

# **Sociopaths: How to Spot Them—How to Protect Ourselves**

The terms sociopath and psychopath are often used interchangeably. They are legal diagnoses in the United Kingdom and for the World Health Organization, but not in the United States. In the United States, the diagnostic term is antisocial personality disorder or conduct disorder until the age of 18. For the sake of brevity, I will use the term sociopath in this article. I've read conflicting information about them, but the information I'm presenting to you is as coherent as I can make it.

With an estimated 12 million sociopaths in the United States, they make up 1-4% of the nonincarcerated population (incarcerated is 25%). That's up to one in every 25 people.

If someone offends you, it doesn't necessarily mean she's a sociopath, and no one can say she is one without more information. We all annoy people sometimes, but sociopaths demonstrate a continuous pattern of manipulative, controlling, exploitative, deceitful or degrading behavior over the course of their lives. The main traits of sociopathic behavior are a pattern of violation of the rights of others to gain power, sex, profit or other material gratification.

## **The Symptoms of Sociopathy**

Early behavior problems/juvenile delinquency (sometimes including cruelty to animals) by the age of 15

Superficial charm and charisma

Extreme charm (glibness)

A powerful, magnetic, captivating presence

A soothing voice

Mesmerizing mannerisms

Calmness

An intense, penetrating, emotionless stare when making eye contact

Fast-talking

Conventional appearance

Grandiosity (self-importance not based on achievements)

Bragging

Manipulative and cunning behavior

Gas lighting (questioning your perceptions so that you think you're the crazy one)

Self-righteousness

Blaming (it's always someone else's fault)

Gossiping

Invincibility

Authoritarianism

Secretiveness

Pathological lying, even when telling the truth would work just as well

Irresponsibility/unreliability

Does not perceive that anything is wrong with them, yet is aware that they are different from others

Masters at gaining sympathy from others and group-scapegoating a targeted victim

Here's where different sources disagree: absence of delusions and other signs of irrational thinking—or, irrational in that they believe their lies become true simply because they say so

Callousness/lack of empathy

Lack of remorse, shame or guilt

Shallow emotions

Incapacity for love

Suspiciousness and paranoia

Contemptuousness toward those who seek to understand them

A need for stimulation and an intolerance of boredom

Reckless, thrill-seeking behavior

Chronic dissatisfaction

Poor behavioral controls i.e. impulsivity, an explosive temper and violence

Drug and/or alcohol addiction

Promiscuous sexual behavior

Lack of a realistic life plan (such as pursuing get-rich-quick schemes)

Parasitic lifestyle (mooching off of others)

Nomadic lifestyle (skipping town so their latest victim cannot locate them)

Criminal or entrepreneurial versatility

An inability to learn from their mistakes and understand the connection between their actions and their actions consequences (not profiting from experience)

Is only rarely in trouble with the law, but seeks out situations where their tyrannical behavior is tolerated, condoned or admired

Parole violations

Megalomania (wanting to rule the world)

Their ultimate goal is the creation of a willing victim

In romantic relationships:

Infidelity

Domestic abuse

Goal of enslavement of their victim(s)

Exercising despotic control over every aspect of the victim's life

Has an emotional need to justify their crimes and therefore needs their victim's affirmation (respect, gratitude and love)

Please keep in mind that people are not diagnostic labels, and labels don't entirely define anyone. Psychological diagnoses are tools used by mental health professionals to understand and communicate about specific patterns of behavior that may apply to certain people. The behaviors described in those labels are normal human behaviors carried to extremes.

The difference between sociopaths and psychopaths is a matter of nature versus nurture. Sociopaths become that way as a result of the environment in which they were raised, whereas psychopaths are born that way as a result of genetics. A child becomes a sociopath as a result of abuse and neglect, or possibly from excessive spoiling.

The part of the brain's cerebral cortex called the amygdala, the part that governs having a conscience, tends to be smaller and is under/nonfunctioning. In an MRI, this region of the brain doesn't light up. The amygdala is also the region of the brain that allows people to feel fear and anxiety, and also to recognize fear and anxiety on the faces of others. Their brain waves stay in alpha, which are the same brain waves of normal people when they're in a light sleep. Their lack of fear and anxiety is what enables them to engage in high-risk behavior, and also to victimize others and then pass polygraph tests. That under-arousal is the reason they appear so calm.

Because of a lack of neurotransmitters in the brain's cerebral cortex, sociopaths' brains store information in a random, chaotic way instead of the usual way a normal person's brain does. The result is that sociopaths take longer to process and retrieve information, limiting their ability to learn social skills.

