

BDSM: A Loving Introduction To Bondage And Discipline (B/D) And Sadomasochism (S/M)

By Michael Castleman

Have you ever played the child's game, Trust Me? Two people play. One stands a few feet behind the other. The person in front falls backward, trusting that the one in back will catch that person before he or she crashes to the floor. It's a game with an element of danger, the possibility that the person falling might get hurt. There's also an element of emotional vulnerability. The person falling places enormous trust in the person catching. When the falling player trusts the catcher enough to let go completely, and when the catcher catches, both players experience a moment of exhilaration and intimate emotional connection that's difficult to duplicate in any other way.

BDSM is similar. The myth is that it's abusive and weird. Actually it's all about trust. When trust trumps the possibility of harm, the result can feel incredibly exhilarating and intimate.

A Special Bond

This type of sexual play goes by several names: power-play because one lover has control (at least nominally) over the other; sadomasochism (SM), which involves spanking, flogging or other types of intense sensation; and bondage and discipline (BD), which involves restraint. But these days, the term most widely used is BDSM. People unfamiliar with BDSM often dismiss it as perverted, dehumanizing, or worse. But for those who like to play this way, BDSM may well be the most loving and intimate form of lovemaking they share. Two people can have intercourse without much conversation, negotiation, or emotional connection. But for BDSM to work, the players *must* have very clear communication, which creates a special bond.

BDSM Throughout History

No one knows when people first began experimenting with BDSM, but clearly, it goes back more than 2,000 years. Ancient Greek art depicts what looks like SM.

The classic Indian sexuality book, the *Kama Sutra* (300 A.D.) touts erotic spanking with accompanying shrieks, and is particularly enamored of scratching and biting: “There are no keener means of increasing passion than acts inflicted by tooth and nail.” The *Kama Sutra* even sings the praises of scars caused by erotic scratching. It considers them advertisements of erotic prowess: “Passion and respect arise in a man who sees a girl with marks cut into her breasts.”

References to SM also appear in European sex writings dating from the 15th century. But BDSM came into its own during the mid-18th century, when some European brothels began specializing in flagellation and other SM-style “punishments” that dominant prostitutes meted out to willingly submissive men.

The first novel dealing with SM was published in France in 1791, *Justine* by Donatien Alphonse Franoise, comte de Sade, better known as the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814). De Sade’s name became the source of the term “sadism.” His highly controversial writings helped popularize BDSM—and the many toys used in sexual power play, among them: riding crops, whips, nipple clips, and restraints.

DeSade spent much of his life incarcerated in prison. He was judged criminally insane—part of the reason why many people consider the sexual practices he popularized equally aberrant and insane.

In 1870, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, published the novel, *Venus in Furs*, about male sexual submission. His name inspired the term “masochism.”

In 1886, the medical text, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, mentioned sadism and masochism as sexual deviations.

Sigmund Freud coined the word, “sadomasochism” in 1905, postulating that those who found it attractive were severely neurotic. The first edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-I, 1952) classified sexual sadism as a “deviation.” DSM-II (1968) did the same for masochism. DSM-IV (1994) continues to list SM as psychiatric conditions.

However, in *Bound to Be Free: The SM Experience*, coauthors Charles Moser, M.D., Ph.D., and J.J. Madeson point out that people involved in BDSM suffer psychiatric problems no more frequently than the general population, and have no psychological issues unique to their sexual proclivities. Moser's research also suggests that compared with the general population, people who enjoy power-play sexuality are better educated and more affluent. All available evidence shows that the vast majority of people who enjoy BDSM are a cross-section of the population, mentally healthy and typical in every respect—except that they find conventional (“vanilla”) sex unfulfilling and want something spicier and more exciting and intimate. Before condemning BDSM sexuality, remember that not too long ago, oral sex was considered “perverse.”

What proportion of Americans enjoy BDSM? That's not clear. The subject is poorly researched. The Kinsey studies from the early 1950s showed that 22 percent of men and 12 percent of women reported at least some sexual arousal when exposed to erotic stories with BDSM themes. A University of Miami study from 1971 showed that 8 percent of men and 5 percent of women admitted engaging in sexual spanking, as either the spanker or recipient. And Morton Hunt's book, *Sexual Behavior in the 1970s* (1974) suggested that 3 percent of men and 5 percent of women derived sexual pleasure from “intense sensation,” the BDSM term for pain.

