

Psychology



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'Narcissists - only more devious': the truth about dark empaths

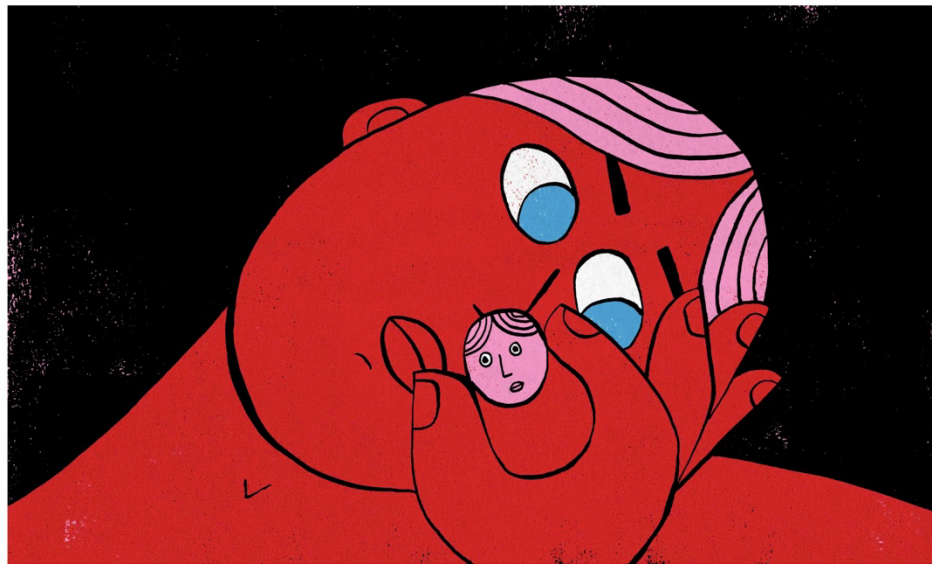


Illustration: Hanna Barczyk/The Guardian

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They seem sensitive and caring – but really they just want to manipulate you. So how do you recognise the danger signs?



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It isn't every day that psychologists identify a hot new character archetype.

Human design doesn't usually generate media stories about "the most-talked-about personality trait for autumn/winter". And yet, something close to this is unfolding with the current fascination with so-called "dark empaths".

On TikTok, the term has been trending, with more than 2.6m mentions. There's even a [#darkempathtok hashtag](#), all the better to locate the latest

videos with ominous titles such as “When an empath goes dark” and “The most DANGEROUS personality”. A measure of how far the idea has travelled is that, when I mentioned the phrase to my hairdresser, he helpfully explained: “Oh yes, they’re the ones who are like narcissists, only more devious.”

Dark empaths were first identified in a 2021 study published in the [journal Personality and Individual Differences](#). Researchers defined it as “a novel psychological construct” concerning individuals who have a high degree of empathy alongside what’s known as “dark traits”. How this plays out in practice is someone who appears to be caring and sensitive, but who is actually using those skills to further their own agenda.

But how is it possible to manufacture empathy? Can’t we as humans detect when that is being done? It turns out there is more than one type of empathy.

The [deeply caring type most of us understand](#) is called “affective empathy” – the real thing. “It is the degree to which I feel what you are feeling,” says Nadja Heym, co-author of the research study and associate professor in personality psychology and psychopathology at Nottingham Trent University. “So, for example, when you feel sad, that makes me feel sad. But there’s another type known as cognitive empathy. In that case, the script is: ‘I know what you’re thinking. I understand your mental state. But I really don’t care about it.’ And this information is important to the dark empath because, if they want to predict your behaviour, they need to understand what you’re thinking in order to try to control you.” It is this manipulation by stealth that can feel so unnerving if you are on the receiving end of it.

Yasmin works in event management. “It was a very social vibe and Elaine, the new boss, liked to treat us to a Friday afternoon ‘drinks trolley’, AKA a few bottles of fizz being passed around the desks. The evening would often end in the pub.” Soon, her boss started to share confidences about her personal life, prompting Yasmin to reveal her struggles in trying to get pregnant. “It felt great that my boss was also becoming a good friend and mentor, and made office life enjoyable.”

