How Should We Respond to Passive Communication?

Miri

[CN: probably skip this one if you think passive communication/Guess Culture is good/acceptable/necessary.]

One of my biggest interpersonal struggles is deciding how to respond to passive communication from others.

A resource from the University of Kentucky Violence Intervention and Prevention Center defines passive communication like this:

> *PASSIVE COMMUNICATION is a style in which individuals have developed a pattern of avoiding expressing their opinions or feelings, protecting their rights, and identifying and meeting their needs. As a result, passive individuals do not respond overtly to hurtful or anger-inducing situations. Instead, they allow grievances and annoyances to mount, usually unaware of the buildup. But once they have reached their high tolerance threshold for unacceptable behavior, they are prone to explosive outbursts, which are usually out of proportion to the triggering incident. After the outburst, however, they may feel shame, guilt, and confusion, so they return to being passive.*

In their book on polyamory, More Than Two, Eve Rickert and Franklin Veaux define passive communication this way:

> *Passive communication refers to communicating through subtext, avoiding direct statements, and looking for hidden meanings. Passive communicators may use techniques such as asking questions or making vague, indirect statements in place of stating needs, preferences or boundaries. Directly asking for what you want creates vulnerability, and passive communication often comes from a desire to avoid this vulnerability. Passive communication also offers plausible deniability; if we state a desire for something indirectly, and we don't get it, it's easy to claim we didn't really want it. Stating our needs means standing up for them and taking the risk that others may not agree to meet them.*

Although I understand that cultural/social/familial norms differ, I'm strongly against passive communication, Guess Culture, and anything else in that vein in my personal life. (My opinion is that those things are often harmful to others too, and much of this blog is based on that opinion, but that's up to you.) I come from a family and a culture that thrives on Guess Culture, so I'm not coming at this from some hyper-individualistic American perspective. My perspective is that I've seen firsthand the harm this communication style does and I refuse to participate in it anymore.

But refusing to participate is complicated for two reasons. One is that when you're raised with something like this, you're inevitably going to fall back into it, especially when you're hurt, angry, or otherwise not firing on all mental cylinders. That's compounded by the fact that I'm still very close with my family, which means that I have to communicate the way they do when I'm with them. The result is that I get plenty of practice at communicating passively, even though I try to be more direct with my family than I used to be.

The second reason is that other people use passive communication too, and it's not always practical, possible, or desirable to just cut all those people out of your life. Sure, I find some people toxically passive-aggressive and avoid having anything to do with them, but most of the people I encounter who communicate passively are, like me, just trying to get themselves out of that mindset and they're going to slip up from time to time. To me, that's not something to dump a friend or partner over.

So, when I sense that someone is upset with me because they're dropping little hints but won't say anything directly, or when I tell someone about my weekend plans and they sigh and wistfully say, "That sounds so fun, I wish I had someone to do that with...", I honestly don't really know what to do. Ignoring the subtext seems like a jerk move, but taking the bait teaches the person that this is an effective (and acceptable) way to communicate with me. All that does is set up a situation where they never feel like they have to actually state their feelings and desires directly, and when I have to constantly read between someone's lines like that, I will eventually fuck up, and they will be upset and resentful that I didn't magically know what they felt or wanted.

You might think I'm exaggerating–what's the big deal with inviting someone along to do Thing because they seem sad that they don't have anyone to do Thing with?–but in my experience, passive communicators don't choose just one thing to communicate passively about. Furthermore, it traps me into communicating passively, too, because being direct with passive communicators often backfires. When I was younger, I used to ask people things like, "Are you asking to be invited?" or "Are you saying you have a crush on me?", only to be met with angry denials and dismissal.

As it turns out, many passive communicators seem to wish people could read their minds right up until they actually do. Instead, you end up swept up into that sort of game-playing right along with them. Most of our popular cultural scripts around sex and romance rely on this– you can never come right out and say that you like someone, and you can't ask them if they like you, either.

