David: Uh? Why what?

- Maddie: why you’re not upset.

- David: Upset about what?

On L.A. Law, when Kuzak is mad, he doesn't answer Gracie's calls. On thirty-something, Michael wants another baby and Hope doesn't so he tries pouncing on her before she can get up to get her diaphragm. In Broadcast News, Albert Brooks is crushed, but he's too scared of losing Holly Hunter to risk expressing his rage. As in Moonlighting and L.A. Law, it's the woman who finally gets angry and lunches the confrontation. ("Bastard, sneak, quitter," Hunter says. "I just found out. You didn't say anything to me? You just resign? Will you meet me now?") The men's modus operandi seems to be get hit, and run.

While no one would argue that a "To the moon, Alice" approach did anything to improve the species, the crucial thing to realize is that the anger today hasn't really changed. Men may have learned to hide it—from themselves as well as from others—but they haven't gotten rid of it. But wait (I hear every man I know saying), what about the woman? Well, women have more than done their time on this particular emotional ride. Passive-aggression traditionally was the province of the female sex:

- "Go ahead. Don't mind me. I'll just sit here in the rain."
- "Is that a new dress? What's different? You look great."
- "Your children would like to see you, you know."
- "Whatever you say is fine, dear."

Of course there are plenty of woman today who are just as passive-aggressive as men. But the same feminism that told me to stop acting macho in the Sixties and Seventies also told women that it was all right for them to express their feelings.

The result is a double whammy for men. As Firestone, who's treated dozens of passive-aggressive men, puts it, "if passive-aggression is more prevalent now, it's because men were freer to show their anger fifteen or twenty years ago. Women have more permission to be assertive in the culture now. The overt balance has shifted. Men of the baby boom generation started out life with a powerful female controlling their behavior. There was some hope that they might come into their own when they were finally out of the house. But then they ran into women who told them not to be macho schmucks. They're caught between a rock and a hard place, so they just sit there and jiggle."

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#### SITUATION 4

Your secretary, who's dumb as a stone, marches into your office and demands a major raise.

Passive Response:

You figure the job doesn't call for a rocket scientist, and you give her what she asks for.

Aggressive Response:

You tell her she's got two weeks, which is ten working days, and you hold up both hands to drive home the point.

Passive-Aggressive Resonse:

You tell her you'll get back to her as soon as you can, spend the next three months avoiding all but essential contact, then give her a cost-of-living raise but tell her you have no complaints.

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And yet for all of the life they miss out on, and all of the fury they cause in others, passive-aggressive men can be brilliant at finding ways of denying their problems.

Remember Moe? Moe is uncommonly good at giving reasons why he never gets closer to the women he dates. For Moe, there's always a fatal flaw: there's always a sentence that starts with, "you know she's perfect for me, except." With the last one, it was her voice. "You know, she's perfect for me," Moe would tell me, "except that I can't stand her goddamned voice." Of course he would add that he never told her how much he hated her voice. "Hey, I don't like, call her Minnie Mouse to her face," he'd say.

What he did do was visibly wince ever time she opened her mouth. I saw him. Why did he think she never said a word when we all went out together? When he met her, this girl was one of the most gregarious people in New York, and within three months he had her sitting at "21" like some waif with big eyes, trying to communicate nonverbally.

"I never told her I didn't like her voice," Moe said.

"Maybe not in words."

"I don't know what you mean."

Of course for all I know, the Mouse factor may be crucial to Moe. Maybe for some reason it's an unspeakable source of dread and embarrassment when the woman he loves sounds like she wears big white gloves. But if my own experience with Curly is any indication, the problem here is not the woman's voice.

Curly was my first passive-aggressive. Also my last. The first tender words I recall him saying were, "you know, I don't usually fall in love with woman who look anything like you." For three years he made me feel so lousy and self-conscious that I lost fifteen pounds I didn't need to lose, and he still used to poke me ("affectionately") in the stomach, and then after we'd broken up and I'd gained back the weight, he told me I looked too skinny. Let's not, I told Moe, waste time talking about the Minnie Mouse voice.

