

05 Anger Fighter Skills Builder  
**Have courage to  
communicate honestly**

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## **Welcome to program 5 in the series:**

*7 anger fighter skills for couples - a practical skill-building program to keep anger from jeopardizing your marriage or relationship.*

Written by Dr. Tony Fiore, psychologist, marriage therapist and anger management expert. This audio series was developed by Dr Fiore to serve as a resource for partners struggling with anger issues. It can be used as a supplement for people in anger management programs or couples therapy, or as a stand-alone self-help resource for couples not currently in therapy.

## Anger Fighter Skill #5 Have courage to communicate honestly

*This is a skill that is a solution to anger expressed destructively as "passive aggression."*



In successful relationships, anger, resentment, and conflict, are handled in a healthy way. Your goal in marriage or any intimate relationship should be that of developing what one famous therapist calls a **secure functioning relationship**.

In a secure functioning relationship, you always have each other's back, you trust each other, you see each other as a friend, and you both try to do things based on what is good for the relationship- not only what is good for you as an individual.

This requires a certain type of communication that is honest, direct, and genuine- as opposed to other types of communication such as passive-aggression. It is difficult to have a securely functioning relationship when you can't trust your partner to be up front with you, you can't trust that they will do what they say they will do, or you never know when they will do something to sabotage things you thought you had agreement on.

This program addresses the problem of passive aggression from perspectives:

1. How the passive-aggressive partner can be less passive aggressive by developing the courage to communicate directly.
2. How much should the partner of a passive aggressive tolerate and what are ways they can better cope with passive-aggressive behavior?

First, let's look at basics:

## What is Passive Aggression?

If passive-aggression was an animal, it would be seen as a wolf in sheep's clothing. It is **an indirect** and safer way of expressing hostility, anger or related emotions. Often, the PA denies that this is what they are doing-like the 4 year old with his hand in the cookie jar explaining that he is not stealing cookies. Some passive-aggressives don't ever show overt anger-they just get even sometimes with an angry smile. "Getting even" may include refusal to talk about something important, withholding things you know your partner needs (like sex), but blaming something else, or throwing your partner under the bus, so to speak, by not backing them up on an agreed upon discipline issue with the children.

Other passive aggressives never offer opinions, weigh in on important decisions, or commit to things, the consequences of which they would have to live with. They often hide emotional needs or desires from their partners (and sometimes from themselves). That way, they can avoid disappointments. They stay safe.



Many partners complain that their passive-aggressive spouses are not proactive in their relationships. That is, they don't take leadership roles especially regarding responsibilities around the house. When the partner of a passive-aggressive take over, then the passive aggressive will complain that their partner makes unreasonable demands on them-or treats them like a child instead of an adult partner.

Finally, many passive aggressive partners cannot deal with actual or perceived criticism from their spouse. They feel picked on, and unjustly criticized, under appreciated, or used.

Alright. Those are the basics. But, here are two more observations you should know about passive-aggressive behavior

Not all passive-aggressives are equal in either amount of passive-aggression they show, or the causes of their passive-aggression. Sometimes, passive-aggressive behavior is combined with other personality traits in a person to create a mix that is almost impossible for a partner to cope with and retain one's life balance (not to mention sanity)

In many years of couples counseling, I have observed that passive-aggressives come in three patterns. This is important because you as a partner may want to make different decisions about your marriage depending on which pattern best describes your spouse or significant other:

# Three Patterns of Passive-Aggression In Relationships

## Pattern 1- Hard Core

With these folks, passive-aggressive behavior is part of their character or personality structure . They were like this long before you came into their lives. They see nothing wrong with being passive-aggressive. They probably were passive-aggressive as children.

Some case examples of “hard-core “passive aggressives;

### **EXAMPLE #1:**

*Sue, a 38 year old attractive but slightly overweight 8th grade teacher was recently married (6 months) to Tony, a 35 year old real estate developer who had recently lost his mother to cancer. Sue was devastated because Tony told her on their honeymoon in Paris that he did not find her sexually attractive. They had not had sex since their marriage, even though they had a lot of sex previously. She had been looking forward to starting a family with Tony, as agreed during their courtship.*

Why was this passive-aggressive? Because in his mind he was taken advantage of by her after his mother died and she played on his emotions to get her to marry him when he was vulnerable. In his mind, he was her victim! So now, it was get even time!

