



Sociopathy is a much-discussed mental health condition. Folks with this personality disorder lack ethical values, guilt, shame, empathy and other mental “governors” (in aggregate, a “conscience”) that keep one’s behavior in line with social norms. Consequently, sociopaths are more likely to lie, cheat, manipulate, steal and, on occasion, become violent.

While the causes of sociopathy remain uncertain, we have known for some time that it can emerge following trauma or injury to areas of the prefrontal cortex of the brain known as the “empathy network.” If subjected to this type of brain damage, people who were previously good eggs can morph into sociopaths, leading some neuroscientists to assert that sociopathy is a brain disorder, first and foremost.

Well, it turns out that otherwise good people can acquire sociopathic features without suffering neurological damage, so it’s not just about synapses and neurochemicals. What makes this happen? Power. A neuroscience study out of UC Berkeley found that affording some people power catalyzes changes in the empathy network similar to those seen in brain trauma patients who develop acquired sociopathy. Not everyone responds to having power in this way, but enough do to suggest that power and sociopathy go hand-in-hand. After all, a sociopath’s behaviors are efforts to gain control of other people and situations.

Long before we had neuroscience, this was a recognized tendency. Abraham Lincoln said, “If you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” There’s plenty of anecdotal evidence that powerful people often absolve themselves of the need to be kind, respectful and courteous to others. Power seduces them into believing they are superior, and, therefore, entitled to put themselves first while ignoring the impact of their behavior on others. The stereotypic tyrannical boss epitomizes this sort of person.

In some folks with power, being rude and insensitive escalates further, sometimes spilling over into outright sociopathy. Whether this only occurs in

those already predisposed to sociopathic tendencies is unclear. Regardless, acquiring power clearly poses some risk that one will become more uniformly selfish and exhibit anti-social behaviors.

Some common examples in this regard include powerful religious leaders, corporate executives and politicians who give themselves license to ignore the moral and ethical precepts of their roles in favor of self-serving indulgences and even crimes. This acting out can range from sexual harassment to fraud to dirty political tricks, among other misdeeds.

The message for anyone anointed with power, be that political, economic, positional or interpersonal, is to avoid the slippery psychological slope leading to acquired sociopathy. Because power is an elixir that can transform Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde.