

Aftercare

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"She took me to the edge of heaven, and then dropped me."

"It would have all been alright if he had been nice to me afterwards."

"When it was over I could see it had just been fucking technique for him"

- 3 submissives reminiscing on bad scenes.

"Oh, crap. I've got a meeting in 30 minutes. Bye."

"I've got to get home or my lover will think I'm cheating on him."

- Grand Prize for Worst Aftercare Ever

Aftercare is the last act of the SM drama. It is the culmination, the pulling together of all loose ends, the finishing touches, the final communion between sharers of the SM ritual, the phase where the participants (usually the tops) formally give the fantasy scene a context in everyday reality. Its technical purpose is to transition both players from the elevated states created in a scene back into normalcy, returning to the motor control and awareness they will need to drive home once the scene is over. But as any good SM practitioner will tell you, it's much more than that. It is the time after the action when the participants come together in mutual affirmation that something special was created and shared. It is when affection and closeness is offered and sought. It is, at very least, the proper time to express thanks to the person who has shared this tiny segment of your life with you. It can be, and often is, the most beautiful part of a scene, and it is part of the scene. To skip it altogether is as rude as having dinner at a friend's house and then bolting once you've eaten your fill.

Aftercare is basic to the planning of any SM scene, especially for intense, edgy scenes where the participants go deep. Play that is physically heavy, intensely emotional, or improvisational, with lots of twists and turns, can leave your partner shaken, vulnerable and exposed, making it all the more crucial to guide them safely back to earth. Some people, even after satisfying play, may experience "Crash": feelings of anxiety, exposure, embarrassment, guilt, or emotional overload. In short, "Crash" is the SM equivalent to the post-coital blues. How well you take care of your partner will say a great deal about what the scene really meant, whether it was just a quickie or a deep beautiful bond bringing you closer together as people.

Aftercare also allows some recovery if things didn't go as well as they could have. In a "broken" scene, sensitive, compassionate and intelligent aftercare is all that stands between you and a bad reputation. Aftercare is especially important following:

- Scenes that are demanding and intense
- Scenes that involve new partners or new techniques
- Scenes that involve punishment, humiliation, or intimations of nonconsensuality
- Scenes that result in tears, screams, orgasm, or emotional release
- Scenes that have been interrupted by an accident, injury, fainting, or unseemly act of God
- Scenes that have "gone bad", resulting in anger, or upset, or ending with a safe word (both top and bottom may well need/appreciate some reassurance if this happens)

The emotional afterglow following the SM fireworks is not unlike the post-coital buzz following sex, and your actions and words will speak five times louder than usual. You can frame the scene beautifully with tenderness and respect, or blow it completely. And just as a perfectly executed single tail strike would be calamitously wrong if it followed a safe word, a wonderful scene can be wrecked by inexpert, thoughtless or cavalier behavior once the "play phase" of the scene has ended. Bad aftercare, or no aftercare, can do damage that is basically incalculable. It can leave your partner feeling queasy, unsatisfied, or used, ruin an otherwise great scene, or damage the trust and affection your partner has in you, if you are seen as arrogant, uncaring or clueless in that time of maximum tenderness and exposure.

But if aftercare is done well, it can double the impact of a good scene. Aftercare can confirm that the scene just ended had meaning, and that the gifts of dominance and submission had value. It can attach the scene to the rest of your life in a way that it makes sense, and is remembered as a good, validating experience, even if it hurt like hell!

Why aftercare is often done poorly:

- As important as it is, precious little has been written about Aftercare in the SM texts currently in print, and at the time of this writing, it tends to be overlooked in educational forums. In Black Rose, we did not prepare our first aftercare presentation until our 12th year! This is an extraordinary omission, when you think about it, because, unlike even SM staples like flogging, aftercare is - or should be - part of every scene we do.
- Unlike many other play techniques, there are no standard methodologies for how to do aftercare. Different personalities, tools, techniques, play intensities demand different levels of intimacy, touching, and duration, and no single approach is ever guaranteed to work. This means that even well intended SM folk may do aftercare that doesn't work for any number of subtle reasons (we will deal with some of these later)
- Aftercare is often forgotten during negotiation setting the stage for aftercare that is rushed or inappropriate later on.
- In a party scenario, one, or both, players may be in a rush to move on to another scenes or may have a partner, or date, waiting for them.
- Because aftercare may be more physically intimate than the play phase of the scene, one or both players may not feel comfortable hugging and caressing a partner they feel happy to take a flogging from/give a flogging to.
- Sheer ignorance: many think the technical stuff concludes the scene is over, and have no idea how important aftercare is in making a good scene better. Bottoms are generally unaware that the top needs any support or gratitude when a scene has ended.