Some passive communicators are hoping that you'll ask them, though. The typical example is someone who silently huffs until you ask them why they're upset. Then they'll insist that it's "nothing" and you have to keep asking until they finally unleash a whole list of things you've been doing for weeks or months that upset them and you had no idea. (Although the sexist stereotype is that this is a "female" thing to do, I assure you, it's quite gender-neutral.)

It can feel like a jerk move to ignore the fact that someone seems to be upset at you, and it can seem like a very small deal to ask them if you've upset them. The problem is that when this becomes a pattern–and with people who habitually communicate in a passive way, it will–it creates a very unequal burden of emotional labor. Rather than just being responsible for listening to them, respecting their boundaries, owning your mistakes, and communicating your own needs and feelings, you are now also responsible for laboriously extracting theirs from them like a dentist performing a root canal.

Some people are totally fine with that dynamic. I, however, am not.

(Some people who are totally fine with that dynamic later realize they're completely overwhelmed by the disproportionate emotional labor, but that's a separate article.)

But there are times when being receptive to passive communication is an ethical imperative, and that's when it comes to setting boundaries.

Because of the way that most women and many people of other genders are socialized, many of them end up uncomfortable or even unable to state boundaries directly. It's a skill we have to relearn as adults. (I say "relearn" because most little children have no trouble with this. It's only as they get older that they learn that saying "no" is somehow wrong.) That's why "no means no" was insufficient as a sexual assault prevention slogan–many people don't say "no" directly. Instead, they communicate their "no" passively–through silence, closed-off body language, uncertainty, and all sorts of other signals that are definitely not meant to communicate a "yes."

In my personal life, I prefer to interact with people who are able to tell me directly when they want me to stop doing something or when something isn't working for them, because for me

that's a major part of trust and intimacy. But if someone communicates a boundary indirectly, I respect it anyway–possibly checking in about it later, if appropriate, so that I can make sure I understood correctly and didn't cross any other boundaries.

So if I ask someone if they want to have sex (to be frank, this almost never happens, but let's pretend it does for the sake of example), and they say, "Well, I don't know...I have to get up early tomorrow..." I just go ahead and consider that a "no," even though it's technically a passive way of communicating "no."

That's an easy call because I consider boundaries so important. But with anything other than that, I just don't think the excess emotional labor is justified.

Refusing to read double and triple meanings into people's words is also a way of pushing back against my own upbringing. Because, yeah, I'm really tempted to do it. My parents taught me to do it, not just by example but through direct teaching ("Maybe she said that because she's secretly upset that you didn't invite her to your birthday party."). I'm also really good at it, which is both a blessing and a curse. (As I said, people rarely like it when they realize how well they've been understood when what they really wanted was to obfuscate.) So at some point I have to say enough and just opt out.

I also hope that it encourages people to be direct with me. The ones who can't do that decide that I'm oblivious, selfish, or both and fade out of my life; the ones who decide that they want what they want from me badly enough to ask for it directly, ask for it directly.

Any discussion of passive communication and its nasty cousin, passive-aggressiveness, inevitably elicits rationalizations and justifications for this kind of behavior. Maybe that's what they learned growing up. Maybe they were abused and this is their way of coping. Maybe they don't think their desires are valid so they feel too ashamed to ask for them directly. Maybe they have social anxiety and can't bear rejection. Maybe they can't trust me enough to risk being direct.

Look, I've been through a lot of that and I get it. But just because a particular behavior once made sense as a response to a particular environment doesn't mean it's still adaptive or reasonable. And it definitely doesn't mean I'm obligated to do harm to myself in order to accommodate it. Maybe if you trust me so little that you can't be direct with me, then we have no business being friends or partners.

Passive communication doesn't work for me. Except for boundaries, which I will always go far out of my way to perceive and respect, this is not a communication style that I can sustainably use (or have used with me).

I'm genuinely sorry if that makes anyone feel like they can't interact with me, but not sorry enough to ever go back to being a passive communicator.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miri is a writer and social worker who writes about social justice, psychology, mental health, sexuality, and tons of other stuff. She is a big fan of cheez-its and cats. Follow her on Tumblr and Twitter, and support her writing on Patreon.