

The Manipulative Approach to Life

Many psychopaths are master manipulators and game players; they will use every trick in the book to achieve their goals. The traits and characteristics noted by Hare and Cleckley serve them well and are best understood if explained in the context in which they play out in their daily lives. Understanding how they perform in public can help one begin to catch a glimpse of the real person behind the charming façade and, we hope, will help the reader mount a defense against their clever manipulations.

Let's look at some strategies and tactics used as part of a three-phase process by many psychopaths. Note that this process is a natural outgrowth of their personality and that often it will be more automatic than consciously planned out. First, they assess the value of individuals to their needs, and identify their psychological strengths and weaknesses. Second, they manipulate the individuals (now potential victims) by feeding them carefully crafted messages, while constantly using feedback from them to build and maintain control. Not only is this an effective approach to take with most people, it also allows psychopaths to talk their way around and out of any difficulty quickly and effectively if confronted or challenged. Third, they leave the drained and bewildered victims when they are bored or otherwise through with them.

Within this broad framework, several factors come into play. Here is a more detailed explanation.

When Bad Is Good:

Adopting the Psychopathic Lifestyle

The attitudes and behaviors of individuals with many psychopathic features are systemic, a natural and pervasive part of their general lifestyle. In a sense, they are what they are. However, there are others whose nature is less psychopathic than prag-

matic; they adopt some of the trappings of a “psychopathic lifestyle” in order to succeed or excel at their work or profession. They are encouraged in this process by all sorts of pop-psych self-help books that promote a philosophy of aggressive greed, self-entitlement, and “looking out for number one.”

In his book *What Would Machiavelli Do?*, Stanley Bing, perhaps tongue in cheek, tells how to *get what you want when you want it whether you deserve it or not. Without fear. Without emotion. Without finger-wagging morality.* The following are some of his exhortations:

- Be coldhearted: *Replace decency and thoughtfulness with insensitivity and hardheartedness.*
- Work hard to become bad: *Most people aren't naturally horrendous . . . but with work we can improve.*
- Be narcissistic: *View others solely as a function of your needs . . . You have enormous selfishness within you . . . Let it out.*
- Be unpredictable: *Very nice. Very mean. Big, big swings. Gigantic pleasure. Towering rage.*
- Be ruthless: For your competitors and those who would bring you down, *“Crush them. Hear their bones break, their wind-pipes snap.”*

Of course, the more psychopathic one is, the easier it is to follow Bing's road map to amoral personal and corporate success. For most of us, though, social brutality and predation are somewhat more difficult. Even if Bing's book is viewed as a satire, it reads like a blueprint for a psychopath.

ASSESSMENT PHASE

The chance to con and manipulate others is a primary motivator for someone with a psychopathic personality disorder; psychopaths like to

play games with people. They often are on the lookout for individuals to swindle or scam, and this first phase of the psychopathic approach involves identifying and assessing targets or prey. Some psychopaths are opportunistic, aggressive predators who will take advantage of almost anyone they meet, while others are more patient, waiting for the perfect, innocent victim to cross their path. In each case, the psychopath is constantly sizing up the potential usefulness of an individual as a source of money, power, sex, or influence. People who have power, celebrity, or high social status are particularly attractive.

In the business world, it is relatively easy to spot those in power—big offices and fancy titles are obvious ways to help us identify who's who in an organization. But do not think that just because you don't have a big office or fancy title that you lack power or assets that a psychopath might find useful. Are you a secretary who controls access to your boss and his or her calendar? Are you a union representative who can smooth over employee conflicts and difficulties? Are you plugged into the grapevine in your company, and do you have access to information that is circulated to everyone in the know? Or maybe you are the person in the mailroom who goes the extra mile to make sure important documents reach their destinations on time? These are examples of *informal* power, an important form of power that is the subject of study in business schools and by organizational psychologists. Your informal power or special authority is a useful asset that corporate psychopaths can use to further their larger, personal objectives.

