



Psychopaths

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The Dark Triad

Psychopathy, Machiavellianism and Narcissism.

Some of the most iconic characters in movie history have been the villains – from Darth Vader to Hannibal Lecter, from the Joker to Goldfinger.

Some people prefer fictional villains to heroes – and those that do are more likely to be villainous themselves, often fitting into the 'dark triad' of personality traits. They are more likely to score high for psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism because they share some of the villains' immoral outlook.

More than 1,000 people in North America were given questionnaires to fill out exploring their personality and views towards fictional characters. They were asked to choose and think about their favourite fictional villains as well as three well-known specific villains – Mr Smith (The Matrix), Mystique (X-men), and Darth Vader (Star Wars).

The participants were then asked to respond to certain statements, indicating how much they agreed, such as... *'I tend to want the villain to succeed in achieving their goals'* and *'I tend to feel I have a better understanding of the hero than of the villain'*.

The researchers found strong links between people who scored highly for the 'dark triad' trait – particularly Machiavellianism and psychopathy.

The 'dark triad' consists of a group of three personality traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy – all of which are indicators of malevolent intent...

- **Psychopathy** is characterised by antisocial behaviour, impulsivity, low self-control, selfishness, callousness and remorselessness... and a callous interpersonal style aimed at immediate gratification.
- **Machiavellianism** describes a manipulative interpersonal style characterised by deception, the manipulation and exploitation of others by duplicity, cynicism, and selfish ambition, and a cynical regard for morality and overriding self-interest...
- **Narcissism** is characterised by a grandiose and entitled interpersonal style whereby one feels superior to others and craves validation ('ego-reinforcement') together with pride, egotism, and a lack of empathy for others.

All three groups are extraordinarily adept at detecting empathy in others and are equally skilled at ruthlessly exploiting it.

People expressing these dark traits are more likely to feel positive about villains, and experience enjoyment, identification, fascination, and empathy towards them. In general, males were more prone to experience the various forms of villain positivity. In fact young males in particular reported high levels of 'villain positivity', which appears largely to be a function of their particularly high levels of dark personality traits.

Maybe there's a good reason why so many successful people are narcissists...

To understand the Dark Triad, we should first try to understand the 'Big Five' personality traits of normal, well adjusted people.

These are openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism and outline the broad dimensions of an individual's personality and psyche. Beneath each broad category is a number of correlated and specific factors.

Openness is about having an appreciation for emotion, adventure and unusual ideas. People who are generally open have a higher degree of intellectual curiosity and creativity. They are also more unpredictable and more likely to involve themselves in risky behaviour like drug taking.

People who are conscientious are more likely to be organised and dependable. They are self-disciplined and act dutifully, preferring planned as opposed to spontaneous behaviour. They can sometimes also be stubborn and obsessive.

Extroverts tend to seek stimulation in the company of others and are energetic, positive and assertive. They can sometimes be attention-seeking and domineering. Individuals with lower extroversion are reserved, and can be sometimes be thought of as aloof or self-absorbed.

Agreeable individuals have a tendency to be compassionate and cooperative and not antagonistic towards other people. Sometimes people who are highly agreeable are seen as naive or submissive. People who have lower levels of agreeableness are competitive or challenging.

Neurotic individuals are prone to psychological stress and can easily get angry, anxious and depressed. More stable people are calmer but are sometimes seen as uninspiring and unconcerned. Individuals with higher neuroticism tend to have worse psychological well-being.

Narcissists fall neatly into two groups.

Grandiose narcissists, the most common type, are dominant and extroverted – they love being the centre of attention. They crave attention and power and often end up becoming politicians and celebrities. Their narcissism developed because their parents, most often their mothers, put them on a pedestal during childhood.

Vulnerable narcissists are more reserved, but they have a strong sense of entitlement and are prone to feeling demeaned or even threatened by the adverse opinions of others – they can easily get into a tantrum when this happens, throwing their toys out of the cot with a passion.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder is an extreme form of narcissism and is classified as a psychological disorder. It's more common in males, but it affects between 1% and 2% of the population – about the same percentage as psychopaths. People who suffer from Narcissistic Personality Disorder also harbour a strong sense of entitlement but also crave approval, admiration and adulation in the same way the rest of us crave oxygen.

Narcissists make friends faster than other people – but not for long. Their lack of empathy eventually becomes apparent – people eventually drift away from them and toward those who are more in touch with their emotions and who care about their relationships.

Researchers at the University of Krakow in Poland tested 15 groups of 20 students and studied how the popularity of individuals in the groups changed over time. During the first

week, the students were asked who they liked most in their group. Three months later, they were asked again. In the meantime, the personalities of each student were continuously assessed in order to discover how narcissistic they were, and the results of the study were published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

The researchers discovered that when a group of people meet for the first time, those who become popular straight away tend to score highly on narcissism. However, they became less popular as other people begin to see through them. The initial surge of admiration, recognition and friendship did not lead to sustained relationships.

Emotionally intelligent people on the other hand, found that their popularity increased over time as their social skills were gradually revealed. In short, a quieter, less needy ego, together with the ability to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions resulted in better relationships in the long run.

A useful exercise would be to think about people you have known and how your relationship with them may have changed over time.

However, these behavioural characteristics are not inversely correlated – most people, perhaps unsurprisingly, fall somewhere in the grey area between the emotionally intelligent and the narcissistic. Some narcissists can also be emotionally intelligent, while others might just be lacking in self-confidence and have poor skill reading others' emotions. Just because someone has more of one characteristic does not necessarily mean they will have less of the other.

The students who ended up with the least number of friends at the end of the three-month study were the students who achieved low scores in narcissism and also in emotional intelligence – 'a particularly unfortunate combination' according to the researchers.

The idea that people in positions of power are manipulative and morally bankrupt is a longstanding cultural stereotype, but it's no myth – there are reasons why we harbour this kind of distrust of wealth and power.

We have seen certain types of personality, rise to the top of the tree. Typically, they *are* manipulative and ruthless and more likely than most to enjoy that position. A new study carried out by Aarhus University, Denmark found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that psychopaths are more likely to study for degrees in business and economics.

The Aarhus researchers conducted personality tests on nearly 500 students, aged 17 to 45 in order to measure the dark triad of narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism. The tests, carried out on students of psychology, politics, business, economics and law were designed to establish whether certain traits affected the kind of subjects the students chose to study. They tested for ruthlessness, desire for power and social domination. The tests were conducted before the students began their courses so as to eliminate any effects course material might have.

In terms of the dark triad, psychology students scored substantially lower than business and law students and so the researchers determined that personality traits were a part of the decision making process involved in picking a profession that involves power and the manipulation of others.

The study showed that the students were already in possession of dark triad traits, rather than having learned them within their chosen faculties, although the researchers allow that subject matter might also have encouraged those traits.

It's unlikely that the choice of subject was a conscious or deliberate decision to satisfy any lust for power or a need to manipulate. Rather, it is more likely an unconscious choice that would allow them to pursue a career in an environment that matches their view of the world and the cynical views they might hold about others.

This study was published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. I would like to have seen the inclusion of music and drama students in the study – having been involved in the entertainment industry myself, I can vouch for the fact that the virulence of performers' precious, monstrous egos has to be seen to be believed. Backstabbing in show business rife, and is often vicious and merciless. There is no perfidious act luvvies will shrink from to beat their competitors to the top, including sabotage, bad-mouthing and character assassination!

However... according to psychologists at Harvard University, it is possible that psychopaths – who are portrayed as cold and calculating – act in the way they do because, like terrorists, their brains are wired to overvalue short-term rewards and goals and lead them to avoid thinking about the consequences of their actions. One expert compared the impulsive nature of the psychopath to that of compulsive and short sighted decision-making, a trait that has been observed in compulsive over-eaters, gamblers and substance abusers.

The Harvard team hope to change the popular image of psychopaths as cold-blooded monsters to that of humans whose brains are just wired differently – not evil, just bad decision-makers. The idea that psychopaths cannot generate emotion, which is why they do all those terrible things, could be wrong. It could be that their emotional deficits may not actually be the primary driver of their bad choices after all.

The team scanned the brains of 49 inmates at two medium-security prisons in Wisconsin. The inmates took part in a type of delayed gratification test that invited them to choose between two options – receive a smaller amount of money immediately, or a larger amount at a later time. This is like the marshmallow test for children, beloved of psychology students everywhere, except with dangerous criminals. The results of the tests allowed the researchers to measure not only how impulsive each participant's behaviour was, but to identify the brain regions that play a role in assessing the relative value of those choices.

They found that people who scored high for psychopathy showed greater activity in a region called the ventral striatum – known to be involved in evaluating reward – for the more immediate choice. The more psychopathic a person was, the greater the magnitude of the response in the ventral striatum. This suggests the way they calculate the value of the reward is deregulated in that they may over-represent the value of the immediate reward.

When the team began mapping which brain regions are connected to the ventral striatum, it became clear why. The connections between the ventral striatum and other regions known to be involved in decision-making, specifically regions of the prefrontal cortex known to regulate striatal response, were much weaker in people with psychopathy.

That lack of connection is important because this portion of the prefrontal cortex is thought to be important for mental 'time-travel' – that is, the ability to envision the future consequences of actions.

We need the prefrontal cortex to make prospective judgements about how an action will affect us in the future. If that connection is broken, the individual is going to start making

bad choices because they won't have the information that would otherwise guide their decision-making to more sensible ends.

Researchers have looked at decisions made by individuals in circumstances where they have to sacrifice one person to save a group of people. The studies have been designed to better understand why people with these behavioural traits act in certain ways. Given several hypothetical dilemmas, the team found that people with strong psychopathic traits were more decisive and chose to sacrifice the one in favour of the needs of the many.

The current wisdom is that psychopathy is generally characterised by antisocial behaviour and impaired empathy. Certainly, individuals with strong psychopathic traits find it less emotionally challenging to sanction actions that justify harming others if it is for the greater good. So it seems that personality traits can influence our moral actions.