The good news is that aftercare can be easily improved, achieved through adherence to one simple principal: active concern and care for your partner. Most people don't regard a scene as empty pageantry, but as a genuine connection between the real you and the real them. Your behavior after a scene will dictate to a great extent what the scene means to both of you. And the silver lining of aftercare is that caring action can salvage a weak, or broken scene, and make a potentially unpleasant experience worthwhile anyway.

The physical mechanics of aftercare

As the pistons stop pumping, as the breathing returns to normal, as you and your partner prepare to return from wherever your play has transported you, there are a number of simple, mechanical activities that need to happen:

- Removing your partner from bondage and/or blindfolds.
- Treating any first aid issues that need to be tended to, such as cleaning and dressing any wounds.
- A bathroom break might be in order.
- If you and your partner have been standing sitting down, standing might be nice. If your partner has been bound stretching out, curling up might be good.
- Holding, talking, being together, allowing time for heart rate and breathing return to normal.
- Food & drink (water is always good, or fruit juice for a little post scene pick up).
- A transitioning out of scene roles into the roles of equal compassionate friends (unless it is important for one or both of you to stay in role).
- Permitting the submissive to return to a state of dress (unless there's more).
- Responding to any physical or emotional needs the submissive may have (talking about the scene, tears, etc).
- Cleanup of the scene equipment and play area. Or have the bottom do it.
- Verify that the bottom has returned to full motor functionality.

All of these pedestrian can either be rushed through, or performed mindfully, slowly, deliberately with focus and attention. Take a guess as to which way I recommend. Don't start jabbering about real world distractions while aftercare is still underway. The scene isn't finished until aftercare is over.

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

More important even than your partner's physical condition is their emotional state. And unlike the standard aftercare techniques listed above, this process is exploratory and changes every time you do it. Leave time after a scene to be with the person you've played with. For a short, one hour scene, 15 to 20 minutes seems reasonable, but you may need more or less. Don't set a time limit if you don't have to.

In general, aftercare is a good time to move from the more polarized roles of play (top/bottom, master/slave, etc.) into more equal roles of mutual friendship, nurturing, and respect. Holding, cuddling and touching is nice, depending on your relationship to your partner. Depending on your level of intimacy, and the time available, so is bathing together, sharing a nap, having sex, grabbing some food, talking more, reading aloud to your partner, a sponge bath, or a massage. Some like their faces touched...but bear in mind that what works for some, will not work for all. What seems affectionate and sweet to some may be mushy and silly to others, or inappropriately intimate, if it involves more kissing and intimate touching than your partner is comfortable with. And Dominants, if cuddling is too touchy-feely for you, at least staying in your partner's presence is good form (have them sit with you, at your feet, fetch you drinks, stroke their hair, etc). Some ideas for expressing affection that aren't too forward include kisses on the forehead, hugs, holding hands, nuzzling heads, or hugs given to the side holding your partner hip to hip.

Talk is important, and affirmation is your first and foremost duty. Express satisfaction, or at least gratitude, after a scene. Tell your partner how nice it was. Murmur sweet nothings. Express warmth. If the scene turned you on, say so. "You suffer so beautifully . . . You really turned me on. . . I really love the sounds you make . . . You look so great on that cross . . . Your eyes are incredible when you're tied up... I hope I didn't go too far. . . ." Express caring and concern. "How was it?...Did you like that?...Are you sore?...Did the ropes make your hands tingly?...What was the best part?...What was the worst part? Did I scare you?...Was it a good scare or a bad one?...Have you had enough?...Or would you like to ask for more?" Your partner may want to talk, too, about the scene, about them, about you...there's no way to know in advance. Let them babble if that's what they want to do. Be supportive and listen. Although everyone is different I don't recommend attempting a critical analysis of the scene right then, unless something has gone wrong. You can follow up later to get a blow by blow, but while the buzz of the scene is still buzzing.

