



How to deal with passive aggressive team members... and how to find out if you're one of them!

By Julie Parker

We all have, or will at some stage be in, a relationship with someone who displays passive aggressive tendencies. They could be a family member, friend or work colleague. Despite our own best intentions, often it is we who act in a passive aggressive manner. Passive aggressive behaviour is relatively common because it a way of expressing our displeasure at a person or situation without having to tackle the issue front-on.

Passive aggressive behaviour displays itself in many forms:

- Resentment;
- Sullenness;
- Moodiness;
- Complaining;
- Sarcasm;
- Petty-grumbings;
- Stubbornness;
- Purposeful inefficiency;
- Chronic lateness;
- Sabotage;
- Silent treatment;
- Blaming others;
- Withholding praise; and
- Withholding affection.

The passive aggressive team member in a dental practice situation is highly damaging if not managed correctly. It is easy to feel controlled by this person. Often, it is the passive aggressive who stays and

the other employees start quitting. I have been witness to practices where growth of the practice is not occurring because it will trigger the passive aggressive office manager into a reaction that makes everyday life very uncomfortable. The “victims” know they should do something about it, but feel incapable of doing so.

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Passive aggressive behaviour stems from a need by the perpetrator to exert control over others, but with the desire to do this without overt conflict. The passive works hard to avoid conflict. Confrontation causes a loss of sense and reasoning.

Passive aggressors seek out those who won't object to their behaviours. Once a person calls them out on their behaviours,

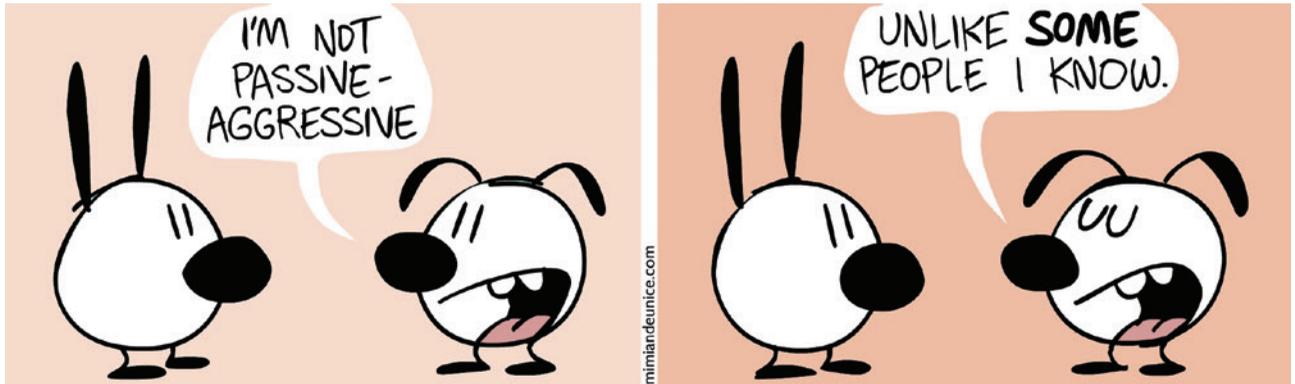
they are highly unlikely to exhibit their passive aggressive behaviours on that person anymore.

Failing to step up to the passive aggressors means that you will remain a victim of them.

The only way to stop a passive aggressor from having a controlling force over your team is to identify the behaviours and bring them out into the open.

How to deal with passive aggressors

- Address them face-to-face. Not via email or phone;
- Stay calm;
- Separate the person from the behaviour. It is not the person that is unwanted, but the passive aggressive behaviour;
- Be respectful in your approach. One, because they deserve it, and two, because anything else will bring out their defensive side. No progress can be made if someone is defensive;
- Your purpose is to open up the channels of communication. Ask them to share their thoughts and feelings;
- State specific interactions, e.g. “When you criticised the nurse yesterday, it seemed to make her upset. That is not how we want people to feel here. Let's come up with a better approach for next time.”;
- Do not get into a tit-for-tat: the perpetrator will attempt to raise issues from the past to justify current behaviour;



- Recognise that the aggressors actually want to be heard. Do not just tell them what not to do, but provide them with an acceptable method of achieving their goals. Tell them, “You should feel comfortable to speak your truth. The acceptable way to do this here is to speak it directly with honesty and kindness.” “You should always feel welcome to come and talk to me personally about anything you wish to discuss. You also have our staff meetings as a place to have your thoughts expressed.”; and
- If you feel there is no progress, cease the discussions and tackle again later. No-one has the right to change people. However, as a leader of a group of employees, it is your responsibility to set a standard of communication and behaviour that enables the growth and prosperity of all involved, including the business.

Recognising your own passive aggressive tendencies

As I stated earlier, passive aggressive behaviour can develop in the best of us. It is an important characteristic to identify and manage due to its potentially damaging effects on our relationships.

Take a step back and look at your own responses to people and situations that displease you. Do you:

- Find yourself sulking when you are unhappy with someone or something?
- Give people the silent treatment when they don't act in a way that pleases you?
- Resist doing things for others as a way of punishing them?
- Avoid people with whom you are upset?
- Become sarcastic or use other ways to avoid meaningful conversation?

If you recognise any of these behaviours as your own, there are useful steps that you can take.

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Passive aggressive tendencies are most effectively eliminated from our behaviour when we take full responsibility over our thoughts, feelings and actions.

When a situation occurs that sparks your passive aggressive response, go for a walk and contemplate what has happened for you.

Ask yourself:

- What specifically upset me?
- How am I feeling?
- What could be going on for the other person?
- Is my upset justified? Or am I being unreasonable?
- If my upset is justified, how could I express myself directly while still displaying respect for the other person?
- If this happens again, what is my chosen response to be, rather than default to one of passive aggressiveness?

Developing new responses to stimuli takes planning and repetition. Allow yourself the time it takes to change.

Despite it feeling quite uncomfortable, conflict is an unavoidable part of life. Learning how to manage yourself in these types of situations will improve the outcomes you experience.

About the author

Julie Parker's whole career has been devoted to the dental industry, starting in 1987 as a dental nurse. In 2003, Julie became the first non-dentist to buy a dental practice in Australia. She owned and managed her practice in Brighton, Victoria for 10 years. During this time, she more than trebled the turnover and her staff base grew from 3 to 12 members. Julie successfully cultivated a winning team and a winning business. Her business programs on how to accomplish a dream dental business are gleaned from her wealth of experience, intensive education and an inquisitive business mind. Julie is a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Time Line Therapy and Hypnotherapy.

Julie Parker Practice Success provides dental teams with coaching and training so they can work together and achieve successful outcomes for their dental practice. Contact Julie on 0407-657-729 or julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au and discover what is on offer to help your team members develop the skills to run an efficient, productive and happy practice.