Things started to go wrong when Elaine confided about how stress was taking its toll on her health. She frequently asked Yasmin to take on extra tasks. “I was happy to help her out knowing what pressure she was under from management. She had also hinted a promotion was in the offing for me. But then she embarked upon a not-so-subtle campaign to try to put me off the idea

of starting a family. She'd tell me that, at 35, I still had loads of time, and didn't I want to prioritise my career and future earnings first? It's only with hindsight that I realise what an outrageous boundary overstep this was. At the time, I genuinely thought she was looking out for me."

A few months later, Yasmin discovered she was finally pregnant. "I was nervous about telling Elaine but I wasn't expecting such an extreme reaction. She went ballistic and started screeching: 'How could you do this to me, after all I've done for you?' After that, she excluded me from meetings and when the much-talked-about promotion was advertised, no surprise, I didn't even make the shortlist. Of course, I could have gone to HR but what would that have achieved? I never wanted to work with the woman again and transferred to another department before my daughter was born. But I'm still annoyed with myself for having trusted her."

Unfortunately, dark empaths are extremely good at getting their prey to drop their defences. "They intellectually assemble an understanding of the other person's weaknesses, where their loyalties might lie and what their insecurities are," explains [Wendy Behary, therapist and author of Disarming the Narcissist](#).

"They crave this knowledge because they can then use it to manipulate. For example, in a romantic relationship, say the dark empath knows that their wife derives a lot of pride from their workplace achievements and how she is viewed professionally. She gets an amazing job. That means the dark empath will feel at risk of potentially losing her to other people. He will lose the spotlight and, potentially, the right to make all of the decisions. Her success at work is making her feel special and he is losing his power over her. So in this scenario, he would typically scheme to bring the person down. He might say things like: 'I know how important it is for you to show up for work looking the part – but when you wear that dress you look like mutton dressed as lamb. I'm very surprised, I thought you would know better.' It's all about shaming."

Like their close relative the narcissist, dark empaths are territorial. According to Behary it is common for such types to create exclusion from friends, family and co-workers. "Isolation means you are more likely to doubt yourself and the dark empath can make you rethink and distort your reality. So it's another form of gaslighting. You can only really successfully do that if you have an extremely good sense of another person's vulnerabilities – that's where the empath part comes in."

One reason why there's so much interest in these types of people is because they present us with a puzzle: good and evil wrapped up in the same package. At the most diabolical level, a dark empath might show up in the form of a Jimmy Savile type. His skill in winning people's trust, posing as a charitable benefactor, allowed him to gain access to vulnerable young girls. But that's an extreme example. What's most striking about the recent dark empath research is that it reveals how prevalent the phenomenon is.

"We identified it as a trait combination displayed by 19.3% of the 1,000 people we surveyed," says Heym. So almost one in five of us have this personality type? Heym sounds a note of caution. "Yes, but traits exist on a continuum – it's not about everyone having a personality disorder."

An election candidate pretending to listen to constituents' problems in order to win votes is just one example of normalised dark empathy. It could also be the neighbour who always has time for a chat – but only because they want to extract gossip from you. Or the frenemy who eagerly pumps you for information about all your problems, all the better to boost their own sense of superiority. "Our study focused on the general population and high empathy, combined with the prevalence of what we call maladaptive personality traits of the dark triad," explains Heym.

The dark triad sounds like it could be the title of a schlocky horror franchise. What exactly is meant by the term? "There are three main traits involved," says Heym. "Psychopathy (being impulsive and ruthless), narcissism (grandiose and entitled), and Machiavellianism (being strategic and manipulative). In some people, those traits overlap in a dark core." Think of it as a rather unsettling Venn diagram.



