

The Connection Between Kink and Abuse.

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There is a considerable overlap between the community of abuse survivors and the community made up of those interested in bondage, sadomasochism, body modification and "bloodsports." This essay is an attempt to explore some of the reasons behind this without getting terribly scholarly. References and footnotes are invited.

It is perhaps a cliché to observe that paraphilic behaviors are the result of early trauma or influence. It's most likely that it's only partially true; for example, one does not have to be a fetishist to enjoy wearing leather. It becomes a fetish when one can only achieve arousal when leather, or some other circumstance or substance is involved.

My understanding of the word "paraphilia" is that it falls somewhere in between a full-blown fetish and an ordinary interest. Bondage, Domination and Sadomasochism, (hereafter referred to as BDSM) are generally referred to as paraphilias although in my cynical view this says more about those describing the scene as it does about the participants. It's a very polite way of saying, "that's sick, but not quite deranged."

Therefore we will simply dismiss all such pecksniffery and deal with our "persons of topic" at face value.

For our purposes we will look only at those abuse survivors that participate in BDSM and related behaviors. Likewise, we are considering only those members of the BDSM and related communities that are survivors. I include those persons who may or may not have experienced childhood abuse but did experience some degree of Attention Deficit Disorder. The effects of a lifetime of ADD overlap with various forms of abuse as well as provoking childhood abuse in many situations.

One thing that I've considered remarkable is the number of people who have said that a beating or a cutting "focuses" them, and much speculation as to why that should be has occurred.

One belief is that a properly-administered flogging or cutting releases endorphins and perhaps effects neurotransmitter levels. A great many Adult Attention Deficit Disorder sufferers have commented that they simply can't function as well without regular beatings. I note that often these people don't seem to be particularly involved with the larger BDSM scene, but are more interested in a good, no-frills flogging, often developing a reputation for being "bottomless" bottoms, capable of soaking up more than the typical top is willing or able to give.

It's rather amusing, actually, to see such a bottom, bruised and glowing, leaving two or three exhausted tops muttering about cattle prods and barbed-wire flails. (These are ironic utterances, as both implements are considered to be beyond the pale by responsible BDSM players.)

Now, if we switch over to the survivor community, we see a whole lot of similar behavior. Self-injury is a particular concern for many survivors and those close to them. Often this activity is far riskier than that seen in a regulated BDSM playspace; severe burns, serious cuts and bruised and broken hands and heads are all possible results of self-injurious behavior. The reasons given for this behavior are very similar to those given by people within the scene; the behavior seems to focus them and quell or redirect even darker urges.

I have suggested self-flagellation to a number of survivors as a substitute for cutting and in one instance I was told that it was a satisfactory substitute. I consider this to be a functional improvement, since, with a proper flogger, the worst thing that can occur is a bruise or two. I have found that a brisk flogging will often break a depressive cycle or cut through the fog of disassociation. While it may seem perverse, it is a drugless alternative to standard modes of treatment and may prove to be an effective solution for many people.

I can testify that, after going on antidepressants my urge to be involved in BDSM has become a sometime thing and seems more driven by personal taste than direct need. I am tempted to conclude from this that this particular "kink" may well be largely biochemical in origin. I add to this the observation that I and many other BDSM'rs report interest in this form of sexuality from the earliest ages.

As a survivor, I can report that from the earliest ages I've had to struggle with disturbing images and urges and have spent most of my life developing an ethical framework that I could exist within and still live with the results. One of the most important parts of that framework is the consensus ethic of BDSM which can be reduced to the simplistic in the phrase "Safe, Sane and Consensual," or the somewhat less snappy "Safety, Consensuality, Mutuality." The psychological aspects of Domination and Submission also seem to have a very strong attraction for survivors. In many cases I believe this relates to the need to find a safe and trustworthy authority figure who will provide a secure environment for healing. The concerns and criteria are similar to those involved in finding reputable and effective therapy and I'd guess that the success rate is about the same. In other words, dismal but better than the alternative.

Survivors often have a great deal of difficulty with trust issues - for obvious reasons - and it seems to help to have an artificial situation that's bound by overriding rules and negotiated escape clauses.

I see this as being reinforced by the common observation that people regularly pass in and out of the scene. It seems to me that each time they come back in they are working on deeper and more subtle issues. Each time they resolve these issues to their satisfaction the "scene" starts to seem a bit contrived and artificial and they return to "normal life." The odds are that they will drop in again in a few years with something new on their mind and new things to contribute.

Body modifications, such as piercing, tattooing and branding as well as more obscure things such as corsetry and such "respectable" means as cosmetic surgery all seem to attract survivors.

For many people these modifications are an assertion of ownership of their body and may well serve to confirm their personal presence in it.

While to many genital piercings may seem purely a rather perverse sexual decoration, they do have some real value to disassociated survivors who often report feeling as if they were simply disembodied heads floating through life. A few ounces of surgical steel through the dangly bits goes a long way towards disrupting this perception and connecting the piercee with their body.

The same rationale applies to brands and tattoos. Tattoos and brands have the potential to distinguish a person from anyone else or to indelibly associate a person with a group. The psychological power of such statements is obvious and I'm sure reams have been written on this topic alone.

My tentative conclusion is that for many survivors, BDSM and related activities such as body modification may well prove to be very positive and healing behaviors if pursued mindfully and intelligently.

Huge potentials for abuse and injury exist of course, but survivors face these risks every day as a result of their abuse. Many survivors feel that there is a giant "kick me" sign pasted to their back and often report ill treatment from varied and often puzzling sources. Often more or less ordinary people are quite disturbed by the near-overwhelming urge to torment people who seem to exude an aura of vulnerability.

BDSM offers the potential for an ethical controlled environment and the possibility of finding a situation whereby some of us can outgrow that sign.