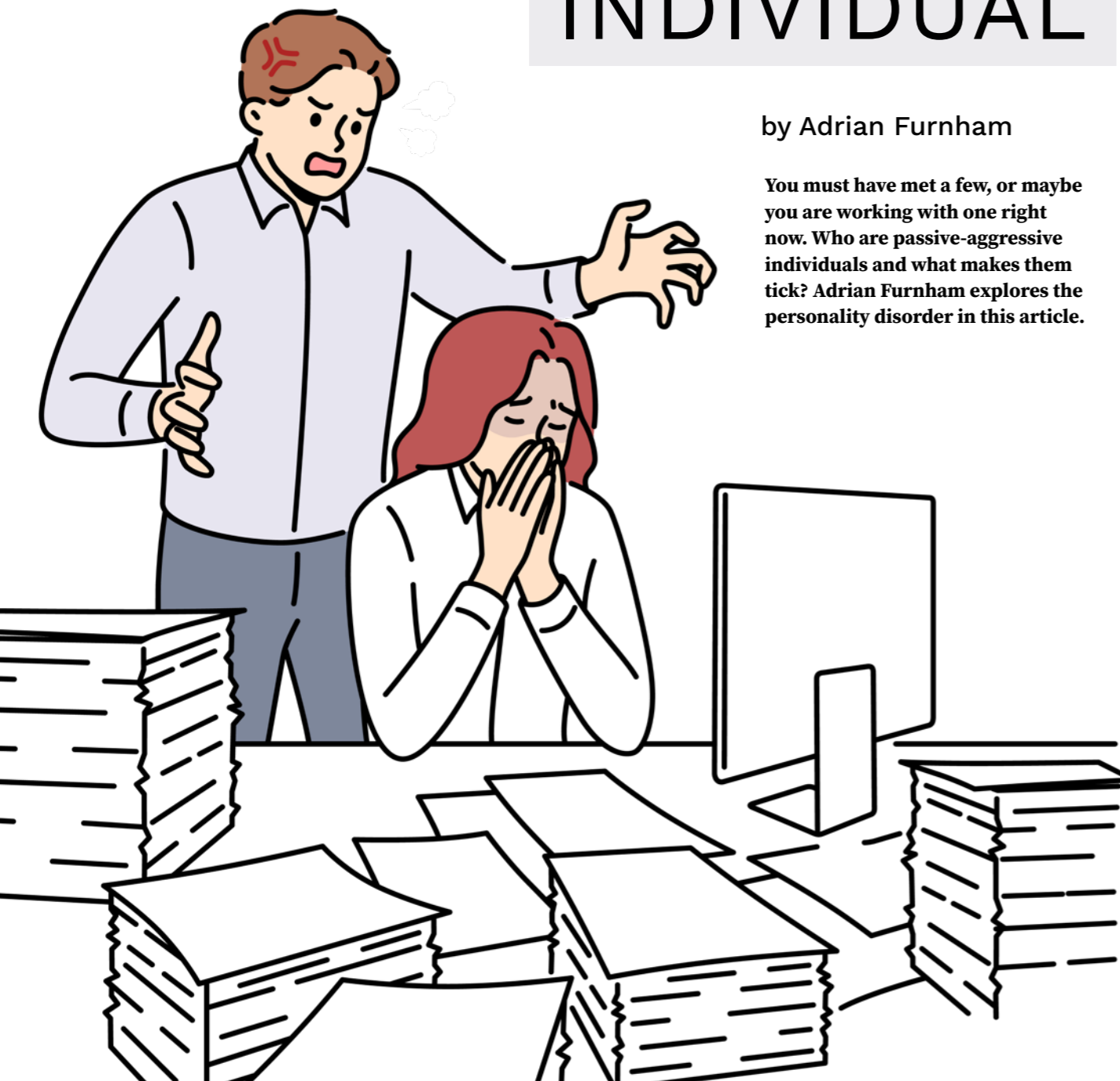


THE PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE INDIVIDUAL

by Adrian Furnham

You must have met a few, or maybe you are working with one right now. Who are passive-aggressive individuals and what makes them tick? Adrian Furnham explores the personality disorder in this article.



