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10 Ways to Spot an 'Everyday' Sadist

A new study indicates how common the tendency may be.

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The film series based on the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels brought into theaters a vivid depiction of the forms that sadism can take in the bedroom.

But there is a more pervasive, and more mundane, type of sadism hiding within the recesses of many individuals' personalities.

Psychologists talk about "the [dark triad](#)" in [personality](#), representing a perfect-storm combination of [narcissism](#), [psychopathy](#), and [Machiavellianism](#). People high in the dark triad traits callously use people to their own advantage, seeing

them as tools to exploit in order to get what they want.

To be sure, enjoying the suffering of others—the hallmark of sadism—can be part of the picture in the dark triad constellation. However, personality psychologists are beginning to believe that a predilection for cruelty stands *on its own* in understanding why one person would want to harm another. Rather than express itself in behavior that results in [humiliation](#), maiming, or death, however, there's a kind of *everyday* sadism that shows up in more benign, everyday form.

You might even express the everyday form of sadism without realizing it.

Perhaps you enjoy the rush of blasting a videogame opponent's avatars to bits. At a hockey game, you may cheer less for your team to score than for members of both teams to engage in a violent clashing of sticks and bodies against the glass. Action movies involving battles to the death may be your favorite form of entertainment. In all of these cases, you're taking pleasure from ordinary experiences in which the cruelty (other than at the hockey game) is vicarious.

University of British Columbia psychologist Erin Buckels and collaborators (2013) decided to investigate the idea that everyday sadists are willing to inflict real, not just vicarious, harm. They also reasoned that people high in this less overt form of sadism might themselves become more aggressive when provoked than other individuals. Further, they believed it possible for sadism to provide a unique prediction of antisocial behavior above and beyond those of the dark triad qualities.

To investigate everyday sadism in actual behavior, they needed to come up with a laboratory task that would mimic the kind of casual harm-producing behavior people might perform in their daily life. But translating everyday sadism into a lab setting is, understandably, a challenge: You have to invent a task that will not actually hurt people but which has to seem realistic. Buckels and her team zeroed in on bug-killing. The act of killing a bug, they argued, would satisfy a sadistic desire to cause a live creature harm through direct physical contact.

and putting their hand in a bucket of ice water. (In case you're worried, the bug-killing wasn't real, but it appeared to be, as the bugs were supposedly being ground in a machine that would loudly crunch them into bits.)

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To identify the everyday sadists in the sample, Buckels and her team used the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS) developed by University of College Cork psychologist Aisling O'Meara and her team (2011). They also administered dark triad questionnaires to be able to tease out the separate contributions of sadism from those other three qualities.

As expected, the highly sadistic-scoring participants were the most likely to choose the bug-killing task. After completing the task, they also reported enjoying it the most—and, if they had chosen a different task, seemed to regret not having taken on the bug-killing job in the first place.

In the second laboratory task, the highly sadistic were compared with their less cruelty-oriented counterparts in their willingness, in a button-pushing competition, to attack an opponent who they believed would not attack them back. Over the course of the experiment, participants had the opportunity to blast white noise into the headphones of their opponents for every trial that they won. The situation was rigged, of course—there was no actual opponent. However, the participants were led to believe that their opponent would not attack them back after receiving the ear-disrupting blast.

The question, then, was whether those high in sadism would continue to inflict the aversive stimulus to a non-attacking opponent. As it turned out, not only were the everyday sadists quicker to harm their opponents, but they would also work harder for the opportunity to blast them some more. Dark triad qualities, as in the bug-killing experiment, didn't predict the outcome of noise-blasting tendencies—but sadism did.

We have pretty good evidence, then, that people who score high on a questionnaire measure of sadism may also behave in the casual, everyday ways that might be similar to these lab tasks. That questionnaire measure appears, then, to have reasonably good validity as a way to predict who will kill for the sake of killing (bugs, of course, not people) and who could inflict harm on an opponent offering an olive branch.

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people's dispositions. In fact, in some cases, the ratings we make of *others* are even more accurate than those we make of *ourselves*. This is because it can be difficult to *admit* having certain qualities, perhaps particularly so when considering the darker sides of our nature, which we would prefer to think we don't have.

With this background, then, here are the 10 questions from the SSIS. *Each one is rated simply as "describes me/this person" or "does not describe me/this person":*

1. I enjoy seeing people hurt.
2. I would enjoy hurting someone physically, sexually, or emotionally.
3. Hurting people would be exciting.
4. I have hurt people for my own enjoyment.
5. People would enjoy hurting others if they gave it a go.
6. I have fantasies which involve hurting people.
7. I have hurt people because I could.
8. I wouldn't intentionally hurt anyone. (Reversed-scored)
9. I have humiliated others to keep them in line.
10. Sometimes I get so angry I want to hurt people.

Now, scoring one point for each *Yes* answer (or *No* on number 8), compare your scores with those from the participants, who ranged in age from 18 to 65 but were mostly undergraduates. Although the scores from participants did range from 1 to 10, meaning that some participants did in fact endorse every item, *96% of the sample scored at 4 or lower*. Thus, if you, or the person you're rating, scored at 5 or higher, you or that person may fall within the small minority of the population who could be considered everyday sadists. (The more sadistic are particularly likely to endorse the items on the SSIS dealing with fantasy and self-gratification.)

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O'Meara and her team examined the relationships among the SSIS and other relevant measures to find out if sadism and empathy were related. The pattern of findings led them to conclude that everyday sadists are aware of the impact that their actions have on others but don't have a particular concern for how those people feel.

Returning to the Buckels study, it was people with scores on the SSIS of close to 2 who were most likely to choose the bug-killing option. Apparently, it doesn't take much to qualify as an everyday sadist. Agreeing with just two of the items appears to put an individual at risk; four is even more atypical.

Perhaps with the popularity of *50 Shades*, and whatever copycat movies it stimulates, we'll be more willing to look at sadism as a part of the human experience. Fortunately, it's only the minority who would ever take their desire to harm others from the realm of fantasy to that of everyday behavior.

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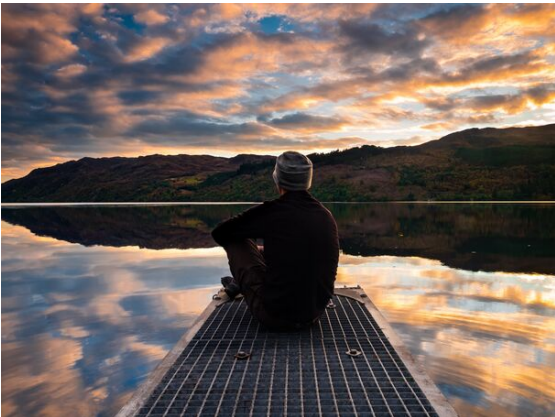
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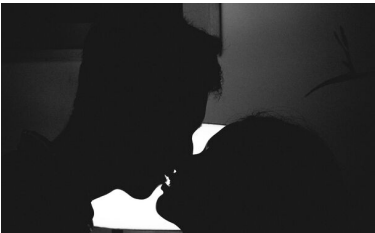
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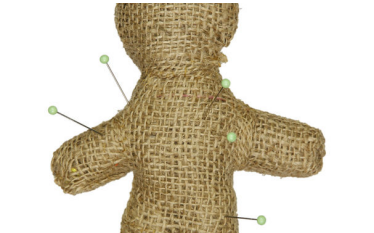
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