

Surviving Passive Aggressive Antisocial People – Covert Abuse

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These Compelling Words

I was born into a middle-class family with various mental health issues, from [borderline personality disorder](#) to substance abuse and [schizophrenia](#). From an early age, constant emotional and psychological abuse and corresponding distress were part of my life and persisted into adulthood as my norm and my template for relationships.

A few years ago. I went through an awakening that led not only to treatment and the process of recovery but ongoing research on the topic of psychological and emotional abuse—specifically, passive-aggressive relational dynamics and covert abuse, a form of abuse that can't be seen by most people and is almost impossible to prove.

My life experience is unique to me but not uncommon. Many have suffered and still suffer from this kind of abuse. Even though there is an acknowledgment by doctors and researchers that it is prevalent in society, it's hard to detect because the abuse is invisible to the naked eye.

Everyone has behaved aggressively and been antisocial at some point. It becomes a disorder when it is a constant theme and leads to abusive behavior negatively affecting important relationships such as marriage, work, or team sports.

The term '[covert abuse](#)' refers to abusers who actively conceal the abuse because they know what they're doing and don't want people to find out. They are charming in public and abusive when no one is looking. Many covert abusers get a thrill from knowing they are causing pain and doing it without getting caught.

Persistent passive-aggressive and antisocial behavior are included as criteria for diagnosing a handful of disorders, including [narcissistic personality disorder](#) (NPD) and [antisocial personality disorder](#) (APD), as well as psychopathic and sociopathic disorders.

Symptoms of Antisocial Personality Disorder:

- Disregard for the safety of others
- Failure to obey laws
- Impulsive behavior
- Irritability and aggression
- Lack of remorse for actions
- Lying and manipulating others for profit or amusement
- Pattern of irresponsibility

According to the [DSM-5](#), the person must display three or more of these symptoms, be 18 years or older, and not have these symptoms because of another condition such as schizophrenia, to receive this diagnosis.

It's one thing to list clinical symptoms, but it might be more helpful to understand what APD looks like in plain language and anecdotes. This type of abuse can be hard to recognize. From this point on, I'll refer to these people – passive-aggressive antisocial personalities – as covert bullies.

How it Starts

I think we've all befriended people who, at the beginning of the relationship, like all the same things we like, laugh at all our jokes, and agree with everything we say. They often want to join activities we're involved in. They immediately notice our strengths and compliment us on them, and they're very interested in knowing all about us and what we think about everything. I've found that at this stage, they even copy the way I speak.

This is a common predatory behavioral dynamic called [mirroring](#) that covert bullies use combined with a technique many therapists refer to as [love bombing](#). These tactics are meant to put people at ease and get them to let down their guard.

Victims usually feel good about how the relationship is going at this point, but always with an underlying sense of uncertainty that comes with ignoring red flags. More on red flags later.

You've only known them for a few days, and they're already making high-commitment plans with you, such as trips, projects, or even marriage. Some trauma recovery specialists call this tactic 'future faking.' They might even make promises of financial support.

Being hit with love bombing, mirroring, and future faking works like a charm on unwitting victims. It doesn't work because the person is weak, stupid, or has low self-esteem, though it is more likely to be a prolonged and repeated relationship dynamic in those with low self-esteem.

It works because people who aren't pathological assume that everyone is like them and tend to be trusting of others. We're not going about our daily lives expecting people to be manipulative and abusive, and we tend to assume that others tend towards goodness.

As things progress, there will be red flags such as jokes at your expense, as they've noted your weaknesses while talking up your strengths. All that love bombing tends to make us let down our guard and share details about our lives that we usually wouldn't.

They might start comparing you to other friends, lovers, or colleagues in a negative light, but in a casual and innocuous tone to avoid confrontation. They might even start complaining about their finances and assume you will help them with that as part of your plans together.

I was persuaded to put a vehicle in my name for an abuser's use. You might ask why someone would do a thing like that—it seems so foolish. But it's because people are generally kind and trusting. Most people aren't pathological.