Whether it is more or less moral to sacrifice one to save many has always been the subject of fierce debate, but individuals with greater psychopathic traits make moral judgements with greater decisiveness. If, in the real world, someone had to quickly decide to do harm for a greater good, then people with psychopathic traits might just be the more sensible choice. I'm wondering how the great generals – Wellington, Zhukov, Eisenhower or even Churchill and Stalin – all of whom sacrificed large numbers of men for later gain, would score on the psychopath test.

Psychopathy is an antisocial behaviour, but what if psychopathy is an evolutionary strategy that not only benefits the psychopath, but society in general? While most people struggle to make moral decisions, psychopaths are measurably more pragmatic when it comes to making decisions for the greater good. In fact in certain circumstances, psychopathic traits could be considered beneficial.

There is a psychopath living next door to you, stalking you at the golf club, in your workplace, behind the pulpit, and even in your bed. These people do not wield knives or raise their voices – their chosen method of murder is the long game, cunningly played with meticulous planning, and first prize is your complete and utter destruction.

So... would you know how to spot a psychopath?

Psychopaths display different traits depending on their disorder. Common signs include superficial charm, a grandiose notion of self-worth, the need for stimulation and impulsiveness, pathological lying, the ability to manipulate others and a lack of remorse and empathy, but despite their popular image, not all psychopaths are actually killers.

Most people find psychopaths intriguing, but can't put their finger on exactly why. The reason stems from their incongruous behaviour – psychopaths tend to do a lot of acting in order to deceive, they are adept at showing normal reactions, and they have an uncanny ability to quickly change their views whenever the need arises. Their grandiose notion of self-worth means they can effortlessly play the part of the most interesting person in the room and can feign suitable interests and responses to make their interest seem real.

Psychopaths are devoid of any real emotion, although they can mimic emotions with the skill of a Shakespearean actor. However, it's one thing to be able to imitate emotional responses, but quite another to *understand* them. It is this failing that sometimes catches them out. Nonetheless, there are always manipulative ulterior motives to expressing them. They will offer to do favours for people, and share false secrets as a way of gaining trust. Later, you can be assured they will ask for favours in return.

Once they have achieved their goal – usually your financial and emotional destruction – they do not experience any sense of elation... instead they move on to their next prey without even the courtesy of acknowledging they have casually ruined another life. There is no malice in this... it's just the way they are.

Psychopaths are incredibly difficult to detect. They are congenial, bend-over-backwards-to-help-you friendly. They are experts in flattery and telling you what you want to hear. Their skill in scanning you is breathtaking. Within minutes of your first meeting they grasp your likes and dislikes, motives, needs and most significantly, your weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Their target will be your Achilles heel, and it takes them only minutes to find it. These people are true geniuses – they are masters of manipulation, and their talent is humbling, awe-inspiring.

They can sniff out a vulnerable target a mile away. Everything about you, your body language, your facial expressions, your words, are all signposts that assist the psychopath in their quest for dominance, but be careful... they are about to rape your soul.

Psychopaths endear themselves to you – they laugh at your jokes, they offer sympathy when the occasion demands, although this is really just an act... they go out of their way to bond quickly with you – they *like* you, they are reassuring, charming... and yet all through the game, they are plying their trade of deceit and entrapment.

The American Psychiatric Association recognised in 1968 that psychopathy was a mental disorder. Until then it had been referred to as 'antisocial personality' or 'personality disorder characterised by a pattern of disregard for, and the violation of, the rights of others.'

It is now generally accepted that being a psychopath is a mental disorder in its own right. The symptoms are lack of empathy, lack of guilt, impulsivity, egocentricity, and chronic violation of social, moral and legal norms. One in every 50 people are said to be psychopathic.

Victims of psychopaths are left dazed, often having been drained of any last shred of self-esteem and unsure about their own identity. The psychopath on the other hand feels nothing, not even the tiniest atom of guilt. Victims feel the psychopath has taken their very soul. They are utterly without conscience and devoid of any of the inner mechanisms that chastise us when we are selfish, unethical, or immoral.

Take away the facade and you will find that psychopaths [I have met at least two in my life] are superficial creatures. They are often grandiose, with vastly over-inflated opinions of themselves, irreparably narcissistic, and they see other human beings as mere pawns. They consider themselves to be Messiahs in their own chosen field and have habit of recycling the work and opinions of others as their own genius.

They are irredeemably deceitful and never willing to accept responsibility. They are often envious of others, and can never stoop too low when the opportunity arises to exploit friends or acquaintances and even family members. They are the ultimate users of other people, but are adept at covering this up with a finely developed pretence of charm and phoney altruism.

One of the fundamental mistakes the victim makes is to assume that all other human beings have the same moral and human standards or the same emotional standards as they do. Unfortunately, conscience is not something that is universal. Psychopaths are pathological liars, particularly when it comes to painting moral pictures of themselves.

They lie with an abandonment that elevates lying to an art form. When caught out, they glibly tell more lies, adapting their stories depending on who they're speaking to without a flicker of shame. Beneath their apparent passion beats a cold, calculating heart of stone.

With most members of the human race, guilt is a natural inhibitor. It stops us from killing, stealing and coveting our neighbour's ox. This regulating mechanism is absent in the psychopath. True, psychopaths do not get a great deal of emotional satisfaction from hurting or destroying the lives of others – getting what they want is paramount. Driving force. In fact Psychopaths *do* covet their neighbour's ox. And their neighbour's cash, job, contacts, wife, daughter... whatever takes their fancy.

They preach high moral standards but think nothing of stooping to the lowest morals to get what they want.

But psychopaths don't like collateral damage – they don't hurt innocent bystanders. They take very great care not to hurt others because they may need them as future character witnesses. This is one reason why victims often find themselves unable to show the rest of the world just how deeply damaging the psychopath's work has been. Female psychopaths pretend to be nurturing, loving, caring individuals, they often appear dependent, and yet at the same time, women psychopaths are equally controlling, manipulative and toxically narcissistic.

In Shakespeare's Othello, Iago (a psychopath) preys on the weaknesses and virtues of the other characters and tells how his victims will be 'led by the nose.' I can never sit through Othello without feeling uncomfortable. For me, Iago is worse than Lady Macbeth – a pussycat in comparison.

Real psychopaths are born and not bred. Being a psychopath is not something you learn at psycho school. The current wisdom is that they are born with manipulative genes. A psychopath's upbringing is bound to play some part, but the absence of the checking mechanism that is part of everyone else's behaviour is typical of the true psychopath. They just don't see that there's anything wrong with their behaviour and that mindset is common with all psychopaths, whether they be serial killers, serial rapists, thieves, confidence-tricksters or fraudsters.

They have an exalted lack of empathy with their fellow humans, although this is often hidden by their need to publicly display their charitable nature. On the other hand, they are brilliant at social influence and are master networkers. In public, they are often good-humouredly self-effacing, but in private, they are supremely jealous of their public image. They are extremely adept at spotting what makes others tick because their skills are not only honed to perfection, they have been developed as an efficient way of data gathering.

In purely biological/neurological terms, 'hot' empathy involves feeling (emotion) and its source is located in somatosensory circuits, including the amygdala – the tiny but powerful emotion processing area of the brain. 'Cold' empathy on the other hand involves calculation – the ability to coldly and dispassionately gauge what others are thinking.

Cold empathy involves different neural circuitry, primarily the anterior paracingulate cortex, the temporal lobe and the superior temporal sulcus. There is a huge difference between the two processes – and one that can be detected using fMRI scanning.

Some researchers comment that psychopaths possess a dysfunctional amygdala, and that the processes that experience emotion are blocked, or even switched off altogether.

Even mental health experts have problems in spotting psychopathy in patients because psychopaths are superbly adept at playing the role of victim.

Psychopaths blink less than normal people, but that's not necessarily a giveaway (unless you're consciously looking out for it) because unconsciously, we find this attractive, especially in members of the opposite sex – it gives a sense of 'openness.'

But the most telling sign – and you have to watch very carefully for it – is that Psychopaths have no *personal* emotional ability. Psychopaths feel no real emotional connection to others – their only true emotional connection is to themselves.

They find it impossible to maintain long-term personal relationships because their lives are entirely occupied solely with working out how others can be of use to them. Their lives are punctuated by a series of unfulfilled short-term relationships and they will harbour no true friendships. They can only talk about themselves or their latest pet projects and have no genuine interest in others because personal gain is always their prime concern.

Although psychopaths are unable to feel empathy, the concept of empathy is integral to their manipulative way of thinking. Psychopaths have a unique ability to spot empathy in others. They can gauge, but not feel, emotion.

Psychopaths may well be intelligent, charismatic, socially skilled, or even attractive. They can sometimes be spontaneous and uninhibited by the rules. Often they are fun to hang around with, at least at first, until you eventually start to see through them, but behind all the charisma and the charm, there is not a shred of morality.

Nothing will get in the way of the psychopath's self interest. The threat of impending danger, punishment, social discomfort, means nothing to them. When caught out, they will even try to turn that situation to their own advantage, and if that fails, they will simply move on to pastures new.

If there is any kind of advantage to be gained, the psychopath will embrace it, irrespective of risk or possible negative consequences. They will keep their composure in the face of threat or adversity, and they are ruthless in their pursuit of detractors. They will pursue their goals with relentless patience and an energy that most of the rest of us find impossible to even comprehend.

In a word... they are irredeemably evil.

The Psychopath Checklist

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

To have personality disorder diagnosed, one needs to demonstrate at least three or four characteristics:

- They believe there are special reasons they are different, for example, they are better or more deserving than others
- They have fragile self-esteem, needing others to recognise their worth and needs
- They feel upset if others ignore them or don't give them what they feel they deserve
- They resent others successes
- They put their own needs above the needs of others, and demand that others do the same
- They take advantage of others.

Narcissists can be very difficult to be around, not least because they don't realise they have a problem. They have a strong sense of superiority and can often come across as arrogant. They need constant admiration to feel fulfilled and despite their apparent arrogance, they often have very fragile egos.

