



Ayzad

NO SHADES OF GREY

what BDSM really is, in black on white

The author

Born in 1969, Ayzad is an Italian former journalist turned coach, author and educator about unusual sexualities. He's been practicing BDSM for a rather long while and he wrote the best-selling book ***BDSM –A Guide for Explorers of Extreme Eroticism***, endorsed by various sexologists and psychologists associations. His ayzad.com website collects news, articles, resources and free ebooks about the world of unusual sex.

NOTE

While the information provided in this book is correct, based on firsthand experience and/or cross-checked with several sources, extreme caution is advised when acting out any of the described practices. Given that their effects vary depending on each person's physical and psychological characteristics, the author denies any liability for any damage of any nature that may arise from putting these into practice. The scientific notions contained herein are presented in simplified form. You are therefore advised not to consider this book a complete source of scientific information and to refer to specific publications for an in-depth study on the various topics presented.



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Foreword

The summer of 2012 will be long remembered as a small sexual revolution. Thanks to an unprecedented global marketing feat, E.L. James novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels drove over 150 million of readers worldwide to discover and appreciate the so-called 'BDSM', or erotic domination games. Of course it wasn't the first time this topic came into fashion: in the recent past the successes of books and movies such as *The Story of O*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *The Secretary* had confirmed how much interest these practices raised. The real difference was in the size of this success. What until then had been a mysterious connoisseurs' passion suddenly became a mainstream phenomenon. With all the related problems, that only compounded with time.

Indeed, the Shades trilogy is just a romance inspired by – among all possible sources – *Twilight's* vampires. Its goal is to let the female readers dream an updated and pornographic version of Prince Charming's tale, not to scrutinize the complexities of a real relationship, nor to describe how BDSM is actually experienced in the real world. Unfortunately, not all readers understood this. Just as in the story about the kid who ties a sheet around his neck and jumps from the window believing he can fly after watching a *Superman* movie, many readers (and plenty of journalists) were convinced that kink actually was what Anastasia and Christian Grey do, and threw themselves into emulating them without really knowing what they were doing. The instinct for emulation opened the mainstream market to more kinky smut, fueling an endless normalization of alternative sexualities.

The news reported the results: a sudden increase of embarrassing or lethal accidents – which however were just the tip of the iceberg. Still more than a decade later, in my counseling alone I keep meeting people whose careless approach to these practices has resulted in psychological, social or even physical damages they could have easily avoided with a little preparation. The fault clearly does not lie in the novels or in BDSM itself, that remains a wonderful form of erotic play safely experienced by hundreds of millions of people every day. The real risk is in the dramatization of sexual domination as portrayed by most media (porn included), which highlight the spectacular and exciting sides of it without presenting any hints of its underlying complexities.

BDSM really is an “extreme” activity, and like all extreme activities, it must be confronted responsibly. Given my 30 years of experience in these things, I then thought it would be useful to write a short guide to explain what BDSM really is. It is an effort to help others to avoid trouble while also enabling them to get the most pleasure and fun from a phenomenon that has lots to offer - if you just approach it sensibly.

Enjoy it!



What 'BDSM' means

The basic definition

'Domination games', 'kink', 'extreme eroticism' and the many synonyms for 'BDSM' all involve many erotic practices with one common structure: one of the partners controls the nature and extent of the stimulation and the other partner receives whatever is being offered, actively contributing to the experience of both. It may sound awfully complicated, but in fact it is simply the actual realization of the «do whatever you want with me» that lovers have been forever whispering to one another. In other words, BDSM represents a safe context within which it becomes possible to rediscover the pleasures offered by sensations, emotions and relations that are normally excluded by our daily lives. When speaking about BDSM and sex many special terms crop up, first of them...

BDSM

...which is the acronym of:

Bondage – both in the sense of ropes and handcuffs, and of close relationship between two people;

Domination – or Discipline, depending on who you ask. Either way it means that one orders and the other obeys. Compliance is rewarded, while failure to obey is punished;

Sadism (or **Submission**) – the pleasure derived from inflicting suffering;

Masochism – the reflection of the above: pleasure derived from suffering for another's enjoyment.

As we will see, all of this is quite different from the mess customarily depicted in mainstream media, and also differs from the pornographic excesses you can see on many websites – but most of all it has nothing to do with sadomasochism as meant by medical science.

BDSM vs. sadomasochism

While the media tend to mix the two up, there is a huge difference between BDSM and sadomasochism. Both are born out of the natural domination and submission instincts shared by every mammal – human beings included –but everything depends on how these instincts are expressed.

If they are let loose in an uncontrolled manner:

- They are lived out as a form of masturbation, in which the other person is treated only as a tool to realize one's fantasy
- They elicit discomfort in oneself and others
- They can possibly turn into crimes and cause social damages

The above constitutes a rather rare pathology, technically called **sadomasochism**, which obviously must be cured.