### **What should Sue do if in a relationship to a “hard core” passive aggressive like Tony?**

In short, run for the hills! She should not waste any more precious years trying to change him or adapt to him.

### **What should he do?**

Commit to long-term individual therapy with a therapist who specializes in helping people re-wire their character structure. But, the probability of change is very low in this situation, even though the passive-aggressive in Tony’s category may claim he wants to change.

## Pattern 2 - Peace at Any Price

Some people with passive-aggressive behavior are that way because they honestly believe in “peace at any price” in terms of dealing with their partners. In a pattern that was learned in childhood, they will do or say anything to avoid an argument, a decision, or a conflict, even if they have to pay a price later on down the road.

They have as their motto: “Go along to get along.” The goal is survival, staying out of trouble, or staying off the radar, yet still being loved or cared for.

So, as an example, they will agree with you even though they don’t really agree, and then “forget” to do that which was agreed upon. They will refuse to state honestly what they want in a situation, then complain later that you are overly controlling because you went ahead and made the decision.

It is an adaptive mechanism probably learned in early childhood. Avoidance of emotional honesty was probably encouraged in their family. In such families, children learn to stay out of trouble and gain approval not by telling their truth, especially regarding anger, but by saying or doing things to avoid conflict, or keep the peace.

But we are hard-wired as human beings such that the root emotion of anger or resentment remains and has to be discharged somehow.

Enter the mechanism of Passive Aggression. With conflict-avoidant folks, it comes out as **subtle defiance** (while pretending to comply), **pay-back** in a way that your partner never knows for sure or **sabotage** hidden in a myriad of excuses as to why something didn’t get done that was absolutely promised.

Common examples are neglecting to pick up the lettuce for tonight’s salad as promised (“Honey, I’m sorry, I forgot”), not paying long overdue traffic tickets as promised (“I meant to, but there was no place to park at the DMV”), or refusing to take part in a decision as to what kind of new car to buy, but then criticizing their decision.



## **What you should do as a “Peace at Any Pricer” to Improve:**

Unlike the “hard core” passive aggressive, you Can change some of your passive-aggressiveness by deciding to develop the courage to communicate more directly and honestly with your spouse.

We say “courage” because “peace at any pricers” are afraid of the consequences if they tell the truth about things. If they admit they took the cookies, they will be punished and this they want to avoid, even if they will be “punished” much worse later on when the truth is discovered.

Specifically, it is recommended you practice the following skills:

- Acknowledge to yourself when you are feeling anger or resentment toward something. Give yourself permission to have angry feelings.
- Assertive communication. Start with small things but tell your spouse honestly how it makes you feel angry or resentful when they do or say certain things. Be up front about your feelings without feeling guilt, shame, or blame.

What you should do to survive being the partner of a conflict-avoidant person and you decide to stay with them:

- Be aware that your partner is passive-aggression and may not change— acceptance is preferable to always being angry at them
- Protect yourself by always having a Plan B
- Do not depend on them if they consistently show passive-aggression in certain ways: for instance:
  1. If always late to important events, drive separately and met them there
  2. If they don't pay bills on time, set up automatic electronic payments
  3. Have them sign physical “agreements” on things they often promise but then renege on....
  4. Find alternative ways to get things done that they promise to do but then don't. – hire a carpenter to fix that fence, hire a housekeeper to clean up the mess, etc. Or, decide to do those things yourself.

### **Pattern 3 - One spouse is unknowingly encouraging passive-aggressive in their partner by inviting lies**

Dr Ellyn Bader, a well known couples therapist, writes the following:

*"Everybody knows about the liar; the person who lies through his teeth, covers his tracks, or acts evasively. But few are aware of the person working behind the scenes, orchestrating the deception even as they're demanding to hear the truth. We call this individual the "Lie Invitee," the forgotten partner in marital deception. For indeed,, it often takes two to lie."*

Some people are completely unaware of the fact that they're inviting partner lies, distortions, or misrepresentations while others understand what they are doing but feel helpless to do otherwise.

