

BDSM Defined:

An Exploration of Adult Sexuality and Lifestyle

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There are many styles of kink that people engage in, but they all have one thing in common: they are activities that take place between consenting adults. Contrary to stereotype, neither SM nor BDSM encompasses or condones abuse, nor do these activities necessarily relate to sex or sexuality, for that is not the exclusive realm in which BDSM plays out. This section takes a look at what BDSM is, and what it is not.

WHAT IT IS

BDSM - The Umbrella Term

BDSM is an acronym combined of several phrases: bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism. This term evolved in the early-mid '90s in internet newsgroups as a quick catchphrase to designate any of a myriad of kinky activities which or may not have to do with traditional SM (sadoomasochism).

No acronym is ideal for capturing the totality of what we do ("what it is that we do") - the "BDSM" phrase does not speak directly to the interests of the fetish community, for instance - but in recent years it has come to be a term in common parlance among the alternative lifestyle population in America. When a person identifies themselves as "being into BDSM" this does not, of itself, pinpoint their interests in any of the activities that come under that umbrella.

To understand exactly what kind of a kink a person has, you have to have dialog with them. In the same manner, some people refer to themselves as "SMers", even if their interest has nothing to do, strictly, with the sensation-oriented play that sadoomasochism tends to focus on. BDSM and SM are often used interchangeably. These are terms commonly used to describe one's general interest in kinky activities, and perhaps also one's affiliation with the BDSM community at large.

Safe, Sane, Consensual

In 1983 the term "safe, sane and consensual" was first used in a flyer for the Gay Men's SM Association (GMSMA) in New York to describe the types of activities that SM-identified folk were engaging in. The phrase rapidly caught on nation-wide, because it accurately captures the defining aspects of our BDSM interactions. People educate themselves about safety, they distinguish between fantasy and reality, and they negotiate consensual agreements as to the activities they engage in. SSC was never intended to be a dogmatic yardstick for scene behavior. Rather, it reflects the philosophy that adults take responsibility for themselves; they make choices using common sense about risk and safety; and that they do this consensually.

Sadoomasochism

"SM" used to be the only phrase applied to what was, but lately the language of kink has become more differentiated than it once was. In traditional usage, the term sadist meant someone who derives sexual pleasure from inflicting pain; masochist meant someone who gets sexual pleasure from receiving it. In contemporary usage, SM is a general term referencing the broad spectrum of sensation play: i.e., interactions where one person does an activity that gives sensation to the partner.

In SM the person doing the action is called the top; the person being done unto is the bottom. Activities that top and bottom engage in may or may not be pain, and may or may not be sexual - what is fairly constant, however, is that the sensation (of whatever sort) generally carries at least some degree of erotic charge to it. SM can range from light, innocuous sensations to the brutally fierce - all depending, of course, on the mutual agreement of the partners involved.

Dominance and Submission

Dominance and submission, or D/s as it is often called, is about the psychology of control. In D/s the person exerting control is called the dominant; the one being controlled is the submissive. Parties negotiate the degree and limits of the control being exercised. Submission is not taken from an unwilling person, but is given as part of a negotiated exchange of power between the two partners.

SM and D/s are distinctively different forms of play: a person can engage in D/s and never experience or inflict pain or other sensations. It is not necessary for these forms to mix, although frequently they do. SM often incorporates some degree of D/s, and D/s often incorporates some degree of SM.

While SM activities most often revolve around a "scene" or finite encounter, D/s may just as readily extend out beyond the limits of a scene and into the daily life of the participants on an ongoing basis. D/s can become the prevailing dynamic of a loving adult relationship, predicated upon explicit agreements about who has what authority and power, and who is obedient to whom. It has been observed that many vanilla (non-kinky) relationships revolve around a core of D/s, although it is not conscious, mindful or negotiated as such. When it is negotiated and consented to, as it is in the BDSM community, both parties are empowered to shape the relationship as they wish it to be. There are many variations and styles of D/s relationships. Common to them all is a mutual agreement about how much control is exercised by the dominant, and how much autonomy is maintained or given up by the submissive.

Master/slave

A Master/slave relationship is the most controlling of D/s relationships. While a submissive retains control over at least some aspect of his or her life, if not most aspects, in consensual slavery this is not the case. This is a relationship based on agreements about absolute control and obedience which is exercised on a 24/7 basis.

Other Kinks

The World Of Kink is vast, and BDSM interests many. I cannot do justice to them in this short essay. Suffice it to say that there are websites, interest groups, educational workshops and

social events that cater to the specialized interests of BDSM subgroups. Some of the more popular include:

Bondage - getting restrained or tied up

Fetish - the wearing or admiring of fetish clothing or gear, these being items for which individuals have a fetish (one classic is the traditional high-heeled shoe) - or clothing which evokes an erotic charge and so becomes fetishized. This ranges from skintight latex to leather, to corsetry to other exotic erotic fashions.

Role play - pick a character, craft a scenario, and interact with your partner in role.

Discipline - revolves around an authority figure correcting an errant person, often in a domestic setting. Frequently expressed in roleplay forms such as: strict governess/delinquent school boy or stern aunt/naughty nephew.

Animal play - no, this is not play with animals, but with people who are role-playing animals. Commonly expressed in the roles of pet owner and pet, or trainer and beast. Popular animals are dogs, cats, large felines, and ponies, though any creature imaginable can be roleplayed.

WHAT IT IS NOT

SM is Not Abuse

BDSM organizations have spent a great deal of thought defining ways in which SM differs from abuse, and creating checklists and information pamphlets elaborating on these attributes. Many of these items are works in progress, and some do not take into consideration all the varieties of behavior that are acceptable between consenting partners within the range of D/s relationships.

Rather than reference these lists and material, then, I offer my own minimum definitions about the ways in which SM differs from abuse. While I am not speaking for any organization or group beyond myself, it is worth noting that these definitions are in keeping with current community thought regarding SM versus abuse, and reflect a commonality of kinky experience.

1. Trust, honesty and communication are central to an SM relationship. Broken trust, manipulation or dishonesty, and abortive communications are central to an abusive relationship.
2. SM interactions leave all parties feeling good about what just happened. Abusive interactions leave at least one person feeling awful about what just happened.
3. Both parties give conscious, informed consent to what is happening in SM. At least one party in an abusive circumstance is not consenting to what is happening.

SM is Not Non-Consensual

Of all the factors distinguishing SM from abuse or criminal behaviors, there is one thing above all that cannot be stressed enough: CONSENT. No one who is abused consents to be emotionally damaged, or verbally or physically attacked. No one who is criminally assaulted

agrees to such a violation of their person. Such actions are unwarranted, uninvited and unwanted boundary transgressions, and these are not things the victim of abusers or criminals give consent to.

In SM, it is important to note that while some activities may appear to be violent or pushing of boundaries, it is the existence of consent that makes all the difference in the world. If there is no consent, there will be no SM interaction. With the presence of consent, the dynamic is one of two adults sharing an exchange that brings them both pleasure. A kinkster on the receiving end of a consensual paddling is no more being abused or assaulted than a football player on the receiving end of a tackle. Both parties have consented to physical contact in the welcome pursuit of their activity of choice.