

The Passive/Aggressive Partner

So, Douglas, we have a people factor question today. Our topic is on passive aggressive partners. Most of us have experienced them at some point, but some folks may not that have any idea what you're talking about. Our audience members are trying to figure out one, how do you recognize it? And two, how do you really cope with it in a way that is mature, loving and has less carnage and more efficiency and advocacy? They just want to figure out how can you navigate it in a healthy fashion? And how would you know, when you're really kind of up against it? Do you have any clues or cues for our audience Douglas?

So, how do you recognize that behavior? Well, here's an example of that behavior that I think will be familiar to our audience. So, your partner is behaving in a manner that's different than they normally behave? They are unusually quiet, unusually abrupt. It can be either one, they've departed from their normal behavior. And you being a sensitive, caring partner, say, what's wrong? And you get your head handed to you, or you get nothing. Nothing. Nothing's wrong. That is passive aggressive behavior, folks. I'm going to turn to you, Alvean, because I'm looking for more of a clinical background. Why do human beings adopt this behavior? If we're angry, why don't we just be angry? Why do we adopt this facade of passivity, when in fact, what we're really feeling is some hostility, or at least some angst or anxiety over something?

There's an element of manipulation that's inside of passive aggressive behavior. Rather than being direct, I am trying to manipulate an outcome, in a particular way, I have figured out what your triggers may be. I want you to come find me. It's almost an emotional hide and seek, so to speak. So, I am indicating that I am hiding, and it is your job to come find me. The passivity is really more about manipulation than it is anything else. If it was really about an effort to resolve an issue I would just say what was wrong. I would just say Douglas, listen. We went through such and such yesterday, and I really am bothered by the way that you handled said situation or how you responded to me. Because in that scenario, I want to fix something. I want to explore what took place. And I want you to know how I feel. But when I go quiet, I recognize that you're going to ask me. And then when you do, I tell you nothing. We both know that I'm upset. My expectation is you will continue to ask me, because I want you to continue to dig, and I want you to continue to do over what you could have possibly done that bothered me, because I am unwilling to allow direct communication. So, it's the manipulative factor in passive aggressiveness that is the more problematic element.

Sometimes I think this behavior is a learned behavior, not necessarily one that is manifest in the individual from the get-go. They may be manipulative without even being aware that they are. They may be unwilling or unable to be confrontational, to actually say to another person, I don't like what's going on right now. So instead, they shield or hide the immediate reaction; the immediate sense of hurt or pain, and instead adopt this kind of passive mode. But all the while they are very disturbed by what's going on.

But that is meaningful. Notwithstanding the origins, they may have more than one reaction. This is what I'm trying to say here. What I think is interesting about that, and the nuances

associated with it is that a lot of times, if I genuinely don't want you to know what's going on, I will do everything I can to not change my behavior pattern. It's the fact that I'm changing my behavior pattern. Most of us know when we are. We really work hard not to speak in absolutes, because there are always aberrations of some sort but the change in my behavior pattern that I may be aware of is the very thing that makes it more manipulative. If I really wanted to make sure that we didn't have to address this, and that we didn't have to confront it, I would make a very concerted effort to hide it so you would not be able to tell that there's something that you did that bothered me. It's not only that my behavior is different, but then, when you engage I also shut you out which makes it clear I'm not really hiding my reaction to your behavior at all. I want you to know, but I'm uncomfortable with it. I don't want to do it right now, (confront you) we're not going to do it right now. I'm going to keep you on my hook. If you were a fish, I am not going to throw you back in the ocean, I want to keep you on my hook. Neither will I address the issue nor will I change the behavior. And that's the manipulative point that I won't release you, and I won't bring you in either.

So faced with that proposition, in our scenario here you're upset. I asked you what's wrong? And you tell me, nothing. What's my next step?