It may also be one of the things that cripple that developing child's ability to develop the same mental and emotional skills that other people take for granted, especially that thing we call a conscience.

### **Differential Diagnosis**

In psychology lingo, there's what's called the differential diagnosis, which is the ruling out of other possible diagnoses with similar behaviors. In Narcissistic personality disorder (characterized by grandiosity and a need for the envy and admiration of others), there is a shared tendency to be overly charming, manipulative, self-absorbed and unempathic. However, while Narcissists' actions tend to hurt others, they don't mean to, and they don't tend to be violent or engage in criminal behavior. People with paranoid personality disorder may have sociopathic behaviors, but their behavior is motivated more by suspicion and a desire for revenge. People with histrionic personality disorder (characterized by an excessive need for attention) can be superficially charming, manipulative, seductive and impulsive, but they're motivated by a need for nurturance. People with borderline personality disorder (characterized by emotional instability and a lack of self-identity) may easily take offense and act like drama queens, but they are also manipulative to gain nurturance. People having manic episodes, psychotic episodes or alcohol or drug intoxication can also have sociopathic behaviors caused by those conditions.

### **Sociopathy Versus Neurosis**

Sociopathy exists on a continuum, with it at one extreme and neurosis at the other. Neurotics feel empathy, shame, and guilt, while sociopaths don't. There is a lot of gray area between those two extremes, in that some sociopaths are capable of feeling love and empathy, albeit to a limited degree. To put it simply, neurotics feel while sociopaths think. Most of us are neurotic.

Traditional psychotherapy assumes that everyone is neurotic and capable of feeling empathy, guilt, shame and remorse. That isn't true, and no therapist can help a sociopath or their victims unless they understand and know how to deal with sociopaths.

### **Manipulation Tactics Sociopaths Use to Get You to Do What They Want**

You might play by the rules, but sociopaths don't. The following tactics are offensive moves employed by them to maintain a position of power, gain power or remove obstacles from their way so they can get what they want. You'll be better equipped to deal with sociopaths if you are familiar with this list of tactics and can identify them when you encounter them:

**Denial**—playing innocent, refusing to admit they have done something harmful

**Selective inattention**—playing dumb, or acting oblivious—refusing to pay attention to anything that might divert them from achieving their goal

**Rationalization**—making excuses or justifying their behavior, often in very convincing ways

**Diversion**—changing the subject, dodging the issue, or distracting someone from the real problem

**Lying**—deliberately telling untruths, concealing the truth, and lying by omission

**Covert Intimidation**—intimidation through veiled threats

**Guilt-tripping**—using the conscientiousness of their victim against them to keep them self-doubting and anxious

**Shaming**—using subtle sarcasm and put-downs to make the victim feel inadequate, unworthy, and anxious

**Playing the Victim role**—playing the innocent victim to elicit compassion; convincing the victim that she is hurting in some way so that the victim will try to relieve their distress

**Vilifying the Victim**—making the victim the “bad guy” and pretending he's only defending himself

**Playing the servant role**—disguising their personal agendas as service to a nobler cause

**Seduction**—flattering and overtly supporting others to get them to lower their defenses and be trusting

**Projecting the blame (blaming others)**—shifting the blame onto the victim, scapegoating

**Minimization**—a combination of denial and rationalization, saying “it's no big deal” and “making a molehill out of a mountain”

### **The Different Categories of Sociopaths**

**Common sociopath:** Because of poor parenting, they lack remorse, shame and guilt and consistently break societal rules.

**Aggressive sociopaths:** They are violent, dangerous, sadistic and motivated to dominate and be in control. They use sociopathic behaviors to obtain, degrade, hurt and sometimes kill victims. Only 2% of sociopaths are of that severe type.

**Dissocial sociopaths:** They would not otherwise have become sociopathic, but through loyalty to sociopaths with whom they became involved, their loyalty influenced their belief systems so that they also became sociopaths due to assimilation of beliefs.

**Alienated sociopath:** They don't have the capacity to love or form attachments with others. They lack empathy and are callous.

**There are four subtypes of alienated sociopaths:**

**Disaffiliated type:** They cannot relate emotionally to others on a mass scale.

**Disempathic type:** They can show affection to spouse, children, relatives and friends, but they may relate to them as objects. The latter is a protective function that desensitizes them from emotional pain caused by childhood trauma, and it is dissociative.

**Hostile type:** As a result of hostile beliefs, they are angry, resentful, and hostile and reject the norms and rules of society.

