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SOCIOPATHY

How to Spot a Sociopath in 3 Steps

It helps to know some of the warning signs of sociopaths.

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KEY POINTS

- The driving force for sociopaths is to dominate others. They do this for the feeling of power and control.
- Because sociopaths lack a conscience, they are willing to do anything to get what they want.
- To assess whether someone might be a sociopath, use The WEB Method, which refers to: their words, your emotions, and their behavior.

Whether you're trying to spot a potential school shooter, a dangerous romantic partner, a total liar at work, a scammer on the internet, or someone pushing a bogus business deal on you, it helps to know some of the warning signs for sociopaths. As I explained in [Part 1](#) of this two-part series, sociopaths can have some hidden and dangerous personality features.

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The DSM-5 lists 10 criteria for diagnosing antisocial personality disorder¹ (ASPD), but it assumes you have professional training and a lot of information about the individuals. I'm not going to teach you how to diagnose an ASPD or to distinguish them from a sociopath (or psychopath, or con artist).

This post focuses on a few of the hints that they may give you at your first or first few encounters. These hints may help you choose to keep your distance despite how appealing they may seem on the surface. Don't be a target.



The Theme of Dominance

The DSM-5 states that the essential feature is their willingness to “disregard [or violate] the rights of others.” From

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Source: Shutterstock

place disputes, and other situations as a high-conflict consultant, I would say that the driving force with sociopaths (and they have lots of energy) is to dominate others. This may or may not involve breaking the law. They want to dominate people in order to get things from them, such as their possessions,

money, sex, business partners, homes, cars, investments, reputation, and so forth. But they also like dominating others just for the feeling of it—the feeling of power and control. Sociopaths lack a conscience, so they will do anything to get what they want.

The three-step method I recommend using to quickly size up whether someone has sociopathic traits (or any high-conflict personality pattern) is what I call The WEB Method®: *Their* WORDS, *your* EMOTIONS, and *their* BEHAVIOR (which involves actions 90% of people would never do). The following are several hints you may pick up from someone by using this method.

Their Words

Sociopaths are fast talkers. Their words are mostly, if not entirely false. But they use many, many words designed to cover their behavior. They may be a completely different person from who they say that they are. Watch out for extremes—big promises; big

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Extremely positive words. *You're the best! I can't live without you! I will never hurt you! You deserve better! You make me a better person! We'll be rich! You're the most beautiful [smart, persuasive, honest, ethical, spiritual, etc.] person I ever met! I'll take you around the world! I'll introduce you to some really famous people! Believe me!*

Extremely negative words. On the other hand, their words can be extremely negative, often after they've known you a little bit. They will blame you (their Target of Blame) for minor or non-existent offenses: *You lied to me! (Even though you didn't and they lie constantly to you.) I can never trust you again! No one will ever hire you! No one will ever want you! I own you! I will destroy you! Don't tell anyone what we're doing, or I'll have to hurt you! You deserve to be punished after what you did! You owe me this! I*

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THE BASICS

What Is Sociopathy?

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The switcheroo. A sociopath will often switch back and forth between extreme charm and extreme threats to get what they want, depending on what they see is or isn't working at the time. Watch out for strong opinions, which they then drop to adopt the opposite point of view when it's convenient. They will use whatever words they perceive as helping them dominate the situation at the moment, like an artist's palette of colors.

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positively, with words to boost your ego: *You will be incredibly successful. With my connections and your brains, we've got it made.* Or they may play on your deepest fears: *See, your body really isn't attractive at all. No one will ever want to be intimate with you. Or no one will ever hire you. I'm the best you'll ever get. You better be grateful. Very grateful.*

SOCIOPATHY ESSENTIAL READS



[6 Reasons It's Difficult to Identify a Sociopathic Parent](#)



[3 Misinterpreted Signs of Sociopathy Development](#)

Your Emotions

How do you feel around the person? It's often your emotions that first tell you to beware because your brain wants to believe them. Many people marry sociopaths, or hire them, do business deals with them, or elect them to responsible positions, *even though* they saw some warning signs. They wanted to believe the person's words rather than pay attention to how they felt. Trust *your* feelings more than *their* words. If you have an uncomfortable or extreme feeling, check it out. Do a little research or ask around about what people think of so-and-so.

Fear. One common feeling around a sociopath is that they could hurt you if they wanted to. Sociopaths can be predators, so you may naturally feel uncomfortable be-

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time and get more background information about them.

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Infatuation. This is the other extreme. Because of their many extremely positive words, people can fall in love with them—especially if they are lonely, grieving or have low self-esteem at the time. (For more, see my book *Dating Radar*, co-authored by Megan Hunter.) This also goes for hiring. In today's fast-paced and competitive business world, sociopaths can make themselves look like a superstar. If you feel swept off your feet by a potential business partner, employee or employer, you may be falling for a sociopath. Since they are everywhere, you have to maintain a healthy skepticism no matter where you are.

Extreme sympathy. If you find yourself feeling extremely sympathetic toward some-

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nerable or sympathetic situations (the elderly, victims of natural disasters, churchgoers, volunteers, etc.). By playing hard on your sympathy, they may be able to get you to do things you wouldn't ordinarily do for anyone else.

Their Behavior (The 90% Rule)

A surprisingly simple way to spot a sociopath is to stay focused on their behavior and ignore their words. Pay special attention to any extreme behavior—things they do that 90% of people would not. Ask yourself, *Would I ever do that?* Extreme behavior is common for sociopaths, but they quickly cover it up with excuses: *I was tired. I was under a lot of stress. He (or she) made me do it. I had to do it given what the other person did.* It almost doesn't matter what the behavior was; their excuses are often the same. They are always blameless and rarely apologize unless they are caught and it will make them look good.

Targets of blame. As I mentioned in [Part 1](#), many sociopaths end up focused on Targets of Blame—people they feel justified in treating cruelly, whether in their families, at work, or in their communities. They often *enjoy* the suffering of other people. While they may target anyone, most people will avoid them. The ones they keep targeting or bullying are those who stay engaged with them. Either they get aggressive back with the sociopath (who can do aggressive better than almost anyone else) or they show their fear or frustration. Both approaches are unwise. It's better to calmly disengage than to show how they affect your emotions. They will enjoy your helpless anger

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Smiles, smirks, and laughter. One surprising aspect is to see how they *enjoy* other people's pain and hardship. In legal cases, I have seen sociopaths smile, smirk, or outright laugh when a victim tells their story in a deposition or in open court. It gets your attention, because, again, 90% of people would never do that. They would know better and feel some empathy for the victim. If you see someone smiling, smirking, or laughing out loud as they watch another's pain on TV, in a movie, or on the street at an accident, you may be watching a sociopath who can't help himself or herself.

Childhood behavior history. One of the DSM-5 criteria for antisocial (sociopathic) personality disorder is that the person has signs of the disorder by age 15. This could include behaviors such as torturing or killing small animals or pets, stealing from family and strangers, fire-starting, or a serious pattern of lying. This is surprisingly common for sociopaths, so they may try to hide such a history or give excuses. The Parkland school shooter in Florida apparently had a history of harming animals. Many people knew about that but perhaps didn't realize the potential it indicated.

This is a very brief look at some of the hints that you may be dealing with a sociopath. The WEB Method® is one way to organize your thinking about people you meet and consider dating, hiring, electing, or otherwise getting involved with. It takes practice, but it's designed to make it simple to avoid being a target, especially when quick decisions are necessary or you are under stress. For more, see my book, 5 Types of People Who Can Ruin Your Life.

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1. American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. Arlington, VA, American Psychiatric Association, 2013.



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About the Author



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