Having said all this let me reiterate that aftercare is never standard and the preceding description, while a sound approach in dealing with new people, may bear no resemblance to the aftercare you need. Aftercare is a subtle and fluid art and what works fine in one instance may be inappropriate, even damaging, in another. Some need a lot of touch and talk to guide them back to their daytime selves, but others want no more than a boot in the ass and a "Good Boy!" Bottoms may wish to be dismissed without a word, given chores, or curl into a solitary ball. In D/s relationships, the concept of transitioning out of scenespace may not have real meaning since D/s energy may permeate all aspects of your shared lives. Even between two regular play partners, aftercare can never be reduced to a rote exercise. The bottom line is that no matter how you do it, thought and action must be applied to connecting the scene just ended to your life in a way that it is processed and remembered as a validating and good thing.

ISSUES AND COMPLEXITIES

There are other intriguing complications to consider. A bottom 'on loan' from another dominant/top may want aftercare from their partner and not from you. Be understanding if this is the case. And bottoms: even if you belong to someone else, a thank you, a kiss on the cheek and a hug is almost always good form.

Use symbolic actions to signal the end of the work phase of the scene and the beginning of aftercare (the removal of a collar, the removal of a ribbon, a change in the lighting).

Over-friendly Aftercare: Aftercare as a non-negotiated grope session is not respectful unless its welcomed by your partner. I know some shrewd tops who follow tepid textbook floggings with aftercare of hands-all-over gooses, gropes, and tonsil hockey that seem less the conclusion of a flogging than an independent scene on its own, snuck in, un-negotiated, on the sly. If your partner wants it - great - but feel up sessions may not be welcome by someone you don't know well. And if you are being showered with more aftercare intimacies than you are comfortable with, speak up. Say something like "Excuse me...just holding me is fine. I don't like being touched like that."

Likewise, on the spot solicitations for future play commitments while your partner is still floating may also nudge into the over-friendly category. Remember, aftercare is closing ritual and not the best time to negotiate future commitments. Again, there's nothing wrong with expressing interest in future play, especially if the scene's gone well and interest is mutual. But the top's job during aftercare is to tend to the bottom's immediate needs. To use the intimate closure of aftercare to push for a future date may put your partner in an awkward spot whether they are top or bottom. Maybe they want to, maybe not, maybe they want to wait and see. Come ons may be entirely welcome and if they are, don't let me tell you not to. But if you float a line and there's no nibble back, let it lie.

Third Party Aftercare: Partly for the reasons stated above, some people may be more reluctant to take aftercare than they will a heavy flogging or beating. In this case a bottom may wish to receive aftercare from someone other than the person who topped the scene. This could be a regular play partner, significant other, or another person you feel better cuddling with. Is this okay? Yes but during negotiations, tell your play partner ahead of time that you will want this other person for aftercare once the scene is over. And a hug at very least is an appropriate show of thanks. A scene without aftercare is incomplete for many tops.

On the other hand some tops, even magnificent ones, don't do aftercare. If you don't, you have a responsibility to arrange aftercare for your partner if they don't have someone to take care of them.

Dealing with Broken Scenes: In a scene where something goes unexpectedly wrong (accidental injury, a crying jag, a safe word, or unexpected and unwelcome interruption), do not blame or rationalize - just deal with whatever the problems might be. Humor might help. "Hey, we broke the cross, I wrapped you twice and put out my shoulder. But there were parts of that scene I loved." If both partners want the scene to continue, try, and proceed with extra caution. If continuation is impossible, be strong, try to make sure your partner is okay and be as supportive as you can be.

Delayed Reaction Crash: Sometimes a scene will seem to have gone fine, the aftercare uneventful, and then while your making popcorn your partner will suddenly break down. Crying jags, fits of unaccountable rage or rapid descent into depression can come like a bolt from the blue. Do not panic. This just happens in the world of SM. Put down what you're doing, and begin your aftercare again. SM digs deep into our subconscious, especially when it has gone really well, or really badly.

