

Tell them what you really think

By Ruth Ostrow

IT all started happily enough. I asked my husband to do a small favour for me. He apologised and explained why he couldn't. "I would love to help you out, but ..." I felt really OK about that, even though it meant a total disruption to my day and it would have been only the tiniest, smallest thing for him to do. Even though I had done a similar favour for him the week before without hesitation. I was really, really OK. I kissed him goodbye and got into my car to do some errands.

I was thinking how OK I was feeling when I heard a huge thud. I stopped the car, got out and discovered his car parked behind mine with a big dent in the front. Oops.

The strange thing was that I hadn't seen it there. I had looked behind me as I was backing out but somehow missed it. The sun was glaring in my eyes and I have a spare tyre stuck to the back of my four-wheel-drive which makes it difficult to see poles and other stationary objects.

Yet I couldn't help thinking that I was blinded by more than sunshine. Ironically, the very next day I caught the tail-end of TV pop-psychologist Dr Phil, doing a program on passive aggression.

Passive aggression is when you are holding anger inside your body or built-up resentment and you don't know it, or you feel mildly peeved but are unaware of how enraged or hurt you're really feeling.

You then somehow forget to lock your partner's house when you leave and when the thieves come and steal the television you swear it was only an accident. You drop his book in the bath by mistake; you "accidentally on purpose" break your girlfriend's favourite vase; you forget to keep that dinner date, genuinely unaware of your hidden agenda.

In my case, I'm such an emotional creature I know the second I get angry. There's no hidden anything ever -- no repressed feelings or unexpressed thoughts. So to discover I'd been passive aggressive came as a shock to me. I guess everyone is capable of an act of sabotage or an unhelpful expression of anger at times. Everyone is capable of being out of touch with their feelings.

But the program focused not on occasional offenders but on chronic passive aggressives. People who only ever operate covertly with their feelings. People who don't know how to say "I'm angry" or "You've hurt me". People who instead act out of a wounded, sulky and blaming place.

Dr Phil interviewed one man who was always running late as a way of sabotaging his marriage and punishing his wife. And a woman who described herself as a passive-aggressive co-worker. She admitted she was wishy-washy with decisions and used the silent treatment instead of dealing with conflict. She told people, "everything's OK", while holding a grudge.

She was just like a man I used to date. He was absolutely fine that I was going out for drinks with an ex-boyfriend who was visiting from Europe. Absolutely fine. "Have a great time," he said. "I am committed to personal freedom," he said. And then in an act of great kindness decided to stay at my house after I'd left and put a wash on.

Accidentally, my pure-wool coat that had been lying on the chair was put in the hot wash and came out vertically challenged. And in that same wash went an African sari which bled yellow on everything. He was only trying to help, he was committed to freedom. Several accidents later, when I confronted him about his punishing behaviour, he finally exploded in verbal diarrhoea about my appalling betrayal. "But why didn't you just say so at the time?" I asked in shock.

Because he couldn't. First, he didn't know how he was really feeling. Second, many people cannot express themselves due to fear or shame. They were intimidated as children for expressing feelings or they don't believe they're worthy enough to be angry. They are not bad but merely confused about how to make their feelings understood in a healthy way.

They then engage in subtle passive aggression: withholding of affection, attention or office paperwork. And in more overt forms, accidents, forgotten arrangements, broken promises and veiled insults delivered as compliments: "You look so young and slim today for a change." I've discovered in life that when you suspect there's an emotional terrorist in your midst, setting off booby traps rather than declaring war, then you're probably right.

Dr Phil says don't play the tit-for-tat game. You have to call it cleanly: "This is the third so-called accident. I think you are feeling angry at me. Let's talk." Passive aggressives have to be made aware that their actions don't get results and leave them feeling more frustrated and unheard. But most importantly they have to learn to feel safe identifying, and then expressing, their feelings.

It's about good communication from both sides, as I can testify. Had I spoken the truth, I would have saved myself a fortune in panel beating.

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