

Mind Your Business – Tia’s Tips for Better Rental Management

THE DARK TRIAD

While listening to the radio a few weeks ago, I heard about a research study about a combination of maladaptive personality traits called “The Dark Triad.” According to the study, people with three specific personality disorders are unusually effective at extracting **nonreciprocal resource transfers** from others by displaying **virtuous victimhood**. The study caught my attention because I often speak with members on the five Landlord Helplines I staff who have been ripped off or otherwise convinced to contradict their own good sense, for one of two reasons, “I was trying to be nice,” or, “I felt sorry for them.”

Sympathetic stories can be an artful manipulation, and the soft-hearted are ripe for the picking. How often have you agreed to rent to someone despite their poor reports during the screening process based on their claims of persecution? Accept payments toward a security deposit based on their sad tale of woe? Adjust your rental payment date to accommodate their pay schedule? Lower the rent or forgive rent payments? Late fees? Noncompliance fees? Accommodate changes to the rental agreement that aren’t in your best interest? Allow a tenant to deviate from the agreement, and eventually get their way even if they asked for forgiveness, not permission? Said yes when you’d rather say no? Decline to address lease violations with your renter for fear of their reaction? If that describes you in full or in part, read on.

What is the Dark Triad?

The concept of the Dark Triad has been around for a while and is defined by a combination of three negative personality traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. I have previously written an article, *Healthy Boundaries*, that partly addressed the issue of boundary-setting by landlords, but not the personality traits that can help us spot manipulators. I was intrigued by how the study identified the specific behavior of **virtuous victim signaling** that indicate the Dark Triad. I was also interested in whether there were common personality traits that made some people more likely to succumb to the manipulation. As I’ve spoken to many landlords who have been or continue to be unresistingly drawn into the nonreciprocal resource transfer, I believe there are.

Wikipedia defines the Triad traits, partly, as:

Narcissistic personality disorder is characterized by a life-long pattern of exaggerated feelings of self-importance, an excessive need for admiration, a diminished ability or unwillingness to empathize with others' feelings, and interpersonally exploitative behavior.

Machiavellianism is a personality trait that is exemplified by manipulative or callous behavior, combined with a lack of empathy. They are not concerned about conventional morality and are much more likely to lie or cheat to achieve their goals.

Psychopathy, sometimes considered synonymous with sociopathy, is characterized by persistent antisocial behavior, impaired empathy and remorse, and bold, disinhibited, and egotistical traits.

What I find interesting is that research shows that people with Dark Triad personalities can be quite charming, attractive, confident, and personable, so they can be hard to spot at first. They may use flattery to soften you up and may try to get too close, too soon or be almost too friendly to get you to

let your guard down. There seems to be commonality about their assurance in themselves and their abilities, combined with tales of how others, fate or the universe have conspired to keep them down or have victimized them in some way. They may prey upon your religious or spiritual sensibilities.

I assisted one family with an eviction right when the pandemic started. The tenants had preyed upon their Christian faith and talked a good game, even disclosing that husband was a felon, but said they wanted to get right with God and pleaded for a second chance. It turned out how you might imagine and due to the COVID moratoria in the courts, it took about eight months to get them out. With the rental right next door, once the landlords stopped buying the lie and started enforcing the terms of the rental agreement, the tenants turned on them. They verbally attacked them on multiple occasions, escalated their abuse of the property and flouted their violations until the very end, traumatizing the landlords, leaving a huge mess and uncollectable rent and damages well over \$10,000. These people perfectly describe the dark triad traits (in my nonprofessional opinion).

During the pandemic I heard again and again how landlords reduced rent, forgave rent, did not raise rent, or otherwise took it upon themselves to ease their tenants' burdens for a time. In some of those cases, when the landlord decided enough was enough, instead of the renter being grateful for what they had been given to that point, they were only angry that the landlord would not continue to give. To me this is a classic example of how the Dark Triad works to extract resources from you with no give and take, only take.

You can read the full study at this link:

<https://gwern.net/docs/psychology/personality/psychopathy/2020-ok.pdf>

Eric Dolan of Psypost.org, reviewed the study results:

New research provides evidence that narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism — maladaptive personality traits known as the “Dark Triad” — are associated with overt displays of virtue and victimhood. The study suggests that people with dark personalities use these signals of “virtuous victimhood” to deceptively extract resources from others.

The findings have been published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

“Fortune and human imperfection assure that at some point in life everyone will experience suffering, disadvantage, or mistreatment,” wrote the authors of the new study. “When this happens, there will be some who face their burdens in silence, treating it as a private matter they must work out for themselves, and there will others who make a public spectacle of their sufferings, label themselves as victims, and demand compensation for their pain. This latter response is what interests us.”

