

Psychopaths can regret bad decisions—but don't learn from them

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Psychopaths do experience regret, particularly when their bad decisions affect them directly—yet they don't use that experience to inform their future choices, according to a new study published the week of Nov. 28 in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"The popular view of [psychopaths](#) is that they are cold, callous, and simply don't care what happens to themselves or anybody else," said Yale psychologist Arielle Baskin-Sommers, co-author of the paper. "But this research shows they can experience negative emotions—if they are impacted by the situation. "

Baskin-Sommers and co-author Joshua Buckholtz of Harvard University evaluated the responses of 62 men, some of whom scored high on psychopathy measures, to different situations. They found that psychopathic subjects did experience regret, for instance, when they discovered that they would have made money if they had made a different decision in a gambling scenario. But, they did not use that experience to inform later decisions. This inability to learn from their mistakes predicted the number of times the

subjects had been incarcerated.

Baskin-Sommers said this form of regret does not imply remorse for actions that harmed other people—an absence that is a hallmark of psychopaths.

"Regret is self-focused, whereas remorse involves another," she said.

However, if psychopaths possess a sense of regret, it might be possible to help devise a strategy to harness that experience and decrease recidivism among psychopathic criminals, who make up a disproportionate percentage of repeat offenders, Baskin-Sommers said.

"If they don't experience any [regret](#) for their actions, we don't have much of a chance, but these findings suggest that there is something to work with," she said.

More information: Arielle Baskin-Sommers et al. Psychopathic individuals exhibit but do not avoid regret during counterfactual decision making, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1609985113](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1609985113)

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