However, if the same instincts are controlled, filtered through intelligence and awareness:

- They are lived out in harmony with a consenting partner
- They are an instrument to better know oneself and the partner
- They do not cause any social problem

This is called **BDSM**, the subject of this guide and a pleasant erotic game played by more people than you can imagine.

What it is about

It is hard to summarize what BDSM is in a few words, because it literally includes hundreds of possible practices and each couple picks and chooses from among the various options to combine the activities in the way they find most pleasing and suitable. Once decided who will take on the dominant role and who the submissive one, the fun lies in letting the fantasy free according to one's preferences. Certainly, however, healthy BDSM is...

- ...something that *enriches* sex, but does not substitute it

Nothing prevents you from inventing scenes that go on even for days, during which erotic tension builds up without any sexual contact – yet it would be unwholesome to think that any alternative practice could take over a fundamental part of a couple's relationship.

- ...*play*, not a lifestyle

Enthusiasts use the term '24/7' to indicate a relationship in which BDSM roles are maintained even out of the bedroom, full-time. That however doesn't mean to renounce a normal social life, a job, hobbies, friendships or anything else: to subordinate your whole existence to any form of sexuality is a symptom of something wrong.

- ...*fluid*, constantly evolving

With the exception of a few safety rules we'll see later, nothing is immutable in kink because we ourselves are continuously changing and evolving – it is then just logical to adapt our play to our momentary desires, abilities and fantasies.

- ...made of extreme *emotions*, not of pushing the limits

Those who choose to engage in BDSM are moved by the wish to experiment with something more intense than their daily routine. For some people this means getting whipped or to undergo body modifications; for others it may be sufficient to feel the excitement of spending the day wearing the clothes chosen by the partner – thus feeling like his doll - or allowing themselves to be blindfolded and tied at the wrists. The only necessary thing is to really “feel” what you are doing.

- ...both an *inner* and a physical experience

BDSM – just like any other erotic activity – can be done mechanically, as a pure search for performance. However, it is best enjoyed when it is used as a chance to better know oneself and one's possibilities, limits and prejudices. In fact, BDSM can be used to help improve communication with one's partner and to help build mutual trust and bonding. And it does offer lots of opportunities for that, believe me.

Who practices it

A common prejudice is that BDSM is only practiced by few very weird individuals. As you might have already guessed reality is however quite different. Surveys and studies over the last decades show constant results. By the definition I gave at the beginning, grouping under the term 'BDSM' every domination game from the gentlest to the most extreme, throughout the industrialized world:

1 person in 6 has erotic fantasies of this kind;

1 person in 10 puts them into practice.

This means, for example, that according to latest available census data, in English-speaking countries worldwide there are roughly 33 million persons between 18 and 65 who practice BDSM. That would be slightly fewer than the whole population of Canada, or about the same number of people who live in the 23 most populous North American cities *combined*.

All kinds of people enjoy BDSM: young and old people, the rich, the poor, stupid people and geniuses, heterosexuals and gays, cultivated and ignorant people, singles, married, balanced individuals, and even a few basket case – every sort of person, just as you would expect in such a vast group.

Clearly, many of them only play occasionally and very gently, yet it is also clear that such a widespread phenomenon cannot be considered an “oddity”. As a matter of fact, the only ones treating it as such are certain mass media, who often benefit from having some scandal available to use on a slow news day. Other than the popular press, others who discuss BDSM have much more reasonable opinions, including two important professional groups.

The position of...

Finding yourself interested in alternative sexuality can be baffling, as it forces you to confront aspects of yourself which society taught you to repress since your childhood, and which we normally keep hidden even from ourselves. The initial confusion often brings you to ask yourself naïve questions that nonetheless appear upsetting in the heat of the moment, among which the classic: «do I need to be cured?» Before moving on, let's then spend a moment to learn how civil society judges BDSM.

Medical science

Psychologists and psychiatrists use as their diagnostic tool a manual called DSM which – in layman's terms – adopts the following criterion:

«The only pathological behaviors are the ones which cause distress to the subject or to those around them»

So, as we said, sadomasochism is bad, but BDSM is perfectly acceptable.

The law

The laws regulating BDSM play vary widely between countries, but they are usually based on the same general principle: people have the right to freely express and enjoy their sexuality – but not to actually harm one another, nor themselves. Some people see governmental restriction as intolerable State interference in their private lives, yet it is also a good way to keep vulnerable people from being abused, and from keeping violent people from wounding others. However, this is just a framework, often allowing for some reasonable leeway when it comes to clearly consensual, harmless and private behavior.