In a series of studies, which included 3,536 participants in total, the researchers examined how signals of virtue and victimhood were related to Dark Triad traits and deceptive behaviors.

The researchers first found that perceiving someone as a virtuous victim made people more likely to help them, indicating that using signals of virtue and victimhood is a valid strategy to gain resources from others. For example, participants were more willing to help a victim of a

random act of violence who was described as being shot while volunteering at a charity event than a victim shot walking in front of a grocery store or a victim shot at a strip club.

In subsequent studies, the researchers established there was a positive relationship between Dark Triad traits and emitting signals of both victimhood and virtue. Among the three Dark Triad traits, Machiavellianism — which is characterized by a willingness to be manipulative and deceitful — was the strongest predictor of virtuous victim signaling.

In other words, people with high levels Machiavellianism were more likely to report that they have often “pointed out how I am not able to pursue my goals and dreams because of external factors,” “explained how I don’t feel accepted in the society because of my identity,” and “expressed how people like me are underrepresented in the media and leadership.” They also reported virtue signaling more often, such as buying products to communicate their positive moral characteristics.

Importantly, this relationship held even after accounting for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Put another way, people with darker personalities were more likely to claim victimhood status regardless of their actual status in society.

Participants who reported engaging in more virtuous victim signaling scores also tended to be more willing to purchase counterfeit goods and were more likely to cheat in a coin-flip game. Finally, participants who reported engaging in more virtuous victim signaling were more likely to exaggerate perceived mistreatment by a colleague to gain an advantage over them, an association that was mediated by the Dark Triad traits.

“Together, our studies present converging evidence that the virtuous victimhood signal is an effective mechanism for persuading others to part with their resources in a way that benefits the signaler and that people who tend to engage in amoral social manipulation to achieve their goals are more likely to emit them,” the researchers explained.

But the researchers “strongly caution against” interpreting the findings as suggesting that everyone who engages in virtuous victim signaling has maladaptive personality traits such as Machiavellianism.

“Our conclusion is simply that victim signals are effective tools of social influence and maximally effective when deployed with signals of virtue. We also provide evidence supporting our proposition that for some people these signals can be deployed as a duplicitous tactic to acquire personal benefits they would otherwise not receive,” they wrote.

The study was authored by Ekin Ok, Yi Qian, Brendan Strojcek, and Karl Aquino.

Another review of the study published on the Psychology Today website:

Dark triad traits appear to be advantageous in some contexts. In their recently published paper, *Signaling Virtuous Victimhood as Indicators of Dark Triad Personalities*, the authors suggest that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy might be beneficial for obtaining resources. In their introduction, they acknowledge that being viewed as a victim can lead to a loss of esteem and respect. But, they continue, in modern Western societies being a victim doesn't

always lead to undesirable outcomes. Sometimes, being a victim can increase one's social status. And justify one's claim to material resources.

They argue that "contemporary Western democracies have become particularly hospitable environments for victim signalers to execute a strategy of nonreciprocal resource extraction." One reason: Strong egalitarian values lead many in the West to believe that any differences in outcomes are illegitimate. Another is that one of our key values is the alleviation of human suffering. Saying that you don't have as much as others and that you are suffering for it, can be a shrewd way to obtain material resources.

The researchers examine victim signaling, which they define as "a public and intentional expression of one's disadvantages, suffering, oppression, or personal limitations." They also examine virtue signaling, defined as "symbolic demonstrations that can lead observers to make favorable inferences about the signaler's moral character." They argue that signaling both victimhood and virtue would maximize one's ability to extract resources. People feel the most sympathy for a victim who is also a good person.

The researchers developed a Victim Signaling Scale, ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = always. It asks how often people engage in certain activities. These include: "Disclosed that I don't feel accepted in society because of my identity." And "Expressed how people like me are underrepresented in the media and leadership." They found that Victim Signaling scores highly correlated with dark triad scores ($r = .35$). This association held after controlling for gender, ethnicity, income, and other factors that might make people vulnerable to mistreatment.

Participants also completed a questionnaire that measured Virtue Signaling. They rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements about moral traits like being fair, compassionate, and honest. A sample statement is "I often buy products that communicate the fact that I have these characteristics." They also found that Virtue Signaling was significantly correlated with dark triad scores ($r = .18$). They replicated this association in a follow-up study. This time they used a different, more robust, dark triad scale. They then found a stronger correlation between the dark triad traits and victim signaling ($r = .52$). The researchers also found that victim signaling negatively correlated ($r = -.38$) with Honesty-Humility. This is a personality measure of sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty. This suggests that victim signalers may be greedier and less honest than those who do not signal victimhood.