Also, I wanted to help someone for whom I had developed feelings. The love bombing and mirroring I experienced early on convinced me that this person was just going through a rough patch and needed some help. If the plans I had made with this person were going to work out, I needed to pitch in.

Before You Know It

At some point, most people will realize that all the professions of love and promises of a bright future weren't sincere. This realization often comes from being treated as an afterthought—being used and abused, and disrespected.

A total change in attitude marks this phase referred to as the **discard phase**. At this point, the victim might start to notice that being treated with common courtesy is a nuisance to the covert bully and that everything the victim does isn't good enough and perhaps even annoying to the abuser. Victims are treated with open contempt.

People with APD and NPD tend to see other humans as adversaries or appliances. They are there to be used or destroyed.

As the relationship progresses, any discussion of problems is dismissed or met with irrational anger. Your needs and concerns are minimized. Problems, whether real or imagined, are your fault. If you are now part of a social group that includes the covert bully, the bully may gossip about you behind your back, adding kernels of truth and fake concern about you, so it seems very credible to listeners. The bully isolates you in the group and makes you the joke and pariah.

Many covert bullies will manipulate people into thinking that you're the aggressor and they're the victim.

Many victims of this type of abuse lose friends and business partners because of the virulent gossiping. Covert bullies often ruin relationships that parents have with their children, as they see the children as tools for their aggrandizement and the victim's demise.

One extremely frustrating aspect of [passive-aggressive abuse](#) is that others may think the covert bully is a great person and you're the problem due to what's done behind closed doors or so subtly in public that no one can tell.

The constant emotional neglect, invalidation, and verbal abuse can wear down the most resilient people. Victims start to feel physically tired and experience brain fog and anxiety. Some even develop [insomnia and depression](#) as the covert bully's relentless attacks wear

them down. Back pain and other physical symptoms can manifest in the body as your mental health deteriorates.

When it happened to me, I was isolated from friends and became so shut down and reserved that the only social interactions I experienced outside of the abusive relationship were at work.

I didn't even notice that the isolation was happening until I began journaling. Writing about my experience helped me notice a distinct timeline and allowed me to pinpoint specific changes in my life as my relationships with various covert bullies progressed.

Awakening

I hit rock bottom after dating an abusive partner. The relationship lasted two weeks. It ended after I had done everything that was asked of me and was no longer of any use. I ended up moving back to my hometown and felt so down and lonely that I resumed friendships with abusive people from my past.

Eventually, I became so miserable with mental, emotional, and physical pain that I cried every day for two months. Then one day, someone asked me if my mother was a narcissist and mentioned that they found her behavior in a situation we'd discussed to be passive-aggressive.

Of course, I'd heard the word narcissist before, but I didn't know anything about personality disorders. I decided to look into it and realized that I wasn't defective, and more importantly, I realized that I needed help.

My first step was to go to my doctor and request a complete physical and a referral to a therapist. My second step was to purge all toxic people from my life. For those who couldn't be purged immediately, I made a plan with my therapist to safely part ways with them. I used a method I learned called 'grey rock' to limit their access to me severely.

When you use grey rock with abusers, you give them no emotional feedback in response to anything they do or say. You don't start conversations with them unless necessary, and your

responses are limited to the least amount of words possible. You share space with them and perhaps responsibilities, but you no longer share yourself.

It's best that you don't directly confront people with APD or NPD as they tend to retaliate. In my experience, covert bullies can spend a whole year retaliating and won't stop until you're destroyed, or their cover is blown.

After more than a year of misery, one of my abusers blew her cover by abusing me in front of a relative. She then proceeded to do a 180-degree turn in her behavior towards me after the relative confronted her.

If you're living with a covert bully or working with one, keep your escape plans secret until you're gone, and don't confront them directly or in front of others.

Healing

Feel Compassion for Yourself

Healing from the emotional and psychological abuse caused by passive-aggressive bullies takes time, consistency, and compassion for the self.

Everyone understands the meaning of consistency and taking time, but compassion for the self can seem abstract.