To feel better about themselves they will belittle or criticise those around them. If they are challenged on this, they may be dismissive or suggest the other person is being unreasonable.

In the extreme, they can be controlling, blaming, and self-absorbed. It's not just arrogance or joking – they typically believe they are more important and more worthy, and their needs should take priority, regardless of their actual status.

About 1% of the population suffer from narcissistic personality disorder.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Personality

People with obsessive compulsive personality disorder are often highly valued by their bosses – they are reliable and their standard of work is high. But they can be virtually impossible to work with and difficult to live with.

These are the characteristics that identify them:

- They need to keep everything in order and under control
- They obsessively check their work, worrying it's not good enough
- They set unfeasibly high standards for themselves and others
- They behave judgmentally towards other people
- They think their way is the best way of making things happen
- They struggle to adapt to change
- They worry that they, or others, might make mistakes

- They expect catastrophe if things aren't perfect
- They find criticism very difficult to handle
- They find it difficult to spend money on themselves or others
- They have a tendency to hang on to items of no obvious value.

Obsessive compulsives are extreme perfectionists, and they get very upset if things aren't done in exactly the right way, and often insist that things are done again. They are sticklers for punctuality, they are rarely late and often arrive excessively early.

They are often workaholics and will sacrifice relationships to get where they want to be. They struggle to relax even at home, with rigid, inflexible routines. They can be preoccupied with cleanliness and symmetry and can be difficult to live with. They dislike unpredictable things or any sense of loss of control.

About 5% of the population is affected by Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder. The condition is more common in men.

Avoidant Personality Disorder

Nervous and anxious people can often be misdiagnosed with an anxiety disorder when their anxiety is really part of a personality disorder.

The group of personality disorders characterised by anxiety and fearfulness can be very debilitating and isolating. Avoidant personality disorder is strongly associated with neglect or rejection in childhood... Those affected sometimes describe being disliked by one parent.

These are the characteristics that identify them:

- They avoid work or social activities involving others
- They expect disapproval and are very sensitive to criticism
- They worry constantly about being 'found out' and rejected
- They feel insecure or inferior
- They worry about being ridiculed or shamed by others
- They avoid relationships, friendships and intimacy because they fear rejection
- They feel lonely and isolated
- They avoid trying new activities in case they embarrass themselves
- They feel a desperate need to be liked and accepted.

People with avoidant personality disorder are often burdened with feelings of inferiority and their principal coping strategy is avoidance.

They also struggle in social situations, but they will still feel lonely and long for company.

They are very self-critical and have an almost pathological fear of being rejected embarrassed or humiliated in social settings.

As a result, they often choose jobs where they can work alone.

Dependent Personality Disorder

People affected by dependent personality disorder are very reliant on others and struggle to attain independence. They have a need to be taken care of and for others to make decisions for them. They are sometimes described as needy or clingy.

They often have a strong sense of self-doubt and will often refer to themselves as stupid or inept and belittle their own abilities. They also tend to seek relationships with dominant or overprotective partners and avoid positions of responsibility. Their social life tends to be limited to this person or a small group of people on whom they are dependent.

This personality disorder is associated with separation and chronic physical illness when growing up.

These are the characteristics that identify them.

- They feel needy, weak and unable to make decisions or function properly without help or support
- They follow others to assume responsibility for many areas of their lives
- They are afraid of being left to fend for themselves
- They have low self-confidence
- They feel easily abandoned or deserted
- They feel hopeless and incompetent, and see others as being much more capable than themselves
- They appear to others to be submissive and passive.

Paranoid Personality Disorder

Odd, eccentric, loner... These are words typically used to describe those with paranoid personality disorder. These people are the hardest to treat because they are suspicious and wary of everyone – the main reason they don't seek help. They are often very suspicious of others, involve themselves in legal disputes, and write lots of letters of complaint.

This is more than just the cliché of thinking everyone is out to get them. Instead, it is often left to family to seek help for them.

They can be very hard to work with because they are prone to assume that the usual mistakes everyone makes are deliberately directed against them. They fall out with lots of people and can get over-angry if, for example, someone occupies their car parking space or unintentionally cuts them up while driving. They often have frequent suspicions about their partner's fidelity.

These are the characteristics that identify them:

- They find it hard to confide in people, even friends, and very difficult to trust others
- They often suspect that others will use or take advantage of them
- They watch others closely, looking for signs of betrayal or hostility
- They bear grudges
- They read threats and danger that others don't see into everyday situations

- They get angry about things that others say or do, and dwell on them
- They look for opportunities to get even.

This personality disorder occurs in approximately 3% of the population.

Schizoid Personality Disorder

People with schizoid personality disorder often come across as aloof or disinterested in others. They don't pay much attention to social norms, so their behaviour may seem strange. They are not really interested in forming relationships and are often loners.

These are the characteristics that identify them:

- They can appear emotionally cold
- They don't like mixing with others and prefer their own company
- They have a very detailed fantasy life they often retreat into, spending a lot of time daydreaming
- They have no real interest in sex – intimacy is an encroachment into their personal space
- They do not get angry or hostile, even when provoked
- They find it hard to express feelings.

Schizotypal Personality Disorder

People with schizotypal personality disorder are odd, eccentric types. Although they may seem alarming at first, they are actually harmless – it's just who they are.

These are the characteristics that identify them:

- They find forming close relationships very difficult
- They behave in an eccentric way
- They believe they have special powers, such as a sixth sense or ESP, or are somehow psychic
- They get anxious and paranoid in social situations
- They sometimes hear voices or talk to themselves
- They use odd or unusual words or phrases
- They struggle to experience normal emotions.

This personality disorder occurs in approximately 3% of the population and is more common in men.

Treatments that can help personality disorders:

There is no quick cure for a personality disorder, but treatment – and this is going to be lengthy – can make life easier. Some people improve so much they can rid themselves of the disorder altogether. However, it is important to get a formal diagnosis by a psychiatrist or psychologist. Most mental health trusts have specialist teams who assess, diagnose and treat them.

Rather than drugs [personality disorders can not be cured with medication] psychotherapy is the answer but it must be tailored to the condition and of course tailored to the individual.

Antidepressants can help with mood or emotional difficulties and feelings of impulsiveness or anxiety. Low doses of antipsychotic drugs are also sometimes prescribed to reduce agitation, but in the long run, the kind of supervision provided by talking therapies are the better – and best – option. With any kind of mental health problem, just being able to *talk* to someone is the best therapy.

It is possible to treat some people in group therapy, but most therapy is better conducted individually. Some psychiatric hospitals offer therapeutic communities, where people with personality disorders choose to live for a period of time. This gives them the space and opportunity for introspection, self-analysis and control.

A lot of people don't need regular treatment, just advice and support at times when they're struggling. In general, admission to a psychiatric hospital is something that should be avoided if possible because research has found that mostly, it is of little benefit to those with personality disorders and can often be counterproductive, as it stops them developing coping strategies. Most hospitals offer outside support to patients in the community.

If your partner, colleague or friend has a personality disorder, it's important that you look after yourself first. This might sound harsh, but it is vitally important to set clear rules [boundaries] and expectations around their behaviour and distance yourself. You should even be prepared to walk away whenever the boundary is overstepped. But it is also important to stress that it's a temporary measure and doesn't mean you don't love them or care about them.

From psychopathy to sadism, spitefulness, and even just general nastiness, the traits that show the more sinister sides of humanity all share a common 'dark core.' If you have one of these tendencies, you just might have some of the others, too...

Researchers at Cardiff and Swansea Universities examined the effect of disturbing images on offenders and saw a marked difference in their eyes. The study revealed that the pupils of offenders who were psychopathic did not widen when they were shown horrific images, whereas the pupils of non-psychopathic offenders did dilate. This may be physical evidence of an emotional deficit common to psychopathic offenders.

Professional gamblers have learnt to look carefully at the eyes of their opponents to gauge if they have been dealt a strong hand. Some very astute salespeople know to up their price if your eyes reveal excitement at their product.

Pupil dilation is a normal response to threat, but it is reduced in psychopathic offenders. This indicates psychopathy is not associated with an overall difficulty in responding to emotion, but rather a specific insensitivity to threat information. The study has provided objective physiological evidence of an emotional deficit underpinning the offending behaviour of psychopathic offenders that doesn't depend on invasive methods or expensive equipment.

Professor Robert Snowden from Cardiff University commented that many psychopathic offenders appear to be bold, confident, and can act in cold-blooded manner: *'It's much easier to act bold if you have no feelings of fear, and to be cold-blooded if there is no emotion to get in the way of the act.'*

Psychopath plc

Psychopaths will rise to the top in almost any walk of life, but their prevalence is highest in the business world... and this is how they manage it:

A study conducted by researchers at Bond University in Australia in conjunction with the University of San Diego, and published in September 2016, revealed roughly 4.8% of top corporate professionals have 'extremely high' levels of psychopathic traits, compared with only about 1% of the general population. This is about the same rate seen among criminals and prisoners.

Remember – a psychopath possesses of an emotional and interpersonal deficit, perfectly blended with an uncanny ability to hide it and appear intensely empathic. They also lack the ability to feel remorse, and can be inhumanly callous in their relationships with others. The bad news is that individuals psychologists refer to as 'successful psychopaths' are becoming increasingly more common.

Psychopaths are fearlessly dominant, bold, and lack any vestige of emotion – exactly the sort of personality traits found in many CEOs. They handpick people they can use as lackeys and doormats and employ similar, easy to manipulate people in HR positions. Protected by weak HR departments that enable and reinforce their psychopathic behaviour, their rise to high-power positions and dominance proceeds unopposed.

Investors too protect malicious bosses because the success of their investment depends on their entrepreneur's ability to deliver profits – everything is riding on the boss and investors will feel tied to them and so tend to ignore bad behaviour.

