

# When Yes Means Yes.



## Understanding the Differences Between BDSM and Intimate Partner Abuse

Prepared for you by



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We all know stories – horror stories – of domestic abuse where the accused party claims bdsm as a defense for having seriously harmed their partner. We also know stories just as harrowing of safe, consenting adults whose home lives are labeled abusive – because of the power structure of the relationship, the intensity of sensation they enjoy behind closed doors, or both – and are disrupted forever by well-meaning outsiders. In both sets of instances where bdsm and abuse are confused, homes are wrecked, families are lost, and lives are destroyed.

But there is absolutely no “grey area” between bdsm and domestic abuse, any more than there is a “fine line” between a karate match and a mugging.

- BDSM play is consensual. Abuse is not.
- BDSM participants plan out what they do to minimize the risk to one another’s physical and emotional safety. Abusers do not.
- BDSM play is negotiated to and agreed upon beforehand. Abuse is not.
- BDSM can enhance the level of trust and understanding in an intimate relationship. Abuse cannot.
- BDSM can be enjoyed in the presence of supportive others. Abuse requires secrecy and isolation.
- BDSM play has responsible, agreed-upon rules. Abuse has none.
- BDSM may be directly requested and eagerly desired by the people involved. No one explicitly asks for abuse.
- BDSM play is done for the mutual pleasure and/or personal growth of both participants. Abuse is not.
- BDSM play can be stopped in an instant, at any time, and for any reason if either person needs. Abuse victims cannot stop what is being done.

### Signs of a potentially abusive relationship:

- Excessive alcohol or drug use.
- Isolation.
- Expressed jealousy and suspicion.
- History of violence toward friends and family members.
- Threats and ultimatums.
- Furniture and other items being broken in arguments.
- Recurring cycle of violent behavior: outburst, remorse, “honeymoon”-like happiness, then violence again.

### Signs of a consensual BDSM relationship:

- Commitment to taking care of one another, often in unique ways.
- Clearly-defined and well-discussed boundaries of behavior.
- Socializing with other likeminded couples and singles.
- Demonstrated respect for one’s own property and that of others.
- Staying together because of how they act toward one another, not in spite of it.

Respecting an adult’s right to say yes to an intimate act is every bit as important as respecting their right to say no. Empowering someone to escape from a dangerous relationship is as right to do as empowering them to invite one that is founded on mutual consent, respect, and open communication.

*Domestic abuse occurs every day, in every walk of life without exception. If you feel that your relationship is nonconsensual or abusive, there is help available to you at any time day or night:*

*The Shelter  
800-548-2480  
[Boonecountysafeshelter.com](http://Boonecountysafeshelter.com)*

*RAINN  
800-656-4673  
[Rainn.org](http://Rainn.org)*