

LEATHER, WHIPS, KINK, RELATION- SHIPS, AND THE BRAIN

A LOOK INTO THE BDSM LIFESTYLE
BY DINSA SACHAN

People have a number of contrasting attitudes towards the lifestyle — some think it's a secret cult, others think it's a bunch of mentally ill individuals indulging themselves in the pain and suffering of other people.

■ Mea Jenkins, a public relations professional based in Los Angeles, was first introduced to BDSM by a man she found through an online dating service. Jenkins, a divorced mother of two, was extremely skeptical of this strange new culture at first, but as he and his friends welcomed her in, she eventually decided to give kink a try.

Now, she is hooked — no pun intended. She is a regular at BDSM parties and has even considered starting a career on the side as an alternative lifestyle coach in a couple of years. While she has never regretted adopting BDSM, she chooses not to publicly acknowledge her participation in the circuit.

“My ex-husband may use it as a weapon to develop a rift between my kids and I,” Jenkins says, knowing that the social stigma of this lifestyle still lingers on. She is also concerned about her image as a PR professional, and how seriously potential clients may take her, if they knew.

While it may frighten some people still, BDSM is gradually entering the mainstream. The erotic novel trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*, brought this way of life into the limelight when it was first published in 2011. A steamy trailer of the upcoming movie based on the book has reignited discussions on the topic, as it marks the first time Hollywood has attempted to portray the fetish community in a serious way.

“Many in the lifestyle have a negative feeling about the books,” says Bo Blaze, who works as an alternative life coach. “But that is understandable because it's so important to them to be portrayed accurately as adults participating in safe, consensual sexual activities and not as abusive people trying to work out their deep psychological issues via mental and physical pain.”

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But what's the truth behind the headlines and the rumors? *Brain World* looks at the science behind BDSM, and talks to people within the community to bust some of the popular myths surrounding their lifestyle.

WHY BDSM?

People who practice conventional sex — known as the ‘vanilla population’ among BDSM individuals — often wonder why there's a need for anyone to experiment with BDSM, when so much fun could be had with just regular sex.

“What purpose does watching football, going to the beach, or riding a roller coaster serve?” asks Cassie Fuller, the co-founder of Touch of Flavor, an organization that organizes BDSM classes and conferences. “Enjoyment! And just like any other activity that you and your partner enjoy doing together, it can bring you closer.”

Kink, an informal term for activities under the BDSM umbrella and beyond, is an intrinsic need for some people. Blaze says, “For some, being kinky is something that has resonated with them since their youth, often beginning in their teens but also many can remember dreams and fantasies since early childhood.”

Are kinky people mentally sick? What does science say?

Most of the vanilla population looks at BDSM practitioners as a cult of depraved people. Books like *Fifty Shades of Grey* have done their part in promoting the myth of the sexually abused man who grows up to be a dungeon master. But evidence tends to differ from the common viewpoint.

A survey conducted by Dr. Andreas Wismeijer at Tilburg University, The Netherlands, found

that people who follow the BDSM lifestyle actually enjoy better mental health than people who do not participate in BDSM activities. Compared to their vanilla counterparts, BDSM practitioners were found to be less neurotic, more extroverted, more open to new experiences, and had thicker skin when taking criticism.

People who participate in the BDSM community have confirmed this. “We are like any other community of people. We have our mentally ill and abused members and we have our bad people and predators, but for the most part we're all pretty together and normal,” says Allena Gabosch, executive director of the Center for Sex Positive Culture in Seattle. “In fact, from my experience the majority of kinky people I meet are smarter than average. Maybe it's because smart people need more mental stimulation and BDSM is one way to get that.”

Belle took up the lifestyle shortly after moving to San Francisco as a college student. Despite living in a city known for its progressive values, she found it more difficult to meet new people in an area where she was surrounded by people. Feeling unsafe and still not adjusted to the fast paced life of the city, she reluctantly attended a nightclub on fetish night — something she had never seen before. She quickly became drawn to the club, and going home with one of the patrons, she found a new side of herself, seduced by the power that the ‘doms’ — those who assume the controlling role in a BDSM relationship — held, the release of endorphins, the way people indulged in new ways of stimulation, from slings, to tying and whipping. At first, she watched as the others indulged, but one week later, found herself craving the intimate skin-to-skin contact and consented to play.

