

BDSM Myths

The acronym "BDSM" conjures images of leather-clad dominatrixes in high heeled boots hitting submissive men with a whip might to mind. That, or the erotic novel turned movie franchise "Fifty Shades of Grey."

But BDSM, or bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, and sadism-masochism, is more complicated than that.

From choking ("breath play") to being tied up ("rigging") to being hit with different items ("impact pay"), BDSM can refer to a number of kinks and fetishes. But at their root, sexual acts that fall under the BDSM all have one thing in common.

"It's really about consensual role-play and power exchange," said Phillip Hammack, professor of psychology at University of California Santa Cruz.

Despite BDSM being a consensual sexual dynamic between adults, it has been stigmatized over the years, with people who engage in kink and fetish sex often framed as freaks or sexual deviants.

Myth: People who like BDSM are sexual deviants and freaks.

Whether they're the butt of the joke on shows like "Skins" or openly condemned by the general public, people who engage in BDSM, kink, and fetish sex have historically been seen as weird or grotesque.

"People will say that BDSM and kink is relegated to those that are deviant," Veronica Chin Hing, psychotherapist and sexologist with NYC Therapy + Wellness, told Indier.

But there's no mental health condition, life experience, or unified reason for people wanting to engage in BDSM. According to

Hammack, people are attracted to fetish and kink for a number of reasons, so trying to create a set list of reasons for liking BDSM is pointless.

"As psychologists, we've moved away from thinking about these kinds of practices or relationships as indicators of abnormality or disorder and more towards the recognition that this is a form of intimate diversity," Hammack said.

An attraction to kink is common. According to Smithsonian Magazine, 36% of people in the US use some kind of bondage tools in bed and 65% of US university students fantasize about being restrained during sex — a number which doesn't account for people interested in other elements of BDSM.

Myth: People who like BDSM are traumatized.

One of the most common misconceptions about BDSM and kink sex is that people who enjoy it must have been victims of childhood abuse or trauma.

According to Hammack, who conducts nation-wide and international studies on BDSM, kink, and sex, a majority of people who report enjoying and engaging in BDSM don't bring up traumatic experiences in their past as reasons for engaging in the practice.

And while there are people who have gone through trauma in BDSM communities (like any community), engaging in fetish sex can be a way to help people heal "by reclaiming power within a dynamic," Hammack said.

Chin Hing said that she has found that many patients are able to work through trauma by engaging in BDSM practices and then

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talking through the sexual experience with a therapist.

Myth: All BDSM has a dominatrix and a submissive.

BDSM sexual and lifestyle practices very greatly beyond the dominatrix and submissive dynamic, including humiliation (being mocked by degrading language), electroplay (being shocked by an electrical source), and gagging.

One subculture that have emerged over the last 20 years is known as pup play, in which one person typically role plays as a dog, dressing in a mask, collar, and leash, and the other acts as the dog's owner.

Hammack said pup play emerged in part out of the gay men's BDSM leather scene to provide a softer introduction to BDSM for younger men curious about the community.

"It's a very kind of nurturing form of doing domination and submission, because if you think about the relationship between a dog owner and their pet is very sweet and affectionate," Hammack said.

According to Hammack, the rise of online communities has made it possible for these different subcommunities to form.

"Especially thanks to social media, there's been just this explosion of different kinds of kink, fetish subcultures," Hammack said.

Myth: BDSM is just about sex.

While sexual dynamics are oftentimes between two people, people who engage in BDSM or fetish sex can form larger communities of support — making their sexual practices go beyond sex.

Historically, BDSM and kink communities have been a space for LGBTQ people to build familial connections with other queer people. For instance, the pup community within the gay male leather scene has a large presence at different pride events across the world and have a strong international network.

"The important thing is that people are fundamentally playing with power, they're doing it with consent and in the process, they're not only making meaning within these relationships and dynamics but sometimes within a larger group," Hammack said.

(Canela López, 2020)

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