How to cure a major (mental) illness? The cure does not involve years of painful soul searching, psychotherapy, or complex cognitive behaviour therapy. The cure is cheap, effective and instant. Now that should get the attention of the NHS executives as well as the medical profession! The secret? Abolish the illness category. This is what has happened to the diagnosis of being Passive-Aggressive.

Psychiatric diagnosis has always been difficult and unreliable. It was said years ago that the best way to cure schizophrenia in America was to bring patients to England, where they might be considered only “eccentric” or “somewhat quirky”. Schizophrenia is, or was, diagnosed less frequently here than in the USA.

Christopher Hitchens pointed out that the Catholic Church has abolished the concept of “limbo”, the place certain souls will dwell until Judgement Day. At the stroke of a pen, possibly accompanied by plainchant and the whiff of incense, a mythical theological location disappears. That is what has happened to Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder.

THE BACKGROUND

Psychiatrists have manuals that describe, in detail, the behaviours associated with a range of psychiatric disorders. This is true of what are called *Personality Disorders*. And every so often the manual is updated. From 1952 to 1987, there was a Personality Disorder called *Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder (PAPD)*.

The history the PAPD suggests the concept originated in the American military soon after the Second World War to describe difficult, childlike soldiers who were, in effect, *social dissidents*.

The disorder originally described typical behaviours such as shirking duty by wilful incompetence. These ideas were then applied by psychiatrists to those in civilian life.

In the original conception, seventy years ago, three related types were identified:

- **Passive-dependent** individuals, who were described as clingy, helpless and constantly indecisive;
- **Passive-aggressive** individuals, who were inefficient, pouty, stubborn, prone to procrastination and very obstructive;
- **Aggressive** individuals, who were destructive, irritable and resentful.

Sixteen years later the latter two types were merged into PAPD. It was suggested that people with PAPD snipe rather than confront, and mask their opposition to, and rebellion against, authority. They shirk responsibility and sabotage others. The list of symptoms grew as the manuals were updated to include behaviours such as apparent forgetfulness, dawdling and intentional inefficiency.

PAPD was described as a pervasive pattern of passive resistance to demands for adequate social and occupational performance, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by at least five of the following:

1. *procrastinates, i.e., puts off things that need to be done so that deadlines are not met*
2. *becomes sulky, irritable, or argumentative when asked to do something he or she does not want to do*
3. *seems to work deliberately slowly or to do a bad job on tasks that he or she does not want to do*
4. *protests, without justification, that others make unreasonable demands on him or her*
5. *avoids obligations by claiming to have “forgotten”*
6. *believes that he or she is doing a much better job than others think he or she is doing*
7. *resents useful suggestions from others concerning how he or she could be more productive*
8. *obstructs the efforts of others by failing to do his or her share of the work*
9. *unreasonably criticises or scorns people in positions of authority*



The Freudians thought passive-aggressive behaviour is an *immature defence mechanism* due to its negativistic and covert nature thereby contributing to the suppression of emotional conflicts and impaired problem-solving capabilities.

However, by the late 1980s, PAPD was dropped because it was thought of not as a syndrome or disorder, but as a specific behavioural response to particular (work) situations. That is, it was situation-specific, not a trait, a response pattern possibly with its origins in childhood socialisation. People were taught it, and reinforced by these behaviours which were “normal” and “adaptive” in certain contexts.

Later the syndrome was renamed *Negativistic*, but was appendicised rather than put in the main text. Many of the behavioural descriptions remained the same, such as resistance to routine tasks, consistent complaints about being misunderstood, sullen argumentativeness, scorning of all those in authority, envy and resentment of the relatively fortunate, and perpetual and exaggerated complaints of personal misfortune.

