

This Charming Psychopath: How to Spot Social Predators Before They Attack

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Jeffrey Dahmer. Ted Bundy. Hannibal Lecter. These are the psychopaths whose stunning lack of conscience we see in the movies and in tabloids. Yet, as this report makes abundantly clear, these predators, both male and female, haunt our everyday lives at work, at home, and in relationships. Here's how to find them before they find you.

She met him in a laundromat in London. He was open and friendly and they hit it off right away. From the start she thought he was hilarious. Of course, she'd been lonely. The weather was grim and sleety and she didn't know a soul east of the Atlantic. "Ah, travelers' loneliness," Dan crooned sympathetically over dinner. "It's the worst." After dessert he was embarrassed to discover he'd come without his wallet. She was more than happy to pay for dinner. At the pub, over drinks, he told her he was a translator for the United Nations. He was, for now, between assignments. They saw each other four times that week, five the week after. It wasn't long before he had all but moved in with Elsa. It was against her nature, but she was having the time of her life.

Still, there were details, unexplained, undiscussed, that she shoved out of her mind. He never invited her to his home; she never met his friends. One night he brought over a carton filled with tape recorders-plastic-wrapped straight from the factory, unopened; a few days later they were gone. Once she came home to find three televisions stacked in the corner. "Storing them for a friend," was all he told her. When she pressed for more he merely shrugged. Once he stayed away for three days and was lying asleep on the bed when she came in midmorning. "Where have you been?" she cried. "I've been so worried. Where were you?" He looked sour as he woke up. "Don't ever ask me that," he snapped. "I won't have it." "What-?" "Where I go, what I do, who I do it with-it doesn't concern you, Elsa. Don't ask."

He was like a different person. But then he seemed to pull himself together, shook the sleep off, and reached out to her. "I know it hurts you," he said in his old gentle way, "but I think of jealousy as a flu, and wait to get over it. And you will, baby, you will." Like a mother cat licking her kitten, he groomed her back into trusting him. One night she asked him lightly if he felt like stepping out to the corner and bringing her an ice cream. He didn't reply, and when she glanced up she found him glaring at her furiously. "Always got everything you wanted, didn't you?" he asked in a strange, snide way. "Any little thing little Elsa wanted, somebody always jumped up and ran out and bought it for her, didn't they?"

"Are you kidding? I'm not like that. What are you talking about?" He got up from the chair and walked out. She never saw him again.

There is a class of individuals who have been around forever and who are found in every race, culture, society and walk of life. Everybody has met these people, been deceived and manipulated by them, and forced to live with or repair the damage they have wrought. These often charming-but always deadly-individuals have a clinical name: psychopaths. Their hallmark is a stunning lack of conscience; their game is self-gratification at the other person's expense. Many spend time in prison, but many do not. All take far more than they give.

The most obvious expressions of psychopathy-but not the only ones-involve the flagrant violation of society's rules. Not surprisingly, many psychopaths are criminals, but many others manage to remain out of prison, using their charm and chameleon-like coloration to cut a wide swathe through society, leaving a wake of ruined lives behind them.

A major part of my own quarter-century search for answers to this enigma has been a concerted effort to develop an accurate means of detecting the psychopaths among

us. Measurement and categorization are, of course, fundamental to any scientific endeavor, but the implications of being able to identify psychopaths are as much practical as academic. To put it simply, if we can't spot them, we are doomed to be their victims, both as individuals and as a society.

My role in the search for psychopaths began in the 1960s at the psychology department of the University of British Columbia. There, my growing interest in psychopathy merged with my experience working with psychopaths in prison to form what was to become my life's work. I assembled a team of clinicians who would identify psychopaths in the prison population by means of long, detailed interviews and close study of file information. From this eventually developed a highly reliable diagnostic tool that any clinician or researcher could use and that yielded a richly detailed profile of the personality disorder called psychopathy. We named this instrument the Psychopathy

Checklist (Multi-Health Systems; 1991).

