

What are some basics of safe SM, emotionally and physically?

by Johnson Grey

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SM is often play, and as such is fun! But SM can also get intense and powerful. Here are some useful tips for people just getting started.

Emotional Safety

First of all, communicate. Let your partner know what you want and don't want. Keep the dialogue going; watch your partner, be aware of what she or he is feeling and thinking, and respect his or her limits. Establish a safeword, and make it very clear that it will be taken EXTREMELY seriously if used. DON'T assume that your partner shares a fantasy of yours unless you've EXPLICITLY discussed it with them; just because someone likes being blindfolded doesn't mean they'll enjoy being tied up. And most important, give full permission to both people playing to stop at any time for any reason; respect each other enough to commit to call a halt and work things out if something goes wrong.

Be sensitive. SM play, which can (doesn't have to! but can) involve helplessness, intense sensation, and psychological domination, is strong stuff; it can reach deeply into someone's soul and bring up childhood traumas or hidden fears, without warning. Be aware that you are swimming in deep waters, and be respectful, loving, and careful. Don't let this reality scare you away from SM, though, if you want to experiment; let it make you more aware and open to what both of you are feeling. Most of all, decide for yourself whether SM (or elements of SM) has a place in your sex life; don't listen when someone else tells you "SM will be OK for you" or "SM will not be OK for you". Only you can make that decision.

Be honest. If you do not want to do something, don't let your partner pressure you into it. When you begin exploring SM, you may often find yourself with a partner who wants something more than you have experience giving, or who's right now in the mood for something that you're not in the mood for. In my experience, it's generally better to say, "Whoa, I think we're wanting different things. Let's talk." Doing a scene when you don't really want to can result in anything from a lukewarm scene to something you just wish was over. There is plenty of time... honesty, and not pushing, will lay a foundation of trust that will stand you in good stead later.

One especially charged kind of D/s play is dominance and submission, in which the bottom gives up some of their freedom of choice to the top, who can command them. Though many people with strong boundaries can play like this perfectly safely (and indeed derive enormous happiness and satisfaction from doing it), this kind of play can carry some real emotional risks for people with low self-esteem. The risk is that the dominant will wind up abusing their power, using the D/s dynamic to make the submissive feel ever more worthless and powerless, and hence willing to let the dominant take over more of their independence.

If you have issues around your personal sense of self-worth, and if you feel that being submissive (albeit perhaps an enticing idea) might serve to confirm and consolidate your negative self-image, you would do well to think hard about whether D/s play is for you at this stage of your life. The answer may well be "no." (And conversely, if you are considering topping someone who wants to submit because they deserve no better, you might consider whether you want a partner who thinks so little of themselves.) In general, it's imperative for everyone who does SM to look hard at their motivations and their boundaries, and to be clear on whether the SM (whatever form it may take) is self-actualizing or self-destructive.

It may not be all black-and-white, either; there may be some particular activities or roles or words that will make you feel unsafe, scared, or worthless, and you may well want to avoid those activities/roles/words. That is exactly what negotiation is for; you have the right to do what feels good to you and avoid what does not, and you have the right to insist your partner respect your boundaries. (This goes for any relationship, of course, BDSM or no.) The discussion of "when do dom/sub relationships become excessive or abusive" is an ongoing one on s.s.b-b, and for good reason; it's an important topic.

BDSM may at times be therapeutic, but it is in no sense a substitute for therapy. It's been said that "you can't take power from the powerless." A healthy D/S relationship is grounded in mutual respect, and in the knowledge that both partners are choosing this life in a fully informed, non-coerced manner; the submissive is proud to submit, and the dominant is proud to receive the gift of their submission. It is a very different thing from an abusive relationship in which one partner controls the other partner's entire world, with the goal of making that partner irrevocably and helplessly dependent.

Physical Safety

Back to the physical plane: If you are the top, and you are tying your bottom up, keep your attention on what you're doing. Your bottom is going to be blissing out; it's up to you to see that they're comfortable and kept amused. The "amusement" can be as nasty as you please, but see that they don't get bored; that's seldom fun.) Indeed, if you as top really are displeased with your submissive for breaking an agreement the two of you had made, ignoring them or sending them away may be the harshest punishment you can administer. But that's pretty advanced.)

Remember AIDS. Almost everything beyond closed-lips kissing and bare-skin contact is potentially unsafe, unless some kind of latex barrier is used. No unprotected contact between any combination of fingers, genitals, mouth, and anus; use a latex dam (or saran wrap) for cunnilingus or rimming (i.e. oral-anal contact), gloves for manual penetration, condoms on dildos and dicks. Use water-based lubricants such as ForPlay, Astroglide, Wet, KY Jelly; if the lube has nonoxynol-9 in it (which kills HIV), all the better (but some people are allergic to nono-9, and Lord knows it tastes FOUL!). OILS AND OIL-BASED LUBES DISSOLVE LATEX; keep the mineral or massage oil away from your gloves and condoms (and latex clothing for that matter!).

Blood, semen, female secretions, urine... all can carry HIV. Play hard, but play safe. (One interesting thing about SM is that it expands the range of safe ways for people to pleasure each other! But it also expands the range of unsafe ways to play....) There are more safety tips, but if you want the in-depth skinny check some of the books at the end.

Disinfect your SM equipment after play, by washing with a disinfectant solution. Betadine is probably the most commonly-used disinfecting agent, followed by Hibiclens. Definitely disinfect dildos, sharp things, anything that penetrates or that could come in contact with blood. Disinfect whips and canes, if the scene has gotten heavy enough to bruise. Rubbing alcohol is not as good at cleaning things as it is made out to be; use an agent with antibacterial properties.

Many tops come up with an SM safety kit, containing (among other things) such items as a flashlight, duplicate keys for all locks, bandage scissors (with one flat blade) for speedy bondage removal, a first aid kit with all the standard first aid items, disinfectant (such as Bactine or Hibiclens) for toys which come in contact with bodily fluids, safer sex supplies (sometimes including several varieties of lubricant--different people like different sorts), and so on. See SM 101 (a book listed in the Resources section) for an excellent description of such a kit.

And there are some things that are commonly regarded as potentially too dangerous to do unless you've been taught by someone who knows. Suspension is one: there are lots of things that can go wrong, and many of them can result in severe injury. Crucifixion is an especially hazardous form of suspension. And body piercing is also not for the novice; it takes know-how and precision, and a mistake can result in a really big mess.

Fortunately, most SM activities, such as bondage, spanking, and teasing, are not nearly so severe; you can start out light and build up the intensity as far as you both want to go. Pay attention to what you're doing and use common sense and you'll likely be fine. In general, start out slow and PRACTICE! You will learn quickly and you'll have fun all along the way, and soon you'll be places you'd only dreamt about!

For more D/s and BDSM reference materials, you can read the rest of Johnson Grey's work at: <http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/faq.htm>

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