

## 458: Handling Passive-Aggressive Behavior



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Jody Moore**

[Better Than Happy](#) with Jody Moore

## 458: Handling Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Welcome to episode 458. Today we're talking about handling passive aggressive people. I'm sure that nobody listening to this podcast has anyone in their life who behaves in a passive aggressive way. But just in case I'm wrong, today I'm giving you some strategies to help you feel peaceful and confident and compassionate and open even when the people in your life are not. Are you with me?

This is *Better Than Happy*. I'm your coach, Jody Moore. And on this podcast, my objective, just so we're clear, is to change what you've been taught and have likely believed about yourself up until now. Here's what I believe about you. I believe that what you think is real is mostly imagined. And what you imagine is actually creating what's real. I believe that in the ways you desire to achieve, you 100% have the capacity to succeed.

And finally, I believe that joy, love, and miracles are your God-given natural state of being. And any time you feel far from them, the way back is much simpler than you think, but that's about to change. Are you ready? Let's do this.

Hey, everybody, how's life? What's happening? We are just trying to get spring to stick around. It's kind of that time of year where we get glimpses of it and the weather gets nice and then it gets cold again. I guess that is spring. But my kids and I are constantly just checking the weather app hoping it's going to be sunny. It's probably not healthy. We should probably learn to enjoy our lives even when it's cold. But what are you going to do? That's where we're at.

But I kind of love the end of the year. I think it's kind of exciting to think about kids getting out of school and summer coming and it just feels like change and growth. And I've got a son graduating from high school this year. How did that happen? So I'm probably going to need some coaching from some of you when he goes away to college in the fall. I'm also getting ready to head out of town.

My husband and I are going to a couple of things for our business. We have a mastermind with a business coach that we work with in California.

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And then we're going to EntreLeadership, which is put on by Dave Ramsey's organization in Texas. And I'm looking forward to all of it so much. So hope you have some fun things going on as well.

Today we're going to talk about passive aggressive people. So I just want to share that I last weekend got to speak to the adults in our stake. Our stake does these adult firesides that usually center around things like parenting or relationships or whatever and they're really cool. They do them on Saturday nights at six o'clock and they're just one hour. And then the idea is you come with your spouse, you learn something, you get enriched, and then you go to dinner after or whatever, kind of make a date night out of it.

So anyway, I got to speak about relationships and the work that I teach here at that, and it was so much fun. And there was a gentleman in the audience who raised his hand at one point and his wife was sitting right by him. And he says, "What do you do if your spouse is just really passive aggressive?" His wife just kind of got a slightly embarrassed look on her face. And I didn't want to put her on the spot or make her feel uncomfortable. So I was kind of trying to read her non-verbals, but she kind of started nodding her head.

And I was like, "Do you think he's right?" She's like, "Yeah." Which just says a lot about her, that she can admit it and acknowledge that sometimes she gets passive aggressive. And anyway I tried to help him. It was a little tough because again, I didn't want to put her on the spot. But I started thinking about it afterwards about some things that I wish I would have added or said. And I thought, well, I'm going to do a podcast and see if I can help some people in this situation who have got someone in your life that is what you would call passive aggressive.

Okay, so let's do it. So I looked it up on the internet, I think it was WebMD where I got my definition. And they defined passive aggressive behavior as somebody who is expressing negative feelings indirectly instead of openly talking about them. They gave a little bit more about the history of it coming from World War Two, I think when soldiers didn't follow their commands,

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which was kind of interesting. But anyway, I like that definition, it's kind of simple.

They're expressing their negative feelings about something, but indirectly. So oftentimes I don't know about you, but I find that when people are passive aggressive, and when I say people, I'm a person too. So I would have to admit that I can definitely be guilty of this and we're going to talk more about that in a minute. But when people are passive aggressive, what I don't like about it is I feel like they're trying to manipulate me. Do you feel that way?

If they make it clear that they're unhappy, but they're not directly saying they're unhappy, it feels like they're trying to accuse me of doing something wrong. And that I'm the reason, my behavior or something I'm doing or not doing, etc., is the reason they're unhappy. But they're saying words that sound like them being polite or kind or being the bigger person, if you will, the more mature person. And I think that's what, for me anyway, maybe you can relate to this, is so irritating about passive aggressive behavior is it feels fake. It feels like a lie.

