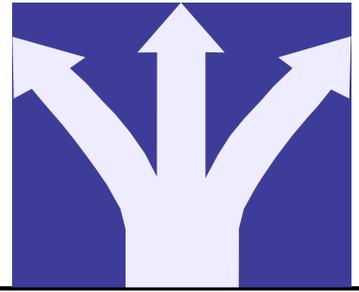


OUTLOOK ASSOCIATES

of New England

637 Massachusetts Avenue, Arlington, MA 02476
781-643-5251
www.outlookassociates.com



Anger Under Cover- Passive Aggression-Part Two

Changing Behavior

Passive-aggression is anger that is subtle or indirect. Reacting passive-aggressively is based on the individual's inability or unwillingness to express anger directly, causing behaviors aimed to intimidate, upset, hurt, and sabotage other people. Hidden anger also hides feelings such as shame and fear of intimacy, failure or uncertainty. For example, a passive-aggressive worker will blame an error on someone else. A family member will do a chore he resents, but won't completely finish, leaving a pail of garbage to rot in the garage.

Initial work with someone who is passive aggressive requires an understanding of the immediate angry feelings causing the behavior. In therapy or self-help, work filling out anger logs is a way to understand triggers and responses. Keeping passive-aggressive behaviors in mind when working on anger management skills can bring out secret dynamics of anger.

Change often happens when people feel undesirable consequences. Because of the subtlety, the hidden anger can go unrecognized or be misunderstood by others for years. Part of the manipulation is to make others feel as if they are the ones doing something wrong. Recipients can be reluctant to confront the person, even if the dynamics are seen, because of concern of direct or indirect retaliation. Eventually, however, consequences will emerge, whether it is complaints by coworkers and disciplinary action at work, or loss of friendships and broken family relationships.

Strategies

What are specific strategies for dealing with people who act passive-aggressively? (Flora, 2006b) :

- Direct confrontation does not usually work, given the hidden nature of the behavior and the fear of anger that is at the root of passive-aggressive behavior.
- Consider your behavior. People who don't want to get into a conflict or who appear vulnerable can easily become recipients of passive-aggressive behaviors.
- As a coworker, document your communications when someone "forgets" to forward an important email, or insinuates to your boss that you never followed up on an issue.

Dealing with Family Members

Murphy and Oberlin (2005) describe strategies for family members:

- Find good boundaries, be firm but flexible with the passive-aggressive person (you don't want to box them into a corner).
- Be aware of your own feelings, and that you may be picking up anger from the other person.
- Be clear about responsibilities of family members – don't do what they can and should be doing for themselves.
- Use "I" statements, be direct and ask others to be direct with you. Instead of "Why don't you ever do..." say "I'd like it if you....."
- Know when to move on.

Dealing with One's Own Passive-Aggressiveness

And what are successful strategies for those of us who engage in passive-aggressive behaviors? Most people do at some point! (Flora, 2006a)

- Take a look at how you express, or don't express anger. Learn the difference between passive, aggressive, and assertive behaviors. Mentally and behaviorally rehearse how to handle difficult situations.

(continued)

- Learn not to please everyone all the time. Practice ways to be reasonable and clear in asserting what you need and want. If you tell someone “No”, the other person may be upset so plan how to react.
- Use anger management techniques to understand what lies behind the anger: disappointment, loneliness, shame, hurt. Shift your thinking away from retaliation. Visualize how you can attend to the situation more positively and effectively.
- Learn to Fight Fair. The all-or-nothing approach (explosive or silent expressions) doesn’t work. Identify some of your “irrational beliefs”: that you are always right or always know what to do. Listen to the other person.

Sources:

Flora, C. Tame Your Passive-Aggression. Psychology Today, March 01, 2006a. www.psychologytoday.com

Flora, C. The Stealth Saboteur. Psychology Today, March 01, 2006b. www.psychologytoday.com

Murphy, T. and Oberlin, L. Overcoming Passive-Aggression: How to Stop Hidden Anger from Spoiling Your Relationships, Career and Happiness. New York: Marlowe & Company, 2005.

(The article was done with the research/writing assistance of Of Alice Miele, LICSW)

FROM THE FILES:

The “Enjoyment of Anger”

Research from Vanderbilt University Brain Institute has show that the brain processes aggression as a reward. According to Maria Couppis, who conducted an anger study as her doctoral thesis, “It is well known that dopamine is produced in response to rewarding stimuli such as food, sex, and drugs of abuse. We’ve now found that it also serves as positive reinforcement for aggression.”

For the experiments a pair of mice— one male, one female, was kept in one cage, and five “intruder” male mice were kept in a separate cage. The female mouse was temporarily removed, and an intruder was introduced, triggering an aggressive response by the

“home” male mouse.

The home mouse was then trained to poke a target with its nose and to get the intruder to return, at which point it again behaved aggressively. The home mouse consistently poked the trigger, which was presented once a day, indicating it experienced the aggressive encounter with the intruder as a reward.

The same home mice were then treated with a drug that suppressed their dopamine receptors, and their frequency of inviting the intruders declined.

In a separate experiment, the mice were treated with the dopamine receptor suppressors again, and their movements in an open cage were observed. They showed no significant changes in overall movement compared to times when they had not received the drugs. This was done to demonstrate that their decreased aggression in the previous experiment was not caused by overall lethargy in response to the drug.

The Vanderbilt experiments published in *Psychopharmacology* (January 2008) were the first to demonstrate a link between behavior and the activity of dopamine receptors in response to an aggressive event.

Spirituality and Health, May-June 2008

“Courage in a Bottle” No myth

Researchers conducted brain scans on a group of 12 social drinkers with an average age of 26 who were given either alcohol or a saline solution intravenously. The subjects were then shown images designed to evoke a fear response while their brain patterns were monitored via functional MRI scans.

The study showed that alcohol increased activity in the reward centers of the brain but depressed activity in areas involved in fear response. “You’re less likely to feel afraid, and you’re less likely to run away or to avoid conflict,” said study co-author Daniel Hommer of the National Institute on Alcoholism and Addiction..

Join Together, May 1, 2008

Women’s Anger Management Group

A colleague Jane Ross M.Ed, M.Div will be running 2 anger management groups for women in Arlington and Lynnfield. The groups are scheduled to start in mid-January and are based on the Outlook Associates model of anger management treatment. Jane can be contacted at 617-947-7209 or ross@nepastoral.org.