



TRISTAN TAORMINO

50 shades
of kink

AN INTRODUCTION TO BDSM



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by Tristan Taormino

CLEiS
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Introduction: Fifty More Shades

It may have started as Twilight fan fiction, but the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy by E L James grew quickly into an international phenomenon. The first book in the series is the UK's bestselling book (beating out Harry Potter), has been translated into thirty languages, and has sold over forty million copies worldwide so far.

As a sex educator and erotica editor, what excites me most about Fifty Shades of Grey is the widespread impact it has made: never before has an erotic novel been responsible for causing such a stir. In addition to driving up the sales of Be Wa balls, it has captured the imagination of so many different kinds of people and sparked important conversations about desire and power. And there is more widespread interest in kink than ever before.

I use kink as a catch-all term that includes BDSM, sadomasochism, kinky sex, dominance and submission, role play, sex games, fantasy, and fetish. But that definition just leads to more terms that need defining! I will both define and expand on these words throughout this book, but for now, if you're reading this I'll assume you have a basic idea of what I'm talking about.

Beyond definitions, what is kink really? And why do people do it? Kink is an intimate experience, an exchange of power between people that can be physical, erotic, sexual, psychological, spiritual, or, most often, some combination. People who practice kink explore the territory between pleasure and pain, eroticize the exchange of power, experience intense physical sensations and psychological scenarios, and test and push their limits. Kink can be a unique laboratory—a sacred space where we feel safe enough to try new things, push our boundaries, flirt with edges, and conquer fears. Members of BDSM or kink communities emphasize consent above all else—everyone is on board with what's going on and nothing happens against anyone's will. They value trust, communication, and safety, and often make use of a safeword—a word that either partner can use to bring everything to a stop. Kink is one area of the spectrum of sexual practices, so people do kink for as many reasons as people have sex: to give, to take, to connect, to discover, to trust, to experiment, to imagine, to learn, and to grow.

One of the components of the Fifty Shades of Grey books that has been widely criticized is its inaccurate representation of kink practices. Many of the details simply don't ring true for those of us who've practiced kink for many years, and additionally, the book portrays some unrealistic and unsafe activities. I realize that it's a romance novel, fiction, and was never intended to be an instructional manual of any kind; however, based on media reports and a huge spike in kink toy sales at sex retailers, lots of readers have been inspired to try out some of the fantasy material in real life. As an educator, I know how important it is for people to have accurate, honest, and straightforward information about sexuality. It was pure luck and coincidence that my own book about kink, *The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play and the Erotic Edge*, came out just a few months after Fif

Shades of Grey caught fire, and The Ultimate Guide has certainly benefitted from the newfound popularity of kink. But I realized quickly that some people were searching for a more basic kinky education, so I wrote this book as a kind of how-to companion to the novels.

This is a primer for people who are interested in kink and want to know more about it, learn how to negotiate with a partner, get some ideas, and explore different activities; it's meant to be an introduction to the world of kink. In it you'll learn the truth behind common myths about kink, how to talk about your fantasies, common kinky terms and tenets, dominant/submissive role play, and sexual power games. In addition, you'll find ideas, tips, and techniques for different kinky activities, including sensory deprivation, sensation play, bondage, spanking, flogging, and more. If you want to go deeper and find out more, check out my book *The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play and the Erotic Edge*, as well as the titles listed in the reading list at the end of this book.

Chapter 1

Embrace Your Inner Kinkster: Myths, Truths, and Communication

Let's say you read *Fifty Shades of Grey* or another erotic, kinky novel like *Carrie Story* by Molly Weatherfield or *The Marketplace* by Laura Antoniou. You enjoyed these fictional accounts of dominance and submission, power and lust, pleasure and pain, hot sex and incredible orgasms. You enjoyed them a lot. But, perhaps you or your partner have some reservations about these newfound fantasies. Portrayals of kink, aka BDSM, in the mainstream media—from novels and magazines to television and movies—are generally inaccurate, misleading, one-dimensional, or just plain wrong. As a result, there are a lot of myths about kinky people and practices out there. If you're struggling with some things you read or heard about kink or these concerns are holding you back from exploring your desires, this summary of some of the most popular misconceptions, along with the real facts, should provide you with reassurance, clarity, and support about your fantasies and desires.