So let's talk about some examples. I'm going to use examples not from my own family. But my own family and myself included, I think we're actually pretty guilty of passive aggressive behavior, every single one of us. I know because the internet went on to say that one of the most common forms of passive aggressive behavior is sarcasm. And I was like, "Ooh, you got me there." I love a little sarcasm and all my whole family, we're very sarcastic, but we're still good people. But I don't want to put my family's stuff out there. So I'm going to use examples that are not my real examples.

Let's say you have a mother-in-law, my mother in law's not, she's one of the least passive aggressive people I know, I think. So when I say my family, I mean my family of origin. But at any rate, let's say you have a mother-in-law who says, "You know, we really wanted to host Thanksgiving at our house this year, but I guess it's not our turn. And I guess we'll just have to figure it out on our own because everybody wants to go someplace else."

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Notice the words are actually pretty reasonable. We wanted to host, but we'll have to figure something else out. But the tone, the sarcasm behind it sends a completely different message. The sarcasm and the tone says, "I am upset about this and if the people in my family were better people, they would see that we should get a turn to host, they'd be more considerate. If people were more selfless like me, they would want to come to my house. But I'm going to be the selfless one here and just accommodate what they want."

But the tone says something totally different. It says, "I'm mad about this and I'm having a little tantrum and a little fit in the hopes that you will feel bad enough that you'll then give me what I want." Is that a pretty good description of passive aggressive behavior? That's how I feel it shows up a lot from the people I coach and in the examples I see in the world.

Maybe you have a spouse who is passive aggressive like this sweet gentleman at the adult fireside. I didn't give specific examples, because again, I didn't want to put them on the spot. But I'm wondering if I would have got examples if he would have said things like, "She says no, it's fine that you're going to go out with the guys and not hang out with me or it's fine that you don't want to go with me to that church activity. It's fine. I'm fine. I'll just go on my own."

Because with the man. I should just explain the rest of his question, he said, "I try to guess what she means, but I often get it wrong." And he's a sweet little older man. He's like, "I try to read between the lines of what she actually means, and then I get it wrong and then I'm in trouble again." So here's what I want to say.

First of all, I think this is important to keep in mind, which again as I was kind of reading up on the way that WebMD and the internet talks about passive aggressive behavior. They did go on to remind us that it stems from, when the person's behaving passive aggressively, it stems from underlying anger, sadness or insecurity. So just reading that, I know that's true.

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If we pause and think about it, we all know that's true. But being reminded of that helps me shift into a little bit of compassion for myself when I'm being passive aggressive and for the people around me when they're behaving passive aggressively. Because it's not coming from confidence. It's not coming from feeling great. It's not coming from having a good, solid relationship with yourself and feeling good about your life and confident about your future, which are all things that I want for people I love.

It's coming from the opposite of those things. It's coming from fear and insecurity and sadness and anger and not knowing what to do with those things and not being confident. And that's too bad. We can have some compassion for that. That's first of all.

Second of all, what I want you to do is pay attention to who you become when you're at the receiving end of passive aggressive behavior. Here's what's interesting, and I just thought of this now. But the man who asked me that question, I'm sure he didn't think about it this way, as none of us do. We don't sit down and plot out our passive aggressive behaviors. We don't go, "I know I'm going to say this in a snarky tone, and then they're going to feel bad." It's not premeditated. I really don't think it is hardly ever.

But this man asking me that question in front of probably 100 other adults in our stake and his wife is kind of passive aggressive. He's saying, "I just genuinely want to understand." But what he's doing is kind of calling her out and putting her on the spot. And again, I don't think he did that with intention at all. I don't think it was premeditated, but it's still, we could say passive aggressive, which is the most common thing that we do.

When somebody is behaving in what we think is a passive aggressive way, we become passive aggressive right back. Instead of saying what's true, we start saying all the right words in a snarky tone. And maybe we say it to their face, or even worse, we just say it behind their back to other people, "Can you believe she said that?" I wanted to be like, "Well, I'm sorry, aren't you special?"