The checklist is now used worldwide and provides clinicians and researchers with a way of distinguishing, with reasonable certainty, true psychopaths from those who merely break the rules. What follows is a general summary of the key traits and behaviors of a psychopath. Do not use these symptoms to diagnose yourself or others. A diagnosis requires explicit training and access to the formal scoring manual. If you suspect that someone you know conforms to the profile described here, and if it is important for you to have an expert opinion, you should obtain the services of a qualified (registered) forensic psychologist or psychiatrist. Also, be aware that people who are not psychopaths may have some of the symptoms described here. Many people are impulsive, or glib, or cold and unfeeling, but this does not mean that they are psychopaths. Psychopathy is a syndrome—a cluster of related symptoms.

Key Symptoms of Psychopathy

Interpersonal Emotional

- Glib and superficial
- Egocentric and grandiose
- Lack of remorse or guilt
- Lack of empathy
- Deceitful and manipulative
- Shallow emotions

Social Deviance

- Impulsive
- Poor behavior controls
- Need for excitement
- Lack of responsibility
- Early behavior problems
- Adult antisocial behavior

Glib and Superficial

Psychopaths are often voluble and verbally facile. They can be amusing and entertaining conversationalists, ready with a clever comeback, and are able to tell unlikely but convincing stories that cast themselves in a good light. They can be very effective in presenting themselves well and are often very likable and charming. One of my raters described an interview she did with a prisoner: "I sat down and took out my

clipboard," she said, "and the first thing this guy told me was what beautiful eyes I had. He managed to work quite a few compliments on my appearance into the interview, so by the time I wrapped things up, I was feeling unusually... well, pretty. I'm a wary person, especially on the job, and can usually spot a phony. When I got back outside, I couldn't believe I'd fallen for a line like that."

Egocentric and Grandiose

Psychopaths have a narcissistic and grossly inflated view of their own self-worth and importance, a truly astounding egocentricity and sense of entitlement, and see themselves as the center of the universe, justified in living according to their own rules. "It's not that I don't follow the law," said one subject. "I follow my own laws. I never violate my own rules." She then proceeded to describe these rules in terms of "looking out for number one."

Psychopaths often claim to have specific goals but show little appreciation regarding the qualifications required-they have no idea of how to achieve them and little or no chance of attaining these goals, given their track record and lack of sustained interest in formal education. The psychopathic inmate might outline vague plans to become a lawyer for the poor or a property tycoon. One inmate, not particularly literate, managed to copyright the title of a book he was planning to write about himself, already counting the fortune his best-selling book would bring.

Lack of Remorse or Guilt

Psychopaths show a stunning lack of concern for the effects their actions have on others, no matter how devastating these might be. They may appear completely forthright about the matter, calmly stating that they have no sense of guilt, are not sorry for the ensuing pain, and that there is no reason now to be concerned. When asked if he had any regrets about stabbing a robbery victim who subsequently spent time in the hospital as a result of his wounds, one of our subjects replied, "Get real! He spends a few months in hospital and I rot here. If I wanted to kill him I would have slit his throat. That's the kind of guy I am; I gave him a break." Their lack of remorse or guilt is associated with a remarkable ability to rationalize their behavior, to shrug off personal responsibility for actions that cause family, friends, and others to reel with shock and disappointment. They usually have handy excuses for their behavior, and in some cases deny that it happened at all.

Lack of Empathy

Many of the characteristics displayed by psychopaths are closely associated with a profound lack of empathy and inability to construct a mental and emotional "facsimile" of another person. They seem completely unable to "get into the skin" of others, except in a purely intellectual sense. They are completely indifferent to the rights and suffering of family and strangers alike. If they do maintain ties, it is only because they see family members as possessions. One of our subjects allowed her boyfriend to sexually molest her five-year-old daughter because "he wore me out. I wasn't ready for more sex that night." The woman found it hard to understand why the authorities took her child into care.

