

Targeted computer games can change behavior of psychopaths

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Psychopaths generally do not feel fear and fail to consider the emotions of others, or reflect upon their behavior—traits that make them notoriously difficult to treat. However, a study published Dec. 18 in *Clinical Psychological Science* suggests it may be possible to teach psychopaths to consider emotion and other pieces of information when

they make decisions. The results could form the basis of treatment for this group of dangerous prisoners—7 of 10 of whom go on to commit new crimes after being released.

Psychopaths are marked by a lack of emotional affect, unrelenting deceit, and callous disregard for others, noted Yale psychologist Arielle Baskin-Sommers, who conducted the study with former colleagues from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"They are also the world's worst multi-taskers and tend not to process information, such as pain and suffering of others, when they are engaging in criminal acts," Baskin-Sommers said.

Psychopaths ignore information that is important to stop antisocial behavior, she noted. For instance, they fail to think about punishment when they're distracted by another activity or when they are focused on a particular goal.

Baskin-Sommers and her colleagues developed a treatment protocol in which [psychopaths](#) played computer games designed to train them to consider stimuli not related to their goal. Psychopaths in the study learned to recognize an array of important cues and showed improvement in their behavior and ability to exhibit emotional responses.

Baskin-Sommers cautions that these computer treatment programs are specifically targeted to neurobiological dysfunctions of psychopaths and will not be beneficial to all offenders. The study showed that when the same computer games were used with prisoners with other forms of antisocial behavior, these non-psychopathic inmates' behaviors worsened. When the non-psychopathic inmates were treated with games that targeted brain dysfunctions specific to their disorder, their behavior improved.

"Treatments for individuals with [antisocial behavior](#), such as such psychopaths, are woefully inadequate," Baskin-Sommers said.

"Hopefully, findings such as ours will lead to more efficient interventions for our most recalcitrant prisoners."

Senior author of the paper is Joseph Newman at the University of Wisconsin. Primary funding for the research came from National Institute on Drug Abuse.

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