Being abused diminishes your sense of your self-worth. It's often very difficult to see yourself as someone of worth after even one short instance of abuse, never mind abuse that takes place over months or years.

Compassion towards the self can take the form of separating from [toxic people and environments](#). It can be taking naps, starting to work out, or buying yourself fresh art supplies.

I showed compassion for myself by being on my own side. I stopped the [negative self-talk](#) and forgave myself for putting up with horrible people. I began standing up for myself even if it felt uncomfortable. Also, I forgave myself when I just didn't feel that I could take a stand.

Recovery isn't about taking all the right steps every time. It's about moving forward and being patient with yourself while learning how to be you again.

Journaling

Abuse can make you forget who you were, particularly when it goes on for an extended time. Many victims report losing interest in their hobbies and passions. Some no longer have any interests at all and spend free time distracting themselves with activities like online shopping, scrolling social media, or watching Netflix.

Journaling helps survivors get to know themselves and gain clarity on who they want to be. It improves self-awareness and [mindfulness](#).

Journaling has been shown to boost your mood and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

You're safe to vent and rage in your journal and let go of negative thoughts. This can help reduce unpleasant thoughts that intrude unexpectedly throughout the day.

Writing things down without judgment as to what you write or whether it's grammatically correct helps us gain clarity when dealing with complex emotions and situations, which helps reduce avoidance.

Journaling lifts my mood and gets me excited about my future. When I write things down, I feel more capable of creating the life I want to live.

Movement

Trauma affects the body. Some therapists say that the body holds on to trauma even if we don't recognize it.

Movement is recognized as a deeply effective healing modality for many types of trauma, from physical injury to [complex post-traumatic stress](#) (CPTSD).

Movement interventions can take many different forms, from [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing](#) (EMDR) and Body Movement Oriented Interventions (BMOI) such as somatic experiencing to dance, yoga, and traditional exercise. They can be an invaluable addition to therapy.

Research suggests that cognitive systems that play a central role in processing overwhelming stress are not sufficiently reached through verbal and cognitive therapies alone. These methods primarily address the prefrontal cortex leaving out more primitive parts of the brain. Therefore, some patients can benefit from an approach that not only includes but starts with the body.

My movement activity was working out at the gym. Exercise greatly improved my mood and ease of interacting with others. I felt more grounded and less restrained throughout the day. I was not only healthier physically, but working out was my way of showing myself that I had value. Through exercise, I showed myself that I was someone who deserved the spending of extra time and money. I also looked better, which helped boost my self-confidence and made me feel happier overall.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

The great thing about CBT is that it focuses on giving us practical skills to deal with issues in the here and now.

CBT practitioners focus on understanding what's really happening in your life, your perception of your circumstances, and how they affect you. They identify patterns of behavior that hinder us.

It's a proactive form of therapy providing us with a toolkit that allows us to deal with what's bothering us while also creating space for us to grow and create our lives.

I'm sure many of you know that there are many books and websites based on CBT, but it's always best to work with a real-life therapist.

CBT helped me greatly to reduce anxiety and become more mindful and in-the-moment when relating to others. It gave me more confidence to deal with decision-making and taking action because it reduced my feelings of being overwhelmed and my fear of making mistakes.

Parting Words

I know 'You've got this!' is a common catchphrase nowadays, but it truly applies here.

The abuse you suffered from being in a relationship with a covert bully isn't your fault, but your recovery is 100% your responsibility.

I know from personal experience that being abused can make you feel like you're in a dark tunnel that will never end. Those of you reading this while you're in the middle of an abusive situation—know that it will end as soon as you end it. Know that there is no one coming to the rescue except you.

You are strong enough. All you need is help. Do some research and reach out for assistance like I did. See your doctor, seek support from a trusted friend and get going on your path to healing and back to yourself.

There's a whole life waiting for you on your journey to recovery. Remember to be patient and compassionate with yourself.

About the Author: Avalon King is a thriving Canadian survivor and a dynamic writer. I create engaging articles and blog posts on mental health. Topics I write about include CPTSD, food addiction/weight loss, and supplements for the mind and body.

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