Besides assessing the potential gain from others, psychopaths assess their emotional weak points and psychological defenses in order to work out a plan of attack. Individual psychopaths do this in different ways and to varying degrees because personal style, experience, and preference play a role in this assessment as well. Some psychopaths enjoy a strong challenge, such as that posed by a confident, well-insulated celebrity or an astute professional with a strong ego. Others prefer to prey on people who are in a weakened or vulnerable

state. These might include people who are lonely or in need of emotional support and companionship, the elderly on fixed incomes, the underage and naive, or those who have recently been hurt or victimized by others. Although the usefulness of this latter group may not appear to be obvious from a strictly monetary standpoint, their perceived “ease” of approach makes them attractive to the criminal psychopath who weighs the investment in time and energy.

Chaos: Opportunity Knocks

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Louisiana, and large parts of the American Gulf Coast. Although the property damage and the human suffering were staggering, the resulting chaos and confusion provided a unique opportunity for those more concerned with their *own* coldblooded self-interests than with the carnage around them.

At the time, Patrick Meehan, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, had this to say: “If the lessons of September 11 and the Asian tsunami are learned, some coldhearted, evil scam artists will use this occasion to perpetrate fraud, lining their own pockets at the expense of the hurricane victims.” His statement was less prophetic than it was a sober comment on the fact that there are lots of common thugs, criminals, and predators ready to make a buck out of someone else’s tragedy. Some of their depredations no doubt were related to poverty, mob mentality, and understandable survival instincts. However, for many opportunistic psychopaths—on the street and in the boardroom—their egregious acts were simply business as usual.

Several psychopathic traits come into play in this phase. While on the surface psychopaths generally want to come across in public as at the top of their game and wear the suit of status, success, and sociability, many are actually playing out a *parasitic* lifestyle. They prefer

living off the work of others rather than their own efforts, so being a drifter, moocher, or wastrel is a common lifestyle choice despite declarations to the contrary. In service of this lifestyle, they have no misgivings about asking for and often demanding financial support from other people. Often, the supporter is a family member or friend, but it can easily be a stranger whom they seduce or con into providing food, shelter, and a source of income. It is not unusual, or wrong, for people to rely on the help of others, including public aid, during rough times in their lives, but psychopaths remorselessly use others even when able-bodied and capable of supporting themselves. Not all psychopaths are out of work, of course. But even psychopaths who have jobs like to mooch off others in overt and covert ways; they take from coworkers and employers alike.

Psychopaths *lack empathy* and possibly even the most basic understanding of human feelings. Characteristically, the economic and emotional impact of their selfish behavior on others is irrelevant to them, in part because they believe everyone in this dog-eat-dog world is as greedy and unfeeling as they are. Also, they seem unable to construct an accurate emotional facsimile of others, wrongly concluding that the emotional life of everyone else is as shallow and barren as their own. People do not exist in their mental world except as objects, targets, and obstacles. Psychopaths also *lack feelings of remorse and guilt*, part of the internal moral sense that prevents the rest of us from acting out some of the fantasies we occasionally have about using, manipulating, or hurting others. Some might suggest that psychopaths are such effective predators because they are *not* plagued by doubts and concerns raised by a conscience.

In addition to their parasitic nature and lack of empathy, there is evidence that psychopaths *need considerable novel stimulation* to keep from becoming bored. This need, which recent research suggests may be rooted in their brain physiology, often leads them to search for new and exciting opportunities and to move casually from relationship to relationship. Most people are able to endure tedium and hard work over long periods in order to do significant things in their

lives, such as completing a college degree, apprenticing, or working at an entry-level job in hope of a promotion. Psychopaths search for easier routes to the same ends. Many do manage to graduate from college or obtain professional credentials, but in most cases it is less through hard work and dedication than through cheating, getting others to do their work, and generally “working the system.” Once on the job, they tend to avoid tasks that become monotonous or difficult, or that need some long-term, serious commitment to complete. They can’t imagine how or why anyone, including coworkers, would wait their turn—or work hard—for anything they wanted. Their need for stimulation is reflected in a penchant for high-risk, thrill-seeking behaviors. Many nonpsychopathic people seek the adrenaline rush associated with such behaviors, but unlike psychopaths, they typically do so by evaluating the risks to themselves and to others, and without putting others in harm’s way. Sadly for society, the psychopath’s need for stimulation shades easily into antisocial and criminal behavior.

