

Inside the Mind of a Sociopath

This excerpt is from: "The Sociopath Next Door: The Ruthless vs. the Rest of Us" by Martha Stout Ph.D. (Broadway Books, New York, 2005, ISBN 0-7679-1581-X). Martha Stout is a clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School and elaborates on the tales of ruthlessness in everyday life based on her 25 years of practice as a specialist in the treatment of psychological trauma survivors.

Imagine - if you can - not having a conscience, none at all, no feelings of guilt or remorse no matter what you do, no limiting sense of concern of the well-being of strangers, friends, or even family members. Imagine no struggles with shame, not a single one in your whole life, no matter what kind of selfish, lazy, harmful, or immoral action you had taken. And pretend that the concept of responsibility is unknown to you, except as a burden others seem to accept without question, like gullible fools. Now add to this strange fantasy the ability to conceal from other people that your psychological makeup is radically different from theirs. Since everyone simply assumes that conscience is universal among human beings, hiding the fact that you are conscience-free is nearly effortless. You are not held back from any of your desires by guilt or shame, and you are never confronted by others for your cold-bloodedness. The ice water in your veins is so bizarre, so completely outside of their personal experience that they seldom even guess at your condition.

In other words, you are completely free of internal restraints, and your unhampered liberty to do just as you please, with no pangs of conscience, is conveniently invisible to the world. You can do anything at all, and still your strange advantage over the majority of people, who are kept in line by their consciences, will most likely remain undiscovered.

How will you live your life? What will you do with your huge and secret advantage, and with the corresponding handicap of other people (conscience)? The answer will depend largely on just what your desires happen to be, because people are not all the same. Even the profoundly unscrupulous are not all the same. Some people - whether they have a conscience or not - favor the ease of inertia, while others are filled with dreams and wild ambitions. Some human beings are brilliant and talented, some are dull-witted, and most, conscience or not, are somewhere in between. There are violent people and non-violent ones, individuals who are motivated by blood lust and those who have no such appetites.

Maybe you are someone who craves money and power, and though you have no vestige of conscience, you do have a magnificent IQ. You have the driving nature and the intellectual capacity to pursue tremendous wealth and influence, and you are in no way moved by the nagging voice of conscience that prevents other people from doing everything and anything they have to do to succeed. You choose business, politics, the law, banking or international development, or any of a broad array of other power professions, and you pursue your career with a cold passion that tolerates none of the

usual moral or legal encumbrances. When it is expedient, you doctor the accounting and shred the evidence, you stab your employees and your clients (or your constituency) in the back, marry for money, tell lethal premeditated lies to people who trust you, attempt to ruin colleagues who are powerful or eloquent, and simply steamroll over groups who are dependent and voiceless. And all of this you do with the exquisite freedom that results from having no conscience whatsoever.

You become unimaginably, unassailably, and maybe even globally successful. Why not? With your big brain, and no conscience to rein in your schemes, you can do anything at all.

Or no - let us say you are not quite such a person. You are ambitious, yes, and in the name of success you are willing to do all manner of things that people with conscience would never consider, but you are not an intellectually gifted individual. Your intelligence is above average perhaps, and people think of you as smart, maybe even very smart. But you know in your heart of hearts that you do not have the cognitive wherewithal, or the creativity, to reach the careening heights of power you secretly dreams about, and this makes you resentful of the world at large, and envious of the people around you.

As this sort of person, you ensconce yourself in a niche, or maybe a series of niches, in which you can have some amount of control over small numbers of people. These situations satisfy a little of your desire for power, although you are chronically aggravated at not having more. It chafes to be so free of the ridiculous inner voices that inhibit others from achieving great power, without having enough talent to pursue the ultimate successes yourself. Sometimes you fall into sulky, rageful moods caused by a frustration that no one but you understands.

But you do enjoy jobs that afford you a certain undersupervised control over a few individuals or small groups, preferably people and groups who are relatively helpless or in some way vulnerable. You are a teacher or a psychotherapist, a divorce lawyer or a high school coach. Or maybe you are a consultant of some kind, a broker or a gallery owner or a human services director. Or maybe you do not have a paid position and are instead the president of your condominium association, or a volunteer hospital worker, or a parent. Whatever your job, you manipulate and bully the people who are under your thumb, as often and as outrageously as you can without getting fired or held accountable. You do this for its own sake, even when it serves no purpose except to give you a thrill. Making people jump means you have power - or this is the way you see it - and bullying provides you with an adrenaline rush. It is fun.

