

What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Suppose this happened to a cross-cultural worker. His committee report to the field director is due this afternoon, and he still has not received John's data that was due a week ago. He wonders what John's excuse will be this time—last time he forgot when it was due, the time before that he had not followed instructions so the data was useless, the time before that... When John gets it in, he will probably complain about how no one appreciates what he does, or that other people don't have to gather data, or that... He will probably come in angry and try to start an argument—then return tomorrow to say that he is sorry, ask forgiveness, and promise to do better next time.

The cross-cultural worker and John have served together for nearly four years now, and the story is always basically the same. Only the details change. What the cross-cultural worker is facing is the passive-aggressive behavior of a colleague, something quite common among cross-cultural workers and other Christians. Since they do not feel free to express their dissatisfaction, such people do things that, in effect, sabotage the project.

What is passive-aggressive behavior?

People who appear to support the requests of others but do not perform the requested action correctly or soon enough are

displaying passive-aggressive behavior. They may even seem to be enthusiastic about the idea, but they use overt behavior to express what they do not want to say verbally. Rather than expressing their opposition in words, they use procrastination, forgetfulness, and inefficiency to avoid complying with the request.

Along with the passive resistance these people have a pattern of negative attitudes. They may complain about feeling cheated, unappreciated, and misunderstood as they blame their failures on others. They may be sullen, irritable, cynical, and argumentative. Some professionals have characterized passive-aggressive behavior as "hostile cooperation," "angry kindness," or "covert assertiveness." This behavior appears most often in the workplace and in social situations, but it may also occur in marriage and/or family situations.

Is it a psychological disorder?

For many years both the World Health Organization (agency of the United Nations) and the American Psychiatric Association listed Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder. However, in 1994 the American Psychiatric Association removed passive-aggressive from the list of disorders and placed it in an appendix of items for further study.

Therefore, most nations consider it as a disorder, but mental health professionals in the USA do not. However, even if it is not a disorder, passive-aggressive behavior is very difficult to cope with. The American Psychiatric Association's manual of mental disorders (DSM-IV) does list seven "Research criteria for passive-aggressive personality disorder," and a person must have at least four

of these criteria to be considered passive-aggressive.

Is it in the Bible?

Most people look at the lost (prodigal) son who returned to his father as the focus of that story in Luke 15. However, his older brother also had major problems. Even though he is not labeled as "passive-aggressive," the older son meets six of the seven DSM-IV criteria in just three short verses.

- Resisted carrying out routine social tasks: he refused to go to his brother's party (v. 28).
- Complained of being unappreciated by others: his father never gave him a party (v. 29).
- Was sullen and argumentative: he argued with his father (v. 29).
- Criticized and scorned authority: he criticized his father's party for the squandering son (v. 30).
- Expressed envy and resentment toward those more fortunate: he resented that the fatted calf was killed for his brother (v. 30).
- Voiced exaggerated complaints of personal misfortune: he had "slaved" for years (v. 29)

The only criterion he did not meet was the one saying that he alternated between defiance and contrition!

What are the symptoms?

By definition the passive-aggressive person has (1) a pattern of passive resistance to carrying out requested actions and (2) a

pattern of negativistic attitudes (an alternate name is negativistic personality disorder).

As noted above, the DSM-IV criteria elaborated these two general conditions into seven more specific criteria. The following are even more specific passive-aggressive actions.

- Deliberate inefficiency, dawdling, laziness, inflexibility, ignoring of others
- Procrastination, stubbornness, resisting suggestions, disregarding instructions
- Pretending forgetfulness, putting things on the "back burner," making excuses
- Losing things, discovering things too late,
- Sullenness, hostility, anger, argumentativeness
- Complaining, resentment, feeling unappreciated, irritableness, cynicism
- Blaming others, feeling cheated
- Overt sabotage, sulking
- Working poorly or slowly, being tardy or absent
- Repeatedly apologizing, asking forgiveness and promising to do better next time—but not really changing

The list can go on and on. Whether they are conscious of it or not, the goal is to do something that slows or prevents the action from being done or undermines the success of others.

Who can be passive-aggressive?

Anyone who is in a relationship with you may be passive-aggressive toward you.

- It may be someone above you, such as your field director, a mentor, a committee chair, or an administrator in the home office.
- It may be someone below you, such as a student in your class, a new cross-cultural

worker you are orienting, or your own child or adolescent.

- It may be someone at your own level, such as a fellow cross-cultural worker, a colleague where you teach, a friend, or even your spouse.

The higher the commitment and the closer the relationship, the more the passive-aggressive behavior will affect your life. For example, if your spouse or teenager does not want cross-cultural worker life, it will disrupt your life more than if a student in your class or a new cross-cultural worker is unhappy.

Cross-cultural workers may show passive-aggressive behavior to avoid the stress of confrontation. In 1983 Dorothy Gish asked 547 cross-cultural workers to rate 65 items that cause stress, and “confronting others when necessary” was the one rated most stressful. Sixteen years later Joan Carter repeated the study with the same items plus some additional ones. The 306 cross-cultural workers still placed confronting others at the top of the list.

Passive-aggressive behavior can stop a project just like confrontation can, but it can do so with less stress. Cross-cultural workers who do not want to oppose a program overtly can just not get their part done so that the project fails. After that they can apologize for their tardiness, ask forgiveness, and they have still accomplished what they wanted in the first place.

What can you do?

Remember that this pattern of behavior has “worked” for many years for the passive-aggressive people. Even though their behavior has an impact on you it is not *about* you. Do not take it personally. Your goal is

to create a climate of safe and open communication. The following may help.

- Keep an open mind, avoid being defensive, and acknowledge that some of the concerns may be legitimate.
- Be empathetic but still request more appropriate behavior.
- Concretely define what you expect, and ask the person to paraphrase your wants.
- Do not accept, excuse, or reward poor performance.
- Tactfully challenge distortions but do not argue over them.
- Make sure that he or she understands that you care for him or her personally and are not just seeking control.
- Remember that if you become viewed as an opponent, the objectionable behavior is likely to increase.

Finally, if you do not succeed, do not blame yourself. If people do not want to change, they do not. Remember that you did not cause the passive-aggressive behavior.

What if you are passive-aggressive?

People who are passive-aggressive may not realize that they are engaging in a self-defeating, objectionable behavior. The Spirit may have revealed to you that you use this habitual and problematic behavior yourself. If you recognize this troublesome behavior interfering with your own work or relationships, there is much hope.

- You may be able to change your passive-aggressive behavior by “observing” yourself and making changes in your own behavior, asking God to help.
- You may want to ask a friend to help you. It is much easier for people to recognize such behavior in others, so the

observations of a good friend may give good insights.

- You may want to see a counselor to help you identify and change your behavior. Cognitive-behavioral therapy may help you become aware of such behavior and minimize it.

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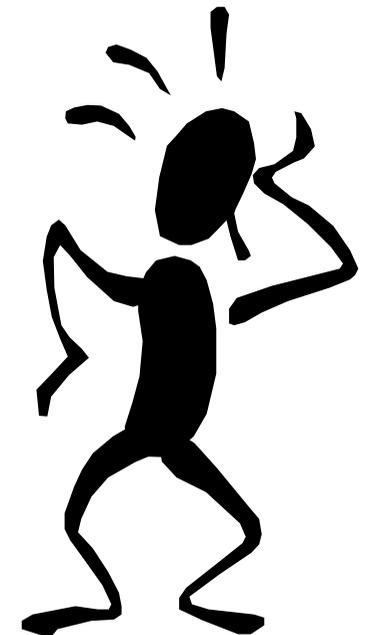
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