Myths About BDSM and Kinky People

Myth: BDSM is the same thing as violence and abuse. Violence and abuse are horrific and should not be tolerated under any circumstances. Some BDSM activities (bondage, slapping, verbal degradation), when they are taken out of their erotic context, may resemble violent acts, but they are not at all; they are consensual activities between adults who derive pleasure from them and who have the power to stop the activities at any time.

Myth: If you had a satisfying sex life, your partner wouldn't want to try anything kinky. If you or your partner has just discovered an interest in kink, it is not an indictment of your current sex life; people's sexual tastes are varied and change over time. If a new desire has emerged, consider it a gift, not a warning sign. People do BDSM for the same wide variety of reasons people have sex, including pleasure and connection. Just as some people love oral sex and others love sex in the woods, some love BDSM. Plenty of folks have told me they believe it's just how they're wired. I've heard countless stories of the first time a lover held her down

the first time a man put a collar on her, the first time she got spanked. Many experienced a visceral reaction to these experiences before they had language to describe what they were doing or knew there were other people out there doing similar things. For some, BDSM does not have to focus on or even involve genital stimulation to be pleasurable and even orgasmic. For others, a good flogging and a good fucking is the perfect combination—BDSM enhances the sexual experience.

Myth: Bottoms, submissives, and masochists have low self-esteem or intimacy issues.

Bottoms like to have things done to them. Masochists enjoy intense sensations including what other people may interpret as pain or discomfort. Submissives want to submit to a partner on their terms. What these roles have in common is that the people who embody them write the script, dictate what they want done to them, and can put a stop to it immediately; they actually have a great deal of power in the situation. Submissives in particular are stereotyped as timid and passive, which misses some of the key elements of the dominant/submissive power dynamic. Submissives generally like the freedom that comes with having someone else be in charge; they don't have to think about what comes next or make decisions, they just have to follow a partner's lead. Submission can give some people permission to explore certain sexual desires without guilt or shame ("I have to do everything my master says..."). Some submissives get a thrill from being sexually available to their partner; they don't have to wait for someone to initiate sex or think about the next move. Some enjoy being the center of attention. Others like the opportunity to focus exclusively on their partner's sexual needs over their own, which is a huge turn-on for lots of people. It's all about the context of the situation—someone can be very "take charge" in everyday life, but like to be ordered around in bed.

Myth: Tops, dominants, and sadists are sociopaths who have intimacy issues. Tops are doers. Dominants like to be the boss. Sadists like to inflict pain and discomfort. Nothing is wrong with any of these desires. These three roles share a common desire to take charge and guide the erotic encounter. Some people prefer to lead in life, and that preference extends to their sexual lives (others may like to express their leadership in bed more than elsewhere). They derive pleasure from being skilled in a particular activity and the ability to bring their partners pleasure. They like to watch as someone becomes putty in their hands, giving in to the experience. What kind of a person wants to hurt their partner? Again, you must return to the context of the scene: sadists inflict pain on folks who enjoy the experiences.

Myth: If you enjoy pain, something is wrong with you. When some people think of activities like flogging, caning, or spanking, they often think of pain. And no one gets turned on by or enjoys pain, right? Actually, some

people do. When people experience pain, adrenaline, endorphins, and natural painkillers flood their nervous system. Some people get off on this chemical rush, which many describe as feeling energized, high, or transcendent. Pain is not just a physical event; like many things in our culture, it is also socially constructed and reinforced. When we see a person slap someone's face, we think, "That hurt, that was unpleasant." But, in the context of a sexually charged scene, when some people are aroused (and their pain tolerance is much higher), they process a face slap in a different way: it feels good. They like how their flesh responds and their pulse quickens. It may feel shocking, intimate, stinging; add the taboo of dominance, punishment, humiliation—whatever that slap signifies for those two people—and you've got a recipe for an intense, pleasurable experience. In certain contexts, one person's pain can be another person's pleasure. Or, as Patricia Califia writes in *The Ultimate Guide to Kink*, "Euphoria and agony are next-door neighbors."

Myth: Kinky desires are not normal.