A powerful scene can jar things loose that have been lurking out of site for years. Again, there is no standard approach on how to handle situations like these, other than to try to keep your head, and be there for your partner.

Self Aftercare (If you don't get it from your partner): At some point you will undoubtedly encounter the sour experience of piss poor aftercare, which fails to provide what you want or need, and you will be on your own. That's okay. It happens. You'll survive. If its coax your partner into providing the aftercare you need. Some bad aftercare is done because the top doesn't know how or doesn't know that its important. If that doesn't work there are still things you can do. Put your clothes on. Get fixed up. Get some water or a juice drink. Eat something. A friend suggests taking a few minutes to shut your eyes, focus, and wrap your arms around yourself and give yourself a long bear hug. If it's a party situation, get a long hug from someone you like or trust , "Could you help me out with hug and a little aftercare? I'm a little short right now." If you're alone, call or visit a friend. Lay it on the line and say you feel bad, and if you think it will do any good, give your scene partner a call. Rest might work. Exercise is my general-purpose antidepressant, and I recommend it to all. Do all the pampering you're supposed to do when your feeling poorly or just fragile and tired: sleep, eat something healthy, talk to a friend, have a good cry, and go to bed early. In the morning, it won't seem so bad.

Endorphine hangover, subdrop, and "crash": Several days after a good intense scene, a bottom may plunge into unaccountable remorse or depression. If this happens, don't panic. This is a physiological response to endorphin production in the body. Really good scenes flood the body with natural oppioids like seratonin, dopamine and endorphins. They stay active for days producing that euphoria some lucky bottoms know well. But after two or three days they metabolize and their euphoric effects vanish. For some, this is a painful and depressing experience. What do you do? Remind yourself that it's a physical condition and that it will pass. Getting in touch with your scene partner isn't a bad idea, but read the section on self aftercare and put them into practice.

Morning-after Aftercare: Before your partner leaves get a phone number or email so you can contact them in a day or so. For tops, endorphine hangover, subdrop, and "crash" are a factor you must plan on. So the day after play, or especially the day after the day after it's good form to follow up. A phone call, an email, a personal note, or a visit is always a good idea, to express friendship, gratitude, and show concern for how they're mending. It will reassure the bottom and make you look responsible and mature. If it turns out that there are questions or concerns, you will have an opportunity to address them. If they are experiencing crash you can help talk them through it, explain it, and let them know not to worry.

A good strategy for tops is to have the bottom write about it. It connects them to you, and connects them to the scene through contemplation. Commanding them to go pamper is another idea. Review the self aftercare section for ideas and instruct accordingly.

This is the right time to ask for insights into how the scene went, what worked, what didn't, where the surprises were. If your partner does have issues or concerns, be polite and attentive, and if you feel you were wrong, say so. It isn't easy to get a bad review but be encouraging and talk through it, if you can. Better your partner complain to you, than to the world at large.

Top drop and its treatment (aftercare for tops): Although aftercare is typically viewed as something the top does for the bottom, tops are people too, and often yearn for affection, gratitude and nurturing. Sometimes, when the heat of the scene has passed, a top can find him or herself exhausted, exposed and feeling guilty about doing bad, nasty things to someone they care about. This is the phenomenon some call top-drop. So, bottoms: remember to express gratitude and respect to the top who has spent the last hour or so being bad to you. Flattery is good ("You're so dominant . . . You really turned me on. . . I didn't know you were that good with a whip. . I'd love to do this again sometime.."). No need to lie, but if you can find something nice to say, its nice to. My friend, Mistress Elizabeth, suggests that as the cuffs come off and the mutual nurturing of aftercare has commenced, bottoms everywhere (and especially her slaveboy, Jim) raise their eyes to their top and ask, "Is there something I can do for you?" Holding/cuddling is nice if the interpersonal chemistry is right. If it's your style, kneeling in front of your top, and offering yourself to be hugged, can be very moving, as can boot worship, kissing your top's hand, etc. Foot massage might be much appreciated for a Domme who has been busily abusing you while in high heels, or for anyone in hard leather boots. A massage for a hardworking top might also be nice. Your top may well want more than anything else to take care of you, so if you're cool with that, allow yourself to be nurtured. If you don't want a lot of touching and hugging, convey it as nicely as you can. And if you are a bottom 'on loan' from another dominant/top who plans to provide your aftercare, don't forget to express gratitude to your partner in play. A thank you, a kiss on the cheek and a hug is almost always good form.

