

The telltale traits of an Elon Musk-like psychopath and how to spot them

Experts believe the personality profile exists on a spectrum, with key signs including a lack of empathy and a tendency to manipulate

Jenny Tucker

Credit: Lou Kiss

Labelling someone a psychopath tends to cast them as a social pariah. Like Charles Manson or Hannibal Lecter, they are seen as sinister figures who bring to mind the monsters that fill our prisons and dominate shocking headlines.

Yet according to Abigail Marsh, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Georgetown University in Washington DC, we should have more compassion for what people with psychopathy may be experiencing, because many of them do not want to be that way.

It is also widely acknowledged that psychopathy exists on a spectrum, which means that those with mild to moderate traits can have the capacity to care.

A study, published last year by Marsh's team, was able to show how people with psychopathy can value the welfare of others, with some of the participants having specific moral codes and an ability to regulate their own behaviour.

Marsh also revealed that there are consistent differences in the brains of people with psychopathy. The part of the brain called the amygdala – the processing centre for emotions – tends to be smaller than average, affecting their response to danger and fear. This could explain why those with psychopathy act impulsively or remain [blinkered to the distress of others](#).

So what is psychopathy?

Psychopathy itself is a recognised scientific term, yet it is not found in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) – the official diagnostic health handbook used by the NHS. Instead, [specialised clinicians](#) arrive at a diagnosis mainly by using scoring assessment tools, a thorough examination of the patient's history, and a face-to-face consultation. It's a complex condition, with psychopathy seen as a more severe personality profile overlapping with [antisocial personality disorder \(ASPD\) or dissocial personality disorder](#). One study, back in 2009, found that 0.6 per cent of adults in the UK showed some psychopathic traits, which include a lack of empathy, conscience, guilt and remorse, and a tendency to use [manipulative behaviour](#) to exploit or harm others. Often, a psychopath's mask of charm is the veneer that shrouds a covert core, making it almost impossible for those around them to ever get to know the "real" person.

Here are the five significant traits of a psychopathic person.

1. They have no empathy even though they can identify why they've upset you

While someone with psychopathy can comprehend what's going on with you, it doesn't mean they will respect or aim to fulfil your needs. In fact, they tend to be hyperfocused on their own goals, so this information can be used to gain power, influence a situation or person, or to benefit themselves.

Dee Johnson, a BACP-accredited counsellor, says: "This personality type can be dismissive of even slightly emotional people, which may include a

lack of tolerance to your friends and family. They can have strong opinions with no room for another's input, and be harsh and uncaring about your feelings. Obviously this is difficult to tolerate, and if the lack of empathy and compassion becomes detrimental to your own wellbeing, then it's time to be brutally honest for the sake of both of you."

2. They will be charming at parties, but their conversation is insincere

Psychopaths can initially appear charismatic and devoted, and are good at 'mirroring' others Credit: Lou Kiss

When the charm offensive is ramped up, those with psychopathy can have a hypnotic allure. It's not unusual for others to be hanging on to their every word, seduced by the all-consuming attention lavished on anyone within their radar. But it's not about being interested in others. It's a way of gaining control.

They are very good at mirroring others, so they quickly latch on to your values or sense of humour. It's a great way to convince you that you have so much in common and they "get" you. The reality, of course, is very different.

Johnson believes this effusive behaviour can be highly confusing for those who fall under its spell, especially when it comes to romantic connections.

"At an initial meeting, or the early days of a relationship, that person can appear charismatic and devoted. But it's important to understand this version doesn't really exist. If you can be aware of this, and realistic about the expectations of your relationship, there may be some chance of success. But if you want love without conditions, you may want to look elsewhere."

3. They manipulate repeatedly, often for personal gain

Psychopaths can prioritise personal gain at the expense of a partner, which can result in serious psychological harm

Psychopathic behaviour is often calculated, even cruel. For another person to survive this, they would need to have a sense of their own self-worth, be highly independent and confident. Johnson says: "Safe boundaries are essential to avoid falling into the trap of being submissive and fearful of confrontation. While it's not easy, a person must be able to spot the signs of psychopathic manipulation and know they could survive without that partner, even though they might love them."

Dr Faye Begeti, a neurology specialist at Oxford University Hospitals, adds: "At the more severe end of the spectrum, there can be a strong prioritisation of personal gain at the expense of a partner, combined with manipulation, which can result in serious psychological harm."

The resulting fallout could involve much worse [mental health](#) outcomes, including depression and PTSD. She says: "Whether a relationship can survive many of these traits is highly individual, and even if it technically can, that doesn't always mean it should."

4. They believe they are above everyone else

There is only one VIP where someone with psychopathy is concerned. This makes it incredibly hard to convince them to see another's point of view, or understand that the universe doesn't revolve around them. However, during Marsh's research, she encountered several people with psychopathy who found a way into long-term behavioural change.

One study suggested that three years of therapy encourages psychopathic patients to moderate their emotions, but because there is often low sympathy for this type, treatment is still lacking. Marsh believes these negative patterns can be changed with the right treatment and therapy.

It also seems that when there is a relationship they don't want to lose, the incentive for change is higher. Marsh previously shared an account of "one very memorable person who told us he just faked it until he made it". She adds: "He acted like he thought a nice person would act. After about a

year and a half, it started to feel natural and even enjoyable. I found that very encouraging. That's exactly what clinical psychologists recommend: practise the behaviours you want to adopt until habit kicks in."

5. They are impulsive thrillseekers, turning their backs on the rule book

Psychopaths can be fearless and impetuous, and are prone to taking risks Credit: Lou Kiss
Those with psychopathy can be fearless and impetuous.

In this instance, Johnson stresses that "rule number one is: keep yourself safe. If they want to take risks, that's their choice. But it's important to be aware that they might bully or guilt you into going along with their dangerous approach. They can be very perilous in business dealings so try not to be naïve around financial matters or decisions that may be life changing".

She adds: "These personality types are often highly successful people, so it is easy to be impressed by their quest for power.

"On a more positive note, if someone with psychopathy learns over time they cannot manipulate you, there can even be a deep level of respect for your resilience. We just need to remember that this might depend on where they sit on the spectrum – and how much work each partner is willing to put into the relationship to make it more successful. It might not be easy, but it isn't necessarily impossible."