

The Alt Sex Anti-Abuse Dream Team

January 16, 2011

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BDSMers face a lot of stigma around our sexuality, and this can be a major problem when BDSMers are trying to deal with abusive situations. I've written before about generally negative conceptions of BDSM — they can briefly be summarized as:

- * S&M is wicked,
- * abnormal,
- * a sign of mental or emotional instability,
- * inherently abusive,
- * or even antifeminist.

Given this climate, it's not surprising that two things almost always happen when BDSM and abuse come up:

1) People of all genders who are abused are often unwilling to report. **People of all genders who are abused within BDSM relationships tend to be particularly unwilling to report.** Victim-blaming is already rampant in mainstream society — just imagine what happens to, for example, a woman who has admitted that she enjoys being consensually slapped across the face, if she attempts to report being raped. And that's assuming the abuse survivor is willing to report in the first place; ze may prefer not to negotiate the minefield of anti-SM stereotypes ze will be up against, ze may be afraid of being outed, etc.

2) Members of the BDSM community sometimes push back against real or perceived anti-SM stigma by talking about how abuse is rare within the BDSM community. This BDSM blog post and comments claim that **not only is abuse within the community rare, but abusive BDSM relationships seem more likely to happen outside the community.** In fact, if you look then you can find posts from submissive women who found that getting into the BDSM community, being exposed to its ideals and concepts, helped them escape or understand their past abusive relationships.

I tend to think that #2 is a really good point — particularly the bit about how abusive BDSM relationships are more likely to happen outside the community, due in part to lack of resources and support for survivors. For this reason, I tend to stress the role of the community in positive BDSM experiences, and I encourage newcomers to seek out their local community. But lots of people don't have access to a local community at all, especially if they're not in a big city. Plus, lots of people have trouble enjoying their local community for whatever reason, perhaps because they have nothing in common with local S&Mers aside from sexuality, or because they don't have time to integrate into a whole new subculture.

There's also the unfortunate fact that point #2 sometimes reacts with point #1 in a toxic way — that is, it can ironically be harder for abuse survivors to talk about abuse within the BDSM community because the community is pushing back so hard against the stereotype of abusive BDSM. **I've spoken to BDSMers who feel that the S&M community pushes back far too hard, and that survivors are being aggressively silenced simply because the rest of us are so invested in fighting mainstream stereotypes.** I have never personally experienced this, but I would not be surprised if I did. And the fact is that I'm sure there are toxic dynamics in some BDSM communities — we aren't a monolith, folks — and that even in 100% awesome communities, I'm sure there are at least a few abusive relationships. And **even one abusive relationship in the community is obviously too many.**

As Thomas MacAulay Millar wrote when the most recent abusive BDSM case hit the media, “Our declaration that the abusers are not us has to be substantive.” This is something we should be taking action on. But how?

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Dynamics Within the Community

I have personally had excellent experiences within the S&M community. However, I am also pretty thick-skinned (unfortunately, this is partly due to lots of time spent working in a sexist industry); and I have a well-developed sense of my own boundaries. I am saying this not to sound self-congratulatory but because I believe that, due to being thick-skinned, I may be less bothered by actual harassment and pressuring dynamics than others are. Also, I am lucky enough that I’ve never experienced an assault. Therefore, it’s incumbent upon me to listen to how other S&Mers — especially female or genderqueer S&Mers — feel about their experiences being pressured within the community.

There are issues that even I have noticed. For example, I think that there is a distasteful tendency to talk about “real BDSM” or “serious BDSM”, as if some S&M is more legitimate than other S&M. That’s wrong and dangerous because it can make some people feel as though they have to push past their boundaries — do things they aren’t comfortable with — in order to be accepted, liked, or seen as “real”. On the rare occasions that I encounter this, I try to point out the problems right there and then. **There is no such thing as “more real” and “less real” S&M. The only truly important part about any S&M activity is that it happens among enthusiastic, consenting adults.**

Thomas once wrote to me by email that “I tend to think that the dynamics of abuse in the community are a combination of the desire to avoid washing our laundry in public, patriarchy colonizing our own, and the usual thing in small communities where people’s willingness to do the right thing in theory bumps up against their personal friends and loyalties.” I completely agree. I’d add that similar issues arise in almost all small communities, and it’s not fair to blame S&M in itself for these problems. At the same time, though, **it’s incumbent upon all BDSMers to contribute to an environment where people who don’t want to participate can easily say “no”, and can rely on being supported by others when they do.**

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Existing Anti-Abuse Initiatives in the BDSM Community

Finding existing initiatives is a bit of a piecemeal project, but here’s what I’ve run across.

* **A variety of pamphlets and written statements.** For example, The Network/La Red, a rather unique anti-abuse organization for lesbians, bi women and trans people, released a pamphlet featuring black text on a white background with a picture of handcuffs. The text says:

The most basic difference between S/M and abuse is **Consent**. It is not consent if ...

- * You did **not** expressly give consent.
- * You are afraid to say **no**.
- * You say **yes** to avoid conflict.
- * You say **yes** to avoid consequences (i.e. losing a job, losing your home, being outed).

S/M is ...

- * Always consensual.
- * Done with respect for limits.
- * Enjoyed by all partners.

- * Fun, erotic, and loving.
- * Done with an understanding of trust.
- * Never done with the intent to harm or damage.

Just because you consent to play does not mean you consent to everything. You have the right to set limits.)

(For the rest of the pamphlet, check out the images at my Flickr account — [here's the front](#), and [here's the back](#).)

