



The Sociopath at the Breakfast Table: Recognizing and Dealing With Antisocial and Manipulative People

By Jane McGregor, Tim McGregor

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Sociopaths can be found in every facet of life: personal relationships, work, school, and family. Most people have been in a relationship or interacted with more than one sociopath in their lifetime, often not recognizing their danger until it was too late. *The Sociopath At the Breakfast Table* breaks new ground in the field of abusive relationships. It presents an emerging theory about sociopathic interaction: SEAT, or the "Sociopath-Empath-Apath Triad." With this new found understanding of how sociopaths worm their way into people's lives, readers can use the tips and techniques found in this book to protect themselves from potential harm. More importantly, the authors show how empathy can be used as an antidote to sociopathic abuse - thus, victims are able to seize back power and ultimately regain control over their lives. This book presents readers information and tips on every aspect of interactions with a sociopath, from avoiding meeting one, to getting rid of them, dealing with the aftermath, and regaining control of their life.

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The Sociopath at the Breakfast Table: Recognizing and Dealing With Antisocial and Manipulative People By Jane McGregor, Tim McGregor Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #257154 in Books
- Published on: 2014-02-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x 6.25" w x .50" l, .50 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 144 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"Sociopaths are chameleon-like and lurk freely among us. They pose a serious threat to humankind, harming individuals, families and communities the world over affecting the health and well-being of millions daily....They may be your neighbor, your partner, your boss, or the person next to you in the checkout queue." - From the Book

About the Author

Dr. Jane McGregor is a lecturer at Nottingham University Institute of Mental Health. With a PhD in public health, she has worked with addiction treatment for years and is a member of the Association of Higher Education on Alcohol and Drugs. **Tim McGregor** is a consultant, writer and mental health practitioner who has worked with the NHS and UK voluntary sector as a commissioning adviser. They live in Nottingham, UK.

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Excerpt from Introduction: What the Book is About

This book is designed to heighten awareness of the problems of sociopathic abuse – and equip you to spot, avoid or remove sociopaths from your life.

Sociopaths are individuals with little or no conscience or ability to empathize with others' feelings. One sociopath (some people prefer the term psychopath) in the course of his or her lifetime will affect many, many people in a myriad harmful ways: bullying work colleagues, abusing children, instigating domestic violence or traumatizing friends and family through a sustained campaign of emotional abuse. Our purposes in writing the book are to reach out and offer supportive guidance to those who already have been targeted by a sociopath, and to forewarn and forearm others who want to reduce the likelihood of being a target of abuse themselves.

The book is also about harnessing your powers of empathy. On the one hand, empathic people prove eye-catching quarry to the sociopath; on the other, if the expression of empathy was more widely approved by society at large it could provide a powerful antidote to sociopathic abuse. This is the 'empathy trap' of the book's title.

Sociopaths in society

For simplicity's sake we use sociopath in the book as a catch-all term. Because the medical profession continues to debate the exact features of this condition, we will not be exploring it in detail. Our aim is to highlight not the condition itself, but the destructive effects of sharing your life with someone who has a sociopathic disorder.

Sociopaths are chameleon-like and lurk freely among us. They pose a serious threat to humankind, harming individuals, families and communities the world over, affecting the health and well-being of millions daily.

Yet, for reasons explored in this book, they exist largely unseen; and this lack of awareness and responsiveness means that the traumas they inflict upon their many targets go undetected.

Sociopaths exist in greater numbers than you might suppose, although it is hard to know for sure just how many there are. Since most estimates are derived from data based on specific sub-groups like prison populations rather than the general population, and the condition has been subject to regular redefinition, estimates for sociopathy in society vary considerably. Martha Stout, a psychologist who treats the survivors of psychological trauma, informs us in her valuable book *The Sociopath Next Door* that 4 per cent of the general population are sociopathic. This estimate is derived from a large clinical trial involving primary care patients in the United States, which found that 8 per cent of men and 3.1 per cent of women met the criteria for a diagnosis of anti-social personality disorder (AsPD), one of the terms used to describe those displaying sociopathic traits. The frequency of the condition was higher (13.4 per cent for men and 4 per cent for women) for those people with a history of childhood conduct disorder (a precursor of adult sociopathy).¹ Meanwhile researchers Robert Hare and Paul Babiak estimate that 1 per cent of the population have the condition, with another 10 per cent or more falling into what they call the 'grey zone'. In their book *Snakes in Suits*,² Hare and Babiak suggest that the prevalence is likely to be higher in some groups including the business world, the philosophy and practices of which encourage sociopathic traits such as callousness and grasping behaviour.

Australian psychologist John Clarke has been working along the same lines as Hare and Babiak. In his book *Working with Monsters*³ he reports that up to 0.5 per cent of women and 2 per cent of men could be classified as sociopathic (like Hare and Babiak he prefers the term 'psychopath'). A British study has estimated the prevalence of sociopathy in the general population at just under 1 per cent (approximately 620,000 people in the UK), although like other studies, this study found that prevalence is higher among certain groups including prisoners, the homeless, and people who have been admitted to psychiatric institutions.

As you can see, estimates of sociopathy in the general population vary from less than 1 person in 100 to 1 in 25. Even at the more conservative end of the estimates, this translates into a possible 3.13 million sociopaths in the USA. And worldwide it equates to a figure of around 70 million. So the fact that sociopathic abuse remains such an overlooked problem is surprising, if not shocking. The cruelty of sociopaths finds no bounds, for there is no recourse, treatment or punishment to permanently stop them.