Deceitful and Manipulative

With their powers of imagination in gear and beamed on themselves, psychopaths appear amazingly unfazed by the possibility-or even by the certainty-of being found out. When caught in a lie or challenged with the truth, they seldom appear perplexed or embarrassed-they simply change their stories or attempt to rework the facts so they appear to be consistent with the lie. The result is a series of contradictory statements and a thoroughly confused listener. And psychopaths seem proud of their ability to lie. When asked if she lied easily, one woman laughed and replied, "I'm the best. I think it's because I sometimes admit to something bad about myself. They think, well, if she's admitting to that she must be telling the truth about the rest."

Shallow Emotions

Psychopaths seem to suffer a kind of emotional poverty that limits the range and depth of their feelings. At times they appear to be cold and unemotional while nevertheless being prone to dramatic, shallow, and short-lived displays of feeling. Careful observers are left with the impression they are playacting and little is going on below the surface. A psychopath in our research said that he didn't really

understand what others meant by fear. "When I rob a bank," he said, "I notice that the teller shakes. One barfed all over the money. She must have been pretty messed up inside, but I don't know why. If someone pointed a gun at me I guess I'd be afraid, but I wouldn't throw up." When asked if he ever felt his heart pound or his stomach churn, he replied, "Of course! I'm not a robot. I really get pumped up when I have sex or when I get into a fight."

Impulsive

Psychopaths are unlikely to spend much time weighing the pros and cons of a course of action or considering the possible consequences. "I did it because I felt like it," is a common response. These impulsive acts often result from an aim that plays a central role in most of the psychopath's behavior: to achieve immediate satisfaction, pleasure, or relief.

So family members, relatives, employers, and coworkers typically find themselves standing around asking themselves what happened-jobs are quit, relationships broken off, plans changed, houses ransacked, people hurt, often for what appears as little more than a whim. As the husband of a psychopath I studied put it: "She got up and left the table, and that was the last I saw of her for two months."

Poor Behavior Controls

Besides being impulsive, psychopaths are highly reactive to perceived insults or slights. Most of us have powerful inhibitory controls over our behavior; even if we would like to respond aggressively we are usually able to "keep the lid on." In psychopaths, these inhibitory controls are weak, and the slightest provocation is sufficient to overcome them. As a result, psychopaths are short-tempered or hotheaded and tend to respond to frustration, failure, discipline, and criticism with sudden violence, threats or verbal abuse. But their outbursts, extreme as they may be, are often short-lived, and they quickly act as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. For example, an

inmate in line for dinner was accidentally bumped by another inmate, whom he proceeded to beat senseless. The attacker then stepped back into line as if nothing had happened. Despite the fact that he faced solitary confinement as punishment for the infraction, his only comment when asked to explain himself was, "I was pissed off. He stepped into my space. I did what I had to do." Although psychopaths have a "hair trigger," their aggressive displays are "cold"; they lack the intense arousal experienced when other individuals lose their temper.

A Need for Excitement

Psychopaths have an ongoing and excessive need for excitement-they long to live in the fast lane or "on the edge," where the action is. In many cases the action involves the breaking of rules. Many psychopaths describe "doing crime" for excitement or thrills. When asked if she ever did dangerous things just for fun, one of our female psychopaths replied, "Yeah, lots of things. But what I find most exciting is walking through airports with drugs. Christ! What a high!" The flip side of this yen for excitement is an inability to tolerate routine or monotony. Psychopaths are easily bored and are not likely to engage in activities that are dull, repetitive, or require intense concentration over long periods.