We have to stop thinking of kink as something abnormal or perverse and instead recognize it as part of a broad spectrum of desires. We should not put moral judgments on people who like certain kinds of sex. Imagine if we did that with nonkinky sex. Why does he like the doggie-style position so much? Why doesn't she enjoy receiving oral sex more? Questions like those sound ridiculous, because we accept that some people like this, other people like that, and plenty of people like both. If it turns you on, you're doing it with consenting adults, you're not breaking laws or ruining your own life or someone else's, just stop worrying and go for it. Life's too short to second-guess your desires and what they might mean about you.

Myth: Kinky people were abused as children, and they are acting out their abuse. There is actually no research which supports this myth, yet it persists. Do some kinky people engage in very emotionally and/or physically intense practices? Yes. Do some people get off on being pushed to their limit, seeing how much pain they can take, enduring an intense experience, or exploring dark psychological territory? Yes. In fact, some people do create and enact scenes that echo past traumas in their lives, but there is a major difference between simply repeating past abuse and purposefully crafting an erotic scenario in order to experience catharsis and healing. In real trauma, you feel powerless. In the latter, you write the script, you control the scene, and you have the power.

Communicating With Your Partner

The truth behind these myths is an important piece in your own journey of self-discovery and can help you embrace your newfound kinky fantasies. Once you go

more comfortable with them, you may begin to imagine some scenes you've read about or watched in a film become a part of your real sex life. You think about what it might be like to spank your partner or be someone's sex slave, but how do you begin? First, you need to share your fantasies with your partner, which you realize is sometimes easier said than done. But the only way you will have the opportunity to explore these desires is if you put yourself out there and tell your partner what you really want. Communication is a crucial component of an empowered and fulfilling sex life. There are a number of different ways you can do it, and it all depends on your communication style.

Be direct. The success of the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy has inspired a new open dialogue about kink among many different kinds of people, and the books are a great way to start the conversation. "So, I read this book, and it turned me on, and I'd like to try some of the stuff with you," is about as direct as you can get. While you're being so direct, you can also get specific; you can say, "One of the things in the book that really got me going was [fill in your favorite: bondage, role play, blindfolds, candles, etc.]" You can also talk about how you might like something different: "In the book, Christian uses a riding crop on Anastasia's vulva, but I think I'd like you to try using it on my butt cheeks instead." Give your partner the space to listen, and tell him he does not have to respond right away if he doesn't want to. If beginning that directly scares you, try the following techniques first and work your way up to a more explicit discussion.

Write it down. If talking about your desires face-to-face with your partner makes you feel shy, intimidated, or overwhelmed, you could write her a note. Handwritten notes are a rarity these days, so it should get his attention. You can use the same direct approach, but put it on paper, then slip the note to her. Or you can email him a note (as long as it's not to a work email account!). Sending a handwritten or emailed note gives you a chance to compose your thoughts and takes any pressure off the situation; it gives her the opportunity to digest the new information and respond when she's ready. As a bonus, it could spark a series of erotic notes you write back and forth to each other about exactly what you want to do together.

Use the book. If you're not quite sure how to express your desires, let the books that inspired you do it for you. Select some of your favorite passages and print out or photocopy those pages, highlight the particularly incendiary sections, and include them with your note. Bonus points for underlining, color coding certain activities, writing in the margins, or creating your own footnotes.

Chat in cyberspace. Sometimes you feel a little bolder if you aren't sitting in the same room with your partner, so try chatting online with instant messaging. Unlike email, this gives you the chance to have a real-time dialogue, but there's still a little distance, which may increase your bravery. You can begin the conversation the same way, "I read this book..." and take it from there. This will give your partner a chance to ask questions and you a chance to be specific. Chatting online can also be a way to start the discussion that can then continue in person later.

Go shopping. Take a trip to your local sex toy store and head to the fantas

role play or bondage section. You both can point out toys that interest you, talk about who wants to do what with them. You don't actually have to buy anything; you can simply use the selection of implements to start the conversation, give your ideas, and point out your preferences. Or you can make a purchase that becomes the spark for your new erotic adventure.

Watch a movie. Pick an adult film with similar themes to a book you like; *O: The Power of Submission* directed by Ernest Greene, for example, is a modern-day retelling of Pauline Réage's book *The Story of O* (see sidebar for more recommendations). As you watch it together, chime in about what interests you, what turns you off, and what you find intriguing but you're not sure you're ready to try. A movie will give you a visual encyclopedia of different activities, power dynamics, and scenarios—use that information to begin to talk about what you want to do.