Intense Sensation Without Harm

If you believe that BDSM is sick, perverted, cruel, or abusive, *don't play that way*.

But Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was once quipped, “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac.” Throughout history, kings and nations have fought to subjugate others. Capitalist economics assumes a dog-eat-dog world where succeeding means exerting control over others. And in sports, winners strive to “hurt” or “crush” the opponent, “break them,” and turn them into “doormats.” As a result, we've all been socialized to some extent to experience the adrenalin rush that comes from domination.

But what kind of person feels sexually aroused by pain? Many who are perfectly normal in every other respect. Again, consider sports: After intercepting the football or sinking a tough shot in basketball, teammates often slap the heroic player's butt, punch him in the shoulder, or hit his helmet. The recipient accepts this “abuse” gratefully as a sign of appreciation and affection. Or consider a long hike up to a mountain peak. On the way, thorns scratch your legs. You get sunburned. And by the time you reach the ridge, you're aching. Yet the pain of this experience allows

you to enjoy the exhilaration of reaching the summit. Or take a yoga class with intense poses that push you to the edge of what you can tolerate. By the end of the class, the pain has been transformed into something else—deep relaxation and contentment.

Some submissives, or “bottoms,” recall that while growing up, they were taught that wanting to be sexual was shameful and wrong. Later in life, a remnant of that training may contribute to an interest in submissiveness. Submission allows people to receive sexual pleasure without guilt because they didn’t really “want” it. It was “forced” on them. Of course, that’s all a fantasy, but it’s one that allows them to enjoy sex.

Sex workers who cater to powerful men often observe that many of them enjoy being submissive. Power may be an aphrodisiac, but the exercise of power can also be an emotional burden. It involves so much responsibility. Being submissive releases people from all responsibility and lets them focus entirely on themselves, on their own experience. They may be physically “restrained,” but ironically, it leaves them emotionally “free” to do nothing but receive pleasure—even if it hurts.

Sadly, media depictions of BDSM have grossly distorted the pain that submissives experience. Much of it is more theatrical than real. When performed with love by a nurturing dominant, or “top,” BDSM is *never* abusive.

“It’s *always* consensual,” says Jay Wiseman, author of *SM 101*. “Abuse is not.” You don’t need restraints, gags, or whips to abuse someone. In loving hands, such equipment serves to heighten sensual excitement, allowing both players to enjoy their interaction, or “scene,” as good, clean, erotic fun. A great deal of power-play sexuality does *not* involve stereotypic whips and chains. It may involve nothing more than one player telling the other: “Hold on to the bed posts and don’t let go until I say you can.” And when BDSM sex inflicts real pain, it is *always* carefully controlled, well within limits clearly set by the submissive beforehand.

Bottoms are very particular about the kinds of pain that bring them pleasure. “They experience the pain of a bee sting or a punch in the face exactly like the rest of us,” Wiseman says, “and dislike it just as much.”

“Safe” Words

There’s a theatrical element to BDSM. Sessions are called “scenes.” And like theater, participants in BDSM scenes carefully choreograph how the scene will proceed beforehand.

A key element of preparation involves agreeing on a “safe” word, a stop signal that the bottom is free to invoke at any time. This signal immediately stops the action—at least until the players have discussed the reason the bottom invoked it, and mutually agree to resume the scene. Popular safe words include “yellow, light” as in a yellow traffic light, which warns the top that the bottom is getting uncomfortable, and “red light,” which means stop everything now.

Some terms should *not* be used as safe words, among them: “stop,” “no,” or “don’t” because bottoms often enjoy “begging” tops to “stop,” secure in the knowledge that tops are free to ignore them. Meanwhile, tops often enjoy hearing bottoms “plead” for them to cease what they’re doing, secure in the knowledge that they are free to say “No, you’re mine, and I can do anything I want with you.”

If the bottom is gagged and can’t speak, a nonverbal safe signal must be arranged. Two grunts often means lighten up, and three grunts mean stop.

Any top who fails to honor the pre-arranged safe signal violates the bottom’s trust and destroys the relationship. In private BDSM play, bottoms refuse to play with such tops and the relationship ends. In public play at any of the hundreds of BDSM clubs around the U.S., tops who fail to honor safe words are ostracized.