Well, there are lots of different opinions about what should be next. This is just life, when I say this I'm taking off my therapist hat. One of two things I think are the more effective ways of being able to handle it. I'm going to actually give you three options, one, you can choose to give it a little bit of time. And then if you're still seeing the same behavior, you're still seeing the chilly response, the change in the person's normal behavior, you can ask again a little bit later. And I don't mean 15 minutes later. I mean, just give it a little bit of time, because maybe he or she is working through whatever the issue is. And if it's six hours later and we're still in the space, you could choose: do I want to do it today? Do I want to let us sleep on it and see what happens, what it looks like tomorrow? That is up to you, what your threshold is, because everybody has a different threshold. But you can give it a little time and then redress it or you can completely ignore it. I actually have one of my children who..... thank god, she's kind of out of it now... but she used to manipulate that way. She would go to this frosty space, because she wanted everybody to ask her what was wrong. And she would stay in that frosty space, trying to get the attention that she needed. As long as we kept engaging, she would stay in that space. But the minute we ignored the behavior, and she realized she was not included in what was going on, she would change the behavior to reengage and then we would talk about what was going on before. So, you have to recognize what may work with your partner or your child in the event of this kind of action. The third option is just to say, let's sit down, I know that you say that there's nothing wrong, but sit with me for just a second to bring all of us inside of the space. And inside of that space, you're communicating to your partner that they have your full attention. Something is clearly wrong, although they're telling you nothing's wrong. But I see that whatever twinkle, whatever smile, whatever, whatever their normal affect is, is absent. If you are willing, sit there for as long as they want you to, so that they know that you care about what is bothering them. Even if they give you just a little bit of what it is, you are saying I'm here to engage, whatever is necessary for us to close this gap between us. So, we have a couple of different options. And that's not to say that those are the only ones. These are the three

ways that I have found most effective in being able to address whatever is creating a passive aggressive reaction.

Well, I want to add a note to the gentleman in our audience. As a general tendency, we as men often want to fix things. And we want to fix them right this instant. That's not always possible. So, we tend to jump over the listening part, directly into the answer, the here's what you should do part, as we give unsolicited advice to a person who really isn't looking for us to answer. They're just looking to us at the moment to listen. And the answer may be something that both of you have to arrive at, or both of you have to arrive at in time. Whatever the situation may be, it's just not so simple as to say, let me give you the answer to your problems. Because that's really saying there is nothing wrong with me, I haven't done anything, this is your problem. And if you would only change the way you are, we'd be fine. You may not hear that gentleman when you do that, but that's the message you're sending.

I know, I would definitely agree. One of the most important things in experiences like this is really the sincere engagement. I really care enough about you and want to know what is going on. There is nothing more important to me at this moment than hearing what it is. And it's not that it has to be about you, because sometimes what your partner is struggling with has nothing to do with you. Sometimes it's other things that are spilling over, that you're being affected by but it may not necessarily be anything you did. And it may it be something that you can fix either. Sometimes all it is, as you said very aptly, is wanting to have somebody who will listen, just sincerely listen.

I do want to say that if we pulled back in this frame, there are personalities who by their nature, have learned to be largely manipulative personalities; people who are not given to finding solutions, because they don't want to, or finding solutions in any overt way that involves some constructive change on the part of both parties. Instead, they want and live for that feeling of.....I almost want to call it righteous indignation..... of being in the right and keeping you in the dark about why they are behaving the way they are, why they feel the way they feel. If you find yourself in a situation like that, and cannot get to some resolution of the issues, either together or with the help of a third party, preferably a trained third party, a counselor, therapist, (the mailman, thank you), and not social media.....

Yes, please don't play this out. In social media

.....then you may have hit that that wall in the relationship where you have to seriously look at whether or not there's a future for the two of you. We are very loath to ever recommend dissolving a relationship. If there was some energy that brought you two together in the first place, assuming it wasn't totally superficial, then there's probably energy there to keep you together if you can work through these issues. But there are those instances in life where you meet up with somebody who is simply so caught up in a certain kind of behavior that they can't let go of it. And you've got to be willing to love yourself enough to let go if that is the case.

That's exactly right. As always, you end on exactly the right note.

It's been so much fun to be with you. We really appreciate you our listeners. We appreciate our wonderful producer Kamaria, and our recording engineer Todd. On behalf of all of us, we'll be with you again next week. In the meantime, if you'd like to write to us you can reach alvean@lovelife.digital or doug@lovelife.digital

And we'll see you next week folks. Bye