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The Sociopath Next Door – What Are We Up Against?

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Are you feeling it? There's a tension, people are off balance, more reactive.

Why is the world feeling so crazy and polarized? What's going on?

Who is behind this insanity??

What is it doing to our bodies and brains?

And, most importantly, what can we do to keep ourselves balanced and grounded, how do we counter the effects on us?

Our offering with this conference is to bring some light to this shadowy influence, to pull back the curtain. Something we like to do here at RVML.

Why do we need to know who's behind this madness?

The reason is that if we can sense and name what is happening, if we can bust those who want to control us, then we are more able to hold our center and keep our minds clear. There are those who are trying to manipulate us by hooking our emotions and actually changing how our brains work. If we can see through those efforts and take care of ourselves, follow our own knowing, then our bodies, our minds and our beings will be able to navigate and even thrive in the midst of this insanity.

We're proposing, and it might be glaringly obvious to you, that many of those people who are fomenting this insanity are people with identifiable mental disorders, specifically these personality disorders: Psychopaths and sociopaths (which fall under the DSM label Anti-social Personality Disorder and I'll mostly just call them sociopaths during this talk) and narcissists. Though it's become a bit easier lately, it has historically been very difficult to identify such people until the last 20 years or so when research into the major personality disorders has

exploded. But, though we know a lot more now, it's still a sticky area of information, especially out in the public; hence this conference.

But before we go into the types of people who are creating this widespread insanity, it might be helpful to look at why they're so crazy-making for our own brains.

Let's take a look at how our brains work when stressed and alarmed, the state that sociopaths and narcissists would like the rest of us to be in all the time. To foil them, we will need to be aware of when our brain is activated by fear, confusion or stress and how that feels. Then we have a chance do something about it and not be run ragged by the craziness.

Our Brain On Stress

This is what happens to our brains and bodies when we're under stress or feeling ongoing fear and anxiety. First, here's a bit of information about our brains structure and function:

We basically have 3 levels in our brain. The oldest, what we call the reptilian brain is the brain stem and cerebellum which takes care of breathing, blood pressure, movement and metabolism – the basics of life.

The second level is called the mammalian brain, or mid-brain, and includes the limbic system for emotional reactivity, memory processing and the older part of the cortex for vision and the other sense processing, as well as some basic cognitive functioning.

The third level, the prefrontal cortex, is the newest development in the brain and has to do with social interactions, a sense of self, relationships, conscience, mirroring neurons and much more. Humans have a very complex prefrontal cortex and as we find in our computer systems, the more complex a system, the more easily it can get messed up.

So while these levels of the brain have their own functions, there's an interesting relationship among them. The mid-brain, the emotional brain, is what pays attention to the outer world for survival and the particular part of it that does this

is called the amygdala. The amygdalae are two almond sized structures in the mid-brain and they act as a switch which flips between the higher centers of the relational, larger picture prefrontal cortex and the lower centers of the brainstem and the body's autonomic nervous system designed for survival.

When there is immediate danger, it's too slow to have the danger signals go from the body through the mid-brain and all the way to the higher centers where they get analyzed, sent back to the amygdala and then finally acted upon. When there's danger, we have to act immediately and that higher pathway takes twice as long. So when real danger is recognized (or remembered as in PTSD), the amygdala immediately flips downward toward the brainstem where reflexive survival behavior can occur in a split second. That can make the difference between life and death in the moment, and life or death is pretty much how it feels when the amygdalae are activated.

The problem with this is when the amygdalae are flipped downward, they're pretty much disconnected from our higher centers. When we're in survival mode, it's really hard to think, hard to access more recent knowledge that might be more adaptive than the automatic fight, flight or freeze reactions we get when on auto-pilot. We might not even know consciously what's going on in our brain and body, we just suddenly react or feel fear or disorientation.

So you can see how we're vulnerable to having our amygdala hijacked by some outside source. When we're interacting with sociopaths or narcissists, that's not a good thing. We become sitting ducks for their control and direction. When they offer a problem, we have a reaction we might not even realize, then they offer us a solution that suits them, not us. And because we can't think clearly, we're much more likely to accept it.

There's a lot of that going on right now and it's not just one side, one political party, one cause, it's happening on both sides, almost all sides. But the trick to not getting caught is to be aware of what's happening in your own nervous system, in your own body. Wherever you feel yourself getting tense, urgent, needing something to happen quickly or there will be dire results, be suspicious that someone wants you stirred up so you won't be able to think for yourself.