Passive-aggressive types are not usually stressed. They sulk, procrastinate, and “forget” when asked to do things they think are not reasonable.

feel unfairly treated, even abused. They are super-sensitive to their rights, fairness, and exploitation avoidance. They also seem leisurely; they believe success is not everything. They tend not to be above middle-management levels because they are not ambitious enough. For them, the game is not worth the candle.

Passive-aggressive types are not usually stressed. They sulk, procrastinate, and “forget” when asked to do things they think are not reasonable. They are called Passive-Aggressive because they are rarely openly defiant, yet they are often angry. They snipe rather than confront. And they are often quietly and surreptitiously furious. They can be needy yet resentful about those moods. They are in essence oppositional, not assertive. They often have downward job mobility, precisely as a result of their beliefs and behaviours.

They are often late for meetings; they procrastinate; they work at around 80% of their capacity; and they are very stubborn and hard to coach. They will rarely directly confront others. Their prickly sensitivity, subtle un-cooperativeness, resistance, and deep self-absorption make them both unpredictable and unrewarding to deal with. As a result, they have trouble building and maintaining a business team.

Passive-aggressives handle stress and heavy workloads by slowing down, simply ignoring requests for greater output, and finding ways to get out of work. Because they seem overtly cooperative and agreeable,

it can take a long time to realise how unproductive and refractory they can be. They are self-centred, they focus on their own agendas, and they deeply believe in their own superior natural talent and their right to leisure. They believe they have nothing to prove to themselves, are quite indifferent to feedback from others, and therefore become annoyed and resentful when criticised or asked for extra effort.

Colleagues need to be aware that Passive-Aggressive types are not nearly as cooperative as they seem, and that they are only pretending to agree with you about work and performance issues. Also, managers should get them to commit to performance goals in public, in front of witnesses, so that a community of people can hold them accountable. Social pressure won't change their views of the world, but it will serve to make their performance deficits less easily deniable.

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Miller (2008), a clinical psychologist, named the passive-aggressive leader a *Spoiler*. He argued that they feel disadvantaged, vulnerable, and as if life has been rigged against them, so they carefully and surreptitiously attack others. In essence, they carefully mask their opposition to, and rebellion against, authority. Thus, they shirk responsibilities, while demanding others do so too. He notes that their “martyred mewling” is mixed with great skill at deflecting blame. They easily destroy team morale and generate a lot of animosity among co-workers. They are also, he concluded, masters of procrastination.

Hogan and Hogan (2001), leading business psychologists, call these people *Leisurely*. They argued that these types “March to the sound of their own drum”; they are confident about their skills and abilities; cynical about the talents and intentions of others (especially superiors), and insist on working at their own pace. They tend to get angry and slow down even more when asked to speed up. They tend to feel mistreated, unappreciated and put upon, and when they sense that they have been cheated, they retaliate, but always under conditions of high deniability.

Oldham and Morris (2000), in their book describing all the Personality Disorders, claim the following five traits and behaviours are clues to the presence of what they too call the *Leisurely Style*. A person who reveals a strong Leisurely tendency will, they suggested, demonstrate more of these behaviours more intensely than someone with less of this style in his or her personality profile.

They noted various characteristics:

- **First**, Leisurely men and women believe in their right to enjoy themselves on their own terms in their own time; they value and protect their comfort, their free time, and their individual pursuit of happiness.
- **Second**, they agree to play by the rules; deliver what is expected of them and no more, but expect others to recognise and respect that limit.

DESCRIBING THE PROBLEM

This personality type is very concerned about “doing their own thing”. They demand the “right to be me”. They demand a right to do their thing in their way and no one has the right to deprive them of it. They believe at work, and in private relationships, nobody has the right to “own them”. They like the companionship of others but need strong defences against being ill-used. They are particularly sensitive to fairness, equity, and equality: pretty hot topics these days.