Some SM organizations have also released statements on SM and abuse, such as the national [Leather Leadership Conference](#) and New York's [Lesbian Sex Mafia](#). Note that at the bottom of the LSM page, they mention that they've sensitized a local abuse hotline; if I ever get a grant or something to start a pro-sex anti-abuse center, I'll immediately grill the LSM to see how they got in with that hotline and what they said.

* **Kink Aware counselors.** The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom maintains an online list of [Kink Aware Professionals](#), which is a grassroots effort begun by writer/activist [Race Bannon](#) and includes doctors, lawyers, and therapists. The list is pretty much open and opt-in — professionals go to the KAP site and offer to list themselves there — and this is one reason it's not a good idea to assume that any given professional will be a great fit for you. Personally, when I was [coming into my BDSM identity](#), I found a Kink Aware therapist to be incredibly helpful — but while I was finding him, I visited another therapist who was not at all helpful.

When people ask me for kink-friendly survivors' resources, I always tell them to seek a KAP therapist first.

* **The annual Alternative Sexualities conference.** This is a comparatively new effort from the [Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities](#). They describe it as "a conference for clinicians and researchers, addressing issues around BDSM/Kink sexualities and consensual non-monogamies."

Unfortunately the third annual conference is already over (San Francisco, September 23), but there'll be another one next year (Washington D.C., August 3). Fortunately, counselors and other relevant professionals can get continuing education credits for attending. I was on a panel at the 2009 conference in Chicago, and I thought it was pretty awesome, but I am obviously biased.

* **Community workshops.** Most BDSM communities in large cities have educational workshops (for example, [here's a calendar of BDSM events in Chicago](#).) These teach SM-related ideas or skills such as community etiquette, how to use various types of equipment, etc. Every SM workshop I have ever attended has emphasized careful negotiation and has, at the very least, mentioned [safewords](#). One workshop — "The Emotional Aspects of BDSM Play", taught by San Francisco's [EduKink](#) — gave a detailed list of ideas for how to tell BDSM from abuse, which I wrote down:

1) Consent. BDSM is consenting; abuse is not.

a) Assuming consent was given — was it informed consent? Did everyone know what they were consenting to?

b) Was consent coerced or seduced from the partner? Did everyone feel like they could say no if they wanted? Was anyone worried about suffering negative consequences if they said no?

2) Intent. A BDSM partner intends to have a mutually enjoyable encounter; an abusive partner does not.

a) Did everyone leave the scene feeling somewhat satisfied?

3) Damage. A BDSM partner tries to minimize the actual damage inflicted by their actions; an abusive partner does not.

a) Did the two partners learn what they were doing before they did it? Did they learn how to perform their activities safely?

b) Were the partners aware of the potential risks of their activities?

4) Secrecy. Abuse often happens in secret. This is the hardest one on this checklist, because — due to the fact that BDSM is a very marginalized, misunderstood sexuality — BDSM often happens in secret, too. But this is one of the benefits of having an entire subculture that deals with BDSM: we try to look out for each other.

a) Were the two partners involved in the local BDSM scene? Did they get advice from knowledgeable, understanding BDSM people during rough patches in their relationship?

I've heard of one or two workshops specifically focused on "BDSM for Survivors". I've also heard of support groups for BDSM-identified survivors of abuse, but I've never run across one in person. I've said this before, but I'll say it again: I believe that the safest place to have a BDSM relationship is within the BDSM community.

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My Fantasy Sex-Positive, Anti-Abuse Program

You can tell from the above list that relevant community efforts have focused on raising internal awareness, consolidating useful information, and educating. If I were to get a grant or something (ha!), I would certainly look for ways to use it on a dedicated pro-sex, anti-abuse initiative, hopefully more expansive than a hotline, and considerably more extensive than a pamphlet. I've never developed this thought too extensively — I hate to torture myself when I know there's no money for one of my ideas — but I know I'd want my Dream Anti-Abuse Team to have the following qualities:

* BDSM is obviously my main interest, because that's how I identify the core of my sexuality. But I have a strong interest in destigmatizing all forms of sexual expression practiced by consenting adults. Everyone involved in my initiative would emphasize that **people of all genders and sexualities could come for help — whether straight, gay, lesbian, bi, trans, asexual, BDSM, sex worker, polyamorous, swing, or whatever amazing fetish could conceivably come up.**

Ideally, I would personally try to shock the hell out of anyone before I agreed to work with them ... because anyone whose face twists up or who gasps at the idea of any kind of consensual weird sex is a person who shouldn't be anywhere near altsexual abuse survivors.

* I'd want **destigmatizing alternative sexuality among the mainstream, especially mainstream anti-abuse organizations**, to be a major focus — so that abuse survivors could feel less anxious about being misunderstood while seeking help. So I'd need people who were willing to go out and charismatically shock the abuse officers at police stations, feminist organizations, college campuses, etc. I'd want us to be running everything from anti-stigma poster campaigns to sex communication workshops.

* I'd want the program to be **well-advertised to the general public, so that people who aren't in the community — yet who are practicing S&M or poly or whatever on their own — could still find us.**

* Of course we'd also do the more traditional work of offering walk-in counseling to abuse survivors, including help making a concrete plan, altsexual-friendly legal advice, and so on.

Aaand this is the point where I throw open the floor to comments. I haven't been directly involved with any anti-abuse organizations, so I really only know the basics — but I'm sure that some of you have. Anyone have experience with altsexual abuse survivors? Anyone have other aspects they'd want included in an altsexual anti-abuse program?

Anyone willing to fund my Dream Team?

<http://clarissethorn.com/2011/01/16/the-alt-sex-anti-abuse-dream-team>