And very often, the ones who will benefit the most from our not being able to think for ourselves are people with an agenda of their own, especially sociopaths and narcissists. That's the time to sit back, calm your nervous system so you can think, then ask questions, gather more information and let yourself review who might benefit from your agitation.

Psychopaths/Sociopaths

Oddly, there has never been a separate diagnosis in the DSM for psychopaths or sociopaths; they are lumped under Antisocial Personality Disorder with other lesser behaviors and signs.

Emotionally, these types lack conscience, empathy and the ability to truly connect with others. Tests have shown that psychopaths lack the ability to recognize fear in another's face. Psychopaths and sociopaths may carefully study and practice how normal people express emotion so that they can use the appearance of those emotions to mislead and influence others into thinking they have real emotions.

The simple difference between a psychopath and a sociopath (though many sources use the terms interchangeably these days) is the degree or intensity of the symptoms.

Definition: The primary qualities of a psychopath/sociopath are:

- No conscience (psychopath)

- Weak or very limited conscience (sociopath)

- Lack of guilt or remorse

- Disregard for laws, social norms, commitments,

- Disregard or disdain for the feelings or expectations of others

- Disdain for normal people limited by emotions and conscience

Intense need for stimulation

Ease or pleasure in lying and manipulating others

Potentially aggressive, violent, physically or psychologically

But there has been a growing body of interest and research into psychopaths and sociopaths. Though these terms are often used interchangeably these days, they have, in the past, been differentiated by degree, the psychopaths being completely devoid of conscience and empathy, sociopaths being capable of some degree of conscience and connection with immediate family or very close friends (whom they may view as possessions or extensions of themselves).

Part of what's fueling this interest is a growing awareness of the damage they to individuals, families, spouses, businesses and on the national and international stages. Most dictators fall into this category, many who climb to the top in corporations are also; many pedophiles, the majority of serial killers and a high percentage of violent prison inmates also qualify. What might surprise you is that one study found that 17% of first year medical school students test as sociopaths and 20% of military personnel.

Estimates of the numbers of psychopaths range from .5% - 1% of the general population

About 4% for sociopaths (which may include psychopaths in the count)

That's about 4% of the people around you. One in 25 people around you are either psychopaths or sociopaths. You might live near one, work with one, have one in your family. That's a sobering number.

Competent Psychopaths and Sociopaths Hiding in High Places

But what's more sobering is that these population estimates may overlook the many psychopaths and sociopaths who are more functional than the prison inmates who are the basis for most research and population counts.

Both research and my own study suggest that there are many more psychopaths and sociopaths who never draw the attention of the authorities and who are never formally identified as a psychopaths or sociopaths or at least not until they've had many years to use their skills to cause suffering among innocent people.

These people are usually more intelligent, self-controlled, less overtly physically violent and, while they feel no bonding or care for individuals, they can sometimes feel strongly about larger social issues. This ability to act for larger social issues can make them seem admirable unless one has personal interactions with them.

These are the people the military can harness to use as sharp shooters or SEAL team members who kill more than any others. They can be the ruthless leader of a social justice movement or political activism. They can appear idealistic and admirable to others who don't know what's going on in their background psyche and personal relationships. These are the psychopaths and sociopaths who can rise to the top and if they're born into or make big money, they can and do have far reaching influence. They help create crazy situations like ours today. As awareness grows in the public mind, the masses become dangerous to them and they become more overt in their efforts to maintain control and dominance.

Example: Stephen Miller, Immigration

Narcissism

Definition: The primary qualities of narcissists are:

- Grandiose sense of self-importance
- Has a sense of entitlement and requires constant, excessive admiration (narcissistic supply)
- Monopolize conversations and belittle or look down on people they perceive as inferior
- Expect to be recognized as superior even without achievements that warrant it
- Exploits others without guilt or shame
- Frequently demeans, intimidates, bullies, or belittles others when others rebel or don't provide narcissistic supply
- Take advantage of others to get what they want
- Have an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others

At their core, narcissists are driven by extreme shame and worthlessness which their lives are structured to deny and cover up. The main way they hide this shame from themselves is to manipulate their world to provide them with enough praise and admiration, called narcissistic supply, that they feel important and superior rather than worthless.

It is the reaction to touching this shame that provokes extreme rage and vengeance in a narcissist when their worth is challenged through rebellion of or abandonment by those who are expected to feed them. Narcissists will work hard to disempower and control their chosen source of narcissistic supply. No amount of love, admiration or care can change this, those who try are drained dry.