Lack of Responsibility

Obligations and commitments mean nothing to psychopaths. Their good intentions-"I'll never cheat on you again"-are promises written on the wind. Horrendous credit histories, for example, reveal the lightly taken debt, the loan shrugged off, the empty pledge to contribute to a child's support. Their performance on the job is erratic, with frequent absences, misuse of company resources, violations of company policy, and general untrustworthiness. They do not honor formal or implied commitments to people, organizations, or principles. Psychopaths are not deterred by the possibility that their actions mean hardship or risk for others. A 25-year-old inmate in our studies has received more than 20 convictions for dangerous driving, driving

while impaired, leaving the scene of an accident, driving without a license, and criminal negligence causing death. When asked if he would continue to drive after his release from prison, he replied, "Why not? Sure, I drive fast, but I'm good at it. It takes two to have an accident."

Early Behavior Problems

Most psychopaths begin to exhibit serious behavioral problems at an early age. These might include persistent lying, cheating, theft, arson, truancy, substance abuse, vandalism, and/or precocious sexuality. Because many children exhibit some of these behaviors at one time or another—especially children raised in violent neighborhoods or in disrupted or abusive families—it is important to emphasize that the psychopath's history of such behaviors is more extensive and serious than most, even when compared with that of siblings and friends raised in similar settings. One subject, serving time for fraud, told us that as a child he would put a noose around the neck of a cat, tie the other end of the string to the top of a pole, and bat the cat around the pole with a tennis racket. Although not all adult psychopaths exhibited this degree of cruelty when in their youth, virtually all routinely got themselves into a wide range of difficulties.

Adult Antisocial Behavior

Psychopaths see the rules and expectations of society as inconvenient and unreasonable impediments to their own behavioral expression. They make their own rules, both as children and as adults. Many of the antisocial acts of psychopaths lead to criminal charges and convictions. Even within the criminal population, psychopaths stand out, largely because the antisocial and illegal activities of psychopaths are more varied and frequent than are those of other criminals. Psychopaths tend to have no particular affinity, or "specialty," for one particular type of crime but tend to try everything. But not all psychopaths end up in jail. Many of the things they do escape detection or prosecution, or are on "the shady side of the law." For them, antisocial

behavior may consist of phony stock promotions, questionable business practices, spouse or child abuse, and so forth. Many others do things that, though not necessarily illegal, are nevertheless unethical, immoral, or harmful to others: philandering or cheating on a spouse to name a few.

Origins

Thinking about psychopathy leads us very quickly to a single fundamental question: Why are some people like this? Unfortunately, the forces that produce a psychopath are still obscure, an admission those looking for clear answers will find unsatisfying. Nevertheless, there are several rudimentary theories about the cause of psychopathy worth considering. At one end of the spectrum are theories that view psychopathy as largely the product of genetic or biological factors (nature), whereas theories at the other end posit that psychopathy results entirely from a faulty early social environment (nurture). The position that I favor is that psychopathy emerges from a complex—and poorly understood—interplay between biological factors and social forces. It is based on evidence that genetic factors contribute to the biological bases of brain function and to basic personality structure, which in turn influence the way an individual responds to, and interacts with, life experiences and the social environment. In effect, the core elements needed for the development of psychopathy—including a profound inability to experience empathy and the complete range of emotions, including fear—are in part provided by nature and possibly by some unknown biological influences on the developing fetus and neonate. As a result, the capacity for developing internal controls and conscience and for making emotional "connections" with others is greatly reduced.

Can Anything Be Done?

In their desperate search for solutions people trapped in a destructive and seemingly hopeless relationship with a psychopath frequently are told: Quit indulging him and send him for therapy. A