Beyond measuring responses to questionnaires, they also had participants play a game. Basically, it was a coin flip game in which participants could win money if they won. Researchers rigged the game so that participants could easily cheat. Participants could claim they won even if they didn't, and thus obtain more money. Victim signalers were more likely to cheat in this game. The researchers again found that these results held after controlling for ethnicity, gender, income, and other factors. Regardless of personal characteristics, those who scored higher on dark triad traits were more likely to be victim signalers. And may be more likely to deceive others for material gain.

The researchers then ran a study testing whether people who score highly on victim signaling were more likely to exaggerate reports of mistreatment from a colleague to gain an advantage over them. Participants were told to imagine they worked with another intern. And that they were competing to land a job. Participants were told, "You keep noticing little things about the

way the intern talks to you. You get the feeling the other intern may have no respect for your suggestions at all. To your face, the intern is friendly, but something feels off to you.” Then participants engaged in the feedback performance of the intern. Then they completed the Victim Signaling scale.

Victim signalers were more likely to exaggerate the negative qualities of their competitor. They were more likely to agree that the intern “Made demeaning or derogatory remarks,” or “Put you down in front of coworkers.” Nothing in the description of their colleague indicated that they performed these actions. But victim signalers were more likely to report that they did.

As the authors note, real victims exist. And they have no intention of deceiving or taking advantage of others. Still, alongside victims, there are social predators among us. In whatever milieu they find themselves in, they will enact the strategies that maximize the rewards of material resources, sex, or prestige. People with dark triad traits will tailor their strategies to obtain these benefits, depending on their social environments.

Today, those with dark triad traits might find that the best way to extract rewards is by making a public spectacle of their victimhood and virtue.”

SPOTTING THE DARK TRIAD MANIPULATION

Virtually everyone aspires to be virtuous in some way, but the results of this study indicate that when someone signals their virtuosity in combination with expressions of victimization and pressures you to feel sorry for them and give them stuff or make exceptions for them, that’s a big red flag.

Aside from virtuous victim signaling, the study did not rate other behaviors regarding nonreciprocal resource transfers; however, there is copious data online that addresses common behaviors that manipulators display as well as personality traits that make you more likely to be manipulated.

What behaviors do manipulators exhibit to control others?

1. Flattery, praise, superficial charm, or feigned sympathy – at least at first.
2. Bad mouthing other people behind their backs.
3. Lying, denying, or shifting blame, or laying guilt trips on the victim.
4. Playing innocent or dumb, minimizing or rationalizing their negative behaviors when confronted - laying blame anywhere but on themselves.
5. Changing the subject. When confronted with their behaviors, manipulators will change the subject, and turn the conversation around to something you are supposedly doing wrong, never admitting their fault, or accepting responsibility.
6. Gaslighting or psychological manipulation to make you question your perception of reality.
7. Bullying, verbal abuse, explosive anger or other intimidation designed to establish dominance or superiority over you and create a sense of fear that trains you to “walk on eggshells” to avoid upsetting, confronting, or contradicting the manipulator.

What personality traits make you more likely to be manipulated?

1. People who lack self-esteem are much more likely to be manipulated. They typically display an unhealthy desire to please, are too agreeable or want to be liked above all and want to be perceived as virtuous. They always assume the best of others or give others the benefit of the doubt, whether it is deserved or rational. This includes wanting to be perceived as a savior for someone claiming to be in a bad spot, to enhance their own feelings of self-worth.
2. People who are naïve or immature may find it hard to believe that there are devious, ruthless people out there who will take advantage of others for their own gain.
3. People who tend to be submissive are more likely to be exploited and manipulated.
4. People who fear any negative emotion or perceived confrontation with another, or fear expressions of anger, frustration, or disapproval are more likely to give in time after time.
5. People who feel guilty about their success. As our society has worked toward a more egalitarian construct, people who have achieved some amount of success can be feel guilt over the fact that life opportunities and outcomes are anything but equal, leading the person to act outside their own best interests and make them vulnerable to exploitation.

Does this describe you? If so, please understand that I'm not writing this article to say it's bad to be helpful, kind and generous, only that you should beware of con artists. Armed with this knowledge, you can raise your awareness of how and when you are being manipulated by an applicant or tenant. Remember, this is a business relationship. Don't let your soft heart lead you astray, and if you find yourself experiencing this situation again and again, you might want to consider hiring a property manager...

This article offers general suggestions only and is no substitute for professional legal counsel. Please consult an attorney for advice related to your specific situation.

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