Passive-Aggressive Personalities

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Oh, Fine, You're Right. I'm Passive-Aggressive.

By BENEDICT CAREY

The marriage seemed to come loose at the seams, one stitch at a time, often during the evening hour between work and dinner. She would be preparing the meal, while he kept her company in the sun room next to kitchen, usually reading the paper. At times the two would provoke each other, as couples do - about money, about holiday plans - but those exchanges often flared out quickly when he would say, simply, "O.K., you're right," and turn back to the news.

"Looking back, instead of getting angry, I was doing this as a dismissive way of shutting down the conversation," said Peter G. Hill, 48, a doctor in Massachusetts who has recently separated from his wife. Even reading the paper at that hour was his way of adamantly relaxing, in defiance of whatever it was she thought he should be doing.

"It takes two to break up, but I have been accused of being passive-aggressive, and there it is," he said.

Everyone knows what it looks like. The friend who perpetually arrives late. The co-worker who neglects to return e-mail messages. The very words: "Nothing. I'm just thinking."

Yet while "passive-aggressive" has become a workhorse phrase in marriage counseling and an all-purpose label for almost any difficult character, it is a controversial concept in psychiatry.

After some debate, the American Psychiatric Association dropped the behavior pattern from the list of personality disorders in its most recent diagnostic manual - the DSM IV - as too narrow to be a full-blown diagnosis, and not well enough supported by scientific evidence to meet increasingly rigorous standards of definition.

The decision is likely to have more effect on teaching guidelines and research than on treatment and insurance coverage.

But psychologists and psychiatrists with long experience treating this kind of behavior say it is hard to study precisely because it is so covert, common and widely variable.
These experts make a distinction between passive-aggressive behavior, which

most people display at times, and passive-aggressive personality, which is ingrained and habitual. In milder forms it can come across as a maddening blend of evasiveness and contrition, agreeableness and impudence, and in severe cases is often masked by more obvious mental illness, like depression.

Yet whether pathological or not, they say, the pattern is often traceable to a distinct childhood experience. New research suggests that in many cases it stems from a positive, socially protective instinct - to keep peace at home, avoid costly mistakes at work, even preserve some self-respect.

"Some of the people being demeaned as passive-aggressive are in fact being extremely careful not to commit mistakes, a strategy that has been successful for them," if not entirely conscious, said Dr. E. Tory Higgins, director of the Motivation Science Center at Columbia University. They become difficult, he said, "when their cautious instincts are overwhelmed by demands that they perceive as unreasonable."

The classic description of the behavior captures a stubborn malcontent, someone who passively resists fulfilling routine tasks, complains of being misunderstood and underappreciated, unreasonably scorns authority and voices exaggerated complaints of personal misfortune.

But the phrase itself has its roots in the military. Near the end of World War II, a colonel in the United States War Department used it to describe an "immature" behavior among enlisted men, many of them at the end of long tours: "a neurotic type reaction to routine military stress, manifested by helplessness, or inadequate responses, passiveness, obstructionism or aggressive outbursts."

This kind of insolence, among adults protecting themselves from what they saw as unreasonable, arbitrary authority, was in part an adaptive behavior, psychologist say, an effort to preserve some independence amid extreme pressure to conform.

A similar family dynamic accounts for early development of the behavior, some researchers argue. Dr. Lorna Benjamin, co-director of a clinic at the University of Utah's Neuropsychiatric Institute in Salt Lake City, said people with strong passive tendencies often grew up in loving but demanding families, which gave them responsibilities they perceived to be unmanageable.

First-born children are prime candidates, she said: when younger siblings are born, the oldest may suddenly be expected to take on far more extra work than he or she can handle, and over time begin to resent parents' demandswithout daring to defy them.

This hostile cooperation is at the core of passive-aggression, she and other researchers say, and in later in life it is habitually directed at any authority figure, whether a boss, a teacher or a spouse making demands. These passive-aggressive people, Dr. Benjamin said, "are full of unacknowledged contradiction, of angry kindness, compliant defiance, covert assertiveness."

This history hardly excuses the multitude of hedging, foot-dragging mopes that populate everyday life, but it can help explain some of their exploits. One Los Angeles woman, who asked not to be identified (and swore she was not being passive-aggressive), described a former co-worker who intentionally made assignments late to employees when she didn't approve of a project.

At the end of some days, she wrote, this archetypal passive-aggressive used to hide under her desk to avoid saying goodnight to people.

Sometimes, however, mild passive-aggressive behavior can be an effective means to avoid potentially costly confrontations. In such cases the cooperation is more significant than the underlying resentment or hostility.

"A joke can be the most skillful passive-aggressive act there is,'' said Dr. Scott Wetzler, a clinical psychologist at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx and the author of "Living With the Passive-Aggressive Man." "They recognize a coming confrontation, and have found a clever way to release the tension."

