

Negotiating for Beginners

I need my needs – but want my wants!

Slow down.

You may not want to move more slowly towards this alternative sexuality, but what's the rush? Sure you found just the thing you've been looking for, it draws you, you've got to do this thing – but there are risks – and you may be overwhelmed by a confusing barrage of emotions. You can minimize risks by slowing down.

Instead of doing this stuff, hang out with people with similar interests. Meet people at a munch, a fetish night, or a play party, and learn from them. Look through BD/SM websites for more information. You can learn about Pittsburgh area groups and websites right here at the PLAN website.

The first thing is that you don't have to do anything (in which case negotiation isn't important). You're you, a person, an individual – and you're only going to do those things that you as a person want to do. Along the way, you'll be exploring, trying things out, doing new things – but only as you feel ready. This applies to both dominants and submissives. Don't fall into the trap of letting other people tell you what you should be doing. If you are a submissive, no one has the right to tell you what to do unless you have agreed up front with that person that they have that right.

By the same token, you cannot make someone do something. (You can enter into a D/s arrangement in which the submissive complies with the dominant – but the relationship is based on consent and limits – meaning no one does what they don't really want to do.)

Ask yourself if this is something you really want to do. Maybe it's a great fantasy, which you wish to explore online. Maybe you just want to hang out with people who do this, to see where you want to go with it. Perhaps you have a single fetish you feel driven to explore – to be tied with rope, to worship women's feet, to be spanked, or something else entirely. The more you know about what it is that you want and about what works for you, the more clearly you are able to give consent. In no time at all, you'll have your own personal checklist of what you want and don't.

There are play checklists elsewhere on this site to help with this process of self-discovery and communication. As you fill out play checklists, remember that BD/SM is a large umbrella. Within this umbrella are many, many different fetishes and interests. Some of these will fit you and some will not. Feel free to avoid the ones that don't fit you.

Once you're got a better handle on things – including sorting through what you want versus what you need, and what is the fantasy versus the reality – your next step is to explore with other people. This can mean different things. But if what you want is currently controlled by someone else (for instance, their body), this is going to involve a negotiation with that person.

When you hear the word negotiation, think instead discussion. When two people talk about some sort of D/s interaction, they need to discuss what each wants. You both have to be straightforward about your wants and needs from a scene, ongoing play or a relationship. (A need is what you must have for this to work for you; a want would be nice to have.) It makes a great deal of sense for two people to look at their own needs and wants, and those of a prospective partner, and to judge whether their needs can be accommodated. You want to get it right before you start, and with the exception of using a safeword, you don't want anything you negotiated to change once play starts.

However, if playing doesn't work the way the bottom expected, he or she is entitled to say the word and end the scene without repercussion.

The basics of negotiating are:

1. Figure ideally what you want if you get everything – because if you don't know what you want, you're not going to get it
2. Understand what you need – what the least is that you can accept
3. Decide what you absolutely do not want to do, which are your limits; insist on a long limits list
4. Learn about the other person
5. Look for common ground for your play
6. Be prepared to walk away if your instincts tell you this isn't right for you

Learning about the other person, which was #4 above, includes two parts. One part is finding out what they want and need; do not assume that you know this. The other part is covered by questions including how experienced is your prospective play partner? Can they do what they say? What level of relationship are they looking for – only play, or a relationship, or move in together? What setting for a scene works for them – private play, or play with a few friends over, or public play? How much is bondage important to them? How much is pain important to them? What is their view of sex in a scene? Will they do good warm-up and aftercare? Sometimes you will need to ask these questions more than one time to get the information that you need.

This approach assumes that people are interested in putting together a situation that's safe, safe and consensual – whether it's one-time play, a series of meetings, or something more lasting or more intimate. So ask yourself: is this person you're looking at playing with also looking out for your interests?