**Cheated type:** They feel rejected by society due to real or imagined inadequacies, which leads them to be hostile and believe that societal rules don't apply to them because others have wronged them. They may feel that the world owes them a living.

Sociopaths are incapable of real human attachment to another: Even though the sociopath has the same need for emotional support as everyone else, they cannot truly take in the healing energy and affection of human contact. Sociopaths become frustrated and envious of others who can, and so take that frustration out on the person offering them affection by taking unfair advantage of them. If I can't have what I need, they think, why should you?

### **Three Phases of Victimization**

**Assessment phase:** When the sociopath evaluates someone's weaknesses to determine if they will make an easy victim. That phase may happen in a number of hours. Common places where it occurs may be in bars, singles events, religious groups, and airports, on airplanes, at parties and on first dates. Some sociopaths are opportunists who take advantage of everyone i.e. family, friends, acquaintances, clients and colleagues. Some are more selective and patiently wait for the next perfect victim.

**Manipulation phase:** When they actively exploit their victim with phony personas or acts, lying and deceit, etc.

**Abandonment phase:** When they no longer find their victim useful, they abandon them with no explanations or apologies. The victim may be left wondering what happened or what they did wrong.

Sociopaths are often at the heart of situations involving adult cliques, adult bullying, groupthink, cults and scapegoating. They cause problems in workplaces, neighborhoods, religious groups, romantic relationships, families, group households, schools, friendships and business partnerships.

### **How to Spot Sociopaths**

Sociopaths often have charming, charismatic and magnetic personalities. They come across as smooth and slick, and can be likable and a lot of fun, with a hilarious sense of humor. They may seem just so *nice*. They are often well mannered at first meeting, and part of their false persona may be to do virtuous, do-gooder type things. For instance, convicted serial killer Ted Bundy volunteered for a teen suicide hotline. They compensate for their lack of having feelings by becoming superb actors and mimicking others emotions. They know where our vulnerabilities are and how to exploit them. The more subtle, intelligent and attractive they are, the more dangerous. They purposefully confuse people in order to manipulate them, so that the other person feels like they're the crazy one. If their bad behavior is pointed out to them, they react with anger and indignation and insist that the other person is to blame instead.

In groups, sociopaths are good at lying convincingly and gaining other's sympathy so that if one of their victims tries to speak out, no one else believes them. They are good at operating under the radar and setting up other people against each other. Many sociopaths attract a cult-like group of followers or "fan club".

Often, a person doesn't realize someone is a sociopath until she is the sociopath's targeted victim. By then the sociopath may have convinced everyone else in the group that he is trustworthy and that the target is not. The sociopath only shows his abusive behavior to the target, so that only the target knows what he is really like. If the target tries to warn the others, the latter are so taken in by the sociopath's charm, charisma and invincibility that no one believes the target. If the target protests and shows anger, the sociopath uses his target's responses to his abuse against her. He might say that the target's response is proof that she is the one to blame instead, and that the sociopath is the victim. The sociopath's allegations against his target are often things the sociopath would do himself.

Sociopaths pit one group against another and cause divisiveness. If you try to nail a sociopath down to answering a documented allegation, they will quickly turn on you, denounce you, and declare that you too are secretly plotting against them. Anyone who does not fall for the brainwashing of the sociopath is sooner or later kicked out of the circle and then disparaged by the remaining members of the group.

Adding to the sociopath's believability is their calm, confident, intelligent demeanor. He may be so verbally eloquent that he sounds like a seasoned courtroom lawyer. The victim, in contrast may appear stressed, overwhelmed and angry, further undermining her credibility in the eyes of the bystanders, who are also called "apaths" because they're apathetic toward the victim. Bystanders may say that it's a he-said-she-said situation and that they don't want to get involved. They may say that they like the sociopath and don't want to cut ties with them. Some of them may hold grudges against the target, and the sociopath's allegations are just the excuse they need to jump on the sociopath's bandwagon in scapegoating the target. They may be so brainwashed that they stand up for the sociopath with fervent conviction.

Sociopaths take advantage of our tendency to not recognize evidence that contradicts our beliefs, such as dishonesty and other lowly character traits in an individual who has 'won' our trust, respect, and appreciation. The persona provides a cover for devious schemes, exploitation, and abuse.

