

Embrace Your Inner Kinkster and Find Your Voice: Discovering BDSM

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It may have started as *Twilight* fan fiction, but the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy by E L James grew quickly into an international phenomenon. The first book in the series is the UK's bestselling book (beating out Harry Potter), has been translated into thirty languages, and has sold over forty million copies worldwide so far.

As a sex educator and erotica editor, what excites me most about *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the widespread impact it has made: never before has an erotic novel been responsible for causing such a stir. In addition to driving up the sales of Ben Wa balls, it has captured the imagination of so many different kinds of people and sparked important conversations about desire and power. And there is more widespread interest in kink than ever before.

I use *kink* as a catch-all term that includes BDSM, sadomasochism, kinky sex, dominance and submission, role play, sex games, fantasy, and fetish. But that definition just leads to more terms that need defining! I will both define and expand on these words throughout this book, but for now, if you're reading this, I'll assume you have a basic idea of what I'm talking about.

Beyond definitions, what is kink really? And why do people do it? Kink is an intimate experience, an exchange of power between people that can be physical, erotic, sexual, psychological, spiritual, or, most often, some combination. People who practice kink explore the territory between pleasure

and pain, eroticize the exchange of power, experience intense physical sensations and psychological scenarios, and test and push their limits. Kink can be a unique laboratory—a sacred space where we feel safe enough to try new things, push our boundaries, flirt with edges, and conquer fears. Members of BDSM or kink communities emphasize consent above all else—everyone is on board with what’s going on and nothing happens against anyone’s will. They value trust, communication, and safety, and often make use of a safeword—a word that either partner can use to bring everything to a stop. Kink is one area of the spectrum of sexual practices, so people do kink for as many reasons as people have sex: to give, to take, to connect, to discover, to trust, to experiment, to imagine, to learn, and to grow.

One of the components of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* books that has been widely criticized is its inaccurate representation of kink practices. Many of the details simply don’t ring true for those of us who’ve practiced kink for many years, and additionally, the book portrays some unrealistic and unsafe activities. I realize that it’s a romance novel, *fiction*, and was never intended to be an instructional manual of any kind; however, based on media reports and a huge spike in kinky toy sales at sex retailers, lots of readers have been inspired to try out some of the fantasy material in real life. As an educator, I know how important it is for people to have accurate, honest, and straightforward information about sexuality. It was pure luck and coincidence that my own book about kink, *The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play and the Erotic Edge*, came out just a few months after *Fifty Shades of Grey* caught fire, and *The*

Ultimate Guide has certainly benefitted from the newfound popularity of kink. But I realized quickly that some people were searching for a more basic kinky education, so I wrote this book as a kind of how-to companion to the novels.

This is a primer for people who are interested in kink and want to know more about it, learn how to negotiate with a partner, get some ideas, and explore different activities; it's meant to be an introduction to the world of kink. In it, you'll learn the truth behind common myths about kink, how to talk about your fantasies, common kinky terms and tenets, dominant/submissive role play, and sexual power games. In addition, you'll find ideas, tips, and techniques for different kinky activities, including sensory deprivation, sensation play, bondage, spanking, flogging, and more. If you want to go deeper and find out more, check out my book *The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play and the Erotic Edge*, as well as the titles listed in the reading list at the end of this book.

Let's say you read *Fifty Shades of Grey* or another erotic, kinky novel like *Carrie's Story* by Molly Weatherfield or *The Marketplace* by Laura Antoniou. You enjoyed these fictional accounts of dominance and submission, power and lust, pleasure and pain, hot sex and incredible orgasms. You enjoyed them *a lot*. But, perhaps you or your partner have some reservations about these newfound fantasies. Portrayals of kink, aka BDSM, in the mainstream media—from novels and magazines to television and movies—are generally inaccurate, misleading,

one-dimensional, or just plain wrong. As a result, there are a lot of myths about kinky people and practices out there. If you're struggling with some things you read or heard about kink or these concerns are holding you back from exploring your desires, this summary of some of the most popular misconceptions, along with the real facts, should provide you with reassurance, clarity, and support about your fantasies and desires.

Myths About BDSM and Kinky People

Myth: BDSM is the same thing as violence and abuse.

Violence and abuse are horrific and should not be tolerated under any circumstances. Some BDSM activities (bondage, slapping, verbal degradation), if they are taken out of their erotic context, may *resemble* violent acts, but they are not at all; they are consensual activities between adults who derive pleasure from them and who have the power to stop the activities at any time.

Myth: If you had a satisfying sex life, your partner wouldn't want to try anything kinky.

If you or your partner has just discovered an interest in kink, it is not an indictment of your current sex life; people's sexual tastes are varied and change over time. If a new desire has emerged, consider it a gift, not a warning sign.

