

Targets of common insult are middle-aged, male and seen as uninterested in changing behavior

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Everybody knows at least one.

That person in your life who's irritating, exasperating and generally unpleasant to be around. In other words, a total asshole.

New research from the University of Georgia suggests that the "biggest assholes" in many people's lives are middle-aged men.

Published in *Collabra: Psychology*, the study asked almost 400 people to think of the "biggest asshole" in their life to assess the traits that people associate with the term. Researchers found that most of the targets of the insult were viewed as manipulative, aggressive and entitled.

These traits, along with other common themes like manipulation and irresponsibility, don't just characterize run-of-the-mill "assholes." They're some of the same traits highlighted in expert profiles of psychopathic, antisocial and narcissistic [personality disorders](#). (The researchers say that these similarities don't necessarily mean your asshole ex has a personality disorder, though.)

"People didn't really have very much trouble figuring out who the 'biggest asshole' in their life was," said Brinkley Sharpe, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences. About half of the "assholes" were participants' former romantic partners, old bosses or estranged family members.

"On average, participants didn't think that they were very close to these individuals, which makes sense because these people are being described as having pretty aversive behaviors."

But about one out of three of the "biggest assholes" were people currently in participants' lives, including co-workers, friends and even current romantic partners.

Assholes are viewed as disagreeable and angry

After identifying the "biggest asshole" in their lives, participants were asked to describe how close they were to that person, what kind of relationship they have with that person and the extent to which the term fit that person. The respondents were then asked to describe the top three behaviors that made that person an "asshole."

For each of those behaviors, participants rated agreement with follow-up questions: Do you think that person knows their [behavior](#) bothers people? Do you think that person cares that their behavior bothers people? And do you think that person could change their behavior if they really wanted to?

Most of the participants believed the jerks in their lives were aware that their behavior bothered people but just didn't care enough to change.

"It's interesting to me that the behaviors people were keying in on sort of run the gamut," Sharpe said. "When we talk about personality, the asshole was described as somebody who is not agreeable and is angry.

"When we talk about behaviors, the asshole was not necessarily being antagonistic toward people, but they just didn't really care about what others were thinking or how they were perceived by others."

These people often appeared to struggle with regulating their anger, were irresponsible and held bigoted views.

Responses ranged from seemingly trivial complaints, things like this person put household decorations away incorrectly, to more severe. "Some of the responses were pretty violent," Sharpe said. "We had a couple where the individual had done something that was frankly criminal."

Others were more a sign of the times, with participants complaining that

the person didn't wear a mask or voted for Donald Trump.

"There's clearly a lot of variation in how people use this word," Sharpe said. "I think the implication of the study is that insults matter. We do mean certain things by using them or we associate them with certain characteristics."

More information: Brinkley M. Sharpe et al, "They Are Such an Asshole": Describing the Targets of a Common Insult Among English-Speakers in the United States, *Collabra: Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1525/collabra.32552](https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.32552)

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