

Sociopaths are modern-day boogeymen, and the word “sociopath” is casually tossed around to describe the worst, most amoral among us. But they are not boogeymen; they are real people and, according to Patric Gagne, widely misunderstood. Gagne wrote “Sociopath,” her buzzy forthcoming memoir, to try to correct some of those misunderstandings and provide a fuller picture of sociopathy, which is now more frequently referred to as antisocial personality disorder. As a child, Gagne found herself compelled toward violent outbursts in an effort to try to compensate for the emotional apathy that was her default. As she got older, those compulsive behaviors turned into criminal ones like trespassing and theft. Eventually, she discovered that there was a name — that dreaded word — that could be used to describe and explain her experiences of remorselessness, criminality and lack of empathy. The desire to destigmatize her experience and also to help others who may share it (Gagne previously worked as a therapist to those with the disorder and has also written about sociopathy) put Gagne on a path that led to “Sociopath.” “I’m not trying to say, ‘Sometimes we do bad things, but we’re really sweet on the inside,’” says Gagne, who is 48. “I’m saying there is more to this personality type.”

When I hear the word “sociopath,” I think of an antisocial, uncaring person who is interested only in satisfying his or her own desires. What’s a clearer picture? Sociopathy is a perilous mental disorder; the traits¹ associated with sociopathy aren’t great. But that only tells part of the story. The part that’s missing is you can be a sociopath and have a healthy relationship. You can be a sociopath and be educated. That’s a very

uncomfortable reality for some people. People want to believe that all sociopaths are monsters and that all monsters are easy to spot.

In the book, you write about stabbing a classmate with a pencil when you were a kid, and then as you got older trespassing² and stealing cars. You don't succumb to those sociopathic compulsions anymore. How did you learn to control these urges? As a kid, I didn't understand why I was acting out the way that I was. All I knew was I felt this pressure, and something in my brain was telling me, Punch that kid, and you'll feel better. As I got older I understood, OK, there's a name for this, there is a whole group of people who share this diagnosis. Once I understood that I wasn't out in space untethered and going crazy, I was on the path to understanding that when I had those feelings of "go steal a car," I could go, Yes, I could do that, but now I understand what's going on. That understanding helped break the cycle — or at least redirect the compulsion toward something less destructive.

What does that redirecting look like in practice? Every once in a while, I will have an urge to do something destructive just because I can, and my redirect is, Do you want this destructive behavior? Or do you want to continue to maintain this life that you have, which requires that you not do those things? I have to have that conversation with myself.

What's a recent sociopathic impulse that you had? This is a very vanilla example. When I go to the grocery store and I come home, if anything that I've purchased has gone bad, I'll make a mental note: I'm stealing this next time.

You write about your difficulty with understanding other people's emotions, feeling apathy and lacking empathy. But you also write about experiencing love. Why are you innately able to feel love but not, say, empathy? The way I experience love seems to be very different from the so-called neurotypical experience. My experience of love seems less emotional. If I had to explain what love feels like to me, I would say symbiotic. So, a relationship that's beneficial to both people involved. Not transactional, not possessive, not ego-driven. Mutual homeostasis. It's not that I'm unable to access emotions or empathy. It's that my experience of those emotions is different.

When you write about becoming a mom,³ you say that profound feelings of love toward your child were non-intrinsic, and you had to work to experience them. Can you tell me about that work? As a woman — forget

my personality type — you're inundated with all these images: Your child is born, it's incredible. I did not experience that. I didn't have that immediate *baby is born, I'm overwhelmed with love*. It was, I don't know this person. This person is very loud! That connection just isn't there. It's not innate. But over time, you can build it. Much like when I first met David:⁴ I knew right away that this person was going to be important in my life, but I didn't have those sweeping romantic, flowery emotions affiliated with that experience. That was the same when I first met my son. Now I just think he's a great kid!

Are you able to describe how you've built a sense of morality? Just because I don't care about someone else's pain, so to speak, doesn't mean I want to cause more of it. I enjoy living in this society. I understand that there are rules. I choose to follow those rules because I understand the benefits of this world, this house where I get to live, this relationship I get to have. That is different from people who follow the rules because they have to, they should, they want to be a good person. None of those apply to me. I want to live in a world where things function properly. If I create messes, my life will become messy. I think people are uncomfortable with the idea of, You don't really care? What does it matter? What does it matter *why* I choose to help the woman cross the street? Why does it matter *why* I choose to pick up a wallet and hand it to the person in as opposed to keeping it? It's not because I'm a good person. It's not because I would feel shame or guilt. But why does that matter?