The Ultimate Irony: The Sub Is The One in Charge

Although submissives feign subservience, the irony of BDSM is that *the bottom is actually the person in charge*. The bottom is free at any time to invoke the stop signal, and the top vows to obey immediately. By the same token, while the top acts dominant and possibly verbally or physically abusive, tops must also be caring and nurturing, taking bottoms up to their limit, but never beyond it. In this way, BDSM provides an opportunity for everyone to experiment with taking power and surrendering it—while always feeling safe and cared for. People who enjoy this type of sexual play say it results in amazing erotic intensity.

Learning the Ropes

Everyone involved in BDSM recommends instruction beforehand: reading a book, taking a class, or investigating any of the groups around the country that have Web sites. It takes extensive negotiation to arrive at mutually agreeable power play. Wiseman says that before every scene, the players should come to agreement on 16 issues:

- People. Who will participate? Will anyone watch? Will photography or videotaping be permitted?
- Roles. Who's the top? The bottom? What kind of scene will be played out? Will the top and bottom stay in role? Or switch roles? Will the submissive obey immediately? Or resist for a while?
- Place. Where? How private is it? How will privacy be guaranteed?
- Time. When will the scene begin and end?
- Accidents. They happen. If the safe signal is invoked, do both parties agree to discuss the reason in a constructive, non-blaming manner?
- Health. Does either party have any medical conditions that might factor into the scene?
- Sex. Which types of sexual contact will be permitted? Will sex toys be used? What about contraception and prevention of sexually transmitted infections?
- Intoxicants. Which, if any, will be permitted? How much?
- Bondage. Will the submissive allow physical restraint? If so, what?
- Pain. Will the submissive allow it? If so, how intense? With which instrument(s)?
- Marks. Will the submissive allow any marks? If so, which? Where? Permanent?

- Verbal Humiliation. May the dominant call the submissive names? If so, which?
- Safe Signals. What are they?
- Follow-up. Will you see each other afterward?
- Etc. Do any other issues need to be discussed beforehand?

Additional Caveats for Beginners

- Stay sober. Intoxication may impair judgment.
- Start softly. If you're interested in erotic spanking, begin with something soft, for example, with the top's hand in an oven mitt. If that's okay, next try spanking with a bare hand. If that's all right, discuss progressing to a paddle, riding crop, or other equipment. (Most sex toy marketers offer a selection of BDSM equipment, for example, mypleasure.)
- Start without equipment. Before you try a blindfold, play with this command: "Keep your eyes shut until I tell you to open them." Before trying a gag, play with: "Keep your mouth shut."
- Be particularly careful about physical restraint. Before you try ropes, stockings, or neckties, first experiment with thread, so that the bottom can break free at any time. Thread provides the excitement of restraint—but safely. If you opt for "heavier" restraints, consider easy-release Velcro wrist and ankle cuffs.
- Treat the bottom very lovingly. Don't jump right into sexual contact or spanking. Instead, tease the submissive for a while with a feather, a fur hat or massage mitt, or your fingertips.
- Stay present. If you restrain anyone, never leave the room. Be there for your partner, especially if that person is tied up and helpless.
- Be extra-careful with anything that can burn or leave marks, for example, hot candle wax.

- Finally—and these two points cannot be emphasized enough: Every detail of the scene *must* be worked out in advance with mutual consent. And *be sure* to arrange mutually agreed upon stop signal.

BDSM: A Possible Door into New, Deeper Intimacy

What is intimacy? Relationship authorities define it as clear, frank, self-revealing communication that begins with an emotional connection and takes that commitment to a deeper level. But many people equate “intimacy” and “sex.” To be intimate is to be sexual and visa versa. Only it isn’t. It’s quite possible to be sexual with a person you hardly know, the “perfect stranger.”

Most couples don’t discuss their lovemaking very much, which diminishes its intimacy. But BDSM *absolutely requires* ongoing, detailed communication. Players must discuss every aspect of their scenes. Many BDSM aficionados say that pre-scene discussions are as intimate, erotic, and relationship-enhancing as the scenes themselves. And couples who enjoy occasional power play but who are not exclusively into BDSM often remark that it enhances their “vanilla” sex because the practice they get negotiating scenes makes it easier to discuss other aspects of their sexuality. The skills required for BDSM include communication, trust, self-acceptance, acceptance of the other person. Those same skills that enhance relationships and sex—no matter how you play.

Help

For individual help dealing with BDSM issues, consult a sex therapist. To find one near you, visit aasect.org, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or sstarnet.org, the Society for Sex Therapy and Research.

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