Maybe you cannot be a CEO of a multinational corporation, but you can frighten a few people, or cause them to scurry around like chickens, or steal from them, or - maybe, best of all - create situations that cause them to feel bad about themselves. And this is power, especially when the people you manipulate are superior to you in some way. Most invigorating of all is to bring down people who are smarter or more accomplished than you, or perhaps classier, more attractive or popular or morally admirable. This is not only

good fun; it is existential vengeance. And without a conscience, it is amazingly easy to do. You quietly lie to the boss or to the boss's boss, cry some crocodile tears, or sabotage a coworker's project, or gaslight a patient (or child), bait people with promises, or provide a little misinformation that will never be traced back to you.

Or now let us say you are a person who has a proclivity for violence or for seeing violence done. You simply murder your coworker, or have her murdered - or your boss, or your ex-spouse, or your wealthy lover's spouse, or anyone else who bothers you. You have to be careful, because if you slip up, you may be caught and punished by the system. But you will never be confronted by your conscience, because you have no conscience. If you decide to kill, the only difficulties will be the external ones. Nothing inside you will ever protest.

Provided you are not forcibly stopped, you can do anything at all. If you are born at the right time, with some access to family fortune, and you have a special talent for whipping up other people's hatred and sense of deprivation, you can arrange to kill large numbers of unsuspecting people. With enough money, you can accomplish this from far away, and you can sit back safely and watch in satisfaction. In fact, terrorism (done from a distance) is the ideal occupation for a person who is possessed of blood lust and no conscience, because if you do it just right, you may be able to make a whole nation jump. And if that is not power, what is?

Or let us imagine the opposite extreme: You have no interest in power. To the contrary, you are the sort of person who really does not want much of anything. Your only real ambition is not to have to exert yourself to get by. You do not want to work like everyone else does. Without a conscience, you can nap or pursue your hobbies or watch television or just hang out somewhere all day long. Living a bit on the fringes, and with some handouts from relatives and friends, you can do this indefinitely. People may whisper to one another that you are an underachiever, or that you are depressed, a sad case, or, in contrast, if they get angry, they may grumble that you are lazy. When they get to know you better, and get really angry, they may scream at you and call you a loser, a bum. But it will never occur to them that you literally do not have a conscience, that in such a fundamental way, your very mind is not the same as theirs.

The panicked feeling of a guilty conscience never squeezes at your heart or wakes you in the night. Despite your lifestyle, you never feel irresponsible, neglectful or so much as embarrassed, although for the sake of appearances, sometimes you pretend that you do. For example, if you are a decent observer of people and what they react to, you may adopt a lifeless facial expression, say how ashamed of your life you are, and talk about how rotten you feel. This you do only because it is more convenient to have people think you are depressed than it is to have them shouting at you all the time, or insisting that you get a job.

You notice that people who do have a conscience feel guilty when they harangue someone they believe to be "depressed" or "troubled." As a matter of fact, to your further advantage, they often feel obliged to take care of such a person. If, despite your relative

poverty, you can manage to get yourself into a sexual relationship with someone, this person - who does not suspect what you are really like - may feel particularly obligated. And since all you want is not to have to work, your financier does not have to be especially rich, just relatively conscience-bound.

I trust that imagining yourself as any of these people feels insane to you, because such people are insane, dangerously so. Insane but real - they even have a label. Many mental health professionals refer to the condition of little or no conscience as "anti-social personality disorder," a non-correctable disfigurement of character that is now thought to be present in about 4 percent of the population - that is to say, one in twenty-five people. This condition of missing conscience is called by other names, too, most often "sociopathy," or the somewhat more familiar term psychopathy. Guiltlessness was in fact the first personality disorder to be recognized by psychiatry, and terms that have been used at times over the past century include manie sans délire, psychopathic inferiority, moral insanity, and moral imbecility.

Other books that analyse the condition are:

"Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us", Robert D. Hare, Guilford Press, 1999, ISBN 1572304510. Professor Hare is one of the leading authorities on psychopaths.

"Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work", Paul Babiak & Robert D. Hare, Regan Books, 2006, ISBN-10: 0060837721, ISBN-13: 978-0060837723. The authors explore the infiltration into today's corporations by psychopaths, or those with destructive personality characteristics that are invisible to many with whom they interact.

"Emotional Vampires: Dealing with People Who Drain You Dry", Albert J. Bernstein, Ph.D., McGraw-Hill, 2001, ISBN 0-07-138167-8. Dr. Bernstein cleverly uses the vampire analogy to examine the condition.

"In Sheep's Clothing: Understanding and Dealing with Manipulative People" George K Simon, Ph.D., A. J. Christopher & Co., 1996, ISBN: 096516960X. Dr. Simon uses the term 'Covert Aggression' in his analysis.

All 5 books include sections on how to cope with sociopaths.

How to spot a sociopath

A simple set of tests that enables you to judge if someone is likely to be a sociopath or not. Please note the caveats further down the page.

Online resources:

www.bullyonline.org is a good starting place when considering bullying in the workplace. Tim Field does an excellent job in describing the features of the workplace sociopath. This site is a useful starting place for online research.

An interview with Martha Stout and a review of 'The Sociopath Next Door'.

An Excerpt from the book 'In Sheep's Clothing' by George K. Simon. Please note that Dr. Simon doesn't use the terms psychopath or sociopath, he prefers the expression 'covert aggressive'.

Biblical resources::

If we look at the book of Proverbs, chapter 6 in particular rails against 'froward' people (King James Version). A 'froward' is translated from the Hebrew tahpukah (tah-poo-kaw') meaning a perversity or fraud. Verses 12 to 19 describe some of the main qualities of a psychopath:

A naughty person, a wicked man, walketh with a froward mouth.

He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers;

Frowardness is in his heart, he deviseth mischief continually; he soweth discord.

Therefore shall his calamity come suddenly; suddenly shall he be broken without remedy.

These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,

A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

It seems that the problem has been around for a long time.

Caveats:

Armed with this information, it is very tempting to label folks we just plain don't get on with. In particular, don't call people sociopaths to their faces - if you're wrong, you've done them an injustice and if you're right it will only make the situation worse as you've given them another reason to bully or otherwise abuse you. Try and get an independent verification of your suspicions.

The safest thing to do is to have nothing more to do with a sociopath. If that's not possible, start reading the books mentioned and use the strategies they describe. Think

only in terms of your survival - these people are a threat to your sanity, your career and your wallet.

Attempting psychotherapy on someone you know will make you both sicker (Bernstein).

Sociopaths think they're always right and will normally resist attempts at therapy. If they do agree to therapy they will try and subvert the process, particularly in a group context.

Dr. William Higgins comments: "You can't negotiate or bargain with psychopaths". Agreements, like truth, are another commodity to be used to win. They will be broken on a whim and the blame turned on the other party.

Bernstein notes that sociopaths are addicted to certain things such as excitement, aggression, deception etc. - not to mention the usual sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. This makes sense in that a person's conscience is a strong inhibitor to such behaviour. He also notes that they have repeat patterns of behaviour which are useful in diagnosing their condition.

Please remember that we are dealing with models of human behaviour - and models are not reality. Models are useful tools for explanation and communication and are part of the scientific method. Next month or next year, a better model may come along. If it explains what is known and yields further insights, it's a good candidate for acceptance.

Lead-in: (For those who came directly to this page via a search engine)

Has your life ever been made miserable by a psychopath/sociopath? Most people have suffered at the hands of a perverse personality at sometime in their lives, be it in the workplace or at home. It may take years before the lovable glib mask is penetrated and the destructive side exposed. An estimated 1 in 25 of the population are sociopaths - which means that we all know a few. Journalist John Simpson's description of Robert Maxwell is a good illustration.

In a book review on Psychopathy by Millon et al, the reviewer quotes: ". . . it was not until Cleckley wrote The Mask of Sanity in 1941 that we came to realize that psychopathy is a personality disorder that wreaks havoc on personal and societal institutions. As reported in chapter 8, Westman estimates that each sociopath costs society about \$50,000 a year." The case of Robert Hendy-Freegard is one of the worst ones to emerge recently.

This extended excerpt from a book by Martha Stout gives a stark insight into the mindset of this type of personality. When read slowly and