Inspiration on Film: Great BDSM Porn Films

O: The Power of Submission (Adam & Eve)
The Surrender of O (Adam & Eve)
The Truth About O (Adam & Eve)
The Rough Sex series (Vivid)
The Fashionistas (Evil Angel)
The Fetish Fanatic series (Evil Angel)
Nina Hartley's Guide to Erotic Bondage (Adam & Eve)
Midori's Expert Guide to Sensual Bondage (Vivid-Ed)
Penny Flame's Expert Guide to Rough Sex (Vivid-Ed)
Tristan Taormino's Guide to Bondage for Couples (Adam & Eve)
Tristan Taormino's Guide to Kinky Sex for Couples (Adam & Eve)
Crash Pad Series Volume 4: Rope Burn (Pink and White Productions)
The Curse of MacBeth (Madison Bound)
Tail of a Bondage Model (Madison Bound)
50 Shades: A XXX Adaptation (Smash Pictures)

All of these approaches should eventually lead to a frank conversation, one you come to with an open mind, patience, and some information. If your partner has questions, be prepared with answers. Be ready to counteract myths, stereotypes, and misinformation (with assistance from the first part of this chapter).

Sex can be very strongly connected to our egos and our core sense of self; it often makes us feel more vulnerable than anything else we do. It's difficult, especially if you are in a long-term relationship, to reveal that you have a new desire, especially one that's different than what you've expressed in the past. When you realize that going in to the conversation, you will be better prepared for different reactions from your partner which could range from surprise, confusion,

and curiosity to shock, hurt, and even anger—or some combination of these. Don't get defensive. Be ready to reassure your partner that this new information doesn't change how you feel about him. Emphasize that these fantasies excite and arouse you, and you want to share that excitement and arousal with him. If you're the one who's hearing this new information, be open. Don't rush to judgment, get defensive, or shut down. Listen to your partner, ask questions, give yourself time to digest the information, and don't feel like you have to respond immediately. Ideally, talking about your fantasies will spark new adventures in bed and bring you closer together.

What If I Don't Have a Partner?

When someone expresses an interest in kink, I always give the same advice: find your local community. You can begin online by joining one of the largest kink social networking sites, FetLife.com, and from there find other online groups and lists that are tailored to your specific interests, identities, experience level, or geographic area. Want to know where the kinksters are in your neighborhood? Google BDSM and your town, city, or county, and you'll likely come up with social events, workshops, support groups, conferences, and, for lucky folks, play parties, dungeons, and clubs. There are hundreds of gatherings of kinksters throughout North America and the world—whether a regional organization's annual conference, a camping event for pervy people, or a BDSM retreat—and the majority of them have a strong educational component. On any given weekend you can learn how to safely set someone on fire, be a good Daddy, plan the perfect orgy, or do bondage without rope.

Chapter 2

BDSM Basics: Terms, Roles, and Principles

Once you've talked about your kinky desires with your partner, there are a few more aspects to discuss including different roles, activities, and limits. In the spirit of direct communication and clarity, I'd first like to define some terms you will read throughout this book.

Terminology

Kink is an umbrella term for BDSM, kinky sex, dominance and submission, erotic role play, fantasy, and fetish.

BDSM is an acronym and an umbrella term that was first used in the late 80s and early 90s in Internet discussion groups and was more widely adopted in the 2000s. BDSM is a combination of several shorter acronyms that reflect the history of our kinky vocabulary and the wide variety of practices that it incorporates:

B & D (also B/D) stands for bondage and discipline. It is an older term that first appeared in personals and magazines in the 1970s and became widely used by kinky folks in the 1980s to describe their interest in kink. It wasn't necessarily meant to denote only bondage and discipline, but rather a range of activities that revolved around power exchange. Today B & D is much less frequently used as a term on its own.

SM (also S & M, S/M, S/m) is the common abbreviation for sadism and masochism or sadomasochism. (See below for definitions of these and related words.) These terms were coined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in 1886 and have appeared frequently since then in psychoanalytic literature to describe sexual pathologies; however, kinky people reclaimed them beginning around the 1970s, and SM was the most popular term for kink activities until BDSM gained widespread use by the 2000s.

