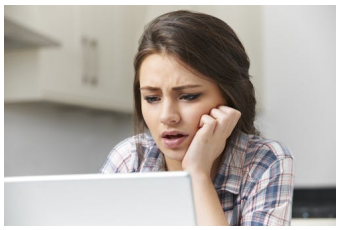

Trolls tend to downplay the impact of their abusive online behaviour on their victims and seem to relish in the mayhem they cause. Let's use this to help them lift their game. from www.shutterstock.com

Singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran recently announced he had quit Twitter because he was sick of internet trolls.

While this high-profile example shows the effects of antisocial online behaviour, it hides an alarming statistic. In one online poll over a quarter of Americans admitted to having engaged in trolling at some point.

Now new research into the personality of trolls suggests building their empathy for others could be one way to modify their behaviour.

What is trolling?

We define trolling as deceptive and disruptive online behaviour , which typically involves posting inflammatory and malicious comments to deliberately provoke and upset people.

An example might be posting a deceitful and inflammatory post on a Facebook memorial page, deliberately designed to upset the person’s family and friends.

Our definition of trolling is different to how the media sometimes uses the word trolling to describe a broader range of antisocial online activities.

Regardless of the strict definition, trolling (and antisocial online behaviour in general) can have serious physical and psychological effects
on victims. These include lowered self-esteem, sleep disruption, depression, and in some cases

suicide

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What do we know about trolls?

Psychological studies show trolls tend to be male, show higher levels of psychopathy traits – low levels of empathy, guilt and responsibility for their actions – and higher levels of sadism traits – the enjoyment of causing others physical and psychological pain.

Trolls are also motivated by what psychologists call “atypical social rewards”. Generally, people are motivated by creating a positive social environment (ty pical, positive social rewards). But trolls show higher motivation to achieve *negative* social rewards, like creating social mayhem and disruption.

We wondered if different types of empathy could explain such seemingly pointless, harmful behaviour.

In our sample of 415 online participants, we assessed relationships between common trolling behaviours (for instance, “although some people think my posts/comments are offensive, I think they are funny”) and two different forms of empathy: cognitive and affective.

Further reading: Internet’s cloak of invisibility: how trolls are made

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Cognitive empathy is the ability to recognise and understand other people’s emotions. But affective empathy is the ability to experience and internalise other people’s emotions. Put simply, cognitive empathy is the ability to predict how another person will feel and affective empathy is sharing the emotional experience.

As expected, people who were more likely to troll had significantly lower levels of affective empathy.

Surprisingly, people with high levels of cognitive empathy *and* psychopathic traits were more likely to troll. In other words, their high level of cognitive empathy indicates they are very good at understanding what hurts people, and their high level of psychopathy means they simply don't care.

Can we teach empathy?

One area to change behaviour might be to teach trolls to become more empathic, in particular, targeting their low levels of affective empathy.

There's strong evidence structured empathy training improves people's empathy. Unfortunately, interventions targeting psychopathy and more severe, clinical empathy deficits are far more complex.

Further reading: Understanding others’ feelings: what is empathy and why do we need it?

Most mental health experts say psychopathy cannot be cured . However, as trolls show higher levels of *nonclinical* psychopathy traits (not enough to meet criteria for a clinical disorder) interventions may be more successful.

One psychopathy intervention that has previously indicated success in reducing antisocial behaviour and criminal activity is the decompression model . Here, people are rewarded for every positive, prosocial behaviour (behaviour that benefits another), with the aim of increasing and reinforcing good behaviour.

Can we treat trolling as an addiction?

Not all trolls exhibit traits like low affective empathy or psychopathy. Some may simply be motivated by negative social rewards, like creating mayhem. And creating mayhem motivates the troll to keep going back for more.

Due to the addictive nature of rewards , there may be an addictive element to trolling. So, other strategies that have been applied to addictive behaviours (for instance, internet addiction) could be used to modify trolls' behaviour.

Further reading: Why comparing technology to drugs isn’t simply a question of addiction

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Cognitive behaviour therapy (or CBT, a talk therapy that targets negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviours), self-help treatment groups, group therapy, and even family therapy are all effective methods for treating addictions, particularly internet addictions .

CBT has been shown to be a particularly effective. Clients learn to monitor and identify thoughts that trigger addictive behaviours and actions. And early stages of therapy, focuses on behaviour and abstinence from situations that induce the problem behaviour.

Will all this stop trolling?

Unfortunately, we don't know if these methods will stop trolling. In the meantime, here are some guidelines based on psychological research on how we can manage it:

1.

If trolls are rewarded by creating social mayhem, then it's best to not feed the trolls. Try not to reinforce their behaviour by reacting. If the troll knows they have succeeded in disrupting the social environment in some way, this will reinforce their behaviour

2.

Psychopathy is generally associated with a lack of a fear of punishment. So, punishing the trolling behaviour might also prove ineffective

3.

Reward good behaviour. By rewarding the good behaviour, we will see more of it.

Evita March does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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Read more http://theconversation.com/how-empathy-can-make-or-break-a-troll-80680