

**NLA-I Media Statement Regarding Consensual SM  
By Caron Ryer**

**SUMMARY**

On any given day, thousands of adults throughout the US engage in various "adult activities" that sometimes incorporate aspects of BDSM, (bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism). These may range from a mild but adventurous explorations sometimes called, "tie and tease," "tie and tickle," or "slap and tickle," to more involved forms. Despite how it may appear or sound to those unfamiliar with these activities, the truth is that it is not uncommon for many of those participants to devote many of hours researching and learning about what they do so that they can do it safely and for the mutual gratification of all parties.

**Terms:** The term "**BDSM**" is a shortened amalgam of other terms: bondage and discipline (BD), dominance and submission (DS) and sadomasochism (SM). Many times these practices are referred to as "leathersex," "kink," and/or "fetish".

While the activities are often interrelated they do not have to overlap. Here's a description of the terms used to comprise **BDSM**:

The term **bondage and discipline (B&D)** includes a variety of activities ranging from the use of silk scarves used as restraints, blindfolds or feathers to spanking and tickling. Additionally, these activities may be performed for their own sake or become part of sexual foreplay.

**Dominance and submission (DS)** is both the definition and a description a type of relationship dynamic wherein one partner (the dominant) assumes various degrees of control over the behavior of the other partner(s) within that relationship. Sometimes the terms "Master/slave" or "Mistress/slave" are also used. This relationship may or may not be of a sexual nature.

**SM** (sometimes S&M) is the combination of sadism and masochism, eponyms derived from work of two writers, Leopold von Sacher Masoch and the Marquis de Sade, (Donatien Alphonse François Sade).

Activities included in **SM** can range from playful tickling and spanking to whippings, floggings, canings, piercing, and humiliation (both verbal and psychological) as well as other related behaviors.

**Prevalence: How Many Kinks Are There?**

In 1953, Kinsey estimated that between 3-12% and 10-20% of men admitted to responding to narratives of a sadomasochistic nature. However, numerous obstacles make determining the prevalence of BDSM extremely difficult.<sup>6</sup> Among these are: the definition of BDSM, the honesty of reporting in surveys, the survey sample, etc.

Today, although no exact numbers are reported, it is likely that hundreds of thousands of adults throughout the world practice some elements of what is categorized as consensual (BDSM).

**The BDSM Community**

Many cities and towns throughout the U.S. and Europe have various groups devoted to those individuals who incorporate some facets of BDSM into their lives. These activities can range from getting together at a local restaurant to socialize and meet others (often called a munch) to club meetings, classes, lectures, workshops and conventions.

Because the activities that fall under the umbrella of BDSM can be so vast and elaborate, those who seriously pursue these interests have as individuals and as a community, made every effort to insure actions are carried out ethically and safely.

***The overarching message among those within the BDSM community is simple: ignorance, stupidity, and recklessness can be lethal in combination with many BDSM activities.***

*BDSM activities often called a "scene" or a "session" are described, discussed and agreed to by all participants, before any activity ensues. This is often called "negotiating a scene" (or negotiation) and it*

should be a comprehensive discussion. In addition, at this time, all participants disclose and discuss their "limits" or ground rules for those activities in which they will not participate. As an example, if both agree that bondage is to be part of a scene, if either party refuses to use a blindfold, then the use of a blindfold would be a limit and unacceptable to use within the context of that specific scene. Likewise, they may agree to bondage with ropes, but make the use of handcuffs a limit.

Any participant can have a limit(s) and regardless of those limits are, the expectation is that these limits will be respected and serve as boundaries that must not be crossed. Moreover, what is a limit for one person essentially becomes a limit for all parties and activities involved.

## **Consent**

Essentially, responsible and ethical BDSM play is a verbal (and sometimes written) contract between the participants and there is every expectation that all participants honor that contract.

