

Psychopathy in One Page

The word '**psychopath**' is debated in psychology. It has come in and out of professional use since it was first coined in 1847. Since then, other substitute terms have been utilised, including **sociopath**, and (most recently) **antisocial personality disorder**. However, **psychopath** remains a popular description in the public mind concerning particularly aggressive individuals who are seen as threatening and dangerous. The condition has been known for a very long time. Indeed, there are even references analogous to psychopathy in the Bible's old testament.

It needs to be said that psychopathy is not a psychosis. That is to say, it is not a mental health disorder (such as schizophrenia for example) that can respond to drug and other treatments. Psychopathy is a problem of the personality itself, and therefore can be intractable in terms of treatment.

Psychopaths are characterised by a '**dark tetrad**' of behaviours: **(1) Arrogant and deceitful interpersonal style** (*superficial charm, inflated and grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying/deceit, and manipulation of others for personal gain*), **(2) Deficient affective experience** (*lack of remorse, shallowness, callousness and lack of empathy, and failure to accept responsibility for their own actions*), **(3) Impulsive and irresponsible lifestyle** (*sensation-seeking and risk-taking, irresponsible and unreliable behaviour, financially parasitic lifestyles*), and sometimes **(4) Sadism** (*taking pleasure in inflicting harm on others*).

Not all psychopaths are a physical risk to others. Some 'high functioning' psychopaths exhibit only the first three of the traits listed above, but lack overt sadism. Nevertheless, all psychopaths are initially experienced as very plausible and charming (even charismatic) individuals, who may well rise within their group or profession to leadership level. In such situations they may inflict devastation on organisations due to their callous disregard for the feelings of others. In addition, because psychopaths have little sense of moral responsibility, they may be blind to the negative impact they cause.

Counter-intuitively, psychopaths are not necessarily 'evil' people. To do evil things (and then to receive the opprobrium and punishment of society) implies that the individual fundamentally **understands** that moral rules apply to them. Consciousness of moral choices is essential to the concept of guilt. If one cannot 'feel' that doing something should bring about guilt, then it is difficult to argue with such an individual that they have done wrong. In the cognitive sense they may **know** what doing wrong means. They may **know** that their actions are harmful. But they have no internal sense of restriction to stop them from engaging in whatever impulse takes their fancy.

Hence those with psychopathic personalities are very difficult to cure. All that can be done (at present) is to monitor their behaviour and as necessary, separate them from the rest of society.