In addition to the Only One Flaw gambit, passive-aggressives have other rationales for not getting closer to the people in their lives. A man I know justifies his passive-aggressive management style by saying it breeds insecurity and insecurity breeds competition and competition breeds creativity and creativity breeds success. One wonders whether it wouldn't be simpler just to say, "Nice job."

Another guy I know loves to wax intellectual about the nature of the difference between men and woman. "Men," he will tell me (while clutching a dagger-shaped letter opener in his hand), "want to go through life side by side with women. Women want to go through life face-to-face with men." Says Hart: "Men usually gravitate to areas of interest far removed from the dread areas of personal involvement—from feeling emotional honesty. In fact, those areas are devalued by men generally, although it is certainly safe to say that that impoverishes human life." According to Hart, passive-aggressives are notoriously difficult to treat, precisely because they're constantly constructing elaborate systems of such excuses and explanations often

creating other problems (“If she’d just go to a speech therapist, I’d marry her in a minute”) to mask the deeper ones.

Predictably, the deeper problems have to do with childhood; childhood rage on the one hand and childhood need on the other hand. The “aggressive” part of passive-aggression comes from the childhood rage, the “passive” part from the childhood need. The need—for love, for food for life—makes letting the rage out too much of a risk. But the rage doesn’t ever go away. It just goes underground.

The possible roots of rage are exhaustive: lack of attention, excess attention death of a parent, divorce, ridicule, the need of a mother for company, even the need of a mother for sex. Firestone believes that most passive-aggressives had mothers who simply wouldn’t let go. Pinned down by expectations and guilt, the men are essentially trapped into infancy, trying to please but wanting to kill. There is so much anger inside them that to express it becomes unthinkable; even to let themselves see it is rare. Who knows what horrors would be unleashed, and how terrible that would make them seem.

Firestone tells of a patient who had an unusual impotence problem. He had no trouble making love on his back, but when he was lying on top of a woman, he’d get a permanent hard-on and could not ejaculate. (This didn’t bother the women much, but the patient wasn’t too thrilled). Says Firestone: “He was harboring so much anger toward his mother that he basically turned his penis into a .45-caliber gun. He actually had dreams about it. As long as he was underneath, he wasn’t responsible for what happened. In the dominant position, though, to come meant pulling the trigger.”

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#### SITUATION 5

You are Mahatma Gandhi and your people are oppressed.

Passive Response:

You move back to South Africa.

Aggressive Response:

You lead a civil war.

Passive-Aggressive Response:

You march to the sea and make salt.

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If you want to take the broad view, you can think of passive-aggression as a quietly raging forest fire. Passive-aggression burns deep, and passive-aggression spreads far, and its tendency to travel is part of what makes it so insidious. The mother who gives her son a mixed signal—grow up and make me proud but why do you want to go out and play when you can keep Mommy company—may herself be passive-aggressive and may pass on both her anger and her tendency to say one thing and feel another.



One woman who is married to a passive-aggressive man says he tells her that he loves her but he's not very good at showing it. "I want," she says, "the whole enchilada. I want to know that he wonders whether he could live without me. And I want to feel that way about him. But if you're married to a guy who won't get out on the limb, you're not about to climb out there alone. So I wind up treating him the same way he treats me. I wind up giving these little digs, not telling him what I'm feeling."

In the workplace, you can see this kind of contagion all the time now. A passive-aggressive approach can infect a whole company's culture. A middle manager with a passive-aggressive boss will tend to treat his employees in the same way that he's treated. "I could see how what I was doing was reinforcing the same instincts in the people beneath me," says one boss who's recently become aware of his problem. "I used to withhold my decisions too long. It seemed to be harmless, but really I left people hanging in the wind. It was actually quite aggressive, and it was unfair to the next people down."

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#### SITUATION 6:

Your mother lets you know that she expects to see her new grandson every Sunday for Brunch.

Passive Response:

You buy a baby seat for the car.

Aggressive Response:

You tell her the guilt trip won't work anymore and remind her that Sunday is your day for golf.

Passive-Aggressive Response:

You take a job in another city.

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Stan is a partner in a large law firm. Susan is an associate. "He's so sweet," she says, "and he's so nice, and he's such an incredible asshole." On a certain Monday, Stan tells Susan that they will need to present a brief on Wednesday. This is not a lot of time.