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Whether we say it out loud or we say it in our heads and then we maybe say it to other people, we become passive aggressive. Instead of expressing our negative feelings openly and talking about them, we become sarcastic. Interesting. What if that's the real problem? The real problem with somebody being passive aggressive towards us is that we become passive aggressive back and that doesn't feel good to us. It feels out of integrity. It feels childish. It feels snarky. And it feels powerless.

Because what we're doing is trying to manipulate other people or at least complain about other people or at least get validation about other people so that we can feel better about ourselves. It's just the long way around. So just notice that. Again, be compassionate with yourself when you notice, because just like other people being passive aggressive is coming from their own insecurity and fear, etc. When we become passive aggressive, we are also now operating from sadness, fear, anger, insecurity etc.

But what is the way out of this? What is the alternative? It's two things. It's number one, being more honest and open, including being vulnerable when necessary. So instead of shifting into passive aggressive behavior which is pretending and sort of lying and pretending everything's fine, I have to tell the real truth. Now, again, whether you tell the truth to them directly out loud or just to yourself in your head is up to you. I think there's appropriate times for both.

What I care most about is that you keep yourself centered and grounded and confident instead of moving into insecurity and passive aggressiveness. So I might, in my mind at least, to begin with, say something like, "Oh, that really was painful for me to hear my family member, whoever it was, say that thing and to see that they're clearly upset and disappointed and hurt." Even though their words didn't say it, I can read in their tone and their body language that they are.

And I made that mean something negative about me. They even maybe made it mean something negative about me. And then I hurt myself by thinking that. I don't like seeing them upset. I especially don't like it when they think I'm the cause of their upset. This is upsetting to me. I just have to

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begin by acknowledging that instead of going, “Can you believe she said that? Can you believe she thinks that?” So I have to be like, “I feel uncomfortable when people are upset with me.” Good to know.

Now, if it feels appropriate to have a conversation out loud. Again, you would want to as much as possible be telling the truth. It’s hard to tell the truth. It’s easier to be passive aggressive, it really is. But the truth is, I feel really bad that you’re upset. And I feel guilty because I feel like you want me to do something about it. And the truth is, I’m not willing to change my Thanksgiving plans. And I’m so sorry if that’s upsetting to you. I don’t want to upset you. I love you. I care about your feelings, but this is where I’m at.

See what I’m saying? Telling the truth is the opposite of passive aggressive behavior. It’s actually quite lovable and understandable when we tell the truth, but maybe not. They may not hear it well, they may not receive it well. Remember, we’re not trying to manipulate their behavior or their feelings or get them to forgive us or to love us or any of that. You can’t take on this challenge of monitoring yourself in order to try to change them from being passive aggressive.

I would just assume they’re still going to do it, but you keep yourself out of a passive aggressive place by doing some truth telling, definitely to yourself and maybe to them. And the truth is messy. The truth is complicated. The truth contradicts itself a lot. The truth is, I want them to be happy, but I’m not willing to do this thing that they ask. Or the truth is, I am willing to do that thing that they ask, but I don’t want to do it out of resentment. So I’ve got to thank myself and believe in myself and change something before I can do it or whatever is the truth.

The truth is, I’m frustrated and I’m tired. The truth is, I’ve been taking on responsibility for their emotions for so long that I don’t know how to not do it. And now I need a boundary in order to get my head straight. That might be the truth. Telling the truth is the opposite of passive aggressiveness. And being willing to discuss difficult behaviors can be a safe place to discuss it or with the person maybe, depending on each specific circumstance. So that’s the first thing.



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The second thing is you can just opt out of the game. Here's what I mean. I do this a lot actually. There's kind of a game that happens when we both become passive aggressive. One person says something with a little bit of a tone, so I know they mean something else. And then I reply with a little bit of a tone. And let's just see if they can read between the lines of what I think and let's see who can out-manipulate the other person. So instead of that, you just choose to, like I said, tell the truth.

But second of all, just believe whatever they say. Take the tone out, don't read into it. Even if you know they meant something different. Who cares? You don't have to play that game. I don't mean who cares, like, forget them, we don't care about them. We do care about them. I'm just saying you can decide to opt out of the game. I actually had a relationship in my life once where I noticed there was this game happening, this passive aggressive thing back and forth. I was participating in it too.