What advice do you have for neurotypical people about how best to interact with someone who identifies as sociopathic? I'm not sure neurotypicals need any, because I have been identifying as a sociopath for years now, and my experience with people who don't know that has been positive. I have yet to encounter anybody who, when I disclose my diagnosis, acts afraid or upset. I think, inherently, neurotypicals are fascinated by sociopathy because it's a relatable disorder. Everybody has that darkness in them. Everybody has those thoughts that they shoo away because of guilt. If more conversations between neurotypical and so-called neurodivergents were to occur, it would benefit both. It would benefit the sociopathic person because that acceptance lets 80 percent of the air out of the balloon, but it would help the neurotypicals, like, Oh, I can share things with this person that maybe I couldn't share with other people. I get more secrets from strangers after telling them my diagnosis; you wouldn't believe the things that people have told me because they feel safe.

What secrets do they tell you? Oh, man. I was sitting across from a man at a dinner party — this was like two years ago — and my diagnosis came up, and 30 seconds afterward he said, “You know, I have thoughts of killing my wife a lot.” Not to normalize that, but I was like, Tell me about that. And he goes: “I’ve really thought about it. I’ve reached out to people about hiring somebody to kill her.”

So people just assume that you’re a sympathetic audience? Yeah, because these are things you’re not supposed to think about. So to be able to talk to somebody — you don’t have to worry that I’m going to start clutching my pearls.

You were a practicing therapist, and we think of therapists as highly empathic, invested in the emotions and stories of their clients. So how did you relate to your clients? I didn’t relate to them. Now, that is not to say I didn’t care about my patients. The easy answer is, of course I care about you. I wouldn’t continue to see you if I didn’t, but why do you need that reassurance from me? My job is to help you understand what’s going on with you. My job is to help you take your emotions, separate them out, explore your motivation. That’s my job. I think that I was a good therapist because I was able to parse those things out unemotionally. My gift to my therapy patients was that I was able to lend them sociopathy: Why do you care? What does it matter? What do you need from that? That, I felt, helped them achieve things that maybe a nonsociopathic therapist couldn’t have offered.

In the book, you describe things like mirroring people back to themselves or your conscious and intentional manipulation in the moment. Is that happening now? Listen, everyone has a front-facing persona. Most people use that persona as a preference: a desire to be liked, a fear of judgment, wanting somebody to be friends with them. But sociopaths use it out of necessity, and that’s a really important distinction. My decision to mask⁵ is not because I have some dark ulterior motive. It’s because you guys are interesting to me. Neurotypical emotions are so colorful and complex. In order for me to engage with you, you have to feel comfortable with me. In order for you to feel comfortable with me, I have to mask. I find that people are unnerved by me when I’m not masking. Because otherwise I’m quiet. I ask invasive questions. I stare. My affect is low. The bottom line is that I want you to feel comfortable, so I engage. I smile. I mirror. It’s not nefarious; it’s necessary. The issue here is motivation. I don’t mask because I’m secretly trying to kill you. I mask because I want you to feel comfortable because I find you interesting.



Patric Gagne at age 4.
From Patric Gagne

What's an invasive question you want to ask me? Why are you interested in me? Why are you interested in sociopathy? Talk to me about your darkness. I'm not expecting answers.

You want to get into it? Oh, yes. I find neurotypical people absolutely delightful!

I'll give you two reasons I'm interested: I was sent the book, and I started reading, and the opening involved you as a second grader stabbing a kid in the head with a pencil. I thought, Holy moly, readers will be interested in this! So there was a mercenary quality to my own interest. Then also, there are times when I've wondered if the skills that I've learned from doing my job over the years are basically just forms of interpersonal manipulation, and I was curious to talk to you as a roundabout way of exploring that question for myself. Where does that question reach you?

What do you mean? Do you manipulate people in order to execute your job?

I think there is a degree of manipulation, but what do we really mean by manipulation? Is manipulation by definition negative, or does manipulation just mean intentionally creating a certain interpersonal context? That sounds like a justification to me, which means you're sidestepping shame or sidestepping guilt.