“It was a place where I was accepted for who I was. These people knew more about me — what turned me on, and how much I could endure — than even I did,” Belle recalls. She developed an intimate relationship with a dom who regularly tied her up. Since graduating college, she has contin-



CONFUSED BY WHAT KINK IS ALL ABOUT?

BDSM is an overlapping abbreviation that stands for Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), and Sadism and Masochism (SM). Most people think of BDSM as really kinky sex. But professional BDSM relationships may or may not involve sex.

Let's take a look at each of these categories one by one.

Bondage and Discipline: Bondage involves tying or restraining someone using rope or tape. It may or may not involve sex. “It's not just about tying someone so they can't move or get away, but about the sensation of the rope on the body, the erotic nature of being lifted in the air during a suspension and for some the submission to the rope,” says Gabosch.

Dominance and Submission: While all relationships seem to have some sort of power exchange, it appears that Dominant/submissive (D/s) relationships go an extra mile. In a 24/7 D/s relationship, a Dominant may govern what a submissive eats, how they dress, or whom they meet. But, most of the D/s relationships are less intense than that. “Many people who identify as submissives are very dominant in their professional and personal lives. Being able to embrace their submission can be a break for them from their day-to-day world,” says Gabosch.

Sadism and Masochism: Sadists enjoy inflicting pain on their partner, while masochists enjoy receiving it. Spanking, biting, and flogging are popular BDSM activities.

The bottom line of all BDSM relationships is consent. If things spiral out of control and one of the partners in the scene is uncomfortable, they can always utter the agreed ‘safe’ word, and the BDSM play would have to stop immediately.

ued to pursue the lifestyle, helping to transform an old loft into a play space for people willing to explore their kinks.

Since BDSM involves inflicting and receiving pain, it is perceived as being violent. How can someone enjoy pain? Brad Sagarin, professor of social and evolutionary psychology at Northern Illinois University, who studies the BDSM lifestyle, proposes one answer: “When we're sexually aroused, our threshold to tolerate pain goes up. But context matters too. The same people who enjoy receiving pain during BDSM play may not enjoy pain otherwise.” He adds that all ethical BDSM play is based on consent, so people know what they're getting into.

In a 2009 study published in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Sagarin and his team looked at 58 sadomasochistic practitioners. Their saliva samples were collected before and after play. They also had to answer a set of questions on relationship intimacy before and after acting out a scene in which they used their kinks. The team looked for cortisol and testosterone levels in the saliva. Cortisol is a measure of stress, while testosterone gives a measure of dominance. BDSM activity during the study involved bondage, visual deprivation, and various forms of pleasure and pain stimuli.

The subjects who reported that the scene went well for them had lower levels of cortisol, meaning they were less stressed out, and felt closer to their partners. While ones who did not enjoy the act as much felt stressed out and did not feel the same level of emotional intimacy with their partners.

Another recent study by Sagarin's group found that participation in sadomasochistic activities creates an altered state of consciousness for practitioners. Participants playing top (dominant role) reported experiencing a state that resembled ‘flow,’ while the ones playing bottom (submissive role) experienced an altered state of consciousness described by psychologist Arne Dietrich, called transient hypofrontality. “Our study suggests that one of the effects BDSM has on its practitioners is to cause pleasurable altered states of consciousness,” Sagarin says.

The study also found that bottoms displayed short-term reductions in executive functioning consistent with transient hypofrontality. Sagarin says these results could provide evidence to a theory proposed by Florida State University psychologist Roy Baumeister, which states that masochism is a way for one to escape from the self.

It's also important to understand that BDSM is just one part of the kinky universe. “The world of kinky sex is much broader,” says Lee Harrington, sexuality educator and BDSM practitioner of 15 years. “Kink includes the entire great big world of sexual adventure that ranges from sexual role-playing, erotic restraint, consensual non-monogamy, fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, cross-dressing, and BDSM. In short, the realm of sexuality perceived to be outside the mainstream between consenting adults.”

Although BDSM is a relatively new concept to go mainstream, its trappings — again, no pun intended — have been with us for some time. Erotic novels and drawings involving kink activities date back to the 18th century, and paintings and statues date back much earlier. Rituals consisting of self-whippings go back to the ancient Sumerian civilization. Perhaps, for better or worse, we may be in the midst of a revolution, in which kink is once again coming to light, becoming another part of everyday life. For people like Jenkins, that could be a good start. **B**