For tops reading this: please familiarize yourself with self aftercare, just to be on the safe side. Depending on your self-image, and style, you may not want to receive aftercare from your submissive partner. Or, you may be with a bottom that does not wish to see you as needing nurturing or care. If this is the case, you may prefer to receive your aftercare as high fives and backslaps from your fellow tops. This is why it's always nice to extend a compliment to players after a scene. They might be aftercare deprived.

Aftercare for the viewing audience: Not that I recommend playing to the crowd, but your viewing audience usually appreciates a little reassurance that all is well, particularly if a scene was loud, heavy or appeared non-consensual. If there was screaming, crying, resistance play, blood, or punishment, some in the crowd, especially newcomers may worry that the scene was not consensual. Here's an idea: let yourself be seen as happy with the scene (especially if you are). I would also advise letting the dungeon monitors know ahead of time that you have an aggressive scene planned. A crowd may be spooked if a scene appears to have damaged the well being of one or the other partners. To give one example, at Delta 96, after what may have been the heaviest scene I've ever witnessed - a crucifixion scene that more or less halted all other activity in the dungeon - the bottom made a specific point of visiting the beer wagon afterwards where everyone had escaped to collect their wits. He just showed up, poured himself a brew, and let everyone see him, walk up and talk with him, shake his hand and affirm that he really was still alive and well. It was a nice intimate touch at the end of a truly frightening scene that had turned a lot of heads.

Recommendations:

- Learn what you like and what you need in terms of aftercare. Pay similar attention to the needs of your partners.
- Include discussion of aftercare in your pre-scene negotiation: what you need, what you like, how much, who from. Be ready to hear unusual needs, everyone is different.
- Stock up on things you'll need so you'll have them at the ready: juice, water, blankets towels, first aid supplies, etc.
- Prepare and maintain an aftercare toy bag containing blanket, jimmies, water, stuffed animal (or rabbit fur or soft flogger), fruit juice or V-8, stories to read aloud, snacks (especially favorites).
- Budget your time to make room for aftercare. If you have an hour play window, bringing the play to a close at the 45-minute mark, leaving 15 minutes for aftercare, is probably the minimum although more may be needed.
- Prepare to move from the more polarized roles of play (top/bottom, master/slave, etc.) into more equal roles of mutual friendship, nurturing, and respect.
- Without interrupting the mood of the scene, free the bottom from bondage, administer clean up, first aid, bathroom break, drink or food.
- Responding to any physical or emotional needs the submissive may have (talking about the scene, tears, etc).
- Attend to the mechanical aspects of aftercare with a similar focus and reverence to the actual play.
- Touch, hold, cuddle, talk, bathe together, shower, sleep. Express satisfaction, or at least gratitude, after a scene.
- Offer water to drink or fruit juice for a little post scene pick up.
- Deal carefully with a broken scene, try to take care of whatever fences that need mending.
- Bottoms, remember to do your part in providing aftercare for your top.
- Next day/week follow-up (to anticipate and deal with endorphin hangover): a phone call, an email, a personal note or a visit is always a good idea, to express friendship, gratitude, concern for how they're mending. It will reassure the bottom, and make you look responsible and mature.
- As a post scene activity, ask your partner to write about the scene, as a basis of later discussion or an activity in its own right.
- Make affirmative truth your goal. Don't lie, but express genuine gratitude for what you've shared.
- Try to establish how your partner is feeling.
- And lastly: always be ready to change approaches if your aftercare doesn't feel like its working.

Clearly this short overview hasn't taught you 'how to do it'. That you must explore on your own. But hopefully I've shined a flashlight onto some of the many issues at work in aftercare, why its important, and what the costs are for doing it wrong. Lastly, I wish for you to explore it and revel in its languid joys. Aftercare, both receiving and giving, really is one of the lovelier parts of the SM art form.