### **Signs of People Vulnerable to Victimization**

People possessing the following traits are prime targets for victimization:

- Being empathetic
- Being different
- Feelings of vulnerability
- A belief that if they love the sociopath enough, he'll change
- Difficulties establishing and maintaining boundaries
- Not being able to say no
- Being easily influenced by others
- Wanting to be rescued from her life situation
- Wanting to rescue others
- Needing someone to confide in
- Being overly nurturing, especially when not asked
- Feelings of shame or self-doubt
- Low self-esteem
- Shyness
- Difficulty communicating
- Being a people pleaser
- A lack of motivation from within and being motivated instead by what others want

Loneliness  
Being rich

If there is a person in a group who is especially sensitive, empathic and vulnerable, she is perceptive and more likely to recognize the sociopath before everyone else. The sociopath is most likely to target her first. Think of that sensitive person as the canary in the coalmine.

If multiple people leave the group because of difficulties with the same person, that person might be a sociopath.

### **How to Protect Yourself From Sociopaths**

Avoid people who seem smooth and slick

Avoid people who are manipulative, exploitative, or who lack empathy

Avoid people who are so charismatic and magnetically mesmerizing that they seem too good to be true. Don't take their flattery personally

Avoid people who are intimidating—they may be hiding a lack of knowledge behind a sense of authority

Watch out for people who say they have certain accomplishments, credentials, skills, experience, qualifications, possessions, connections, etc., but when vetted they don't check out—always verify their accomplishments

Avoid people who focus on winning and being right rather than on solving a problem

Practice the rule of threes—One lie or broken promise may be a misunderstanding, two lies may involve a serious mistake, three lies—the individual is not trustworthy. Stay away from that individual

Suspect flattery—when people flatter you excessively, don't take it personally—question what it is they want from you

Redefine your concept of respect—respect must be earned. Don't automatically give respect to an individual because of her professional role or her relationship to you

Once you identify a sociopath, avoid her and refuse any interaction. It is the only way to protect yourself

Never join any religious or spiritual organization that charges large sums of money. Whenever you hire a contractor to work on your home, always have a signed business contract. If someone has a pattern of taking advantage of you financially, asking for favors and not reciprocating, "borrowing" things without your permission, distorting or omitting information for their personal gain at your expense, or doing anything else that takes unfair advantage, set limits with the person immediately.

Question your tendency to pity too easily. Anyone who actively campaigns for your pity or consistently hurts others might be a sociopath. Pity should be reserved for those who truly

deserve it. Make sure the individual who seeks your help really needs it.

If you are in a position of authority over her, such as her boss or landlord, letting limits with her is easier because you have more power. You can fire her, evict her, or kick her out. If she gets wind that you are planning to cut off ties, if she thinks she can get away with it she might organize others to undercut you with lies and false allegations of abuse. Therefore, always be discreet and don't tip her off by telling her what you plan to do.

Gossip is both harmful and helpful in these situations. People talking to other people is how most of these things go down, so keep up with the flow of personal interactions and news in order to be in a good political position. Being in the gossip loop enables you to catch early clues and, if you're targeted get people on your side. Sociopaths use gossip to find, cultivate, and recruit followers—and then to turn them against their targets.

When you're plugged into your group's "information network" you will cultivate sources of information and soon be able to assess the accurate ones versus the self-serving ones. You will hear whispers of trouble brewing long before it strikes you, and you will have a way to get "your side" out there should trouble start.

If you're married to/living with a sociopath as his romantic partner, are his colleague or business partner, he is a family member, or you are in some other close relationship with him where you must deal with him on a regular basis, cutting ties isn't easy to do. Cutting ties with him can get messy and affect the lives of other people (your kids, housemates, co-workers, etc.) You might end up having to divorce or look for another job, career or place to live. If the sociopath singled you out as their victim, he might have convinced others involved that it was your fault. It might also mean having to cut ties with many other people who are loyal to the sociopath or under their sphere of influence. That can be traumatic and painful.

## **Ways to Set Boundaries With Sociopaths**

With people with lower degrees of sociopathy, setting boundaries may help lessen their sociopathic behavior, at least with you.

If you have reason to fear that the sociopath may physically hurt you, the following techniques won't work and you must find a way to leave the relationship for your own safety.

Sociopaths already know that you want them to treat you with respect, they just don't want to. It doesn't matter how they feel—it only matters how they think and act. Don't pay attention to what they say, pay attention to what they do.

Sociopaths want you to trust them so they can exploit you. Never trust anyone right away. Your trust must be earned. That bears repeating—your trust must be earned.

These tips may also help:

Confront the sociopath by asserting yourself, and your focus needs to be on their behavior. You may feel too scared to speak up to them, but even if your heart is racing and your knees are shaking, acknowledge the fear and speak up anyway.