Sociopath-induced distress and trauma

Individuals who have been targeted by a sociopath often respond with self-deprecating statements like 'I was stupid,' 'What was I thinking?' or 'I should've listened to my gut instinct.' But being involved with a sociopath is like being brainwashed. The sociopath's superficial charm is usually the means by which he or she conditions people. On initial contact a sociopath will often test other people's empathy, so questions geared towards discovering whether you are highly empathetic or not should ring alarm bells. Those with a highly empathetic disposition are often targeted. Those who have lower levels of empathy are often passed over, though they may be drawn in and used by sociopaths as part of their cruel entertainment, as we discuss later in the book.

Those living with a sociopath usually exist in a state of constant emotional chaos. They may feel anxious and afraid, not knowing when the sociopath will fly into a rage. The sociopath meanwhile carries on untouched, using aggression, violence or emotional bullying to abuse his or her partner. Sociopaths are often aggressive, though not all of them exhibit violent or criminal behaviour. Aggression is not limited to men either; sociopathic women can be aggressive and violent too. Sociopaths make up 25 per cent of the prison

population, committing more than twice as many violent and aggressive acts as other criminals do. Violent sociopaths who cheat on their partners or defraud people are the ones most likely to get caught. According to Robert Hare, the author of *Without Conscience*, in the United States approximately 20 per cent of male and female prisoners are sociopaths. They commit more than twice as many violent and aggressive acts as do other criminals and are responsible for more than 50 per cent of all serious crimes. When they get out of prison, they often return to crime. The reoffending rate of sociopaths is about double that of other offenders and for violent crimes it is triple.

As well as inflicting physical trauma on others, there is the added and less visible burden of sociopath-induced emotional trauma, which if left unchecked can lead to anxiety disorders, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Chronically traumatized people often exhibit hyper-vigilant, anxious and agitated behaviour.

They may also experience insomnia and assorted somatic (bodily) symptoms such as tension headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, abdominal pain, back pain, tremors and nausea. Exposure to and interaction with a sociopath in childhood can leave lifelong scars, including a deep mistrust of other people and anxiety in social situations.

Yet for all these problems, no one knows the true extent or depth of mental anguish suffered by those on the receiving end of chronic sociopathic abuse, because in the majority of cases the physical and mental health problems either go undetected or the root cause is overlooked.

We believe that sociopathic abuse thus has a substantial public health dimension and as such warrants far more attention than it attracts at present. The public need to be more alert and equipped to counter the problem and to stop sociopaths from interfering in adverse ways in other people's lives. Furthermore, effective responses and interventions are required to reduce the range and extent of sociopathic abuse suffered by people the world over.

Excerpt from Chapter 3: A Profile of a Sociopath

According to psychologists Hare and Babiak, sociopaths are always on the lookout for individuals to scam or swindle. They outline the sociopathic approach as having three phases.

The Assessment Phase

Some sociopaths will take advantage of almost anyone they meet, while others are more patient, waiting for the perfect, innocent target to cross their path. In each case, the sociopath is sizing up the potential usefulness of an individual as a source of money, power or influence. Some sociopaths enjoy a challenge while others prey on people who are vulnerable. During the assessment phase, the sociopath determines a potential target's weak points and uses these to lead the target off course.

The Manipulation Phase

In this phase the sociopath has identified a target and the manipulation begins. At this time a sociopath may create a persona or mask, specifically designed to 'work' for his or her target.

A sociopath will lie to gain the trust of her target. Sociopaths' lack of empathy and guilt allows them to lie with impunity; they do not see the value of telling the truth unless it will help them get what they want. As the interaction with the target proceeds, the sociopath carefully assesses the target's persona. This move gives her a picture of the target's traits and characteristics so she can exploit them. The target's persona may also reveal insecurities or weaknesses he wishes to hide from view.

The sociopath will eventually build a personal relationship with the target based on this knowledge. The persona of the sociopath, the 'personality' the target is bonding with, does not really exist. It is built on lies, carefully woven together to entrap the targeted person. It is a mask, one of many, customized to fit the target's particular expectations. This act of manipulation is predatory in nature and often leads to severe physical or emotional harm for the person targeted. Healthy relationships are built on mutual respect and trust; the targeted person believes mistakenly that the 'bond' between himself and the sociopath is of that kind, and that this is the reason their relationship is so successful. So when the sociopath behaves disrespectfully or there are breaches of trust, such incidences are overlooked.

The Abandonment Phase

This is when the sociopath decides that his target is no longer useful. He then abandons his target and moves on to a new one. Sometimes, perhaps not surprisingly, targets overlap. The sociopath can have several individuals 'on the go' as it were: one who has just been abandoned, but who is kept in the picture just in case the others do not work out; another who is currently being played; and a third, who is being groomed in readiness.

Excerpt from Chapter 4: Interactions of a Sociopath

The Sociopathic Transaction

Often empath's are targeted by sociopaths because they pose the greatest threat. The empath is usually the first to detect that something is not right and express what he or she senses. As a consequence, the empath is both the sociopath's number one foe and a source of attraction; the empath's responses and actions provide excellent entertainment for a bored and listless sociopath going about her daily business. Cameron's story highlights what happens to empath's who become embroiled in the intimidations of a bully.

The world of the empath is not for the fainthearted, and it is easy to see why others walk away from these kinds of confrontational situations. In the context that we are discussing, empath's often find themselves up against not only the sociopath but quite often a flock of apaths as well. Apaths hide among the 60 per cent of people who obediently follow the leader. On the basis of these traits they are afforded pole position in the sociopath's intrigues. But this prime spot comes at a price, for in what we call the sociopathic transaction, the apath makes an unspoken Faustian pact with the sociopath, and then passively (often through fear) or otherwise, participates in his cruel sport.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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