They also do not find the workplace of great importance. They can be good managers and workers. But they do not work overtime, take work home or worry much about it. They certainly will not do any more than their contract specifies. They do not work to please their boss or feel better about themselves. They are often heard saying “It’s not my job” and they tend to be suspicious of all workplace authority. If their boss asks them to work harder, faster, or more accurately, they



- **Third**, they cannot be exploited and can comfortably resist acceding to demands that they deem unreasonable or above and beyond the call of duty.
- **Fourth**, they are relaxed about time and feel haste makes waste and unnecessary anxiety.
- **Fifth**, they are easygoing and optimistic that whatever needs to get done will get done, eventually.
- **Sixth**, they are not overawed by authority.

Inevitably, different schools of psychotherapy react very differently to the construct of a Passive-Aggressive person, and, if they do not wish to abolish it, how to treat it. Thus, those from a more psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic tradition wish to explore the childhood and parental origins of the disorder, while cognitive behaviour therapists would advocate confronting and changing everyday cognitions about how they are treated and perceived, and thence modify their behaviours.

In their book aimed at helping CEOs understand their “dark side”, Dotlich and Cairo (2003) noted that PAPD people thrive in a culture where no one says what they think. To help people self-diagnose, they ask four questions: “Is saying one thing and doing another your standard operating procedure?”; “Do you have a private agenda you share with no-one?”; “Do you avoid conflict

at all costs and rarely express disagreement?” and “Do you know or care what others expect of you?” They argue that PAPD people often have angry and confused reports/subordinates who are deeply cynical. They seem incapable of developing and sustaining alliances, partnerships and teams. And they have a reputation for only giving lip service to many issues.

So, they are advised to focus on the gap between what they say and what they feel; to try some empathy by putting themselves in the shoes of those they work with; to learn how to deal with conflict; and to study successful leaders. They concluded that PAPD behaviour was “part of the leadership repertoire in the big, slow-moving bureaucracies of the past”, but now you have transparently to align and commit. Perhaps because it was/is so common, it was thought of as normal and OK.

SO, WHAT TO DO?

Oldham and Morris (2000)

They offer eight tips on dealing with the leisurely passive-aggressive type:

1. **Accept the Leisurely person as he or she is.** Don't approach a relationship with such a person with the expectation of changing him or her to suit your needs. Rather, ask yourself

what it is in this person that you like and are attracted to?

2. If you are having difficulty with a Leisurely person, ask yourself whether the problems arise because you two have different value systems. Perhaps you come from a push-hard, get-ahead, make-a success-of-yourself tradition, while the Leisurely person sees more value in doing his or her own thing. Instead of judging one system as better than the other, ask yourself whether your two value systems can coexist or merge.
3. Be realistic. Life with a Leisurely person may demand more sacrifices from you than from him or her. Can you make these without bitterness or resentment?
4. Make life easier for yourself. People with the Leisurely personality style don't automatically tune in to what's important to you. Instead of waiting for this person to figure it out, let him or her know your basic, essential expectations.
5. Leisurely types can be stubborn about protecting their rights to do or to be as they please. Offer to assist in projects that need doing and/or make a deal.
6. When the Leisurely person in your life starts stalling, refusing, or forgetting, ask, "Are you angry about something?" People with this personality style have a hard time expressing their anger directly.
7. Try to share in the Leisurely person's pleasures. Observe his or her habits and routines and join in.
8. Take good care of him or her. Leisurely people are suckers for pampering and loving attention.

There are many middle managers, but more likely specialists (think IT) with this rather unattractive profile. Their “pathology” may have served them well, even if the burden of it has been “borne” by their long-suffering staff.

I have psychologist friends who say the disorder should not be re-introduced to the psychiatric manuals because it is now so widespread, and even growing as a result of its social acceptability that it is not considered pathological or even unusual. Some argue modern “woke” attitudes actually endorse many PAPD behaviours and beliefs.

One thing is clear: they are not ideal people to work with or for.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Adrian Furnham is a Professor in the Department of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour at the Norwegian Business School. In his career he has worked with too many Passive-Aggressive people for his own good.