

# Association Mental Health & Law Podcast

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## The Dark Triad Narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy in HOAs and Condos

### DARK TRIAD & “HIGH-CONFLICT” PERSONALITY PATTERNS

**What they are, how they show up in communities, and how HOAs can respond effectively**

Some people use **manipulation, intimidation, and chronic conflict** as their default way of relating. In an HOA, that can disrupt meetings, fracture neighbors, and exhaust volunteers.

**Important note (please read):**

- Many people have **traits** without meeting criteria for a disorder.
- The goal is not labeling, it's learning how to **respond to behaviors** in a fair, consistent, and safe way.

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### 1) The “Dark Triad” — Three personality trait clusters

The **Dark Triad** is a research term describing three overlapping personality trait patterns that can cause harm in relationships and groups (it's important to clarify that this is not a DSM mental health diagnosis, just a way of conceptualizing high conflict people):

#### A) Narcissistic Traits (Not the same as “confidence”)

**Core pattern:** entitlement + need for admiration + fragile self-esteem

**How it can look in an HOA:**

- “Rules apply to everyone but me.”
- Constant status battles, grandstanding, taking credit, blaming others.
- Rage or retaliation when challenged (especially publicly).
- Weaponizing “respect” to silence disagreement.

## **B) Machiavellian Traits (Strategic manipulation)**

**Core pattern:** calculated influence, deception, “ends justify means”

**How it can look in an HOA:**

- Behind-the-scenes alliances, rumors, selective “facts.”
- Triangulation: telling different people different stories to split them.
- Using procedure as a weapon (endless complaints, gotcha emails).
- Exploiting ambiguity in rules.

## **C) Psychopathic Traits (low empathy + fearlessness + callousness)**

**Core pattern:** shallow remorse, charm used instrumentally, intimidation, impulsivity or calculated cruelty

**How it can look in an HOA:**

- Threats, bullying, “I dare you” behavior, boundary violations.
- Enjoying chaos or “winning” more than community outcomes.
- Appearing calm while others feel rattled or unsafe.

**Key point:** “Dark Triad” describes **traits**. It does not automatically mean someone has a diagnosable disorder.

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## **2) Sociopathy vs. Psychopathy**

You may hear “sociopath” and “psychopath.” In everyday use:

- **Psychopathy** is often used for a colder, more calculating pattern (charm, low fear, low empathy).
- **Sociopathy** is often used for a more reactive pattern (impulsive, volatile, rule-breaking).

Clinically, these patterns are usually discussed under **Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD)**.

**HOA relevance:** regardless of label, the red flags are **coercion, intimidation, exploitation, and repeated harm with little accountability**.

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### 3) Where Borderline Personality Fits

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is **not part of the Dark Triad**. It's different:

**Core pattern:** intense emotions + fear of abandonment + unstable self-image + “all-good/all-bad” thinking under stress

**How it can look in a community setting (especially during conflict):**

- Rapid shifts from idealizing to devaluing leaders (“You’re amazing” → “You’re corrupt”).
- High sensitivity to perceived rejection or unfairness.
- Escalating communications (many texts/emails), urgent demands.
- “Splitting,” pulling others to take sides.

**Important distinction:**

BPD is often rooted in **pain and emotion dysregulation**, not cold exploitation. That said, the *impact on a group* can still be significant if boundaries and structure are weak.

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### 4) How these patterns disrupt community functioning

These behaviors can create predictable “systems problems”:

#### A) Meeting dysfunction

- Hijacking the agenda, filibustering, personal attacks
- “Prosecuting” board members, baiting emotional reactions
- Turning routine issues into moral crises

#### B) Division and mistrust (“splitting the neighborhood”)

- Rumors, private chat groups, selective screenshots
- Recruiting “factions”
- Public shaming campaigns

#### C) Volunteer burnout and leadership turnover

- High-conflict individuals can exhaust boards with volume + intensity
- Good people quit → power concentrates in the loudest voices

#### D) Rule enforcement chaos

- Inconsistent enforcement becomes fuel for accusations
- Boundary testing escalates if consequences are delayed or unclear

## **E) Safety and liability risks**

- Harassment, stalking-like communications, threats, property damage risk
  - Increased legal threats or actual litigation
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## **5) The HOA Playbook: What Works**

High-conflict patterns thrive in **ambiguity, inconsistency, and emotional reactions**. They struggle against **structure, fairness, and documentation**.

### **A) Build Structure into Meetings & Elections**

- The Statute already includes a lot of structure
- Board Adopts Rules (time limits, scope, no interruptions, no personal attacks)
- Have a clear agenda and stick to it
- Use speaker timers and a scripted warning process
- If needed: get an election monitor for elections
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### **Helpful script lines**

- “We’re addressing the issue, not personalities.”
- “That’s outside tonight’s agenda. Please submit it in writing.”
- “If the personal attacks continue, we’ll end your comment period.”
- “We will follow the same process for everyone.”

### **B) Respond to behavior, not provocation**

- Keep responses brief, neutral, and consistent (“business-only tone”)
- Avoid debating every accusation; reply to actionable items
- Don’t defend your character—return to policy and process

### **C) Create a single channel for complaints and requests**

- One official email portal or management system
- Standard forms (architectural requests, violations, disputes)
- Clear timelines for review and response

### **D) Document everything**

- Save communications
- Record warnings and boundaries given
- Keep minutes factual (no editorializing)

## E) Apply rules consistently & engage in rule enforcement

- Follow the **exact notice, hearing, and fine procedures** in the statutes and governing documents
- Treat enforcement as a process, not a punishment
- Consistency is your strongest protection against manipulation and “favoritism” claims
- Make enforcement **boring and predictable**: same steps every time
- *Always* engage in rule enforcement per the governing documents

## F) Reduce triangulation

- Avoid private side deals and “secret meetings”
- Use “reply-all” strategically (or central ticketing) to keep a shared record
- Don’t pass messages through neighbors (“Tell her I said...”)

## G) Legal recourse

- Mediations are sometimes required by law
- Injunctions can be quick and don’t require mediation
- Litigation is usually successful with good documentation and can lead to removal of the owner

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## 6) What NOT to do

- Don’t try to “win” by out-arguing them in public
- Don’t make mental health accusations (“He’s a narcissist / psychopath”)
- Don’t create special exceptions “to keep the peace”
- Don’t engage in lengthy back-and-forth emails that reward escalation
- Don’t rely on verbal agreements—put it in writing

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## 7) Green flags: what healthy communities do

- Transparent decision-making
  - Predictable enforcement and due process
  - Clear roles (board vs. committees vs. management)
  - Respectful communication norms
  - Strong onboarding for new board members
  - Rotating responsibilities to prevent burnout
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## Quick takeaway

You don't have to diagnose someone to protect your community.

**Focus on:**

1. **Structure** (rules, agendas, time limits)
2. **Consistency** (same process every time)
3. **Documentation** (written records)
4. **Boundaries** (business-only communication)
5. **Safety** (take threats seriously)