And I finally just said, "Listen, I'm going to tell you the truth. I'm going to try as hard as I can anyway to tell you the truth. So if I tell you, I am available to come and help you in this way, you can know that I'm telling you the truth. And if I'm not telling you the truth, that's on me. You don't have to do this whole, "You're so busy. I know that probably, I don't want to inconvenience you." You don't have to do that. You can just trust whatever I say because I'm either telling you the truth or I'm not. And I'm already taking full accountability for that.

Second of all, whatever you tell me, I'm going to take as the truth. I'm not going to try to read between the lines because it's exhausting and frankly, I'm not even good at it. So I want to invite you to tell me the truth. I can handle it. I would much rather hear you say, "I'm really sad and hurt because I wanted to host Thanksgiving." I would much rather that than you pretend that you're not, but clearly you are."

Now, again they may or may not change their behavior. I'm not telling them this in order to try to change them. I'm telling them so that when I just choose to believe what they say, if they say, "No, nobody's coming here for Thanksgiving this year and you know what? I guess we're just fine with

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that.” If I can’t take the tone out of it and hear it differently, here’s a little trick, ask Siri to say it to you or ask Alexa to say it to you. Type it in your phone and have Alexa say it. She takes the tone right out.

Those AI bots don’t have any passive aggressiveness in them. She’ll say, “I wanted to host Thanksgiving this year, but I guess everyone’s going somewhere else and that’s fine. I’ll just make do.” I love to play this game where I put it into Siri or Alexa and I have them say it. And there’s no tone. There’s no agenda. Everything’s just directly straightforward because they’re computers.

Then I say, “Okay, great, I’m glad you’re great with it. Well, we’re going to miss you and if we can do anything, let me know.” So you can literally just opt out of it, did you know this? You can literally opt out of it. Write their words down and take the tone out of it. Now, again, that might not always be appropriate.

Maybe sometimes it is appropriate to go, “I hear you saying that you’re okay with it, but I’m getting the sense that you’re not okay with it. Do you want to talk about something? I feel like your feelings are a little hurt and I’m so sorry if that’s the case.” That might be the appropriate way to handle it in some situations. I want you to have compassion. Use your human brain to make decisions about how to be a good, kind, compassionate person, but either way, I still can opt out of the game. Do you see it?

I can just take what they say, literally, or I can open up and give an invitation to be real and at least be real and honest myself. And it will take you right out of the game. I’m telling you, it will set you free. People who become passive aggressive are, first of all, in pain, and it might be the only way they know how to be in the world. And you don’t have to let that dictate your experience. You don’t have to let it put you into passive aggressiveness and you also don’t have to guess what they’re thinking.

One final thing and then I’ll let you go. Somebody came up to me afterwards. It was a gentleman again and he said, “I’m worried that maybe my wife and I are doing that passive aggressive thing because we’ll say to

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the kids, “Hey, we’d love for everyone to come over Sunday for dinner, but also if you’re busy, we don’t want to put you out. And so don’t feel bad if you can’t come, feel free to say no.””

And I don’t remember exactly how I answered him, but as I thought about it later, this is what I would have answered is, if that’s true for you, great, nothing wrong with saying that. But also, what’s wrong with, hey, we’re hosting dinner on Sunday and we’d love to see you, let me know if you can make it. And you drop the part about, just so you know, we don’t want anyone to feel pressured.

Because maybe we give people the benefit of the doubt, that they’re able to also be honest and vulnerable and tell us the truth. And that if they choose to come, maybe they really want to come. And if they say, “We’re busy and we’re not going to be able to make it”, then you show them, you don’t have to tell them that you’re not going to be offended or hurt and it’s okay. You just show them when they say, “We’re so sorry, we have other plans.” No problem. I’m glad you have a full life and I’m sure we’ll do it again soon.

So just some things to play with there because I feel like especially for those of you that have adult children, we get into this weird dance in adult child-parent relationships where we’re all trying not to step on each other’s toes. And it can easily slip into this disconnecting, not completely honest, not vulnerable type of conversation. But at any point, give people the benefit of the doubt and choose to not be passive aggressive yourself and it will go a long way.

Alright, thanks for joining me today, you guys. I love you so much. Have a beautiful week and I’ll see you next time.

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