

Safe Words and Safe Signals

To begin, let's define what a "safe word" is. It is a word chosen by a submissive (or bottom) and known by the Dominant (or Top) that will halt a scene whenever a submissive feels that their physical, emotional or mental safety is threatened, or that a hard limit has been reached. In addition to a safe word, many couples also rely upon "safe signals" for the same purposes, since submissives (or bottoms) may participate in scenes in which they are gagged or otherwise unable to communicate verbally.

The first question many people have is, why have a "safe word" over a simple "no" or "stop". I've heard it said that during the course of a scene a Dominant (or Top) in "Domspace" might not react to "stop", but I can't imagine that to be true. For a Top to be so lost in the scene would be inherently dangerous. On the other hand, "stop" is often an integral part of a scene, as it would be in a rape scene. And so use of a specialized safe word helps avoid confusion.

A safe word can provide a submissive's feeling of "permission" to use it, while not feeling as though they've taken control. Casinos give us chips to bet with, because we don't give chips the same value as "real" money, even though that's what they represent, and we spend the chips with greater ease. Similarly, a submissive can use a safe word with greater ease (hopefully not with abandon) without feeling as though she has stepped out of her role as a submissive.

At the same time a safe word can be personal. It can be something uniquely chosen by a submissive, making them feel special, cared for and valued. Having that peace of mind can make any scene or experience much more pleasurable.

Other submissives may not prefer to have a "special" word at all. And truth be known, a "safe word" is just another form of communication. It's not at all uncommon to simply rely upon standard, everyday verbal communication which is every bit as much of a "safe word" as is "red".

Safe words are, of course, used in ways that express the approach or surpassing of some limit. But they can also be used in more innocent ways, such as indicating that a rope is too tight, or a chain has become painful, or the cuffs are in an uncomfortable position. And used in such a manner, it doesn't disrupt the scene. Many couples use colors along with the safe word in order to convey additional information. Red meaning stop and check something out that's not right. Yellow for something is not quite right, or "I'm uncomfortable, please go slowly". And green for "go, go, go" or "more, more, more". (Note: Public facilities such as Dungeons and clubs often use the Red, Yellow, Green system for stop, caution and go). Use of a "stop" safe word (such as Red) in many relationships requires the complete cessation of a scene, and thus additional color designations can convey information without bringing the entire scene to a halt.

The various types of safe words, and manners in which they are used, require that both the submissive and Dominant (or bottom and Top) fully discuss those matters prior to any scene so as to have the same understanding. No Top is a mind reader. We rely upon such forms of communication to indicate what our bottoms are thinking

and feeling. We can tell much by using our powers of observation, but we can't know everything.

Holding a rubber ball, a set of keys, a bell, or anything that is likely to be "noticed" (or heard) when dropped makes for a good "safe signal" when unable to speak, such as when a gag is employed.

Some submissives or slaves claim no need for a safe word. They feel that their Dominants know and understand them well enough, and that their level of and ability to communicate during a scene is sufficient, so as to make one unnecessary. They may even see this as some sign of not having limits (for those prone to fantasy). I would surmise that for these slaves/submissives, it helps to enhance their "feeling of submission" by making them feel more "vulnerable". And while all of that may be personally pleasing to them, in my opinion (please note that it's my opinion only) anything that conveys information is a "safe word" (or a rose by any other name would smell just as sweetly).

I'm not sure it's credible or intellectually honest to claim that limits don't exist (ok, I'm sure... it's not), and therefore the need for a safe word does not exist either. It's my opinion that every healthy individual has limits, and those that don't are in need of a mental health professional. Some limits are just more or less extreme. Yet, they exist just the same. The mere fact that a Top has not approached or surpassed them does not mean that they don't. Nor does compatibility in the form of shared limits (ie: "Masters limits are my limits") cause them to magically cease to exist, anymore than shared opinions means that you don't have an opinion.

Depending upon the relationship, safe words can be used anywhere and for any reason. Not exclusively in a scene. As a communication tool, safe words could theoretically be appropriate any time a submissive feels that their physical, emotional or mental well being is threatened. But that does beg the question, "What is an appropriate or inappropriate use of a safe word?" In general, the answer to that question depends upon what the couple has mutually agreed upon. But it's important for a submissive not to misuse a safe word so as not to detract from the magnitude of its value. And while the thought might cross your mind, I would strongly advise submissives out there not to use a safe word as some sort of "punishment" for their Dominant.

I've never disciplined a submissive for misusing a safe word, but if the misuse was intentional as in the form of some "punishment", I might consider doing so. On the other hand I would want her to communicate freely with me whenever she might feel that her physical, emotional or mental well-being was threatened, and that may include using of a safe word.

Here are a few suggestions on the use of safe words:

- Decide what constitutes a "safe word" in your relationship... plainly spoken dialogue or a "special" word.
- If you choose a special word, choose something that's personal to you and that you can recall and use quickly.
- Choose a safe signal for any scene that may impede your ability to speak.
 - Communicate that safe word and safe signal to your Dominant.

- **Discuss and agree upon their meaning, and any other communication tools you may use such as red, yellow and green.**
- **Discuss and agree upon the proper use of safe words in your unique relationship.**
- **Discuss your limits with your Dominant and make sure they are fully understood.**

As a final thought, it's important to keep in mind that no matter what the safe word, its value is only as great as the trust you have in a Dominant. No safe word has any worth if it is ignored. When you are bound and gagged it's too late to start thinking about whether you trust the one you're scening with.

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