Sadomasochism is the enjoyment of giving or receiving pain or discomfort.

A sadist derives pleasure from inflicting pain, intense sensations, and discomfort on someone else. That pain or discomfort can be physical (like during a spanking) or emotional and psychological (as in an interrogation scene), or both.

A masochist is someone who enjoys receiving pain or intense sensations, being made uncomfortable, or being “forced” to do something they don’t want to do. Remember that sadists and masochists experience these desires and pleasures in the context of consensual BDSM scenes.

D/s (also DS or d/s) stands for dominance and submission or dominant/submissive. The terms dominant, submissive, and dominance/submission have been around for a long time; people began using them in the context of kink in the 1980s to describe the power dynamic within a SM scene or relationship, or to communicate their interest in roles like master/slave or daddy/boy. In a D/s relationship today, the power exchange may exist without other elements of BDSM.

When a D/s power exchange is always or very often present, partners inhabit their roles and reinforce the dynamic through various rituals, protocols, and behaviors all the time; these relationships may be referred to as 24/7 D/s (as in 24 hours a day, 7 days a week), lifestyle D/s, TPE (total power exchange), or AP (absolute power exchange). (Read more about dominants and submissive in the next section on roles.)

BDSM can be used as a noun (“I’m interested in BDSM”) or an adjective (“I went to a BDSM event”). Some people use other terms interchangeably with BDSM, including SM, kink, and leather.

The use of the term leather in association with BDSM (as in, “I’m part of the local leather community”) originated in post-World War II gay male biker clubs and bars and continued in leather bars and sex clubs from the late 50s all the way through the 2000s. Leather is still used today, especially by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer folks, to signify kinky interests, identities, and communities.

Play is a common term used to describe the practice of BDSM, as in, “I want to play with a bondage expert so I can learn more about it.” It can also be used as an adjective: “My play partner caned me really well at Susan’s play party. I’m glad you set up that play date!”

A scene is where two or more people come together to do BDSM. People may also use scene to describe the BDSM community (“Is she in the scene?”). You can do a scene anywhere, but often people do them in a play space or dungeon. These spaces may be private, such as a room in someone’s home, or public, like a large club. Such places often have different stations that feature various types of

equipment for BDSM play, such as a St. Andrew's cross (a large X, usually made of wood, with places to attach wrist and ankle cuffs), a bondage bed, a spanking bench, a sling, a medical exam table, and a cage.

Erotic role play (or fantasy role play) occurs when you and a partner (or partners) create characters and scenarios to act out fantasies with a sexual component.

The term fetish has several meanings. When the word first appeared, fetish was a psychological term to denote a particular object that one needed in order to experience sexual pleasure and orgasm. Over time, the word has evolved into a kind of shorthand. Now people use it as a way to describe their favorite kinks, as in a shoe fetish, a foot fetish, a cigar fetish, or an ass fetish. In addition, some people say, "I belong to the fetish scene," meaning they like to dress up in latex, leather, and PVC, and attend fetish parties and balls, but they don't necessarily belong to the local BDSM or leather scene.

Roles

One of the first things to consider as you talk about what kinds of BDSM activities you might like to try is what role you'll take in a scene: do you want to be in charge or do you want your partner to be in charge (or both)? A top is the doer who initiates activities and actions and does things to the bottom. Do you love the idea of blindfolding your partner, tying him up, or spanking him? If you like doing things to your partner and want your partner to receive, you will probably enjoy taking on the top role.

A bottom follows the top's lead, receives stimulation from the top, and has things done to him or her. If you fantasize about giving control to your partner, being put in bondage, or being whipped, then you should explore the bottom role.

Top and bottom can also be used as verbs, as in "I topped my girlfriend last night." A switch is someone who enjoys playing both roles. Whether a switch becomes a top or a bottom can change from one scene to the next; switches may take on a particular role based on the partner they play with or the activity. They can also switch between both roles within one scene.

A dominant is the partner in charge; dominants run the show and call the shots. Think of the dominant as the authority figure who should be obeyed. A female dominant is sometimes referred to as a dominatrix. A submissive is someone who enjoys surrendering to their partner, likes to prioritize the dominant's needs and desires, and gets turned on by being told what to do. Read more about dominant/submissive role play in the next chapter.