“It’s in My Genes”

Evolutionary psychology provides another reason for the nomadic lifestyle of many psychopaths: the search for multiple sex partners. Psychopathy is characterized by casual sexual relationships that are devoid of genuine, long-term emotional and personal attachments to partners. Frequent liaisons, the use of sex as a weapon, and the callous treatment of intimates are common features of psychopathic individuals, both male and female.

Recent theory and research in evolutionary psychology suggests that there are genetic reasons for such attitudes and behaviors. In this model, psychopathy is a heritable, adaptive life strategy in which the goal—reflected in the early emergence of aggressive sexuality—is to provide genetic continuity. As indicated in *Without Conscience*, passing on one’s gene pool can be accomplished in a number of ways, including the careful nurturance of a small number

of offspring. The psychopathic pattern appears to be quite different, but equally (or even more) successful: the production of a large number of children, with little or no emotional and physical investment in their well-being.

This pattern involves the use of a persistent and callous pattern of deception and manipulation to attract potential mates, a readiness to abandon them and their offspring, and the need to move on to fresh mating grounds.

Psychopaths have a great sense of superiority and entitlement, and think nothing of helping themselves to property that belongs to others. Their *grandiose sense of self-importance* leads them to believe that other people exist just to take care of them. Because they see most people as weak, inferior, and easy to deceive, psychopathic con artists will often tell you that their victims deserved what they got. Sometimes their sense of superiority is so great that they will say that they are conferring a *gift* by letting their victims support them. This is obvious in the many cases of cult leaders who are charlatans or outright psychopaths, but can be seen in more subtle cases as well. This condescending air toward others comes across as cocky and egotistical to many observers, but, as we will discuss below, some may find this behavior somewhat charming, even charismatic.

MANIPULATION PHASE

Following identification of individuals who may be useful to them, psychopaths begin to create a shroud of charm and deceit that we have labeled the *psychopathic fiction*. This is the beginning of the manipulation phase.

The first goal here is to gain the trust of the individual through ingratiation and various impression-management techniques. Perhaps one of the most effective skills psychopaths use to get the trust of people is their ability to *charm* them. They often have an engaging manner and make great first impressions on people. Upon this first impression,

they may build an elaborate fictitious character, persona, or mask. A psychopath can appear strong, naive, dominant, honest, submissive, trustworthy, worldly, or whatever he or she believes will get others to respond positively to manipulative overtures. Some rely on social stereotypes to help them create a useful façade. For example, they might foster impressions of a suffering artist, a misunderstood spouse, a successful businessperson, a celebrity, a member of a respected profession, or a person with connections to the rich, famous, or infamous.

The French Branch of the Rockefellers

A few years ago, French-born Fabian Ortuno was arrested in the United States after cutting a swath through Long Island's high society by pretending to be a Rockefeller. Although many of his victims wondered about his French accent, they succumbed to his charming ways, and were bilked of large sums of money after investing in a variety of his get-rich schemes.

Once arrested, Ortuno posted bail and promptly disappeared, only to reappear in Vancouver as Christopher Rocancourt, a Formula One racing driver. He was a big hit on the local celebrity ski circuit before he was accused of defrauding a West Vancouver businessman of \$200,000. He was arrested but still managed to appear on *60 Minutes*, claiming that he never stole, only borrowed. In Vancouver, he was sentenced to time in custody and extradited to the United States.

Facing a possible twenty-year sentence, he plea bargained and was sentenced to five years in prison. Authorities in several countries wish to question him about a variety of unsolved crimes, including fraud, smuggling, bribery, and perjury.

His wife said, "He only steals with his mind."

Recently released from prison, he has become an author, wealthy, and a celebrity in France, where his ability to con "stupid people" out of their money is much admired. *C'est la vie!*

Some psychopaths lay the charm on too thick, coming across as glib, superficial, and unconvincing. However, the truly talented ones have raised their ability to charm people to that of an art, priding themselves on their ability to present a fictional self to others that is convincing, taken at face value, and difficult to penetrate. Psychopaths do naturally what some politicians, salesmen, and promoters have to work hard to achieve: impress listeners with how they say something. In criminal cases, it is sometimes only after the authorities uncover some heinous crime or masterful deceit that a psychopath's charming mask of sincerity, integrity, and honesty is questioned. In less dramatic cases, it may still take much day-to-day exposure before the façade becomes transparent to a few studious observers, but this rarely happens with most people with whom they interact.