basic assumption of psychotherapy is that the patient needs and wants help for distressing or painful psychological and emotional problems. Successful therapy also requires that the patient actively participate, along with the therapist, in the search for relief of his or her symptoms. In short, the patient must recognize there is a problem and must want to do something about it. But here is the crux: Psychopaths don't feel they have psychological or emotional problems, and they see no reason to change their behavior to conform with societal standards they do not agree with. Thus, in spite of more than a century of clinical study and decades of research, the mystery of the psychopath still remains. Recent developments have provided us with new insights into the nature of this disturbing disorder, and its borders are becoming more defined. But compared with other major clinical disorders, little research has been devoted to psychopathy, even though it is responsible for more social distress and disruption than all other psychiatric disorders combined. So, rather than trying to pick up the pieces after the damage has been done, it would make far greater sense to increase our efforts to understand this perplexing disorder and to search for effective early interventions. The alternatives are to continue devoting massive resources to the prosecution, incarceration, and supervision of psychopaths after they have committed offenses against society and to continue to ignore the welfare and plight of their victims. We have to learn how to socialize them, not resocialize them. And this will require serious efforts at research and early intervention. It is imperative that we continue the search for clues.

A Survival Guide

Although no one is completely immune to the devious machinations of the psychopath, there are some things you can do to reduce your vulnerability.

Know what you are dealing with. This sounds easy but in fact can be very difficult. All the reading in the world cannot immunize you from the devastating effects of psychopaths. Everyone, including the

experts, can be taken in, conned, and left bewildered by them. A good psychopath can play a concerto on anyone's heart strings.

Try not to be influenced by "props." It is not easy to get beyond the winning smile, the captivating body language, the fast talk of the typical psychopath, all of which blind us to his or her real intentions. Many people find it difficult to deal with the intense, "predatory state" of the psychopath. The fixated stare, is more a prelude to self-gratification and the exercise of power rather than simple interest or empathic caring.

Don't wear blinders. Enter new relationships with your eyes wide open. Like the rest of us, most psychopathic con artists and "love-thieves" initially hide their dark side by putting their "best foot forward." Cracks may soon begin to appear in the mask they wear, but once trapped in their web, it will be difficult to escape financially and emotionally unscathed.

Keep your guard up in high-risk situations. Some situations are tailor-made for psychopaths: singles bars, ship cruises, foreign airports, etc. In each case, the potential victim is lonely, looking for a good time, excitement, or companionship, and there will usually be someone willing to oblige, for a hidden price. Know yourself. Psychopaths are skilled at detecting and ruthlessly exploiting your weak spots. Your best defense is to understand what these spots are, and to be extremely wary of anyone who zeroes in on them.

Unfortunately, even the most careful precautions are no guarantee that you will be safe from a determined psychopath. In such cases, all you can do is try to exert some sort of damage control. This is not easy but some suggestions may be of help:

1. Obtain professional advice. Make sure the clinician you consult is familiar with the literature on psychopathy and has had experience in dealing with psychopaths.

2. Don't blame yourself. Whatever the

reasons for being involved with a psychopath, it is important that you not accept blame for his or her attitudes and behavior. Psychopaths play by the same rules-their rules-with everyone.

3. Be aware of who the victim is. Psychopaths often give the impression that it is they who are suffering and that the victims are to blame for their misery. Don't waste your sympathy on them.

4. Recognize that you are not alone. Most psychopaths have lots of victims. It is certain that a psychopath who is causing you grief is also causing grief to others. Be careful about power struggles. Keep in mind that psychopaths have a strong need for psychological and physical control over others. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't stand up for your rights, but it will probably be difficult to do so without risking serious emotional or physical trauma.

5. Set firm ground rules. Although power struggles with a psychopath are risky you

may be able to set up some clear rules-both for yourself and for the psychopath-to make your life easier and begin the difficult transition from victim to a person looking out for yourself.

6. Don't expect dramatic changes. To a large extent, the personality of psychopaths is "carved in stone." There is little likelihood that anything you do will produce fundamental, sustained changes in how they see themselves or others.

7. Cut your losses. Most victims of psychopaths end up feeling confused and hopeless, and convinced that they are largely to blame for the problem. The more you give in the more you will be taken advantage of by the psychopath's insatiable appetite for power and control.

8. Use support groups. By the time your suspicions have led you to seek a diagnosis, you already know that you're in for a very long and bumpy ride. Make sure you have all the emotional support you can muster.

<http://aftermath-surviving-psychopathy.org/>