People of all different genders are tops, bottoms, switches, dominants, and submissives. In this book, I will use "he," "she," "her," and "his" not to proscribe certain roles to certain genders or assume a specific kind of dynamic, but rather

to mix it up randomly.

Useful Concepts

Kinky folks have adopted a set of principles that represent some important core values: consent, communication, negotiation, education, safety and risk reduction, and aftercare.

Consent

Consent—explicit, informed verbal approval after negotiation, a confident and secure “Yes!”—is the bedrock of sex and relationships, and one of the most significant elements of kink. It’s what separates kink from abuse. You will read about consent repeatedly in this book. Securing consent from a partner is a necessity, and this holds true whether the person is brand-new to you, you’ve played together more than a dozen times, or you’ve been in a relationship for ten years. Never assume anything. When you ask for consent, you clearly speak your part in the exchange: I need to know you’ve agreed to this before we begin. Giving your consent to a partner prior to a scene is absolutely crucial. It establishes that you’re ready, willing, and able to proceed; you’ve discussed what’s likely to happen, shared any concerns, talked about your limits, and agreed to dive in. When you give consent, you do so willingly, without pressure, coercion, or reservation. You agree to play, communicate during the scene, and stop if you need to.

Communication and Negotiation

Giving your consent and receiving a partner’s consent is part of the process of negotiating a kink scene. Negotiation creates a space for everyone to talk about their needs, wants, limits, fantasies, and fears before they play. One way to begin the negotiation process is to identify what role or roles you will take on: top/bottom/switch, dominant/submissive, sadist/masochist. Together you can discuss possible activities; for each one, you can decide if you are interested in doing it and whether you want to give or receive or both.

BDSM encompasses so many different activities, turn-ons, fetishes, and scenarios that listing them all would take up way too much space here. Plus, there can never be a complete list, since folks are coming up with new kinks every day.

Many lists of kinks can be found on the Internet, such as the kinky social networking site FetLife.com, where you'll find a list of thousands of different kinks. Sites like FetLife are also good places to virtually meet others who enjoy BDSM, including people who can act as mentors as you explore the world of kink.

Checklists

People sometimes make a "Yes-No-Maybe" checklist, marking yes for the things they'd like to do, no for the things they definitely don't want to do, and maybe for activities that fall in between. These lists help you think about what you want to try (or not) as well as assist you in communicating that information to your partner—and vice versa.

The maybe list is the trickiest to define, since it's often made up of activities that fall into a grey area; a "maybe" can have multiple meanings. Here are some reasons why you might check maybe:

- You are curious about an activity but have no idea if you'll like it.
- You want to find out more information before you mark it with a yes or no.
- If you and/or your partner became skilled at doing it, then you'd give it a go.
- Once you have more experience with other activities, you may want to try this activity.
- It doesn't warrant a yes, but you aren't opposed to trying it.
- This activity both excites you and scares you, so you're not sure what to do.
- If you get to know your partner better and it feels right, you'll go for it.
- If you learn to get over your anxiety about it, it could become a yes.
- Under the right circumstances, you might like to do it.
- You've never thought about it, but your gut doesn't say no.

Talking openly about why something ends up in the maybe column will give your partner insight and information about your desires, so be as open as you can.

This book is meant to be a primer for kink, so I'm going to list some of the most popular kinks suited best for beginners to this kind of erotic play. After you read the chapters that follow, which discuss these activities in more detail, come back to this checklist and talk to your partner about each entry.

Sample Checklist

Activity	Yes	No	Maybe	Comments
spanking				
paddle				
crop				
cane				
slapping				
flogging				
blindfold				
ball/mouth gag				
DIY bondage				
restraints				
bondage tape				
rope bondage				
hot wax				

sensation play				
nipple clamps				
hair pulling				
biting				
scratching				
collar				
leash				
dom/sub roles				
pleasure/orgasm control				

Note: this list is just the beginning. Other popular kink activities not on this list include clips and clamps, bondage with suspension, genitorture, mummification, face slapping, animal role play, age play, taboo play, mindfuck, objectification

medical play, electricity play, play piercing/temporary piercing, singletail, whipping, and many more. If you want to learn more about these and other more advanced BDSM activities, read my book *The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play and the Erotic Edge*.