While *lack of empathy and guilt* allows psychopaths to identify their victims in the assessment phase, these traits also help them to con and manipulate shamelessly during the manipulation phase. What contributes significantly to their success in engendering trust in their victims is their almost pathological ability to *lie* with impunity. Unencumbered by social anxieties, fear of being found out, empathy, remorse, or guilt—some of nature's brake pedals for anti-social behavior in humans—psychopaths tell a tale so believable, so entertaining, so creative, that many listeners *instinctively* trust them.

One might think that a long series of lies would eventually become transparent, leading to unmasking the psychopath, but this is rarely the case. The reason most observers do not see through the lies is that many psychopathic lies serve both to allay the doubts or concerns of the victim and to bolster the psychopathic fiction. Their often theatrical, yet convincing stories and entertaining explanations reinforce an environment of trust, acceptance, and genuine delight, leading most people to accept them exactly as whom they appear to be—and almost unconsciously excuse any inconsistencies they might have noted. If challenged or caught in a lie, psychopaths are not embarrassed. They simply change or elaborate on the story line to weave together all the misarranged details into a believable fabric. Well-practiced oral communication skills make this endless stream of disinformation seem

believable, sensible, and logical. Some psychopaths are so good at this that they can create a veritable Shangri-la view of their world in the minds of others; a view that they almost seem to believe themselves.

Surprisingly, psychopaths will lie even to people who already know the truth about what they are saying. Amazingly, more often than not, victims will eventually come to doubt their *own* knowledge of the truth and change *their* own views to believe what the psychopath tells them rather than what they know to be true. Such is the power of psychopathic manipulation. In at least one case we have heard, a thief fleeing the law shot at his pursuer. Upon capture, the arresting officer—even though he returned fire—was convinced by the fast-talking suspect that the suspect did not, in fact, have a gun and never shot at the officer! Some psychopaths are proud of this expertise, making fun of their victims' gullibility and often bragging about how they fooled this person and that person. To give the devil his due, this self-praise is justified in many cases.

It is not clear whether psychopaths lie because it is an effective tactic to get what they want, or the act of lying is pleasurable, or both. It could be that psychopaths fail to learn the importance of honesty in their youth, and learn, instead, the utility of lying to get what they want from others. In the typical child, lying and distortion lessen with age, while psychopaths just get better at them. They don't see the value of telling the truth unless it will help get them what they want. The difference between psychopathic lies and those told by others is that the latter typically are less callous, calculated, damaging, and destructive to others. They also are far less pervasive than psychopathic lies. For example, poker players, men trying to talk a woman into having sex, adolescents working their parents over to obtain permission to go to a party, a businessmen trying to close a deal, and a politician trying to get elected or to explain his actions may use a variety of lies to attain their goals. But unlike psychopaths, cynical, facile lying is not an integral, systemic part of their personality, and it does not coexist with the other features that define psychopathy.

Another characteristic of psychopaths is an ability to *avoid taking responsibility* for things that go wrong; instead, they blame others,

circumstances, fate, and so forth. They have an impressive supply of excuses for why *they* are not to blame for anything that they have said or done to hurt someone else. Pointing the finger at others serves the dual purposes of reinforcing their own positive image while spreading disparaging information about rivals and detractors. They do this by positioning their blame of others as a display of loyalty to the listener. That is, psychopaths appear to be helping or protecting the individual from harm by passing the blame onto a third party. Blaming the system, the company, or society as a whole for their own behavior is also a common response. In many organizations, coworkers can always be found who distrust the company or are angry about something that happened to them. Psychopaths can use these genuine feelings to generate support for their own position.

Even if those with a psychopathic personality admit to involvement in a crime, they will minimize their role, as well as the negative impact on the victims. Psychopaths may even blame the victims for their own misfortune, offering convincing reasons why they got what they deserved!

