

WE LOVE OUR HOLLYWOOD PSYCHOPATHS – BUT WHY? PSYCHOLOGIST SAYS THE ‘SHADOW SIDE’ OF HUMANITY LIVES WITHIN US ALL



By Suzanne Kane – Why have psychopathic killers become TV’s darlings? From NBC’s “Hannibal” to Showtime’s “Dexter” and now “Fargo” on FX, network and cable producers have been luring legions of viewers over to the dark side.

Could it be that they possess character traits we identify with or even admire? Not that we aspire to be psychopaths or act out fleeting malevolent thoughts, but there must be something to account for how mesmerizing and compelling these characters are and how they continue to appeal to movie and TV audiences.

Dr. Anita Gadhia-Smith, a Washington, D.C., psychiatrist, notes that since the beginning of time, humans have struggled with their good and evil sides.

“While we are all quick to own the good, it is often very difficult to own our darker sides,” Dr. Gadhia-Smith said. “Psychopaths in film are fascinating to many people because theater allows the expression of the unconscious ‘shadow’ within us. We all have aspects of our inner and unconscious life that are repressed, for example, the feeling of murderous rage or inappropriate sexual behavior. Although human beings have been socialized and civilized, our deepest impulses do not completely disappear.”

During childhood, most of us are taught how to behave — what is acceptable and what is not. Just because we don't act out does not mean that any of us are incapable of regressing if our defenses are stripped or unwrapped, and our values, judgment and self-control are impaired, said Dr. Gadhia-Smith, adding that this fact is exemplified by the high percentage of incarcerated violent criminal offenders who were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of their crimes.

“Substances are one way that people can lose their judgment and self-control and temporarily release some of the deeper impulses,” she said.

It has been less than 10,000 years since our ancient ancestors were, in fact, savages and cannibals. There are some tribal communities in the world in which “savage” practices are still the norm. But while most of the world is out of survival mode, we still have the capacity to return to those roots, experts say.

Bad Guys Have a Good Side?

The scary thing is that people oftentimes find themselves rooting for these beasts. Todd Schirmer, PhD, clinical and forensic psychologist, said psychopaths display personality traits that viewers may find appealing, such as:

- **Superficial charm:** People can be introverted or extroverted, or more likely, somewhere in the middle. Someone who is high in psychopathic traits is likely to be more toward the extroverted side of things, but in a shallow way. They may be charming — not because they are outgoing and warm — but because it is a way to get what they want. They use their charm to control the interaction.
- **High self-esteem:** We want to feel good about ourselves and our accomplishments. But most of us are fairly realistic about this. A psychopath views himself in a more grandiose way. That is, he may distort reality to present himself as much more successful, much more influential, or much more powerful than he is.
- **Lack of remorse:** Most people experience remorse when they have done something wrong. They feel bad for people they have hurt, experience shame and may ruminate about their behavior. A person who is high in psychopathic traits is likely to not care too much about the bad things he or she has done (and in many cases, there are a lot of bad things). They are focused primarily on themselves and may blame others for their failings.

“It is important to emphasize that most of the traits of a psychopath are not something people aspire to,” Schirmer said. “Traits such as irresponsibility, impulsivity, a parasitic lifestyle and criminal versatility are generally negative. So in any discussion of psychopathy, we should keep that in mind.

“These are people who in many cases commit repeated criminal acts: they lie, manipulate and take advantage of others, and they add very little positive to society.”

But aren't there certain characteristics of anti-heroes that are, well, fascinating, that we find it hard to turn away from, drawn like a moth to a flame?

“In the cases of Gregory House and Gordon Gekko, both are charming men (if superficially so) who have very high self-esteem. They are able to get what they want by talking others into it, by overtly manipulating others, or by other devious means, and they don't feel bad about it. They often have to do bad things to achieve their desired outcome. They are able to move on to the next thing without as much as a second thought. They have both achieved a great deal of success and do not hesitate to let others know about it.”

Schirmer finds House a particularly interesting case in that the character is a doctor.

