

The Complainers

A sociopath, by my definition, is anyone who has lost the ability to empathize with others. Pimps, con artists and serial killers are obvious sociopaths, but many with the disease are living among us, not breaking any laws, appearing as functional members of society. These are the ones most likely to cause us grief.

A common feature of these "everyday sociopaths" is that conflict tends to follow them wherever they go. Because they can't grasp the significance of other people's feelings, they are always ploughing over them. This isn't just a matter of inadvertently stepping on people's toes but deliberately stomping on them.

Why? It's the dynamics of the disease. Empathy—the ability to project oneself into the emotional position of another—is part of the natural human circuitry. In sociopaths, this circuitry has been burned out by childhood abuse. Their core self-esteem is so weak that they are constantly defending their own value and can't afford to put themselves in another's shoes.

Deprived of love in his childhood, the sociopath has an insatiable need for it in adulthood. "Love" in this case can take many bizarre forms. If you can't get someone to respect you for your positive attributes, at least you can get them to fear you.

If you give a wounded Saddam some power, he is naturally going to

use it to generate pain and fear in others, even when it serves no practical purpose. The visible suffering of others makes him feel more alive, more important. "What do you think of me now?" he sneers as he turns the screws.

The everyday sociopath probably won't torture you, physically at least, mainly because society doesn't give him a chance. Instead, he is more likely to complain, complain, complain.

Anyone engaged in "customer service" runs into these people from time to time: customers who suffer some minor inconvenience but treat it like a war crime. If you say the wrong thing, they get angrier and angrier and vow to exact revenge.

Whether a sociopath is torturing a prisoner or merely making life hell for a public servant, there is a predictable cycle of escalation. First comes an initial injury, perhaps something others would regard as minor. This destabilizes the fragile ego of the sociopath, triggers his anger and starts the cycle going.

Once the aggression begins, the sociopath's own internal shame tends to keep it going, because each time he is rebuffed or does something shameful, he feels privately worse about himself and has to lash out at others to counter it. If he has too much power and the social conditions are right, this can eventually lead to some absurd atrocity like trying to murder all the Jews in Europe.

While sociopaths can be clever in manipulating others, they are likely to get tripped up by their own escalating aggression. Serial killers, for example, need to keep killing because the shame of one murder almost demands another one to justify it. They may not be captured for the first killing or the second, but eventually they are going to push the limits so far that they can't help but be caught.

A sociopath is in the inherently unstable position of always needing more love. No matter how much attention you give him, he will always demand more, because the hole inside him is bottomless. Attention, in fact, can often feed and empower a sociopath, not deter him.

The sociopath is mentally ill, but in adulthood the disease is incurable. There is no way you can talk him out of his style of behavior. The only thing you can do is place external boundaries on him—to cage and confine him. In the worse case, these boundaries must be a prison cell. In the everyday case, you must simply move the sociopath out of your life as quickly and efficiently as possible without giving him any power.

If you are rude to the sociopath, it is going to trigger his shame and his urge for revenge, but being nice might get you in trouble too. Normally, people respond well to generosity, but a sociopath will only see it as a license to take advantage of you. When you are generous, he doesn't appreciate what you have done for him. His wounds are still not healed, so he'll expect you to give even more.

To deal with a sociopath and move him out of your life, you have to be cool, courteous and efficient, more like a robot than a counselor. You don't want to give him anything to use against you.

This aloofness may be difficult, especially knowing how he suffered in his childhood, but if you respect your own resources, you can't get too engaged.