To run a successful and profitable company depends on a certain amount of egotism coupled with the kind of determination needed to make sacrifices, including marriages, family, and friends. Bosses have to convince other people, so a certain amount of charm and charisma are basic requirements, enabling the CEO to suspend the disbelief of their audience when they convince them that certain things *can* be done. Psychopaths are ideal for this kind of work.

Of course, many of the attributes of psychopathology can be advantageous in a business setting in terms of cost-cutting, reducing the number of staff and the relentless pursuit of profits, but psychopathic bosses can also create a toxic workplace.

There is a real cost of having a psychopath at the head of your organisation, especially if they indulge their willingness to manipulate through deception. Having a psychopath within a company can lead to poor employee retention – departments managed by psychopaths can suffer decreases in productivity and morale as they happily play people off against one another. Psychopathic bosses have been known to engage in unethical and occasionally illegal business practices.

While they may indeed be charming, psychopaths will show their true nature when things cease to go their way. When this happens, their carefully crafted persona quickly fades. If they don't get their own way, their veneer of charm will miraculously vanish. Then, there's the bullying, the targeted venom and the ruthless destruction of dissenters or anyone considered a threat.

Spotting them however is a real art and takes hundreds of hours of careful observation. But there are some tell tale signs to watch out for. They tend to use few anxiety-related words, but they do use a lot of hostile language and in a way that lacks fluency, and full of hesitation and repetition, and yet the veneer of sincerity remains. Tony Blair is a prime example. Hesitation gives the psychopath time to think on their feet, to engage brain before operating mouth.

Because they are more interested in themselves than others, they tend to refer to other people a lot less than non-psychopaths. They also find it difficult to adapt their language for different forums, using private messaging as opposed to public posts.

Text-based communication is a much better way to communicate with someone you suspect may be a psychopath, since it will remove some of the tactics they rely on, like their charm and supreme confidence. In non-verbal communication, they are unable to display their grandiose self-worth, although it will not stop their pathological lying.

It's easy to find psychopaths intriguing, but we too often unable to put our finger on just why. This is almost certainly linked to the psychopath's ability to fake or mimic normal emotional reactions, even though they are incapable of experiencing these emotions for real themselves. They cover their true intentions extremely well because they have become skilled in the arts of guile and deception.

Enthusiasm is also a weapon in their armoury – Paul McKenna's gushing enthusiasm for anything and everything is delivered with the skill of the seasoned professional. He indulges in bonhomie joie de vivre with people he thinks may be useful. Watch him carefully in interviews – look out for lashings of enthusiasm interspersed with moments of gravitas and deep sincerity he plays like a finely-tuned viola. Not that I am in any way suggesting that the great guru of self-improvement is in the slightest psychopathic, I merely use his behaviour as an example. It would be deeply unfair to infer Mr McKenna was anything other than a genius who has dedicated his life to self-improvement.

There is a manipulative ulterior motive to everything psychopaths do and say. Sharing fake secrets while carefully recording real ones is all part of the wicked web they weave to gain the trust of others.

Occasionally though, they do slip up and give away unconvincing emotional responses in tone of voice and body language and sometimes their air of superiority is momentarily revealed – but not for long.

Such is their skill, anyone can be duped by a psychopath, and there's no shame in it – it happens all the time. Victims never realise it's happening until it's too late. It's nothing to be ashamed of – how can you possibly know you're being played? After all, the psychopath is first and foremost, your best friend.

People with an inflated sense of self-worth get ahead in life because they are mentally tough. Their grandiosity, entitlement, dominance and superiority gives them the motivation and confidence to take on life's challenges. Their heightened sense of self-worth may mean they are more motivated, assertive, and successful in certain contexts, giving them a head-start over other people which begins in school – adolescents with the personality trait often got better grades at school, compared to their more humble counterparts.

The findings were the result of an international collaboration headed by researchers from Queen's University in Belfast. In the study, 340 adolescent students, from three different Italian high schools in the Milan Province, took part in the investigation.

The research focused on subclinical or 'normal' narcissism which includes some of the same features of clinical syndrome – grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority. If you are a narcissist you believe strongly that you are better than anyone else and that you are entitled to reward. Being confident in your own abilities is one of the key signs of grandiose narcissism and is also a core value of mental toughness. If a person is mentally tough, they are likely to embrace challenges, seeing them as opportunities for personal growth. So in some ways, narcissism might actually be a positive attribute!

Previous research has also found narcissism is linked to mental toughness, and other research has shown that those with greater mental fortitude perform better in school. This latest research suggests all three factors are linked and therefore, narcissism can be linked to better academic achievement.

Psychopathy and criminality

Psychopaths are different from the rest of us. I've known two in my life – one was a bald hypnotist who despite his whiter than white image was a secret cocaine and ecstasy addict who had an unhealthy interest in prostitutes and liked young girls to urinate on him. The other was someone with whom I was once in a relationship. So I know all about psychopaths and their behaviour because I've had plenty of first hand experience.

A lot of people have had brushes with psychopaths at some stage in their lives, and they didn't realise it until it was too late. Psychopaths are so different they've merited their very own separate area of study.

The psychopath is defined as someone who has no empathy for their fellow human beings, yet the psychopath is able to exploit the empathy of others – they have a finely tuned ability to spot weaknesses in those they think they can use and have no hesitation in exploiting that knowledge and take pleasure in the targeted destruction of their prey. They are master manipulators who are able to maintain an amicable front to hide their ruthless treachery. They can be captains of industry, politicians, criminals or even members of your own family. They are the ultimate predators and the latest research shows that they have other unique personality distinctions.

According to a recent study, violent psychopathic criminals may be unable to learn from punishment due to abnormalities in key parts of their brain. Brain scans of violent offenders show that those with psychopathic tendencies react differently when confronted with punishment or a negative reaction to their behaviour. This could be why psychopaths do not benefit from rehabilitation programs while other violent but non-psychopathic criminals sometimes do.

When punished, brain scans of psychopathic criminals showed significantly increased abnormal activation in the bilateral posterior cingulate cortex compared to other violent non-psychopathic offenders. Around one in five violent offenders are thought to be psychopathic and they are known to have higher rates of reoffending.

In the non-violent spectrum, psychopaths experience no feelings of guilt when caught. They will lie convincingly and are able to justify their actions, if only to themselves. Getting caught is the only thing that makes them feel remorse, but don't be fooled... they are remorseful only because their self-image has been damaged. They will then likely embark on a course of targeted revenge against those they perceive to have been responsible for their undoing – before they carry on with their old ways, regardless of any penalties or restrictions imposed on them.

Serial killers are portrayed as cold, calculating and obsessive. Research has found that these traits may be linked to specific psychological disorders and childhood trauma. By analysing reports, legal files and journals from killers – including Anders Breivik and Harold Shipman – they found that 28% of high profile killers were thought to have suffered from Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In contrast, only around 1% of the general law abiding population is thought to suffer from the condition. There were additional reports that claimed 20% had suffered a 'definite or suspected' head injury in the past. Of those killers with ASD and/or a head injury, more than half had previously experienced psycho-social stress such as sexual or physical abuse and/or parental divorce.

The research concluded there is a probability that more than 10% of serial killers, across the worldwide population, show signs of ASD, and a similar proportion had at some stage received head injuries. The researchers believe there is a distinct possibility that this combination could potentially result in an individual being predisposed to progress into becoming a mass murderer.

The research scientists found that the psychopaths had reduced levels of grey matter and abnormal amounts of white matter in areas of the brain that are involved in learning from reward and punishment – in other words, the ability to apply principle.

The researchers, whose work was published in the journal *Lancet Psychiatry*, conducted MRI scans on 12 violent male psychopathic criminal offenders and 20 male non-psychopathic violent offenders in the UK. The men had all been convicted of murder, rape, attempted murder and grievous bodily harm and were recruited with the assistance of the probation service. They were asked to complete a task that involved matching pairs of images of animals or furniture displayed on a screen when they were in the MRI scanner.

The same test was also conducted on 18 healthy non-offenders.

University of Montreal Professor Sheilagh Hodgins, who was also involved in the study, said learning from punishment was an important part of regulating behaviour.

Psychopathic offenders seem only consider the positive consequences of their actions and fail to take account of the likely negative consequences. Consequently, their behaviour often leads to punishment rather than the reward they expected. Punishment normally teaches people to change behaviour, but psychopaths offenders have difficulty learning that principle.

What strikes me most about this research is not so much that it confirms what I always suspected to be the case, but the startling similarity between the behaviour of psychopaths and drug addicts. Again, I have had some experience with heroin addicts – I worked with several addicts in the mid 1980s. I soon realised that addicts have no conscience and no empathy, that they do not learn from their mistakes and appear unable to predict outcomes.

Addicts are unable to predict or recognise loss, such as the consequences of a break-up or being sent to jail, because heroin appears to change the way their brain functions. While on the drug, their behaviour is both illogical and reckless. Even when engaged in criminal activity, such as stealing to get money to buy more drugs, they are willing to take huge and unnecessary risks, even staling from family members.

According to a study carried out in New York, researchers found cocaine addicts continue their destructive drug habit even in the face of huge personal setbacks because the parts of the brain responsible for predicting emotional loss become severely impaired.

The study recorded the brain activity of 75 people, 50 of whom were cocaine users with a further 25 non-users making up the control group. Wired up to an electroencephalogram (EEG) each of the test subjects played a gambling game on a computer. Each player had to predict whether or not they would win or lose money on each game.

The study, published in the *Journal of Neuroscience*, focused on the difference between a likely reward or loss, and a person's ability to predict that outcome. This measurement is known as Reward/Prediction/Error, or RPE.

RPE signalling is believed to drive learning in humans because it guides future behaviour.

After learning from one mistake, people usually modify their behaviour without having to learn from the same mistake twice. Previous research has shown that predictions of actual reward or loss are managed by changes in dopamine levels that accompany unexpected gains and losses.

Results showed that the group of cocaine users suffered impaired loss prediction, which meant they failed to trigger RPE signals in response to worse than expected outcomes.