It is just this instinctive ability to pre-empt and defuse that, paradoxically, may lead to more problematic passive-aggressive behavior.

Dr. Higgins of Columbia has described a personal quality he calls prevention pride, a kind of native caution in the face of new challenges, an effort to avoid all errors. He assesses whether a person is high or low in this style by asking a battery of questions, like how often they broke their parents rules, how often they take risks, how often they have been in trouble by not being careful enough. The style is adaptive, he said, in that it allows people with a certain temperament to avoid failure and embarrassment.

In one recent experiment, Dr. Higgins and Dr. Ozlem Ayduk, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, tested how these especially cautious people reacted to conflict in relationships. The researchers had 56 couples who had been together at least two months keep detailed diaries, answering questions about conflicts, thoughts about the relationship, moods and their partners' behavior.
After three weeks, the researchers compared the diaries and found that

people who had a highly cautious personal style and were especially sensitive to rejection were significantly more likely than the others to respond to conflicts by going silent, withdrawing their affection and acting cold.

"The people in this study were not the type who would ever say, 'I hate you' to the person's face because they are so careful not to do something that puts them out there," and directly offend their partner, Dr. Ayduk said.

The evidence that this sensitivity can be appealing, at least for a while, is recorded in millions of relationships that have lasted for years. A 45-year-old college instructor in Hawaii recently broke off a long relationship with a man she said was a "wonderful, devoted listener, an extremely sensitive person."

But in time, she said, it was apparent that he was also passive-aggressive. On one occasion, she said, he gave away her seat on an airplane while she was finding a storage compartment for her luggage, saying he thought she had taken another seat. On others, he would arrive home early from work and finish off meals they normally shared, without explanation. And when he was in one of his moods, the listening ceased; she may as well not have been in the room.

"The challenging thing was, you never know what you did wrong," she said. "That's the difficulty, all these scenarios, I could not point to what I did. I never knew."

The person who has become hostile may not know exactly why, either. In some cases, psychologists say, people unable to recognize or express their annoyance often don't feel entitled to it; they instinctually let the "little things" pass without taking the time to find out why they are so angry about them. Unsure of themselves, they take care not to offend a spouse, a co-worker or friend. The anger remains.

When the behavior pattern is deeply ingrained and compulsive, it is neither adaptive nor merely bewildering, but can be dangerous, some experts say. At her clinic in Salt Lake City, Dr. Benjamin treats many people with multiple diagnoses, from attention deficit disorder to obsessive-compulsive disorder to intractable depression, many of them with other problems, like substance abuse or multiple suicide attempts.

"And I would say that in close to half of them this passive-aggressive behavior is running the whole show," she said.
When and if they do get therapy, psychiatrists say, people with strong passive-aggressive instincts are usually determined to fail: the therapist

becomes the scorned authority figure. The patients will take their medications and then report with relish that they don't work. The patients will follow advice and then complain that it is senseless, useless. "They are not doing this on purpose; it's part of a deep-seated ambivalence about getting better," a determination to expose the authority as incompetent, said Dr. Marjorie Klein, a psychiatrist at the University of Wisconsin.

It is left to the individual therapist's skill to deflect or disarm this determination and get patients to at least experiment with an alternate strategy to engage their lives. In one, called cognitive behavior therapy, they learn to monitor their thoughts, moment by moment, to recognize when they are angry, and to challenge unexamined assumptions about confrontation. For example, some people assume that confronting their boss about a raise will be a catastrophe, said Dr. Wetzler of Montefiore, but it often simply is not the case, especially if they have prepared themselves by learning the market value of their skills at other companies.

Yet Dr. Benjamin said that often the childhood roots of the behavior must be faced and felt, and that means revisiting the parental relationship and learning that it does not have to set the pattern for all relationships with authority. "The main challenge is to help them shift from winning by losing to winning by winning," she said, "to see that it is they who benefit most when they win, not their therapist, their spouse or their boss."

Just living with the behavior in someone else can be as tough as treating it. To manage garden variety passive-aggressive behavior, psychiatrists often advise a kind of protective engagement: don't attack the person; that only reinforces your position as an authority making demands. Take into account the probable cause of the person's unexpressed anger and acknowledge it, if possible, when being stonewalled during a discussion.

And be sure to be on guard against likely retaliation.

"If he agrees to go over to your relatives' place for Thanksgiving, but you know he's upset about it, make sure you have alternate transportation to get over there," Dr. Wetzler said.

"He may take the car and not manage to get home in time to make it."

Ken

Malingering Research from 2001-present:
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http://kspope.com/assess/malinger.php>

"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most

intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."
--Charles Darwin (1809-1882)