As it does in the assessment phase, *lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse* plays an important role during the manipulation phase—by facilitating behavior that is callous and insensitive to the rights and feeling of others. This can lead to the psychological and physical abuse of family, friends, and innocent strangers. Later we will discuss in detail the impact of psychopathic abuse on the victim. The level and intensity of psychopathic intimidation often keeps those who have been abused from coming forward. In psychopathic crimes, abuse can extend far beyond property damage or assault, sometimes intensifying into sadistic attacks on victims.

Hit Them When They're Down

A particularly nasty scenario involves scanning the media for accounts of elderly people who have been victimized by fraudulent scams or schemes, and then approaching them with an offer to help

get their money back. In one such incident, a newspaper reported that an eighty-year-old woman had lost her life savings in a venture promoted by a middle-aged woman who had offered to care for her. Following the report, another scamster, posing as a lawyer who specialized in helping victims of fraud, convinced the devastated woman he could get her money back. She borrowed his up-front “recovery fee” of \$5,000 from a close friend. You know the rest.

ABANDONMENT PHASE

Once psychopaths have drained all the value from a victim—that is, when the victim is no longer useful—they abandon that victim and move on to someone else. Abandonment is most often abrupt—the psychopath just disappears one day—and it can occur without the current victim even realizing the psychopath has been looking for someone new to use. In crimes such as identity theft, credit card fraud, and construction swindles, the psychopath effectively disappears, typically reappearing with a new identity in another geographic location. The arrival of the Internet has made the psychopathic criminal’s life easier, as running and hiding are easily carried out, and targets are plentiful and readily accessible.

Most people feel at least a twinge of guilt or regret, and will want to apologize if they have hurt someone. Psychopaths have only a vague appreciation of these concepts, and sometimes find the idea of guilt or remorse an amusing weakness the rest of us possess—something that they can, of course, take advantage of. Certainly, they are not influenced by the possibility that their behavior may have dire consequences for themselves and others. In part, this is because the past and future are less important to them than is the present. In addition, their own shallow emotions make it difficult for them to appreciate that others might have a much richer emotional life. It also makes it easy for psychopaths to view others as objects or pawns to be moved around at will. Put another way, psychopaths are better at understanding the intellectual or cognitive lives of others than they are

at understanding their emotional life. As a consequence, people have value only for what they can provide. Once used, they are discarded. To be able to abandon people in such a callous and harmful manner one must be immune to the feelings of those one hurts. Psychopaths can easily do this because their emotional and social attachments to others are poorly developed; weak at best.

Although psychopaths do not feel the range and depth of emotions experienced by most people, they do understand that others have something called “emotions.” Some may even take the time to learn to mimic emotions so they can better manipulate their victims. But they do so at a superficial level, and trained observers can sometimes tell the difference; the real gut-feel behind their playacting is not there. Consider these words by Jack Abbott, a psychopathic killer who was championed by Norman Mailer and released from prison, only to kill again: “There are emotions—a whole spectrum of them—that I know only through words, through reading and in my immature imagination. I can *imagine* I feel these emotions (know, therefore, what they are), but *I do not*.”

Practice Makes Perfect

Hare consulted with Nicole Kidman on the movie *Malice*. She wanted to let the audience know, early in the film, that she was not the sweet, warm person she appeared to be. He gave her the following scene: “You’re walking down the street and come across an accident at the corner. A young child has been struck by a car and is lying in a pool of blood. You walk up to the accident site, look briefly at the child, and then focus on the grief-stricken mother. After a few minutes of careful scrutiny, you walk back to your apartment, go into the bathroom, stand in front of the mirror, and practice mimicking the facial expressions and body language of the mother.”

The emotional poverty of psychopaths and their inability to fully appreciate the emotional life of others have been the subject of considerable neurobiological research, some of it using brain-imaging technology. The results of this research are consistent with the clinical view that psychopaths do not respond to emotional situations and material in the way that the rest of us do. In several functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain imaging studies, Hare and his associates found that emotional words and unpleasant pictures did not produce in psychopaths the increases in the activity of brain (limbic) regions normally associated with the processing of emotional material. Instead, activation occurred in regions of the brain involved in the understanding and production of language, as if the psychopaths analyzed the material in linguistic terms. Think of Spock in *Star Trek*. He responds to events that others find arousing, repulsive, or scary with the words *interesting* and *fascinating*. His response is a cognitive or intellectual appraisal of the situation, without the visceral reactions and emotional coloring that others normally experience. Fortunately for those around him, Spock has “built-in” ethical and moral standards, a conscience that functions without the strong emotional components that form a necessary part of our conscience.