The findings offer insights into the compromised ability of addicts to learn from their mistakes – in other words, they are unable to apply principle, which results in continued drug use even after suffering major losses such as arrest and imprisonment.

A separate study, led by Doctor Muhammad Parvaz, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Icahn School of Medicine in the US found that those who were addicted to cocaine had impaired loss prediction signalling in the brain. This study also showed that those with substance use disorder had difficulty computing the difference between expected and unexpected outcomes, critical for learning and future decision making. This impairment might be responsible for the poor decision making in these individuals. In other words, addicts don't learn and are unable to apply principle.

The study also took into consideration how 'high' the addicts were when they took the test. Half the group had used cocaine within 3 days of the study whilst the other half had abstained for at least 3 days. The addicts who had been using cocaine had a higher level of electrical activity in the brain's reward circuits when they had an unpredicted win. This pattern was similar to the 25 healthy control subjects. Conversely, the addicts who had abstained for at least 72 hours did not display the higher activity in response to an unpredicted win.

The researchers said these findings support the hypothesis that in addicts, the drug normalises certain brain functions, in this case RPE signalling of better-than-expected outcomes.

So what the psychopaths have in common is they are unable to practice any form of self-control. It could be argued that psychopaths are born like that and don't have a choice, whereas addicts *did* have a choice. However, in either case, the end result is the same – a failure to regulate their antisocial behaviour.

To this fine research I would like to add a further comment of my own: It is my own experience that people who are addicted to any kind of drug, whether it be illegal or legal (such as alcohol) or prescription, have one thing in common. They all display symptoms of poor decision making together with carelessness, recklessness and a complete disregard for what others – even those close to them – may want or expect.

These bad behaviour patterns are not difficult to spot. Whether it be drug abuse or gambling or alcoholism, some addicts set themselves on the path to self-destruction. No one forces them to take drugs or to get drunk – they are all adults and know what they are doing.

While on drugs, users cease to mature mentally. Their minds become locked at the age they started taking the drugs, which is why many of them seem childish and immature. In other words they stop 'growing up'. There are things that can be done to help them, but only if they want to be helped, which usually they don't. The really difficult decision, and one that seems to have been glossed over by our leaders and perhaps society in general, is whether the rest of us should have to continue to put up with it.

Sociopaths – ten tell tale signs

While psychopaths are classified as people with little or no conscience, sociopaths do have a limited, albeit weak, ability to feel empathy and remorse.

Four in every 100 people can be classed as sociopaths – that's 275 million sociopaths worldwide! It's highly likely there's one living, working or socialising with you! You are likely to come into contact with them more frequently than you think. If you recognise any of the patterns below, you may have already been a victim...

Sociopaths and narcissists live to dominate others and are obsessed with winning – and at any cost, as long as it's not to themselves. They have a natural, innate ability to excel anywhere ruthlessness is rewarded, in the same way that some people have a natural talent for music or sport, and they are driven, duplicitous and vengeful when they get caught.

Recent research has brought us a new and shocking understanding of what this serious emotional disability is – what causes it, how prevalent it is, and how studying it helps us to understand the connections between the twisted psyche and the rest of society.

So here are a few pointers. If anyone you know scores more than 50% on the list below – *beware!*

1. The sociopath's most deadly weapon is the charm offensive – but be warned... it's superficial charm and lacks even an atom of sincerity. Sociopaths are accomplished actors. Smooth, engaging, charming, flattering... a sociopath will never be tongue tied or embarrassed. They are fond of quoting from movies or books – this is because despite their manipulative skills, they don't have an original thought of their own.

As charming as they are, they also have a great desire to be respected, even adored, by others. Some stoop to hints of the way they were allegedly abused at the hands of others, spinning dreadful tales of their own imaginary traumas – something that is guaranteed to elicit sympathy and therefore assistance from the uninitiated.

2. An over-inflated sense of self worth. Sociopaths believe they are superior human beings, often portraying themselves as having some deep intelligence, pretending to possess some great insight that others lack. Some of them even pretend to have qualifications – a phoney PhD is a common one – bought from a dodgy online American 'university'. Nonetheless, they feign modesty, admitting to being 'a bit of a nerd'. They use self-effacement as a tool to manipulate others' opinion of them.

3. Prone to boredom. They have a need to be constantly stimulated, yet they rarely engage in long-term hobbies or pastimes. They have an inability to hold down long-term relationships, referring to their latest conquests as 'stunners' or 'Brazilian beauties' or the like. This is because, despite their apparent charm, they are shallow human beings with nothing to add to the collective knowledge of humanity.

4. Pathological liars. Sociopaths are deceptive and dishonest and they can lie to your face with heartfelt sincerity – and to prove their point, they will win your confidence by displaying a faux-genuine interest in you – they will laugh at all your jokes and will appear to feel your pain. They will also agree with everything you say!

5. Master manipulators. They will say and do anything to deceive and cheat others. This is their one true hobby and this skill has been honed to perfection, the result of years of practice. They are adept in enlisting the sympathy of others, to whom they will be the very embodiment of goodness itself. Often they will play the part of the victim to gain the sympathy of people they wish to recruit to their particular cause.

6. Lack of remorse. Sociopaths have no sense of the suffering of their victims. On the contrary, they *enjoy* the suffering of their victims. To them, this sort of domination is better than sex. It's often payback for all the times they were frustrated or snubbed in childhood, and their victims are often substitutes for the person who abused them when they were children.

7. Limited range of feelings. Don't expect them to express any emotion other than happiness or sadness because there *is* nothing in between. Everyone they meet is either 'wonder-filled' or 'low class' unless of course it's someone they can use. Sociopaths use people and throw them away like Kleenex.

8. Callousness. Sociopaths are cold and contemptuous of others. This is an emotion (or lack of emotion) they are skilled at concealing. The pretence of the caring humanistic butter-wouldn't-melt persona is kept up at all times – even to the person they are busy destroying – and that's part of the fun!

9. Parasitic lifestyle. Sociopaths are often financially dependent on others. They trade off time and 'caring' for financial security, and they will very soon know more about your finances than you do yourself.

10. Can't control their behaviour. When challenged, sociopaths become angry and vengeful. This is the only real emotion they are capable of experiencing.

Sometimes they get their lawyers to bury you under an avalanche of litigation. Refusing to let you see your children. This is a common lever and again, something that gives them orgasmic pleasure.

Where they have been found out, you run the very great risk of becoming their new hobby, and they will involve themselves in that to the point of obsession.

So be warned! Better still... be prepared!

Spot the Narcissist!



Left: Narcissus, by the artist Caravaggio.

Narcissism is characterised by grandiosity, pride, egotism and a lack of empathy. Symptoms include an excessive need for admiration, disregard for others' feelings, an inability to handle criticism and a sense of entitlement.

Extreme narcissism can cross into a mental illness called narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and is found more commonly in men. The cause is unknown but likely involves a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

Narcissists are more likely to be aggressive and violent because their poor resistance to criticism causes them react badly if they feel they've been disrespected. They are also more likely to be cold, deliberate and proactive in their aggression, and not particularly picky when it comes to how they attack those who try to belittle them. Narcissism is linked to bullying, and social media has provided the perfect platform for that behaviour.

There is a strong link between narcissism and aggression, regardless of gender, age or cultural background, characterised by an overblown sense of self-importance, with entitlement the key component.

Narcissism has two peripheral components: grandiose – those with high self-esteem – and vulnerable – those with low self-esteem – and both these components are linked to aggression.

Narcissism does not have to be at levels high enough to be pathological. The link between narcissism and violence is nearly as strong as its link with less serious forms of aggression – some research suggests that narcissism might be a risk factor for extremely violent acts such as mass shootings.

Narcissists were more likely than others to be aggressive whether they were provoked or not, the study found, but the risk for aggression was significantly higher when they felt provoked, such as being ignored or disrespected.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) falls on a spectrum: you can score high, low or anywhere in between on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. There are nine official

criteria for narcissism but you only need to meet five to clinically qualify as a narcissist. These are:

1. **An exaggerated sense of self-importance.** People with NPD often wildly exaggerate their achievements and talents.
2. **A sense of entitlement.** They insist on having the best of everything, they expect special favours from others and have difficulty remembering to say thank you and are indignant if anyone dares to question why.
3. **A need for constant, excessive admiration.** Narcissists expect to be recognised as superior and very knowledgeable, often without any achievements or qualifications to warrant it. They react badly to criticism and become angry when they don't get the attention they think they deserve.
4. **A preoccupation with fantasies about success, power, brilliance and the perfect mate.** They're often depressed or moody because they fall short of perfection, something that can lead to problems with drugs or alcohol. This is one of their weaknesses.
5. **A belief that they are superior, special and unique and should only associate with equally special people.** They belittle people they consider inferior. Narcissists will put others down to make themselves feel superior – even your close friends or family.
6. **They engage in interpersonal exploitative behaviour.** They take advantage of others to get what they want.
7. **A lack of empathy for others.** They are incapable and unwilling to recognise the needs and feelings of others.
8. **Envious of others or believe others are envious of them.** They're constantly measuring themselves against others to see if they come out on top. They secretly wish others to be envious of them, for instance, they often indulge in displays of wealth and they often crave public recognition. They're constantly engaged in competition with others and will do anything to come out on top. Many narcissists crave to be seen as some kind of Messiah in their own field.
9. **Arrogant and haughty behaviour.** Narcissists come across as conceited, boastful and pretentious. Secretly, narcissists feel insecure, shameful, vulnerable and often humiliated. This can mean suicidal thoughts or behaviour. It most certainly means they have relationship difficulties with everyone.

Social media has made it much easier for us to keep up with the latest news of our friends, wherever they may be, and of course all the latest gossip.

Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have revolutionised not only the way we communicate but also the way we see each other and ourselves... or more accurately how we wish ourselves to be seen by others. [I use my Facebook page only as an instrument to publicise my events.]

There is however, another and less attractive facet to this revolution in social media, and it's given us an opportunity to play a new kind of game. It's a game for psychologists everywhere, professional and amateur, and it's called '*Spot the Narcissist*'.