I disagree. That would be like saying therapists are always guilty of "manipulation." Just so we're clear, when I said justification, I wasn't trying to say that what you were doing was bad. You're talking to a sociopath! I don't think anything that you're doing is bad. Yes, you are manipulating people to a certain extent — to your point — in the way that I might manipulate somebody in therapy, but I would never feel the need to justify it, and your justification came so quickly. That's why I was like, Hey, what's happening that you felt the need to defend your answer?

We don't usually say we have to justify a positive thing. That's probably why I reacted that way. What else? How much of that dark side of sociopathy can you relate to? And if you don't have an easy answer for that, was it comforting to read about somebody who was open with their experience of being fully immersed in their darkest impulses and a lot of times carrying them out?

Well, I would say that one question that the book raised for me was the extent to which a lot of behaviors that people do could be considered sociopathic, and we just don't understand them that way. Plenty of us do things that we know are bad because the transgressions feel good. It feels good. Why? I think it feels good because it feels free. To do something bad, it's like, I don't give a [expletive]. The consequences — be it internal guilt or getting thrown in jail — happen after. In this moment, I'm going to do this because it feels [expletive] great to just not care. That is what the sociopath experience is almost all the time. One piece of advice I would give to anyone who sees themselves in my description is to find an external philosophy that works for you. I liked karma. It seemed clean. It seemed organized. Find that philosophy for yourself, because you're not going to get to rely on internal checks and balances.

I realize I didn't quite understand what you meant when you said that you can experience empathy, just differently. What is empathy to you?

Eventually as I got older, what I started to realize is that if I can connect to something that I can internalize naturally, I use that as a bridge to broaden my empathic response. For example, I've found frequently that a lot of people who exhibit sociopathic symptoms have strong feelings for pets. That's a great bridge: You would feel upset if something happened to this animal that you care about. Now let's extend that feeling to someone close to you that you have a strong relationship with.

But when you say "extend that feeling," is it cognitive understanding that you're describing or an emotional response? At first it is cognitive. Then, over time, that does grow into the emotion. It's the understanding of it that leads to the feeling. I'm sure you've had a situation where someone is explaining something to you, and at first you're like, I don't care.

Multiple times a day! [Laughs.] Great. Now, imagine if that's your first instinct, but you understand that you have to be like, Oh, yeah, I understand that I have to care. That is cognitive empathy. You're not faking it, but you're internalizing it. That's your first take on something, and then maybe you get to know the situation better, or you find something about that situation that you can anchor to, and then the feeling kicks in.

Do you see your sociopathy as beneficial to you? I think my sociopathy is entirely beneficial to me. I see my friends struggling with guilt. On an almost daily basis I think, I'm glad I don't have that. The psychological characteristics of sociopathy are not inherently bad. Lack of remorse and shame and guilt has been misappropriated to mean this horrible thing, but again, just because I don't care about you doesn't mean I want to cause you more pain. I like that I don't have guilt because I'm making my decisions based on logic, based on truth, as opposed to ought or should. Now, there is a flip side. I don't have those natural emotional connections to other people, but I've never had those. I don't feel like I'm missing anything. Just because I love differently doesn't mean my love doesn't count.

Opening illustration: Source photograph by Kristia Knowles, via Simon & Schuster

1. Traits may include lack of remorse, deceitfulness and a disregard for the feelings of others as well as right and wrong.

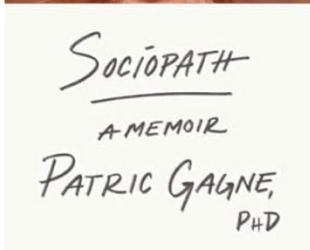
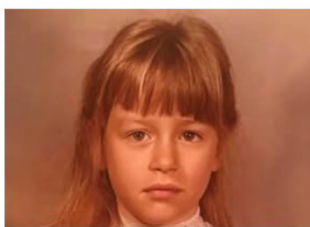
2. Specifically, breaking into people's homes.
3. Gagne has two school-age children.
4. Gagne's husband, whom she has known since they were teenagers.
5. By which Gagne means adopting prosocial mannerisms.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/25/magazine/patric-gagne-interview.html>



Patric Gagne



Roll over image to zoom in



Sociopath: A Memoir Hardcover – April 2 2024

by Ph.D. Patric Gagne (Author)



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Named a most anticipated book of 2024 by *Vulture*, *LitHub*, *The Guardian*, and *Cosmopolitan*

A fascinating, revelatory memoir revealing the author's struggle to come to terms with her own sociopathy and shed light on the often maligned and misunderstood mental disorder.