People do BDSM for the same wide variety of reasons people have sex, including pleasure and connection. Just as some people love oral sex and others love sex in the woods, some love BDSM. Plenty of folks have told me they

believe it's just how they're wired. I've heard countless stories of the first time a lover held her down, the first time a man put a collar on her, the first time she got spanked. Many experienced a visceral reaction to these experiences before they had language to describe what they were doing or knew there were other people out there doing similar things. For some, BDSM does not have to focus on or even involve genital stimulation to be pleasurable and even orgasmic. For others, a good flogging and a good fucking is the perfect combination—BDSM enhances the sexual experience.

Myth: Bottoms, submissives, and masochists have low self-esteem or intimacy issues.

Bottoms like to have things done to them. Masochists enjoy intense sensations, including what other people may interpret as pain or discomfort. Submissives want to submit to a partner on their terms. What these roles have in common is that the people who embody them write the script, dictate what they want done to them, and can put a stop to it immediately; they actually have a great deal of power in the situation. Submissives in particular are stereotyped as timid and passive, which misses some of the key elements of the dominant/submissive power dynamic. Submissives generally like the freedom that comes with having someone else be in charge; they don't have to think about what comes next or make decisions, they just have to follow a partner's lead. Submission can give some people permission to explore certain sexual desires without guilt or shame ("I have to do everything my master says..."). Some submissives get a thrill from

being sexually available to their partner; they don't have to wait for someone to initiate sex or think about the next move. Some enjoy being the center of attention. Others like the opportunity to focus exclusively on their partner's sexual needs over their own, which is a huge turn-on for lots of people. It's all about the context of the situation—someone can be very “take charge” in everyday life, but like to be ordered around in bed.

Myth: Tops, dominants, and sadists are sociopaths who have intimacy issues.

Tops are doers. Dominants like to be the boss. Sadists like to inflict pain and discomfort. Nothing is wrong with any of these desires. These three roles share a common desire to take charge and guide the erotic encounter. Some people prefer to lead in life, and that preference extends to their sexual lives (others may like to express their leadership in bed more than elsewhere). They derive pleasure from being skilled in a particular activity and the ability to bring their partners pleasure. They like to watch as someone becomes putty in their hands, giving in to the experience. What kind of a person wants to hurt their partner? Again, you must return to the context of the scene: sadists inflict pain on folks who *enjoy* the experiences.

Myth: If you enjoy pain, something is wrong with you.

When some people think of activities like flogging, caning, or spanking, they often think of pain. And no one gets turned on by or enjoys pain, right? Actually, some people do. When people experience pain, adrenaline, endorphins, and natural

painkillers flood their nervous system. Some people get off on this chemical rush, which many describe as feeling energized, high, or transcendent. Pain is not just a physical event; like many things in our culture, it is also socially constructed and reinforced. When we see a person slap someone's face, we think, "That hurt, that was unpleasant." But, in the context of a sexually charged scene, when some people are aroused (and their pain tolerance is much higher), they process a face slap in a different way: it feels *good*. They like how their flesh responds and their pulse quickens. It may feel shocking, intimate, stinging; add the taboo of dominance, punishment, humiliation—whatever that slap signifies for those two people—and you've got a recipe for an intense, pleasurable experience. In certain contexts, one person's pain can be another person's pleasure. Or, as Patrick Califia writes in *The Ultimate Guide to Kink*, "Euphoria and agony are next-door neighbors."

Myth: Kinky desires are not normal.

We have to stop thinking of kink as something abnormal or perverse and instead recognize it as part of a broad spectrum of desires. We should not put moral judgments on people who like certain kinds of sex. Imagine if we did that with nonkinky sex. Why does he like the doggie-style position so much? Why doesn't she enjoy receiving oral sex more? Questions like those sound ridiculous, because we accept that some people like this, other people like that, and plenty of people like both. If it turns you on, you're doing it with consenting adults, you're not breaking laws or ruining your own life or someone else's, just stop worrying

and go for it. Life's too short to second-guess your desires and what they might *mean* about you.

Myth: Kinky people were abused as children, and they are acting out their abuse.

There is actually no research which supports this myth, yet it persists. Do some kinky people engage in very emotionally and/or physically intense practices?

Yes. Do some people get off on being pushed to their limit, seeing how much pain they can take, enduring an intense experience, or exploring dark psychological territory? Yes. In fact, some people do create and enact scenes that echo past traumas in their lives, but there is a major difference between simply repeating past abuse and purposefully crafting an erotic scenario in order to experience catharsis and healing. In real trauma, you feel powerless. In the latter, you write the script, you control the scene, and you have the power.

Communicating With Your Partner

The truth behind these myths is an important piece in your own journey of self-discovery and can help you embrace your newfound kinky fantasies. Once you get more comfortable with them, you may begin to imagine some scenes you've read about or watched in a film become a part of your real sex life. You think about what it might be like to spank your partner or be someone's sex slave, but how do you begin? First, you need to share your fantasies with your partner, which I realize is sometimes easier said than done. But the only way you will have the opportunity to explore these desires is if you put yourself out there and

tell your partner what you really want. Communication is a crucial component of an empowered and fulfilling sex life. There are a number of different ways you can do it, and it all depends on your communication style.