Illustration: Hanna Barczyk/The Guardian

One of the things that makes a dark empath so difficult to identify is that most of us aren't on the lookout for fake compassion. Shona met Ian at their local running club. "I was a newbie, unfit and overweight. He was so encouraging and supportive. He seemed a little shy, with a gentle manner. I trusted him." Ian mentioned how much money he had raised for charity, his volunteering at food banks and how he used to coach a junior football team.

Soon, they became a couple and everything was great. But after just a few weeks, Shona began to feel uneasy about him. "One evening, we met up and I was upset because my grandmother had been taken to hospital. Ian was saying all the right words but there was something disengaged about him. I caught a glimpse of his face when he thought I wasn't looking and his expression was one of disdain. I thought maybe I'd just imagined it but there were other signs of something being not quite right. He was always so keen to present himself as this caring person, but then one evening I came home to find him subjecting a delivery driver to an angry tirade. It worried me."

Then, one day another woman at the club took her aside. "She didn't say much, just that she had also been involved with Ian until he dropped her for someone else, another runner at the club. It emerged that he had a well-known pattern of hitting on new female members, often keeping several on the go at the same time. Honestly, he was the least likely Lothario you could ever imagine, and it was precisely because of that that he was able to cheat on so many women. I broke up with him and he was outraged. I also learned that most of the good deeds he talked about were total fiction."

It can sometimes be easier to spot a dark empath in a romantic or friendship relationship than a workplace one, suggests Heym. "Usually, there is less to gain in personal relationships so the dark empath doesn't bother masking their lack of empathy to the same degree." That said, there are some telltale signs to look out for if you have doubts about someone, whatever the context. "Pay attention to whether they are using kindness and sympathy to gain something. Is there an ulterior motive? Have you seen evidence that they are capable of being ruthless towards others? Or are they maybe [more antagonistic than you would normally expect someone to be](#)? Do they always make you feel guilty when things don't go according to plan?"



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It can also be a good idea to watch how the person treats others. This personality type prefers to meet people one on one, so pay attention to what they tell you and how they interact with transient connections such as those with waiters, cab drivers etc. Also, even if you don't meet their friends, listen carefully to how they talk about them. "Are they quite choosy in terms of who they are friendly with, and is there maybe an underlying motive? Do they make jokes at the expense of others in order to belittle them? Are they only nice to some people and mean to others?" Heym adds.

In this data-driven culture, we are increasingly required to evaluate other people on paper before meeting them, both in love and at work. All the more reason then to take your time evaluating someone you don't know. "It can take ages to know if you're dealing with a dark empath – the signs are subtle," says Heym. "The more time you spend with them, the more aware you will become of their oddities. And then you need to think about, is this something you can deal with? Can you live with their behaviour? Or is it problematic?"

Psychotherapist Charlotte Fox Weber believes that self-help tropes popularised by social media might have made things easier for dark empaths to operate. "Sometimes dark empathy is connected to this whole prevalence of 'impostor

syndrome'. That used to be a groundbreaking and helpful term but now it's changed into people signalling fake vulnerability. 'Oooh I don't feel good enough, everyone else feels like they belong but not me' – subtext: you can totally trust me."

Another related tactic, Fox Weber says, "is to pretend to be a saintly person. I'm always super-wary of someone who tells me their problem is 'overgiving' – that's a tell for me. Look out for people who are constantly getting weirdly involved in the details and scenarios of other people's lives; you never know if they might be plotting to use the information to bring the other person down, or at the very least sustain their own sense of superiority."

After researching this topic, I did find myself wondering whether labels such as "psychopath", "narcissist" and "dark empath" serve any useful function. Being an armchair psychologist may be enjoyable when discussing the antics of public figures such as Donald Trump or the [Menéndez brothers](#). But when it comes to analysing the people in our own lives, is it a good idea to generate so much suspicion? "It's true that some of these terms are totally overused and misused," says Fox Weber. "Take narcissism: it used to be a thing that only Greek mythologists would mention, then therapists. But that said, I think that 'dark empath' as a term does serve a useful function. It reminds us that incredible sensitivity and insensitivity can coexist, otherwise we don't have a way to make sense of such behaviour."

Some names have been changed.