

## Q&A with Donna Andersen, author of *Senior Sociopaths*

### 1 . How did you learn about senior sociopaths?

I first learned about senior sociopaths the hard way—by marrying one. My ex-husband was 55 years old when I met him, although he lied about his age. This man took \$227,000 from me, cheated with at least six women during our 2 ½-year relationship, had a child with one of the women, and then, 10 days after I left him, married the mother of the child. It was the second time he committed bigamy. He was almost 60 years old when I divorced him, and he was still looking for women to swindle.

### 2. What exactly is a sociopath? Isn't it a serial killer?

People do think that sociopaths are all deranged serial killers, but that's a myth created by the movies. Sociopaths know exactly what they're doing, and most of them never kill anyone. They are people with serious personality disorders who manipulate and exploit others. Sociopaths view others as objects and pawns to be used.

### 3. In your book, *Senior Sociopaths*, are you saying senior citizens are manipulating and exploiting others?

I'm saying that if someone is a sociopath, they don't stop manipulating and exploiting people as they get older. Now, this is not the prevailing view in the psychology field. The conventional wisdom is that sociopaths "burnout" starting in their 40s and engage in less antisocial behavior. It's another myth. My research shows that most sociopaths continue their abusive behavior until the day they die.

### 4. Where did the "burnout" idea come from?

It appears to have come from crime statistics. Plenty of research shows that criminal behavior peaks during teenage and young adult years and then drops off dramatically. Two old studies, from the 1940s and 1960s, examined troubled children after they grew up. Many, but certainly not all of them, managed to stay out of jail as adults. So because people were less likely to be arrested as they got older, psychologists seem to have surmised that they stopped their antisocial behavior. It's not true. My research shows that sociopaths are still abusive after age 50.

### 5. What evidence do you have that sociopaths keep abusing as they get older?

I conducted two surveys of Lovefraud readers, specifically about the behavior they saw in people who were age 50 or older and who they believed were sociopaths. Nearly 2,400 survey respondents answered questions about their romantic partners, spouses, parents, family

members, work colleagues and friends. Of those who knew the individuals both before and after age 50, 91% said their deceit, manipulation and antisocial behavior was just as bad, or worse, as they aged.

The stories the survey respondents told about what they experienced—fraud, abuse, violence—are shocking.

## **6. How do you know that the people the survey respondents described were actually sociopaths?**

My survey respondents completed the rating scale that was proposed in the first draft of the DSM-5. That's the official manual published by the American Psychiatric Association. It's pretty straightforward. There were nine traits, and the respondents indicated whether traits described the individual extremely well, moderately well, somewhat or not at all. I can't say that any particular individual was a sociopath based on the rating. But as a group, they consistently exhibited extreme or moderate levels of disordered traits. For example, 95% were rated as callous, 94% as manipulative, and 92% as deceitful.

I worked with respected university researchers on a scientific paper based on the same data. They did a statistical analysis that validated the main points of my book.

## **7. How do senior sociopaths affect the people around them?**

Senior sociopaths cause all kinds of harm. Among the survey respondents, 68% reported that they lost money, 45% incurred debt and 27% had their lives threatened. Psychological harm was even more widespread: 88% of survey respondents said they became anxious or depressed, 76% said the stress of the involvement made them ill, 70% said they suffered PTSD and 31% considered or attempted suicide.

## **8. Do senior sociopaths abuse their families?**

Senior sociopaths treat the people closest to them the worst. Most of my survey respondents described spouses or romantic partners—those who married the sociopaths definitely suffered more. Sociopaths make terrible parents—they abuse their children while young and continue abusing them as adults. People with disordered siblings described being tortured all their lives. Disordered in-laws caused all kinds of problems. Sociopaths cause havoc throughout their entire extended families.

## **9. What's the difference between a sociopath and a psychopath or a narcissist?**

The word sociopathy is no longer an official diagnosis. But it originally meant “anything deviated or pathological in social relations.” That's how I use it on Lovefraud.com—as an umbrella term

for all of the personality disorders in which the affected individuals deceive and manipulate others. These include antisocial, narcissistic, borderline and histrionic personality disorders, and psychopathy. There is a lot of overlap among these conditions, but from the point of view of us targets, the precise diagnosis doesn't matter. All we really need to know is that sociopaths exist, they're harmful and we have to get them out of our lives.

#### **10. How big is this problem? How many senior sociopaths are there?**

No one really knows how many sociopaths live among us, but the estimates are pretty scary. Depending on which studies you look at, the number of people who could have antisocial, narcissistic, borderline or histrionic personality disorders, or psychopathy, ranges from 5.5% to 17.5% of the population. For simplicity's sake, let's use a midpoint of 12%. If 12% of Americans over 50 are disordered, that means we live among 14 million senior sociopaths.

#### **11. What do people need to understand about senior sociopaths?**

People need to understand that sociopaths exist, and once they are adults, there is no treatment or therapy that will cure them. Senior sociopaths never grow up and never calm down. If you have a senior sociopath in your life and you're waiting for him or her to change, it's not going to happen.

#### **12. What should people do if they realize they have a senior sociopath in their life?**

The last two chapters of my book provide advice from my survey respondents on how to deal with senior sociopaths and recover from the harm that they cause. The top advice is to get the person out of your life. If that's not possible, disengage emotionally. Whether this person is your spouse, parent, sibling, co-worker or friend, the senior sociopath cannot be fixed. You need to protect and take care of yourself.