

'Dirty John'-style romance scams cost Canadians millions, police say

Brett Bundale / The Canadian Press

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One expert calls it a "Dirty John" scenario: An alleged scam artist who woos victims with romance and charm.

Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Dalhousie University, says such scams are often pulled off by people with "a very dark constellation of traits."

"These individuals tend to be narcissistic, psychopathic, Machiavellian, and sadistic," he says. "Someone possessed by these traits can be very exploitative and parasitic, and that's usually part of a lifelong pattern where others are used in a callous and unemotional way."

Sherry says they can be charming, well-groomed and self-assured, and they tend to excel in the early stages of a relationship.

As for the victims, he says "it's difficult to withstand the tsunami of charm and persuasion."

Such scams were highlighted in the true-crime series "Dirty John," based on a California case. And some Canadian women have come forward to detail how they succumbed to the charms of a more polite, bilingual version of the notorious U.S. scammer.

Romance scams surpass all other types of fraud in Canada, with 760 victims reporting losses of more than \$22.5 million to the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre last year.

Sgt. Andrew Joyce with the Nova Scotia RCMP Financial Crime Section says the majority of those scams are online, with the victim never even meeting the perpetrator.

"This sort of Dirty John scenario where they have a relationship gets a lot more complicated," he says, noting that they are also less common.

Joyce says proving a crime beyond a reasonable doubt is a challenge in these cases, which is why police may recommend victims pursue a civil case where the threshold is the lower balance of probabilities.