Don't try to get them to care about how you feel—they don't understand emotions, and they don't care how you feel and nothing you do will make them. They only understand power and limits.

Determine what your limits are, and what is non-negotiable. Determine what leverage you have.

Take control of the conversation immediately, and make sure that you are the one steering the conversation so that you can set your boundaries with them and state what behavior you expect from them. Don't let them change the subject, or they'll steamroll over you.

Clearly state your boundaries, or what is unacceptable to you using "I" messages briefly and succinctly. The less you say, the less you give them to manipulate you. Stand your ground, and don't back down no matter how much they yell or blame. If necessary, repeat it again.

Don't show emotion! They don't understand or sympathize, and they don't care if you cry. State your boundaries in the most neutral, robot-like way you can.

If they try to turn the blame around on you, and they will, deflect their accusations vaguely. Say something like, "perhaps, but," or "that may be, but" and then state your boundary again like a broken record. They may sound like a lawyer, with logic that sounds irrefutable. They may challenge your descriptions of their behavior as inaccurate. One way around that is by using expressions such as, "there's that thing you do again that I'm not okay with", or, "I'm not comfortable with that."

If they seem to accede too easily with a sarcastic tone and say something like, "yeah, whatever", and you don't feel they're taking you seriously, be persistent with them. If you have any leverage, use it but only if it's practical and something you know you will follow through with that can be realistically enforced.

Take advantage of teachable moments in the here and now—that is when change occurs.

If you can't get them to agree to your conditions at the moment, make sure they understand your consequences. Even if the only consequences are that if they do the undesirable behavior again than you will call them on it. Even if it is too hard on their ego to verbally agree with your limits, they may behave better when the time comes.

You may feel like you're training a dog.

Don't focus on their behavior in the limited context—you have to cut through the B.S. to the actual content of their problematic behavior. For instance, if they put you down by criticizing you for the magazines you like to read, don't defend yourself by saying Cosmopolitan is a worthy magazine to read. Instead, tell them to stop finding fault with you. Period. Rather than focusing on single instances, look for patterns or the big picture of their behavior.

### **Signs of Victimization**

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Fear of relationships
- Numbing of feelings
- Irritability
- Difficulties falling asleep
- Fear of being alone
- Severe mood swings
- Loss of energy
- Loss of interest in life
- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Not seeing the connection with those symptoms to the way they're being treated, sometimes not realizing the situation they're in until someone else points it out to them.

### **Healing for Victims**

Victims experience severe emotional trauma and loss (financial, loss of reputation, career, social or religious groups, family and friends). Without any legal recourse to recoup those losses, healing can be difficult. These tips can help:

- Cut your losses and get out of the situation with the sociopath. That may mean breaking up with the person, moving, quitting your job, or accepting the loss of large sums of money

- Get therapy with a therapist who understands that sociopaths cannot feel empathy, guilt, shame or remorse

- Find a support group

- Seek possible legal recourses

- Know that you're not alone; all sociopaths have many victims

- Don't blame yourself—few people can see through the sociopath's ruse

- Mobilize your support system, or create one

- Reach out to multiple people for help so that no one person feels overwhelmed by your needs

- Study up on sociopaths and the experiences of other victims

Read *Without Conscience, Character Disturbance, The Sociopath Next Door, In Sheep's Clothing* and *Snakes in Suits; When the Psychopath Goes to Work*

Read online articles

Being kind, loving and caring is the best way to live. It is the way most people live their lives

Know that their karma will give them their comeuppance

The best revenge is success

### **How family, Friends, and Professionals Can Help Victims**

Family and friends may wonder why the victim is so affected by the experience, and why they have so much trouble letting it go and moving on. Follow these tips:

Remember they are traumatized—that their losses may be substantial

Listen to them and offer support and compassion

Never tell them that they should let it go and move on. If they could do that, they would have done it already

Dealing with a sociopath is a life-changing experience—the victims are not the same people that they were before

Suggest they read the books and articles mentioned above

Remind them that it wasn't their fault

Challenge any denial they have about the true nature of their abuser

Remind them that their abuser sees the world in a different way than they do and that they have no empathy for their pain

Warn them that if their abuser apologizes with tears and lavish gifts, that they are only trying to woo them back so they can abuse them again

Remember that many sociopaths are masters at convincing others that *they* are the victims, instead of the actual victims. Their problems, however, are from not getting what they want, whereas their victim has been emotionally, physically or financially abused

Sociopaths are the bane of society, but by remembering and following that information and those tips, you're better able to protect and empower yourself and have the positive relationships you deserve.