Just to give you the background on this, Narcissus – an ancient character of Greek

mythology – loved himself so much that resting by a pool one day, he fell in love with his own reflection and was unable to tear himself away, and as a consequence, starved to death.

So now you have read these first few lines, your mind is going over all the people you know who use Facebook to post lots and lots of selfies!

But people who post lots of selfies, and I mean the people who consistently post flattering pictures of themselves, may be displaying psychopathic traits. People who regularly post selfies are more likely to be not only narcissistic, but also more likely to be impulsive and have other characteristics linked to psychopathology, including lack of empathy for others.

This kind of self-objectification may be a bigger problem for men than previously thought, although it's also a problem for lots of women too, with many taking the time to use artificial means (for example spending an inordinate amount of time on makeup, composition and even Photoshop) to improve portraits before posting them.

It is important not to become confused here... It would be disingenuous to say the advent of photographic social media has caused more people to become narcissistic, but more accurate say that social media has accidentally exposed people who *are* narcissistic. Who would have guessed that Facebook would be used as a research tool by psychologists?

But this unexpected consequence of the extensive use of social media has set alarm bells ringing.

Research psychologists at Ohio State University found that men who doctored selfies regularly scored higher than average for tell-tale levels of antisocial traits such as narcissism and self-objectification. These findings were published in the specialist science journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

Of course, narcissism is usually associated with vanity, something we can all be prone to from time to time, especially in the entertainment industry, but if carried too far can be classed as a psychological flaw or even in extreme cases, mental illness. If left unchecked, it can lead to feelings of being more intelligent, attractive, better than everyone else and the perception that one is on a higher plane than the rest of humanity.

The researchers in Ohio also believe that those who indulge in self-objectification, in particular, the habit of posting the selfie as soon as possible, are more likely to show signs of psychopathy, which is defined as having a lack of empathy or regard for others, together with impulsiveness. Psychopathy is characterised by impulsivity and impulsive selfie addicts need to see themselves online as soon as possible. In addition, selfie addicts also display other symptoms of psychopathy, such as selfishness and self-absorption.

The researchers, did not come to their conclusions lightly. They carried out a survey of 800 men aged between 18 and 40 and asked them a series of questions related to their social media habits. The volunteers filled out questionnaires to establish both general and specific personality traits. The survey included questions such as '*how often do you post pictures on sites like Instagram and Twitter*' and '*do you Photoshop your selfies first?*'

It comes as no big surprise that men who post a lot of selfies and spend time editing them are more narcissistic and more prone to self-objectification. More interesting is the finding that they also score higher on another test designed to spot antisocial personality traits and psychopathy.

Self-objectification can lead to more serious psychological issues, amongst them

depression, eating disorders (especially in young women) self-harm and even suicide as – and again women are more at risk here than men – people are becoming increasingly obsessed with their own image. It would be fair to say that this obsession is fuelled by the ‘skinny-thin’ culture.

One should note that it is unlikely that this self-image problem is exclusive to physical appearance. There are countless Facebook pages whose owners boast about and over inflate their importance, achievements and earnings even to the point of telling lies. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that obsessive of posting selfies *is* linked to mental illness, if not a separate category of mental illness in its own right.

Psychologists are beginning to understand that people who spend inordinate amounts of time taking photograph after photograph in an effort to get the perfect most flattering image with which to portray themselves could actually be ill. Sure, fashion photographers can take literally hours over a shoot for a glossy fashion magazine, but that’s rather different. Selfie addicts can spend hours trying to take pictures that do not show any defects or flaws in their appearance - flaws which they are very aware of but which might be unnoticeable to others.

Perhaps the problem is of a more general nature – that there is too much pressure on individuals, especially young girls and young women to attain the perfect physiques of stick-thin supermodels. Psychiatrists who find themselves dealing more and more regularly with girls suffering from anorexia and Body Dysmorphic Disorder are beginning to realise that a disconcerting majority of these patients take a lot of selfies.

Dr David Veale, a consultant psychiatrist at the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust and The Priory Hospital claims that two out of every three Body Dysmorphic Disorder patients have an underlying compulsion to repeatedly take and post selfies on social media sites. He further claims that taking selfies is not just an addiction but a symptom of Body Dysmorphic Disorder that involves constantly checking one’s appearance and at the very least it could be that obsessing over one’s image is a clear symptom of confidence related mental health issues.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is often used to help patients moderate their obsessive behaviour relating to their appearance. They might want to try hypnotherapy, but not even I am sure it would do any good because for hypnotherapy to be successful, the patient has to first recognise there is a problem. Most sufferers of anorexia for example are simply unable to see that their appearance is abnormal, let alone understand they are ill.

But is the problem really more serious for men than it is for women? In one extreme case, a British teenager, Danny Bowman, tried to commit suicide because he was dissatisfied with his appearance in the selfies he took. He was so desperate to attract girls, he spent 10 hours a day taking more than 200 selfies trying to find the perfect image, but his habit, which began at the age of 15, caused him to drop out of school and lose almost two stone in weight.

In an article for Psychology Today, Dr Pamela Rutledge, Director of the Media Psychology Research Centre in Boston Massachusetts, said *‘Selfies frequently trigger perceptions of self-indulgence or attention seeking social dependence that raises the ‘damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t’ spectre of either narcissism or very low self-esteem’*.

Which brings us neatly to the former President of the United States, Donald Trump...

Was Trump a Narcissist? The sun-bed orange look and comb-over hairstyle might be a giveaway, but his bombastic style, which reduced every utterance to the simplicity of the lowest common denominator was more a function of his own language skills. In Trump's world, every problem had a simple answer. But lack of sophistication is not narcissism – it's just poor language skills.

But for some observers, the posturing and disregard for any version of the truth other than his own were evidence that this president was a full-blown narcissist who had excessive interest in himself and little empathy for others. A few clinicians went further, actually diagnosing him with narcissistic personality disorder.

But leaving aside the questionable ethics of making a diagnosis without an examination, I have to disagree – for a diagnosis of 'personality disorder', there must be evidence that the individual's life is severely affected and causes them distress and impairment, which was clearly not the case with the ebullient President Trump. In fact, this discrepancy is at the heart of a fierce debate in psychiatry about narcissism in general. Should it even be considered a psychiatric condition when it confers so many advantages on the 'victim'?

In the U.S., narcissism is a legitimate diagnosis of a mental disorder, but it is not a legitimate diagnosis in the UK which follows the diagnostic guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO). The WHO takes the view that people can be narcissists without being mentally ill.

Key indicators of a narcissistic personality include grandiosity and an expectation of superior treatment by others, a fixation with power, success, intelligence and attractiveness, a self-perception of being special, a need for approval, exploiting others to achieve personal gain, an unwillingness to engage with the needs of others, and so on.

Trump certainly displays many of these characteristics, but then, so do many politicians and celebrities to varying degrees. Most of the 'high-flyers' I've come across ticked a few of the boxes, if not most of them.

In fact, far from being negative, narcissism helps people get on in life. A steely belief in yourself and what you're capable of is an essential ingredient in actually achieving things – and so is self-confidence and determination.

Of course, it's a delicate balance, and an excess of these qualities will no doubt alienate some people, but I frequently see the damage the opposite of this behaviour can cause – that is, crushingly low self-confidence and feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. Low self-esteem makes us highly vulnerable to the comments and actions of others. It underpins conditions such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

While consideration of others is important, all too often I see those whose problems stem from a failure to prioritise their own needs. People stuck in dead-end relationships or jobs they hate because they feel they can't do any better, or those who feel obliged to do things out of a misplaced sense of duty and then feel frustrated and angry. I've seen countless clients who don't feel they are deserving of happiness or success and who feel trapped and powerless.

Much of the work psychiatrists and psychotherapists do is designed to instil a little bit of narcissism to ignite some sense of self-worth. While there is much that I find objectionable about The Donald's behaviour, there are many people who might just benefit from a touch of 'the Trumps' to motivate them and get their lives back on track.

Narcissists however are more likely to be politically active. Researchers found individuals who displayed classic narcissistic traits such as selfishness, entitlement and a need for admiration were more likely to sign petitions, reach out to elected officials and vote.

People who are more interested in their own personal gain and status take a greater part in elections, then the candidates themselves are bound to emerge who reflect their ideas. Sander Thomaes – a developmental psychologist at Utrecht University – called Donald Trump a 'prototypical narcissist', exhibiting a grandiose self image, an overinflated ego, an insatiable need for attention and admiration, a tendency to lash out when criticised, and a tendency blame others for their failures.

Successful democratic functioning requires trust in institutions and engagement in the democratic process. If those who are more narcissistic are the most engaged, there is a danger that the political process itself is driven by narcissism.

Research from 2018 indicated narcissists believe democracy is bad for society, and preferred a totalitarian leader to take charge. For the record, I am a great admirer of Vladimir Putin because he get's things done! When the former Soviet Union imploded after 70 years of communist mismanagement and failure, Putin transformed Russia from basket case to the world's second most powerful country. Putin was the only world leader to emerge from the Syria debacle with dignity. Putin stabilised the Russian economy and rebuilt its military. On the world stage, Vladimir Putin commands respect.

According to scientists from the University of Kent, high levels of narcissism predicted decreased support for democracy while people who trusted others were more likely to endorse democracy, something which requires the ability to respect the views and opinions of others, even if one disagrees with them'. A 2018 study published in the *American Journal of Political Science* found that conservatives and liberals were equally narcissistic but express their beliefs in different ways.

Narcissists are also more likely to believe in Conspiracy Theories. For example, people who doubt the moon landings were real are more likely to be selfish and attention-seeking.