“Normally, we view doctors as healers who are empathic,” Schirmer said. “However, in his case, he often appears to view the patient not as a person but as a problem to be solved. And he does not hesitate to manipulate his staff, colleagues and patients to solve that problem. He does not appear to have much in the way of emotions and is quite irresponsible and impulsive.”

Why, then, do people aspire to some of these traits? Schirmer says the answer to this question is complex.

“I think these characters are appealing because they are so different from most people's experiences,” he said. “Most people experience at least occasional struggles getting what they want out of the world, but these characters seem to have it easy. They make things happen and get things done, regardless of the means. Most people experience at least occasional self-doubt, but these characters do not. They seem to always be confident and forward-looking. And when most people have done something wrong, or have made a bad decision, they experience at least some remorse. These characters don't.”

Schirmer observes that in popular culture, psychopaths are portrayed in one of two ways: either the cold-blooded killer (e.g. Hannibal Lecter) or the high-powered, high-status professional (e.g. Gregory House or Gordon Gekko). And you've got Sharon Stone's character from “Basic Instinct” to bring women into the picture.

Getting Their Due

What about a sense of relief or satisfaction in seeing psychopaths get their comeuppance? Do we keep watching, waiting for this to occur? According to Schirmer, there is an element of relief in seeing the bad guy get nailed. But in most of the portrayals of psychopaths, that justice or comeuppance “is often a long time in waiting, or sometimes doesn’t come at all.”

Adding to our fascination with psychopaths is envy — a psychopath gets to act in the moment, a personality trait that could get the rest of us in a lot of trouble if taken to the same extreme.

“Many people go through the world in a constantly introspective state, questioning their decisions and experiencing a great deal of anxiety about what is happening,” Schirmer said. “These characters are the opposite. They live in the moment, regardless of consequences. If bad things happen as a result of their decisions, they figure out what to do then, rather than trying to anticipate those bad things ahead of time.”

Other traits that are interesting to look at in this context include a parasitic lifestyle and promiscuous sexual behavior, Schirmer said. These could be compelling to viewers because they might think, “What would life be like if I could just mooch off of others and never be personally responsible,” or “What would life be like if I didn’t care who I had sex with and didn’t ever commit to anybody?” Not many people view these as positive traits, he said, but perhaps they might fantasize about behaving in such a way.

Dr. Gadhia-Smith sees the positive traits of psychopaths as focus, control, purpose, creativity and being in the now.

“Many of us strive to possess these qualities within ourselves in modern society in order to advance,” she said. “Thus, we may be using the exact traits that we witness in TV psychopaths in our own lives, but sublimated in a positive direction. Most of us try to behave, most of the time.

“When we see our unconscious wishes acted out in theater, we experience a release of uncomfortable feelings, without ever having to do anything destructive. In theater, we also have the opportunity to experience the pain and fear, as well as a positive resolution. We all want things to be well in the end, and in film, this is often the case.”

Within the Elements Behavioral Health family, Korina Jochim, program director at Malibu Vista, offers her observations about psychopathic characters.

“I think these characters are so intriguing to us because there’s really so little we know about psychopathy. We tend to want to distance ourselves and so we create these characters that represent the Jungian ‘shadow’ side of humanity, which to some degree lives inside us all.

“We live vicariously through these characters because they live out these shadow longings, which most of us won’t and shouldn’t allow ourselves to do.”

Jochim adds that psychopaths rarely enter therapy willingly or outside the prison setting, but says it’s certainly not unheard of.

“What I encounter more, because I treat women,” she said, “are women who are severely emotionally impacted (breakdowns, suicide attempts, etc.) from romantic relationships with psychopaths or pathological narcissists (abusive and/or criminal partners).”

Perhaps most telling is Jochim’s final comment.

“I also believe that fundamentally, we use these characters to create an honest dialogue with ourselves, with our libidinal ‘id’ nature. There are many things society frowns upon discussing, which are routinely discussed in therapy. These characters are a mouthpiece for this part of our nature. For a society to be healthy, there needs to be dialogue about the unspeakable — or as we say in the field of psychology, ‘what gets repressed gets expressed’ somewhere else.”

So, is there a little bit of the psychopath in you?