

Dark Triad

[Reviewed by Psychology Today Staff](#)

The term “Dark Triad” refers to a trio of negative [personality](#) traits—[narcissism](#), [Machiavellianism](#), and [psychopathy](#)—which share some common malevolent features. The construct was coined by researchers Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams in 2002.

Understanding Dark Traits

People with these traits tend to be callous and manipulative, willing to do or say practically anything to get their way. They have an inflated view of themselves and are often shameless about self-promotion. These individuals are likely to be impulsive and may engage in dangerous behavior—in some cases, even committing crimes—without any regard for how their actions affect others.

While many researchers consider [psychopathy](#), [narcissism](#), and [Machiavellianism](#) three distinct traits with overlapping characteristics, others believe the commonalities suggest an underlying [personality](#) construct that has yet to be fully understood.

How is psychopathy related to the dark triad?

Most researchers consider psychopathy—a trait characterized by a lack of empathy and remorse—to be the “darkest” of the Dark Triad, in so far as psychopaths generally cause more harm to individuals and to society than do narcissists or “High Machs.” [“Psychopath” is not a mental health diagnosis](#); the disorder that most closely represents it in the [DSM](#) is antisocial [personality disorder](#).

What is Machiavellianism?

Machiavellianism is not a mental health diagnosis; rather, it's a personality trait describing a manipulative individual who deceives and tricks others to achieve [goals](#). It is based on the political [philosophy](#) of the 16th-century writer Niccolò Machiavelli. Some evidence suggests that of the dark traits, [Machiavellianism is most closely tied to high intelligence](#). If a psychologist refers to someone as “High Mach,” it means they behave in a highly manipulative manner.

How to Recognize the Dark Triad

The Dark Triad attempts to capture manipulative, exploitative traits that are not represented by the Big 5, a [five-factor model](#) of the core traits of an individual’s personality which is considered the most reliable and widely used model of personality to date. To identify these traits in clinical settings, clinicians and researchers typically use individual scales measuring narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism separately, or a 12-item scale known as the “Dirty Dozen” that is designed to measure all three at once.

Do dark triad individuals easily conceal their true nature?

Though there are physical and behavioral cues that have been shown to be associated with the Dark Triad in research settings, individuals with these traits may excel at hiding their true nature, especially at first. Narcissists, for instance, often appear charming and likable upon first meeting; [some evidence suggests](#) that this may be due to the perception that they have high [self-esteem](#), a socially desirable trait.

Are there facial features associated with the Dark Triad?

Narcissism, in particular, has been found to manifest in people’s physical appearance. Narcissists are more likely to dress nicely, be physically attractive, and wear makeup or dress provocatively. One 2018 study found that grandiose narcissists also tended to have [distinctive, well-groomed eyebrows](#).