Over the course of three online-based studies, researchers at the University of Kent showed strong links between the belief in conspiracy theories and negative psychological traits. Reported in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, the team explained that '*Previous research linked the endorsement of conspiracy theories to low self-esteem.*'

In the first study, a total of 202 participants completed questionnaires on conspiracy beliefs, asking how strongly they agreed with specific statements, such as whether governments carried out acts of terrorism on their own soil. Additionally, they were asked to complete a narcissist scale and a self-esteem assessment, and the results showed that those people who rated highly on the narcissism scale and who had low self-esteem were more likely to believe conspiracy theories.

Personality plays a big part in a person's willingness to adhere to social distancing and other Covid related rules. Researchers found people with psychopathic personality traits such as meanness are more likely to disregard official advice.

An assessment of more than 500 Americans compared adherence to narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, as well as agreeableness and conscientiousness. The study found a high psychopathic score was linked to a tendency to ignore and breach public health rules. People who scored highly for meanness and disinhibition were also

more likely to touch or sneeze on regularly used surfaces in public. According to the report in *PsyPost*, people scoring high on these traits tended to claim that if they had Covid, they might knowingly or deliberately expose others to it.

The data was collected online between March 20 and 23 – before the pandemic became extremely politicised in the US. Previous research has also found people expressing the Dark triad traits sometimes deliberately put the health of others at risk, including unsafe sexual practices while infected with HIV or other STDs.

A separate study from the Universidade São Francisco in Brazil and published in April 2021 found that extroversion was also a measure of a person's tendency to stick to social distancing. Higher scores for extroversion were associated with lower means for social distancing and higher scores for conscientiousness were associated with higher means for social distancing and hand-washing.

Calling someone a narcissist is generally taken as an insult, but the label could be attractive for potential employers. According to a report in *PsyPost*, researchers in China have linked narcissistic personality traits to higher energy levels in the work place and also better regarded by supervisors. People with more narcissistic personality traits tended to take leadership roles more readily than other workers, whether asked to or not, often taking the initiative in the work space. This trait could be fuelled by the desire for status and esteem that narcissists have. Narcissists are also less likely to experience depression and exhibit higher levels of mental toughness.

The 2019 Queen's University Belfast study claimed narcissists were 'horrible but happier' people. Mentally tougher they are more likely to embrace challenges head-on, rather than viewing them as a hurdle.

A new study may explain what motivates the 'self-focused nature of social media' – and people who constantly post selfies on Instagram.

From a survey of nearly 300 people, a team from New York University's Department of Psychology found that narcissistic behaviour is linked to 'vulnerable narcissism'.

Vulnerable narcissism can manifest itself as self-promoting behaviours – such as constant selfies – but is due to low self-esteem and extreme sensitivity to criticism. According to the study, narcissism is not 'self-love' driven by an inflated sense of the self, but 'self-loathing in disguise'.

For a long time, it was unclear why narcissists engage in unpleasant behaviours, such as self-congratulation, as it actually makes others think less of them. The behaviour has become prevalent in the age of social media – and has been called 'flexing'. These narcissists are not grandiose, but insecure, and this is how they seem to cope with their insecurities'.

The psychologists sought to refine the understanding of how these conditions relate, by creating a 'performative self-elevation index' (FLEX) that captures 'genuinely narcissistic behaviour'. For the purposes of the study, FLEX can be seen as essentially a proxy of how likely one is to post lots of selfies on social media.

Researchers used data from 270 participants – 60% female and 40% male, and with an average age of 20. FLEX, as well as the two types of narcissism and psychopathy, were calculated for each participant, based on their rankings of how true or false a series of statements were.

FLEX was shown to be made up of four components:

- Impression management – 'I am likely to show off if I get the chance'
- the need for social validation – 'It matters that I am seen at important events'
- self-elevation – 'I have exquisite taste'
- and social dominance – I like knowing more than other people.

Overall, the results showed high correlations between FLEX and narcissism – but not with psychopathy.

For example, the need for social validation (a FLEX metric) correlated with the reported tendency to engage in performative self-elevation, a characteristic of vulnerable narcissism. By contrast, measures of psychopathy, such as elevated levels of self-esteem, didn't really correlate with vulnerable narcissism, implying a lack of insecurity.

The findings suggest that genuine narcissists are insecure and are best described by the vulnerable narcissism subtype, whereas grandiose narcissism might be better understood as a manifestation of psychopathy. The results suggest that narcissism is better understood as a compensatory adaptation to overcome and cover up low self-worth. In the long term, this behaviour is likely to make others like them less, thus further aggravating their insecurities, which then leads to a vicious cycle of flexing behaviours.

The study was published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

There are ways of dealing with narcissists:

- Always remark on what they are doing well. Give them compliments without mocking them as that will avoid them making demeaning comments back.
- Everything you say to them must include something positive. If you need to remind them about a deadline, remember to add something like 'I can't wait to read what you've written'.
- Pay them attention. If you don't give them enough they will think you are criticising them. Remember to always respond to their emails and correspondences quickly as it makes them think you respect them.
- Don't act out of anger. You risk being bullied by them if you get on their bad side. Catering for them is a necessity because the alternatives will be worse!
- Reflect the person's emotions back to them. Remember that narcissism is based on insecurity. Remind them that work is challenging for everyone and don't single them out as struggling with something.

Bully bully...

Bullying happens everywhere and in every walk of life.

Bullying is more widespread than you would think, and difficult to tackle, partly because bullies don't always realise they are bullies!

Common behaviour to watch out for are:

- Someone is being repeatedly upset by someone else. If this person gets angry a lot, or complains about the behaviour of the one doing the bullying, these reactions should be taken seriously.
- Bullies lack empathy and they don't always recognise that. They can get aggressive, including shouting, threatening or humiliating someone with disparaging comments in front of others or making passive aggressive comments, such as *'Oh, that's interesting... well best of luck with that one...'*
- Bullies thrive around insecure people – they make themselves feel better by creating discomfort or insecurity in a colleague. A classic sign of bullying, for example, is persistently picking on someone or deliberately setting them up to fail or spreading malicious rumours. Spreading rumours could make someone's life a living hell – costing them professional and social success.
- Bullies often misuse their position in the social or work hierarchy to misuse their power, for example, intentionally blocking someone's promotion or taking away duties and responsibilities without explanation or deliberately and persistently ignoring or excluding someone from joint collaborations and social events.

Bullying was first investigated in Norway in 1973, and it used the word 'mobbing' to describe it, but academics still disagree about how bullying should be conceptualised and defined. Generally speaking, bullying is carried out either by an individual or a group, repeatedly over time, and with an intent to hurt an individual.

Bullies have traditionally been viewed as having a low IQ and lacking in social cognition, but this isn't always the case, and may contribute to people failing to recognise themselves as bullies. Some researchers have found evidence that bullies actually score high in their social information processing abilities, as it takes a certain amount of skill to recognise who to target. Bullies often seek out people with low self-esteem to pick on and in doing so, they maintain their standing and increase their confidence, which in turn raises their own self-esteem to unrealistically high levels.

In the UK, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) reported receiving 20,000 calls from workers related to bullying and harassment in 2016, many of whom were from ethnic minorities employed in the public sector or women who worked in traditionally male-dominated professions. The real figures however may be much greater because bullying is not always reported, for fear of retaliation or because the person affected might not realise they are being bullied. Victims often blame themselves, not realising they are in reality, being abused.

Bullying is especially likely to take place in stressful workplaces with poor leadership and a culture that rewards aggressive, competitive behaviour, and it can trigger an array of mental health issues including depression, burnout, increased absenteeism, low self-

esteem and stress. Employers who do not provide a safe environment for their employees are in fact breaking the law.

While most countries have some sort of policy on bullying in place – Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden, France and Denmark are amongst the most enlightened countries, a more concerted effort is needed to recognise how widespread the problem is, and to deal with it effectively. Educating people about bullying is a positive step and will also create a safer environment for victims to come forward.

People who show signs of being addicted to social media sites such as Facebook and Snapchat are more likely to use the platforms to embarrass and anger others.

Researchers at Michigan State University, led by Dr Dar Meshi, studied how long 472 university students spent on Facebook and Snapchat as well as what drove the people to use the platforms and discovered that those who are more obsessed with social media are also more likely to use the sites for cruel and callous purposes.

Researchers asked participants to fill out a questionnaire that measured which social media interactions they most enjoyed and any 'problematic use' – defined as use of social media as 'when users display symptoms that are similar to substance use disorders', including conflict with other users and relapsing when trying to remove themselves from social networking sites.

Problematic social networking site users display aberrations in decision making as well as reward-related brain function and structure. The kind of interactions the researchers quizzed the participants on included admiration, passivity, prosocial interactions, sexual relationships, sociability and negative social potency – something which has previously been linked to the so-called 'Dark Triad' of personality traits.

The last option – negative social potency – which is people's desire to be cruel, callous and use others for personal gain – was where researchers found an interesting relationship. Remarkably, they discovered a correlation between problematic use on both platforms and negative social potency. People who used Snapchat a lot were found to be strongly linked with negative social potency, admiration from others and sociability. However, for Facebook, the only behaviour positively correlated with problematic Facebook use was negative social potency.

The results demonstrate that individuals who have a greater preference for these types of rewards display greater problematic use of both platforms and these traits are also associated with narcissism and psychopathy and have previously been associated with addictive internet use.

Social media sites unwittingly 'cater to people who seek rewards from being cruel, through cyberbullying or various aggressive online behaviours'. Both Facebook and Snapchat have separate features that make users want to keep coming back and using the platforms.

The study published in the journal *Addictive Behaviors Reports*.

Escaping a psychopathic relationship

When you first meet your toxic partner, they will appear the very model of perfection – the perfect soulmate... kind, thoughtful, caring, loving and totally supportive. But this will soon change, giving way to testing boundaries to see how much you will take. There will be warning signs, but of course you'll be so in love with them, you will ignore their faults, hoping that things will return to the way they were at the start. But over time, they will slowly break down your self-respect.

Toxic partners don't love in the same way normal people love... they see you as something they own. They are supremely jealous of potential rivals, envious of your success, and resent you for it. In effect, they're imposing their own insecurities on you. They need constant reassurance and over time your behaviour will adapt to accommodate their demands... They will control the way you dress, who you speak to, the kind of food you eat, which movies you will watch... In time, you'll find yourself living in fear of doing anything wrong.