Be direct. The success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy has inspired a new open dialogue about kink among many different kinds of people, and the books are a great way to start the conversation. “So, I read this book, and it turned me on, and I’d like to try some of the stuff with you,” is about as direct as you can get. While you’re being so direct, you can also get specific; you can say, “One of the things in the book that really got me going was [fill in your favorite: bondage, role play, blindfolds, candles, etc.]” You can also talk about how you might like something different: “In the book, Christian uses a riding crop on Anastasia’s vulva, but I think I’d like you to try using it on my butt cheeks instead.” Give your partner the space to listen, and tell him he does not have to respond right away if he doesn’t want to. If beginning that directly scares you, try the following techniques first and work your way up to a more explicit discussion.

Write it down. If talking about your desires face-to-face with your partner makes you feel shy, intimidated, or overwhelmed, you could write her a note. Handwritten notes are a rarity these days, so it should get his attention. You can use the same direct approach, but put it on paper, then slip the note to her. Or you can email him a note (as long as it’s not to a work email account!). Sending a handwritten or emailed note gives you a chance to compose your thoughts and takes any pressure off the situation; it gives her the opportunity to digest the new information and respond when she’s ready. As a bonus, it could spark a series of

erotic notes you write back and forth to each other about exactly what you want to do together.

Use the book. If you're not quite sure how to express your desires, let the book that inspired you do it for you. Select some of your favorite passages and print out or photocopy those pages, highlight the particularly incendiary sections, and include them with your note. Bonus points for underlining, color coding certain activities, writing in the margins, or creating your own footnotes.

Chat in cyberspace. Sometimes you feel a little bolder if you aren't sitting in the same room with your partner, so try chatting online with instant messages. Unlike email, this gives you the chance to have a real-time dialogue, but there is still a little distance, which may increase your bravery. You can begin the conversation the same way, "I read this book..." and take it from there. This will give your partner a chance to ask questions and you a chance to be specific. Chatting online can also be a way to start the discussion that can then continue in person later.

Go shopping. Take a trip to your local sex toy store and head to the fantasy role play or bondage section. You both can point out toys that interest you, talk about who wants to do what with them. You don't actually have to buy anything; you can simply use the selection of implements to start the conversation, give you ideas, and point out your preferences. Or you can make a purchase that becomes the spark for your new erotic adventure.

Watch a movie. Pick an adult film with similar themes to a book you like; *O: The Power of Submission* directed by Ernest Greene, for example, is a

modern-day retelling of Pauline Réage's book *The Story of O* (see sidebar for more recommendations). As you watch it together, chime in about what interests you, what turns you off, and what you find intriguing but you're not sure you're ready to try. A movie will give you a visual encyclopedia of different activities, power dynamics, and scenarios—use that information to begin to talk about what you want to do.

All of these approaches should eventually lead to a frank conversation, one you come to with an open mind, patience, and some information. If your partner has questions, be prepared with answers. Be ready to counteract myths, stereotypes, and misinformation (with assistance from the first part of this chapter).

Sex can be very strongly connected to our egos and our core sense of self; it often makes us feel more vulnerable than anything else we do. It's difficult, especially if you are in a long-term relationship, to reveal that you have a new desire, especially one that's different than what you've expressed in the past. If you realize that going in to the conversation, you will be better prepared for different reactions from your partner which could range from surprise, confusion, and curiosity to shock, hurt, and even anger—or some combination of these. Don't get defensive. Be ready to reassure your partner that this new information doesn't change how you feel about him. Emphasize that these fantasies excite and arouse you, and you want to share that excitement and arousal with him. If

you're the one who's hearing this new information, be open. Don't rush to judgment, get defensive, or shut down. Listen to your partner, ask questions, give yourself time to digest the information, and don't feel like you have to respond immediately. Ideally, talking about your fantasies will spark new adventures in bed and bring you closer together.

What If I Don't Have a Partner?

When someone expresses an interest in kink, I always give the same advice: find your local community. You can begin online by joining one of the largest kinky social networking sites, FetLife.com, and from there find other online groups and lists that are tailored to your specific interests, identities, experience level, or geographic area. Want to know where the kinksters are in your neighborhood? Google BDSM and your town, city, or county, and you'll likely come up with social events, workshops, support groups, conferences, and, for lucky folks, play parties, dungeons, and clubs. There are hundreds of gatherings of kinksters throughout North America and the world—whether it's a local organization's annual conference, a camping event for pervy people, or a BDSM retreat—and the majority of them have a strong educational component. On any given weekend, you can learn how to: safely set someone on fire, be a good Daddy, plan the perfect orgy, or do bondage without rope.