Narcissistic abuse is covert and often disguised as love and care, but it's anything but. They use a combination of emotional and psychological abuse aimed at undermining a person's sense of self-worth and identity for the sole purpose of obtaining control for personal gain and narcissistic supply. It can involve patterns of dominance, manipulation, intimidation, emotional coercion, withholding, dishonesty, extreme selfishness, guilt mongering, rejection, stonewalling, gaslighting, financial abuse, extreme jealousy, and possessiveness.

Contagion: Narcissism can "rub off" onto close associates of the narcissistic. Their influence through long time control and induce normally good enough people to act more like the narcissist or do things under his direction that they would not normally do.

How Smart, Educated, Competent People Get Taken in by Psychopaths, Sociopaths and Narcissists:

Love Bombs and Rescuing Followed by Rejection and Discarding (Trauma Bonding)

Love bombs are designed to hook a victim's wounding and longing for love, being valued or safety. It sets the first tone of a narcissistic relationship which the victim keeps trying to re-elicited from the narcissist/sociopath when the rejection follows.

It affects the bonding centers in the brain such that a person will gradually tolerate abuse in the hope of being accepted or loved. Belonging is a healthy survival drive in all of us, we are a social species and suffer in isolation. The abuser takes advantage of and manipulates that healthy need to gain power and control.

At the political level, it's the promise that "I'll solve all your problems if you'll just vote for me", meaning I'm special and can do the impossible that you are powerless to achieve. Desperate hope and increasing investment keeps the victim believing and loyal. This is happening on a large scale now, though some

who are not receiving what was promised are beginning to question. At that point, the narcissist or sociopath will abandon the formerly loyal follower.

When the narcissist tires or feels they are losing control, they will turn with rage and blame on their former supporter. The victim will either try harder to win favor, abandoning themselves, or leave the narcissist but feeling shamed and inadequate.

This powerful love-rejection pattern sets the stage for the victim feeling it's their fault; the narcissist or sociopath is happy to reinforce that conclusion and actively blame the victim for the narcissist's attack as in gaslighting.

This love-rejection/attack is how trauma bonds like the Stockholm Effect develop. Examples are captives joining their captors and children defending their abusers.

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is a concept in social psychology that says that people have a bias to seek consonance between their expectations and reality, seeking internal harmony and congruence.

Dissonance is the discomfort felt by a person who holds or is asked to hold conflicting ideas, beliefs or values at the same time. This dissonance is particularly confusing when a person is presented with conflicting words and actions in another person.

Our brains are designed to try to make sense of our environment and the dissonance between what an important person says and does will trigger this discomfort.

I have found that when this distress rises to a point necessitating a choice between behavior and words/ideas and the person cannot change the source of the dissonance, a stressed person will discount their direct experience and choose the words said by another person. This conflict results in an internal splitting away from the person's own experience in favor of what they're being told. The resulting separation from their own knowing makes them more vulnerable to further cognitive dissonance created by controlling people.

If you feel an internal tension/discomfort around trying to make sense of what's happening in your world – when you see words and actions not matching up – be suspicious of someone's lying and trying to make you change yourself to make it ok. If it doesn't make sense, don't try to make it make sense. Instead, question what's happening.

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is an extremely effective form of psychological manipulation that seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or group. It makes them question their own memory, perception, feelings, instincts and sanity. When the targeted people no longer trust themselves, the gaslighter is able to control their thoughts, loyalties and actions. The process makes much use of creating cognitive dissonance in the victim.

The tactic relies on persistent denial, contradiction and lying in an attempt to delegitimize the victim's beliefs and experiences. The gaslighter may use blatant lies but repeat them often enough to induce doubt in the listener. Anyone can be vulnerable to gaslighting.

The term "gaslighting" comes from a 1938 play, and subsequent 1944 film adaptation, in which a murdering husband manipulates and confuses his wife by dimming the gas lights in their home and then denying it's happening. She begins to believe she's gone insane.

The 3 stages of gaslighting:

1. Denial of and arguing against what the gaslighter says; defending the truth.
2. Growing self-doubt and internal destabilization; maybe you're really not remembering correctly or maybe you really are doing things and forgetting, just like the gaslighter says.
3. Giving up, agreeing with the gaslighter; I really must be forgetful, going crazy, unreliable. Loss of trust in your own reality and perceptions.

If you start to feel crazy around a person and can't make sense of what they're doing or saying, be suspicious of gaslighting.