"Come to my office in half an hour," he tells her on the phone. Thirty minutes later, she appears there, legal pad in hand.

"Come in, come in!" Stan says warmly from behind his desk—and promptly swivels around his chair and picks up the telephone.

"Hello, little pumpkin," he starts cooing into the receiver, "How was school today? No, Daddy won't be home for dinner tonight...."

Susan is not only outraged that Stan is ignoring her; she's outraged that he's obviously trying to be a good father to his daughter: How can she blame him for that?

The phone call is followed by several others. Stan never looks Susan directly in the eye. He never tells her he's sorry. Finally Stan has to leave to go to a partner's meeting down the hall. "I'll buzz you when I'm out," he calls to Susan over his shoulder.

Seven hours later, he has still not called. Susan is stymied on the brief. Several times she calls his office and leave word with his secretary. Finally, at 6:00, she goes downstairs to his office again.

The punch line is: he's left.

There is no acknowledgment the next morning. Stan gives Susan the fifteen minutes she's needed, and she works till four in the morning to complete the brief.

"The thing that made me most crazy," she says, "is that when I told this to another associate, he just kept saying that he didn't see the problem. He kept saying 'that's just the way things are around here, that's how they've always been.' And meanwhile he's got two paralegals who are waiting outside his office."

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#### SITUATION 7

Your father was King of Denmark, and you're jealous of your mother's new husband.

Passive Response:

You say, "O! Woe is me, To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"

Aggressive Response:

You say, "O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!"

Passive-Aggressive Response:

You say, "To be, or not to be: that is the question..."

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My friend Ollie fell in love a few years ago and got married to a woman who, in fairly short order, told him four things. The first was that she knew a passive-aggressive when she saw one; the second was that she saw one; the third was that she loves him; the fourth was that she was going to help him work it out somehow.

Ollie's wife has an amazing way of standing out side the pattern of their lives and not taking his act too seriously. She also has a way of calling him on his passive-aggression without being holier-than-thou about it. Personally, I think she's incredible. Ollie gets major points, too: he seems to sense the rareness and the strength of this woman, and I've heard them laugh together about the tricks that his anger can play on them.

In effect, Ollie's wife is doing just what a shrink would do for him. She's helping him see the pattern, which is usually the toughest part. The whole psychological point of passive-aggression is to spare oneself the messy implications of one's anger. And it's no picnic getting a grown-up

man to say he's a child inside. Say's Hart: "You find men feeling as if they were still infants, and acting that way, but not admitting it. Their feeling of anger is so intense. It's never been dealt with and never brought out, so it feels like a monstrosity."

Firestone describes the challenge in terms of child verses adult belief systems. If you can start by assembling an accurate picture of what the man was as a child, he says, then show how the childhood beliefs are still present in his life, the very act of observation becomes the seed of the adult, and the man who is looking at the child in himself gets stronger and stronger over time.

Seeing the child, of course, is only the first step. And passive-aggressives are great at paying lip service to their problem. "They'll say, 'Yeah, I'm just terrible, I'm not good at all,'" Hart explains. "That totally relieves them of responsibility. But it doesn't solve the problem to go on being guilty."

Says Hart: "you need a relationship—either with an analyst or someone who's strong enough to stand all this and let it emerge its true light. You don't go off by yourself and mediate and solve this problem alone." Hart believes in the power of laughter to put passive-aggression into perspective, and he doesn't underestimate the need for courage.

"One woman said to me not long ago, 'Men are cowards,'" he recalls. "But if you consider the intensity of these feelings that men often have, you understand that just being there and trying his best is an act of courage.

These are some of the things that a passive-aggressive man can learn to want:

- Less of what is holding him back
- More of what he loves

These are some of the things that a passive-aggressive man can learn to do:

- End a bad relationship
- Laugh at himself
- Reward good work and criticize bad.
- Show up on time for a dinner.
- Admit he's a passive-aggressive and that the sun still rises.

These are some of the things that a passive-aggressive man can learn to say:

- "I won't."
- "You're fired."
- "Fuck off."
- "I need you."