Meet Lisa, a successful attorney with deep insecurity in her romantic relationships. Married for 10 years, her husband Jacob, knows this about her and honestly tries to stay out of trouble with her, but constantly feels he cannot be truthful. Why? Because she is constantly accusing him of betrayal or at least being tempted to stray. He has never cheated on Lisa, but recently he posted something on Facebook about a football game he would be attending next month. An old girlfriend saw the post and sent him a text to say "hello, what are you doing these days? Want to have a cup of coffee?"

He did not respond to the text. However, Lisa saw it one night, after deciding to snoop a little by reading his smartphone while he was in the shower.

The following interchange then occurred:

**Lisa:** *(in accusatory tone) "So, who is this Mary woman who texted you yesterday to say hello?"*

**Jacob:** *(who didn't want to outright lie to Lisa, but knew what would happen if he revealed that Mary was an old girlfriend and they had been lovers at one time) so he says casually) "she is a friend I went to high school with."*

**Lisa:** *"Just a friend? Why is she texting you? Why does she want to have coffee with you?"*

**Jacob:** *"I can't control who texts me. We used to be lovers but it has been over for 15 years. I have zero feelings for her. I will text her back and tell her I am now happily married, would she like to meet my wife?"*

**The result of his honesty?** Let's just say that Jacob immediately knew that the rest of his evening was completely ruined (and, darn, tonight was the Laker's playoff game) – maybe the rest of this week was now going to be hell to pay!



Lisa turned into a combination prosecuting attorney and demented drill sergeant who immediately demanded that he let her read all his texts plus all his deleted phone messages for the last six months.

A relentless Lie Invitee can push even fairly honest people, like Jacob, to the far side of truth.

So, what do you think Jacob will say the next time a similar incident come up? Unless he is into pain, he will feel compelled to lie next time. It takes courage to communicate honestly and directly in intimate relationship, when you know what the consequences will be; to avoid this, often people in Jacob's position will dance around the truth, backstroke until their shoulder hurts, or develop a pattern of stretching that rubber band of truth until it snaps.



### **What should you do if you are a lie-invitee?**

The short answer is to do everything possible to become a Truth-Invitee, to achieve that ideal secure functioning relationship we keep talking about. You want to encourage your partner to tell their truth, even if it is a truth is hard to hear, it does not fit your version of things, or it will seriously disrupt plans you may have made.

To be a truth-invitee, according to Dr Bader, you need to develop the skills of having greater capacity for involvement and engagement and request more honest, more complete answers to your questions. And develop the skill to deal with the truth- even if it you don't really want to hear it.

Rather than being a truth-invitee, often the lie-invitee, without being aware of it, closes off selective areas of the relationship discussions, like going through a large house and boarding up unused rooms. Too many of these boarded up rooms can lead to big trouble in your relationship or marriage.

## **What should you do to create a more open and honest relationship?**

Picture that spoof advertisement with Abe Lincoln and his rotund wife who asks him 'Honey, do I look fat in this dress?' You can just see poor "Honest Abe" squirming and struggling with how to handle the uncomfortable conflict that she is forcing him to confront: namely, the truth vs not wanting to hurt his wife's feelings (and/or not wanting to having to deal with her negative reaction)

First, realize that for many reasons complete honesty in a marriage probably is not possible nor desirable. For instance, if your partner expresses a political view you don't not agree with, perhaps you should let it go rather than start a major argument.

But you don't have to be a passive-aggressive either in communicating with each other.

As Dr Bader says "Truth is a process and the key is to build a culture of truth- telling in your partnership-Nobody is totally honest all of the time, but if you can start talking more openly about how to give and receive honesty... it will make all the difference in the world." So, create a container and a commitment together to being clear and direct."



*This is the fifth program in a series of 7 Anger Fighter Audio Programs for Couples available at [fiorecouplescounseling.com/angerfighters](http://fiorecouplescounseling.com/angerfighters).*