This "contract" is one reason why consent is considered sacrosanct within the context of BDSM. We define consent as follows:

- ***Consent means that activities occur voluntarily between consenting adults.***
- ***Consent must be voluntary and given of one's own free will.***
- ***It is not considered BDSM if the consent is given under the influence of drugs, alcohol, mental/emotional duress or physical stress or anything else that would impede or preclude one's ability to give consent.***
- ***It is not a consensual activity if consent is the result of any form of coercion, exploitation, or fear of reprisal that may have been utilized to obtain consent.***
- ***Consent can be withdrawn at any time and for any reason.***

One more thing about consent: as stated above BDSM play is de facto a contract between two consenting adults. The NLA-I condemns the exposure or involvement of minors for many reasons, the least of which is that children are incapable of giving consent.

To emphasize the concept of safe, voluntary, and consensual activities, the idea of SSC or "Safe, Sane and Consensual" has emerged.

The actual term SSC is attributed to slave David Stein and first appeared in the statement of purpose of the GMSMA (Gay Male S/M Activists) in 1983.<sup>8</sup> RACK was an alternative term to SSC coined by Gary Switch.<sup>9</sup>

### **SSC can be defined as follows:**

**Safe:** Regardless of the activity, every effort is made to insure that participants are knowledgeable about the techniques and safety concerns involved and every effort is made to insure that no permanent injury or harm will result. In addition safety also refers to the fact that if sexual play is a component, that all parties are for the protection against contracting any STD (sexually transmitted disease) or other communicable disease. To that end, a "safeword," (a previously agreed-upon word or phrase) and/or a "safe sign," (a previously agreed-upon gesture) are employed to indicate that a particular activity and/or the entire scene should be modified or cease immediately.

**Sane:** This refers to the fact that those engaged in BDSM are: (1) able to distinguish fantasy from reality and (2) fully capable of understanding and participating in these activities and (3) able to fully evaluate any/all attendant risk(s) and (4) that none of the participants are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

**Consensual:** Consent is the cardinal rule of BDSM. Consent means that all parties involved agree to the activities and also agree to respect the limits defined by the participant(s). One of the most easily recognized ways to maintain limits is through a "safeword" or "safes sign" that ensures that either a particular activity or the entire scene can be modified or stopped with a single word or gesture. In addition, persons involved are not giving consent while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

## **BDSM vs Abuse**

If BDSM is defined by various activities between adults that ascribe to definitions and intricacies of consent above, then anything that occurs outside of that definition is considered by those within the BDSM lifestyle to constitute abuse.

### **Abuse can occur when:**

- ***Consent is not voluntary and given of one's own free will.***
- ***The activities did not occur between consenting adults (mentally able to give consent).***
- ***Any activity is not voluntarily (and mutually) agreed upon by the participants.***
- ***The consent was given under the influence of drugs, alcohol, emotional duress or physical stress or anything else that would impede or preclude one's ability to give consent.***
- ***The activities were the result of any form of coercion, exploitation, or fear of reprisal that may have been utilized to obtain consent.***
- ***Consent was previously withdrawn.***

It is important to note that what those within the BDSM lifestyle consider abuse may also constitute criminal activity (depending upon the laws in a particular state) and there are instances where reports to authorities have been made which have resulted in prosecution.

However, at first glance, even though the majority of BDSM activities and relationships could fall into the category of domestic or intimate partner violence as defined by the CDC,<sup>13</sup> and other organizations, because many forms of BDSM include fantasy exploration or enactment (rape, kidnapping, castration, abduction, interrogation, humiliation, etc.) it is important to understand the difference between the two. The distinction between domestic violence and abuse is so important to those practicing BDSM that organizations such as the NLAI-I have their own domestic violence project. Up to date information as well as presentations can be seen here: <http://www.nlaidvproject.us>

In addition, various BDSM organizations have legal and medical outreach programs to help law-enforcement and healthcare professionals understand the nature of our pursuits and the lengths the BDSM community goes to educate itself and others regarding the nature of BDSM and how it differs from various forms of abuse and domestic violence.

## **In Conclusion**

For additional information on BDSM and related issues, see our complete media statement or contact the National Leather Association – International through our website (<http://www.nla-i.com>) for more information or to arrange for interviews or spokespeople.

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