Some researchers have commented that psychopaths “know the words but not the music,” a statement that accurately captures their cold and empty core. This hollow core serves them well, though, by making them effective human predators. Not only are psychopaths unconcerned about the impact of their own behavior on others—or of possible retribution—they more often than not will *blame* their victim if they are caught or charged with a crime. In fact, it is not uncommon for criminal psychopaths to state that *they* are suffering more in prison than their victims did during the original crime—and they (the psychopaths) deserve some sympathy or special treatment. Other psychopaths may sometimes *say* that they feel remorse for their transgressions, but scrutiny of their behaviors betrays their words as simply lies to get better treatment or an earlier release

date. Unfortunately, many co-opt socially supportive belief systems—typically religious beliefs of every kind—declaring that they have found God, repented their sins, and are ready to reenter society.

Praise the Lord

At a judicial conference in Maine, Hare spoke about the ease with which convicted offenders often are able to convince various religious groups, simply by using the right words and phrases, that they too had “found religion.” The tactic of the offenders was to tap into the groups’ belief that there is good in all of us and that everyone can be redeemed, even though we sometimes temporarily go off track.

After the presentation, a woman came up to Hare, identified herself as a prosecutor, and stated that she was a fundamentalist Christian, as was her husband, a judge. Thinking that he perhaps had offended her, Hare began to explain his comments. The prosecutor interrupted by saying that she was in agreement with what he had said, and that she had heard the same hollow line from many repentant offenders. As described by her, the scenario typically went like this:

Defendant: “I found Christ.”

Prosecutor: “Congratulations. You’re going to heaven. But first, you’re going to jail.”

Irresponsibility, another one of the twenty traits that Hare uses to define the psychopath, is not an unusual trait. Many of us make promises we don’t keep or enter commitments on which we don’t follow through. Typically, though, while we may seem irresponsible in one part of our life, we may be very responsible in others, unlike the psychopath, who is chronically irresponsible in all aspects of life.

There are many variants on the theme of ignoring responsibility: defaulting on loans, overspending on credit cards, failing to pay bills, neglecting child support, putting others at risk by driving recklessly, and so forth.

The selfish, one-sided, psychopathic approach to life can lead, over a lifetime, to several predictable outcomes. First, psychopaths have *many short-term relationships* over the course of their lives, a direct result of the Assessment-Manipulation-Abandonment process.

They may approach many individuals offering “commitment,” but then leave when their usefulness has expired. This results in a series of traditional and common-law marriages, short-term live-in relationships, and so forth. They often leave behind a trail of jilted lovers, possibly abused ex-spouses, and unsupported children. Occasionally, this pattern of behavior leads to a reputation as a “player,” and some psychopaths will even promote these reputations themselves to build up their status and mystique. Unfortunately, for the psychopaths’ partners, these relationships are one-sided, exist without real intimacy, and are often plagued by intimidation, abuse, and violence. Sadly, as many as one in five persistent spouse abusers have psychopathic personalities. Many avoid prison by taking part in court-mandated treatment programs that do them or their partners no good.

Second, psychopaths typically *do not have practicable long-term career or life goals*. Thus, a series of unconnected, randomly selected jobs defines their work history. Despite the lack of a real career, psychopaths will claim all sorts of goals and achievements, and weave a career “history” so convincing that others believe the success, fortune, and achievement they profess to have attained in their lives. In the business world, these fictitious achievements are memorialized in a résumé filled with lies, self-generated letters of commendation, and even fake wall plaques and awards. Even psychopaths who choose a *criminal* career lack clear goals and objectives, getting involved in a wide variety of opportunistic offenses, rather than specializing the way typical career criminals do. This is

an outcome of their impulsivity, poor behavioral controls, and low frustration tolerance. That their predatory lifestyle may bother their friends, family, or even fellow criminals is of little importance to them. Depending on the situational demands, though, they can spout or make up what seem like reasonable, attainable goals in order to impress or manipulate others.