Elicit Empathy/Pity

An effective way for sociopaths, psychopaths and narcissists to test a person for vulnerability is to try to illicit sympathy or pity for their hard life. An incarcerated sociopath reported that the only thing in the world he needed was a person's pity – then he could have whatever he wanted. Be suspicious of sad stories from someone you don't know. Be careful of the urge to step in and rescue. It could be a ploy.

Why it's so hard to recognize these sociopathic or narcissistic behaviors, and so difficult to not excuse, ignore or explain them away.

Why is it so hard to believe that people can be so different, so mal-intended while looking and acting so "normal"? There must be something wrong with us, it can't be them. That's often because they have structured their appearance and how they deliver their abuse to make you feel confused and question yourself.

What in us blinds us to seeing reality clearly and sends us into confusion and fear?

Personal bias from spiritual, political or humanistic assumptions/values – people are basically good, though perhaps wounded, and they can be loved into becoming good.

Wanting to think the best of people (or we're being negative if we don't)

Intentional tools used by Sociopaths and Narcissists to confuse their victims and the public.

Self-Care Tools:

Education, Knowledge

It takes extra time, but when you feel discord within yourself or any suspicion of someone or some news source having an agenda, take what time you can to investigate other opinions and other sources of information. Each side might have their own bias, but it can help you to be exposed to both so the selective presentations become clearer. In this polarized time, it helps to not land too hard on an apparent solution as that can close your mind to the nuances of a more balanced solution. You'll also stay more relaxed and clear headed by holding back just a little to gain more perspective.

Problem, Reaction, Solution – Question Who's Defining the Problem!

If you find yourself agitated, feeling urgent or desperate for a solution to a looming and dire problem, you may be under the influence of a structured emergency which doesn't have to be reacted to as urgently as is presented.

Problems are easy for those in power to construct so that your energy gets directed wherever those people are pointing. Be suspicious of simple answers offered by governments, political parties and those with money based agendas. It's not easy to resist the body sensation of an emergency, but using the techniques in this section can help you stay centered and able to think.

Critical Thinking, Challenge Your Own Biases

These are skills that date back to Plato and Aristotle and are still good today. Neuroscience and social psychology have extensive research to back up the existence of bias, priming (a brain primed to skewed perceptions by prior experience), bias for certain solutions over others through familiarity, and influences from our family, culture, religion and much more. The examined life is a freer life.

Local resources include:

Building Bridges, Marla Estes and Rob Schlapfer (Google them for workshops, videos and classes.)

RVML, How Do We Navigate Our Post-Truth World?, 4 Lectures with Rob Schlapfer and Marla Estes available free at www.RVML.org, click Events Archive, then click RVML's Lecture Series Videos

Rogue Valley Metaphysical Library, 1757 Ashland St, Ashland, OR. RVML has an excellent collection of books in critical thinking and social psychology to help understand more deeply how our brains work and process data and stress. When we know what's going on in our brains and bodies, we don't have to be dragged along with the reactions. We can then use the next tool:

Stepping back, Witnessing Awareness/Mindfulness

Just taking a deep breath and pausing is an excellent start to managing our body responses to the tension and polarizing producing news. Most of us are feeling the need to do something in the face of these pressures but we also realize that we have pitifully little power and even the power we have at the ballot is in question these days. If we stay in these feelings, we will keep ourselves in the stressful flight-fight-freeze conundrum explored earlier.

So stepping back really helps. Meditation helps strengthen that ability to gently hold ourselves in a relaxed awareness. This kind of state is called witnessing awareness in the Daoist tradition and mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition. But however you cultivate it, it is very good for your nervous system, brain function and clarity and overall health.

EFT

EFT, or Emotional Freedom Techniques, is a tapping modality which is easy to learn and has surprisingly beneficial effects for stress, trauma, cognitive dissonance, gaslighting and crazy-making news. There are thousands of YouTube videos of people who can lead you through all sorts of issues while tapping and we will use it during this presentation.

You can tap surreptitiously while in a meeting (Karate Chop Point under the table), in the shower, while waiting for the signal to change or with your friend or loved one. It works all the better when more people tap together.

EFT taps on the endpoints of the major acupuncture meridians and so helps the body's energy system smooth out and balance while you're talking or thinking about whatever is disturbing, from the driver who cut you off to childhood trauma. It is a major tool in my counseling practice with trauma and abuse.

Below is a diagram of the tapping points. Many people on YouTube only use the points on the head, torso and side of hand, but I use them all including the fingers. You can use whatever points you like as it is so very forgiving and effective.