If all this sounds familiar, the chances are your partner is suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder – NPD – a psychological condition where people have an inflated idea of their own importance, a deep need for constant attention and admiration, and a complete disregard of what others may want or need. In short, they are selfish, self-centred, self-absorbed, and tragically low on empathy.

Narcissists often appear special or outstanding in some way – better looking, more talented, intelligent, moneyed, charismatic – but it's all an act. Beneath the surface they're not quite as extraordinary as they pretend to be. Their charm will draw you in, but they will keep you there by constantly chipping away at your own self-esteem.

Why would anyone be attracted to someone with such appalling characteristics in the first place? The answer is, like other abusers, they're good at disguising their true selves. It takes time to recognise the warning signs and patterns of behaviour and even longer to accept that they will *never* change.

It's not entirely clear what causes NPD. Parents who were excessively adoring or excessively critical, genes and neurobiology are possible theories. The most likely explanation is that at least in part, it is a learned behaviour, a specialised survival strategy based on selfishness and domination. However, while the causes are sometimes unclear, there are characteristics that are easy to recognise.

The first, and most obvious clue that your relationship is toxic, is that it is generally speaking, deeply unsatisfying. Narcissists only talk about themselves and their own achievements and have very little interest in your life! Try to talk to your partner about your own interests or needs, and within a sentence or two, they will hijack the conversation back to themselves – and make no mistake, narcissism exists in both men and women!

The first thing to understand about narcissists is that they are themselves insecure, which is why they feel they have to control and manipulate others. In reality, they have very low self-worth, which is why they need constant validation and need to be in control of people and situations. But... narcissists are also vulnerable to criticism and easily humiliated, in fact the thing they fear the most is to be found out and exposed as the frauds they really are. If this happens, they will stop at nothing to get even and punish anyone who dares to

question their brilliance. This is the tell-tale trademark of the narcissist. Most people caught showing off will be mildly embarrassed and stop immediately, but a narcissist will be incensed. If you question their accomplishments – which you might want to, since they are usually exaggerated and embellished – this will be taken as a massive affront to their dignity and they are likely to seek a swift and terrible revenge.

Narcissists are not rules-based people – rules are for other people. This behaviour goes beyond merely sailing close to the wind, they have a flagrant disregard for rules they don't agree with and will ignore rules they think are stupid, dragging you down with them when they get caught.

Relationships that seem too good to be true at first usually are. Your new partner will sweep you off your feet... at the start. They will complement, praise, admire, and flatter. They will have never met anyone like you. They will compliment you on your beauty, or on your virility. They will claim they've never felt like this before. They will tell you they love you almost right from the start as they lavish you with attention, compliments and gifts.

It's never a good sign if someone comes on too strong, too soon... its a clear warning it won't last. Before long, the compliments will give way to criticism. Although they pretend to have respect for others, that's also been part of the act. In time, they will even start to turn you against your closest friends. Suddenly nothing will be satisfactory, no amount of effort will be good enough. Remember, this applies to men as well as women. In fact it's worse with narcissistic women because they will use sex as both an instrument of reward and punishment – even as a weapon should they not get their own way!

By the time you realise the person you fell in love with has a dark side, it can be too late. First come the sulks, the unreasonable demands, the mood swings. They never apologise, there's no negotiation and they're never wrong. Having invested so much time and energy in the relationship, you are now trapped in their world, with their rules – a world of broken promises where only one person matters – and that person clearly isn't you! All the time they will be trying to mould you into being the person they want you to be... obedient, subservient, unquestioning, and always at their beck and call.

Nothing you say or do will ever be good enough. Soon, you'll start doubting yourself, and then you'll start to believe everything is your fault. People with NPD lie about everything, often telling silly, pointless lies. When they're not telling lies, they content themselves with massaging the truth. If you confront them over it, they will twist your words and distort your reality to confuse you.

They won't care about your feelings. People with high scoring NPD simply don't have the skills to experience and show love. Often, this is because they have not experienced love themselves, especially as children, but they only care about you in relation to how it affects them – the only happiness that matters is their own.

When they say 'I love you', what they really mean is 'I love how you make *me* feel... I love seeing how much you love *me*... or 'I need something from you and saying '*I love you*' is how I will get it'.

As time goes on, they will inevitably become more and more demanding. A common trick is to accuse you of things they themselves are doing, thereby projecting their guilt onto you. If allowed to continue over a long period of time, this behaviour can cause extreme mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and PTSD.

Your attractiveness to them is based on whether or not you contribute to their dream of being universally admired. If you're good-looking, it makes them look and feel good to be seen with you. If you're wealthy and generous, they stand to gain by living off you. Often, they start relationships only because they're lonely or bored or want sex.

Narcissists often appear idealistic about love because they believe there's a perfect mate out there that they *could* love, someone who would mirror their own magnificence. The reason they're so appealing at the start, is because they think you could be this perfect mate. They'll smother you with attention and promises, but be warned... they'll throw you over the moment they see a flaw.

Most relationships will inevitably involve listening to, and sympathising with, your partner's problems. But narcissists don't have time for any of that, after all, their own problems are the ones that really matter. They don't do feelings, unless of course those feelings are their own, and they can't sympathise, even if you try to explain why you're upset because it's beyond them.

Before you know what's happened, your narcissistic partner will be controlling where you go, who you talk to, what you buy and even what friends you are allowed to see. Which gives us our next clue... narcissists have very few, if any, long term friends of their own. They have short term crushes on people they perceive to be useful or special but will drop them the moment they find someone better or they outlive their usefulness. They will immediately drop anyone who sees through them.

The main reason narcissists don't like commitment is because they're constantly on the lookout for something better, hence they are often unfaithful. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they often see two people at the same time. If they need to test out a prospective better bet, they will, and they will feel no remorse, unless of course they get caught, in which case, it will be your fault for not giving them the love and support they needed.

There's also another and unexpected trait with Narcissistic Personality Disorder. If you leave them, they will fight tooth and nail to get you back. Walking out on them is such an affront to their precious ego, they will beg and plead for you to come back. The truth is, they simply cannot handle rejection! So... they'll do whatever it takes to get the relationship back on track. And everything will be just fine and dandy for a few days, even a few weeks – the old charm will return and they'll make all the right noises – but rest assured, things will slowly and inevitably return to normal and you'll be back to square one.

If they think you're serious, and the relationship really is over, be aware that it almost certainly isn't! Even if you're no longer 'together', it has simply moved to the next phase. They will badmouth you to friends, they might troll you on social media and maybe even spread rumours. They'll even try to date your best friend. This won't last long because in their mind, your replacement will always be second best and even if they succeed, it won't last very long. Their main concern will be if you are comparing notes!

Even though you are no longer together, they will continue to try to manipulate you and even 'gaslight' you to make you feel like you are the one with the problem.

Whatever happens, don't fall into the trap of thinking you can change them, or that they will change themselves if you give them more love and attention (this is called being a doormat, by the way.)

Incredibly, recent research carried out by the University of Warsaw, discovered that narcissists actually *prefer* to date *other* narcissists because they believe that if they love someone enough, they can change anyone. Sorry... there is no cure for narcissism. It's a personality trait which is set in stone by the late teens.

In any event, a narcissist will never admit they have a problem, after all, they're perfect! Counselling won't work because any advice will be interpreted as criticism. If they do end up seeking help, it's only because they want you back.

If by any chance there are children involved, minimal contact, without emotion, is vital, but there's really only one solution and that is to get a big long stick and keep them firmly at the other end of it!

It's pointless trying to discuss why you're leaving them because they still won't get it. Any attempt at reasoning or argument is utterly pointless. Even more pointless is giving them another chance. The most important thing to recognise – and remember – is that *they will never change!*

The best – and only solution is to ignore them, but don't think that if they come back on their hands and knees begging to get back together, it might work this time, because it won't – and that's because *it never does!* Delete them from your social media and phone book and block their calls.

Instead, surround yourself with people who really do care about you and who are capable of love and empathy and affection. People who have been trapped in toxic relationships do go on to have happy and healthy relationships, because they had learned what is acceptable, and what isn't.

Therapy can give you the opportunity to understand what has happened and to process the trauma you've been through. It will help you examine the reasons you fell into the trap and why you ignored the warning signs.

Now you have to learn how to impose healthy boundaries to avoid falling into a similar trap in the future. It's ok to have self-worth and self-love, your own identity, and to understand who you are.

It's up to you to break the cycle of abuse, and once you've made up your mind, it's going to be easier than you think and kit will get easier – especially as you begin to comprehend what really happened and develop a perspective on the whole debacle. Your real friends will be supportive and after a short time, you'll be surprised how easy it is to get over it!

Switching your attention from your toxic ex and putting your energy into recovery will mean focusing on the future and setting goals. Severing all contact with your ex is the first step to ensure you can move on without them. Cutting them off is an essential part of recovery – no phone calls, texts, emails or social media!

Toxic people will do whatever it takes to get their victim back under their control so beware of empty promises – like everything they've said before, it's all a lie designed to put you back under their spell.

Socialising with friends and family are also healthy ways to replace the feelings you were craving from a relationship, although you should be wary of rushing into another relationship until you're ready – a toxic relationship can be damaging and you need to feel secure in yourself before allowing someone else in.

Being in the right place mentally and having healthy boundaries firmly in place is the best way to avoid falling into the same trap.

Knowing your self-worth and being able to recognise the warning signs in any future relationship is important.

Don't get caught on the rebound... rather, take things slowly because there will always be plenty of time. A normal person will respect you – they will respect boundaries and want to take things at a steady pace. What happened to you is not a life sentence, and nor should you allow it to be. Rather, it should be a lesson for the future. There will be plenty of time to get to know a person fully before committing yourself.

Most important... learn to love yourself before you love someone else... and remind yourself from time to time of all the good things in life!

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