**North-Dakota-Nice or Passive Aggression?**

We joke about our ND – Nice behavior, knowing full well that it means that we don’t always say what we mean, leaving those with more direct forms of communication habits at a loss when trying to interpret the meaning of our words. I recently spoke with a new faculty member who experienced this phenomenon. She was given advice on how many committees to serve on, how many classes to teach, and to focus on research. She did exactly as told, but a few months later, experienced a heightened level of hostility from some colleagues which culminated in a meeting with the Chair who told her that she was not doing enough service and teaching. If our ND-Nice means that we hide our expectations and punish those who can’t read our minds, it’s not really *nice*, is it… It’s simply passive-aggression, and we need tools to reduce the negative effects if we want to be supportive to each other, retain good people, and maintain a positive climate.

What is it? Passive- aggressive actions can range from the relatively mild, such as ignoring a personal or work related phone call, to the very serious, such as indirectly undermining someone’s well-being and success. Most chronically passive-aggressive individuals have four common characteristics: They’re unreasonable to deal with, they’re uncomfortable to experience, they rarely express their hostility directly, and they repeat their subterfuge behavior over time. Passive aggressiveness may be directed towards a person or a group.

Below are four categories of [passive aggression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/passive-aggression):

**Disguised Verbal Hostility.**Negative [gossip](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-networking). Sarcasm. Veiled hostile joking — often followed by "just kidding." Repetitive teasing. Negative orientation. Habitual criticism of ideas, solutions, conditions, and expectations.

**Disguised Relational Hostility.**The silent treatment. The invisible treatment. Social exclusion. Neglect. Backstabbing. Two faced. Mixed messages. Deliberate button pushing. Negative or discomforting surprises. Overspending. Sullen resentment. Indirectly hurting something or someone of importance to the targeted person.

**Disguised Task Hostility.** [Procrastination](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/procrastination). Stalling. Forgetting. Stonewalling. Withholding resources or information. Professional exclusion. Denying personal responsibility. Excuse making. Blaming. Broken agreements. Lack of follow through. Resistance. Stubbornness. Rigidity. Avoidance. Inefficiency, complication, incompletion or ruination of task.

**Hostility Towards Others Through Self-**[**Punishment**](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/punishment)**(“I’ll show YOU”).**Quitting. Deliberate failure. Exaggerated or imagined [health](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/health) issues. Victimhood. Dependency.[Addiction](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/addiction). [Self-harm](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/self-harm). Deliberate weakness to elicit sympathy and favor.

In short, passive aggressiveness is [anger](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger), hostility, and/or learned helplessness in disguise, expressed in a covert, underhanded way to "even the score," and with the hope of "getting away with it." The perceived payoffs for the passive-aggressive are greater power, control, and negative emotional satisfaction.

**So how can you best deal with a passive-aggressive person?**

**1. Identify the behavior for what it is: hostility.** "The big thing there is to recognize the phenomenon, the behavior, for what it is -- to see it as a kind of hostility and not be fooled by the innocuousness, the sugar-coatedness of it," Wetzler advises. "Once you recognize it's a sign of hostility, it emboldens you to deal with it."

The biggest mistake people make is to be lenient. Once you give in to passive-aggressive behavior, you lose your options, he explains. "It's critical to see it as a power struggle, and then use the typical tactics one might use in a power struggle."

**2. Set limits -- and then follow through.** Make it clear that you won't tolerate being mistreated, Wetzler says. If a person is constantly late and it bothers you, make it clear to the person that next time she is late meeting you for a movie, you're just going to go in without her. "That's a kind of limit-setting," Wetzler says. "It's also [a way of saying], 'I'm not going to pay the price for your behavior.'"

**3. Talk specifically -- not generally.** If you're going to confront a passive-aggressive person, be clear about the issue at hand. A danger of confrontation is that statements turn too global -- phrases like "You're always this way!" won't get you anywhere -- so it's important to confront the person about a specific action. For instance, if the silent treatment is what gets on your nerves, explain that a specific incident where you were given the silent treatment was considered a hostile move. Be specific and direct: “You seem upset that I’m not attending the new meetings about the new position and search. However, you specifically told me to keep my boundaries and only attend full faculty meetings and to serve on the policy committee. I don’t get it. How can you be angry with me about something you told me Not to do?”

**4. Practice assertive communication.** There's aggressive communication, there's passive communication, and there's passive-aggressive communication. None of these is as effective as assertive communication, Brandt says.

Assertive communication means being assertive and nonreactive, yet respectful. "You have a sense of confidence, you're collaborative, [there's a sense that] you both want to resolve the problem, in a 'win-win' sort of way," she says. It's also important to listen and not inject accusations or blame into the conversation. "It's not just about getting your way, but taking the other person into consideration as well. Acknowledge the person and validate their feelings, which doesn't mean you have to agree with them."

Sources:

1. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/26/stop-being-passive-aggressive-behavior-signs-\_n\_5515877.html
2. https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/communication-success/201405/how-recognize-and-handle-passive-aggressive-behavior