In addition to negotiating your wants, needs, desires, and limits for BDSM, you should also decide if there will be sexual activity as part of your play. You can write up a similar “Yes-No-Maybe” list for this kind of contact. Will there be genital touch and stimulation? Masturbation? How about penetration, oral sex, sex toys, ejaculation? As part of the negotiation process, you should also disclose when you were last tested for sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) and decide on safer-sex practices.

Making a list of activities is like drawing the outline. Now it’s time to fill in the details and get more specific. Erotic desire is in the details, so it will be helpful to you and your partners to flesh out your fantasies and figure out exactly what you want. Say you like the idea of bondage. Do you crave being restrained into submission or do you like the idea of struggling to get out of it? Perhaps you enjoy dominating. Do you prefer to give orders, create predicaments, or use someone for your pleasure? You know you’re into sex-for-money fantasies where you’re a prostitute—but are you a streetwalking hustler or a high-priced call girl?

As you fill in the details of your desires, decide on and communicate your limits within a certain activity, like these:

- You love to be slapped and spanked, but not on your face.
- You’re excited to have hot wax dripped on you, but you don’t want it on your breasts.
- You checked yes under clips and clamps, but you have one caveat: no clothespins.
- You’re game to try sensory deprivation if your partner promises not to put a gag in your mouth.
- Caning is fun, but no marks on your body that people could see when you wear shorts.

Now is also the time to tell your partner all relevant information he should know about you. Is there anything in your medical history that is serious or will affect the type of play you do? You should let a partner know if you have a heart condition, high blood pressure, diabetes, allergies, or similar ailments. You should talk about medications you take, a sensitivity to hot or cold, if you’re prone to dizziness or fainting, how well you can see without your glasses. Do you have bad knees and can’t kneel for more than twenty minutes? That is vital information to tell a dominant before a scene!

Although it can be difficult, you should also share any specific elements that you know can trigger a negative reaction in you; these may be based on phobias, negative experiences, past trauma, childhood abuse, or strong aversions. They can be about a specific body part, an activity, an implement, a certain word or words. I have a friend who cannot be spanked with a hairbrush because she has awful memories of being punished as a little girl with a hairbrush by her mother.

Another friend likes to be called names like whore or bitch in a scene but draw the line at cow or pig. I know a guy who has an intense fear of being strangled, so even hands around his neck can send him into a tailspin. One woman had a bad first-time experience with nipple clamps, and now they give her tremendous anxiety.

This is important information to know as you decide if you're going to play with someone, what you're going to do, and how to construct a scene. This information sharing is part of giving and receiving informed consent; it also helps prepare you to assess the risks and determine how to play safer.

Education

Education is a very important part of the BDSM community, and you'll find that there is a wide variety of ways to learn kinky skills including educational books, videos, websites, classes, and events. If you're interested in spanking, flogging, sensory deprivation, or acting as a top in any other BDSM activities with a partner, it's important that you learn how to do them correctly from experienced people first. Investigate your local community to see if there is an organization that hosts classes or weekend events. Learning about proper techniques, common mistakes, safety issues, and risk reduction tips will provide you with a solid foundation. And educational classes are not just for tops; there are classes for bottoms where you can learn about negotiating skills, pain processing, and other useful information. After that, it's all about practice!

Safety, Risk, and Responsibility

The issues of safety and responsibility have been vital for kinky people both personally and politically. People who practice BDSM have long emphasized the importance of mentoring and education so newcomers can learn proper skills before picking up a paddle or a flogger. When SM groups first became more visible, and as they continue to grow and get more politically active, kinksters want nonkinky folks to know that they aren't whip-toting lunatics.

Coined in the 1980s by an SM activist group, the phrase "safe, sane, and consensual" is a concept many kinksters embrace—it prioritizes a commitment to consent and both physical and psychological safety. Others prefer "risk-aware consensual kink" (RACK). RACK also emphasizes the consensual nature of BDSM while acknowledging that some of its practices are inherently risky (and, in fact, exploring the risks and edges are part of what draws people to them). You can make an informed decision to acknowledge the risks, take steps to reduce them, and proceed.

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