Patric Gagne realized she made others uncomfortable before she started kindergarten. Something about her caused people to react in a way she didn't understand. She suspected it was because she didn't feel things the way other kids did. Emotions like fear, guilt, and empathy eluded her. For the most part, she felt nothing. And she didn't like the way that "nothing" felt.

She did her best to pretend she was like everyone else, but the constant pressure to conform to a society she knew rejected anyone like her was unbearable. So Patric stole. She lied. She was occasionally violent. She became an expert lock-picker and home-invader. All with the goal of replacing the nothingness with...something.

In college, Patric finally confirmed what she'd long suspected. She was a sociopath. But even though it was the very first personality disorder identified—well over 200 years ago—sociopathy had been neglected by mental health professionals for decades. She was told there was no treatment, no hope for a normal life. She found herself haunted by sociopaths in pop culture, madmen and evil villains who are considered monsters. Her future looked grim.

But when Patric reconnects with an old flame, she gets a glimpse of a future beyond her diagnosis. If she's capable of love, it must mean that she isn't a monster. With the help of her sweetheart (and some curious characters she meets along the way) she embarks on a mission to prove that the millions of Americans who share her diagnosis aren't all monsters either.

This is the inspiring story of her journey to change her fate and how she managed to build a life full of love and hope.

This woman has a comeback answer for everything. But why not? She thinks she operates from a simpler dispassionate, rational place others cannot reach like she can, and she really doesn't want "more." She is not "fooled" like we are.

Would Hannibal Lecter, *The Silence of the Lambs* psychiatrist agree? Heartily, while he was eviscerating you.

We need to reign in the campaign dedicated to "normalizing," accommodating, the "neurodivergent." I have seen a school run by an Asperger's principal; the interpersonal carnage over the years was terrible. There are some roles the neurodivergent cannot and should not fill; genuine capacity for emotional empathetic engagement—"theory of mind" fellow-feeling—is the more necessary the more directly affecting other people. We might need sociopaths in the front lines in the military, but not on the General Staff. Further, though we might need "our" sociopaths to combat "their" sociopaths, don't forget they are still the ones who take the lead in committing the *My Lai* atrocities that shame us.

Through the cult of Trump the florid kinds of sociopathy are being normalized and unleashed under the pretext that, not only are his political and legal enemies "just like him" only worse, sneakily dishonest in jealous pack mentality, but also in that the antinomian tendencies-temptations he shamelessly indulges in are just like those to which "you and I are" inclined but are too cowed to obey.

Patric Gagne does point out one thing however: "the banality of evil" (Hannah Arendt). We grossly distort the customary caricature of the psychopath (*Criminal Minds* and all that). Ms. Gagne rightly points out the callousness to which we all can be given, but she neglects to acknowledge that we legitimately can and must be more than this. For one thing, all spiritualities are based on it, even if religiousness tends to be taken over by masked narcissisms.

Two apropos examples given in *The Evolving Self* (1983, Robert Kegan), used in my graduate training. The premise is that we develop upwards through a double helix of shifting positions wherein subject and object shift along with us (as, and if, we develop.) A young man was in court again for defrauding his friends. Exasperated, the judge asked "Why do you keep making friends with people only to steal from them?" "Well, Your Honour," the culprit patronizingly but patiently explained, "How can I steal from them if they don't trust me?" Another fellow kept ordering big meals in restaurants unable to pay for them. "How does this keep happening?" his Honour asked. "Well sir, I get hungry, I have no money, and restaurants always have food. What's so hard to understand about that?"

Robert Hare, the (Canadian) expert on psychopaths once said that we only catch the slow-witted ones; after studying them in Lower Mainland penitentiaries, he half-joked he intended to move onto studying the truly high-functioning ones on the Vancouver Stock Exchange. This led to co-authoring *Snakes in Suits: Understanding and Surviving the Psychopaths in Your Office*. (Revised 2019). TJB