Having said this, the precise approaches of the various governments can be so different that I cannot but urge you to personally check the legal status of erotic play in your local territory. At the very least you should check out the Wikipedia entry called [Legality of BDSM](#).

Note: the above-mentioned approaches are just the *most frequently* held by professionals. Their assessments of BDSM can be biased by their personal culture, open or closed mindedness, context and more. A good rule of thumb is not to take someone's kindness or intelligence for granted and to prevent unpleasant situations. Let's see how.

The principles of BDSM

The very point of erotic domination games is to live pleasurable intense experiences, so it is not surprising that most practices come with some risk of physical or psychological harm. What is surprising is that people generally don't get hurt by the most dangerous-looking activities, but by minor mishaps that may even go unnoticed. A thorough preparation constitutes the best prevention, and when practiced by responsible people, BDSM always respects three important risk-reducing principles:

Collaboration, not competition

Although some scenes involving whips, restraints, humiliating practices and the such may lead to think of *competition*-based relationships («Let's see if you can stand it or break»), the normal BDSM approach is founded on *collaboration* instead. The partners commit to explore the intense sensations and the emotions arising from such uncommon situations. There is a sharing and an equal give-and-take during BDSM play: resistance and violence are most definitely excluded from this.

SSC – Safe, Sane and Consensual

The acronym is rather well known, but it might be worth it to remember what each letter precisely means:

Safe – To minimize risks you must not improvise, but thoroughly know yourself, your partner, the activities you want to engage in and the correct use of any involved tool. Keeping full control allows to prevent and deal with possible emergencies;

Sane – We all would love to live in a fantasy world unrestrained by everyday nuisances like work, social obligations, the limits of the human body, physics, laws and so on. Still, we do not – therefore any kind of sexual activity must take them into account. After all, there is no need to go overboard to have your fun;

Consensual – Each partner has wishes and limits that must be clarified before playtime begins and that must be respected throughout the scene. To do this you must be lucid, only involve people who have explicitly and reliably agreed to it, and agree on a signal (a word, gesture or both) to be used to immediately stop the scene in case of problems.

You might stumble on a slew of other acronyms and “frameworks”, but the simple reality is that in a healthy relationship the partners trust and respect each other, they consciously choose to explore extreme activities, and both of them take the responsibility for working together to deal with any accidental problems that arise from their BDSM play. This refers to both the normal yet intense psychological and physical effects, and the consequences of possible, imponderable accidents. No amount of kinky lingo can exonerate you from that.

The practices

«All right, but what BDSM players *actually* do?» This is a legitimate question, especially because all these references to risks and dangers seem to clash with the outrageously romantic concepts I described a few pages earlier. Still, it is impossible to offer a comprehensive answer, as the safety and responsibility rules we just saw also have an important collateral effect:

*When you clearly know what you must not do, **everything else** becomes a possibility to experiment with.*

To clarify, when I tried to briefly describe all the practices of this erotic art in my book *BDSM – A Guide for Explorers of Extreme Eroticism...* I needed over 650 pages! You might wish to come by and have a look at my ayzad.com website to find some inspiration, but the truth is you just have to keep in mind one concept, common to every practice: **intensity**.

Let me reiterate that ‘intense’ doesn’t mean ‘excessive’ or ‘without control’, but simply whatever evokes the strongest emotions *for those particular people, in their particular conditions, in that particular moment*.

There are four main aspects:

Physical intensity

The exploration of unusual bodily *stimulations*, such as restraints (bondage and sensory deprivation), temperature (hot wax or ice play), extreme sex (dilations, forced orgasm), pain (from a spanking to whipping, play piercing, clamps, electro-stimulations...)

Psychological intensity

The experience of *behaviors* far from normal daily life: exhibitionism, humiliation, pony play, orgasm denial, submission in general...

Relational intensity

Practices based on the strong *power difference* in the partners’ roles, such as role play, discipline, objectification, toilet games...

Transformative intensity

Practices which radically modify the *very understanding* of your identity and of your body, such as fixed behavioral rules, body modification (permanent piercings, branding...), 24/7 relationships...

But where is the fun in that?

Reading the previous list probably left you a bit perplexed. While it is easy to see the fascination in some of those games, others sound absurd or gross... Are we sure that harboring such passions is not deranged? The most precise answer can be found in a famous saying of sufi master Rumi, who lived in 1200:

«Who doesn't hear the music thinks the dancers are insane»

Or, if you prefer a more contemporary source, you can trust Louis Armstrong, who sighed:

«If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never understand it»

Fact is, many profoundly moving activities are inexplicable under the lens of logic. To understand some of these, you must be willing to abandon yourself to it. But, if you really need a scientific explanation, there is one. What makes BDSM pleasurable is:

- The feeling of complicity and intimacy which arises from sharing extreme experiences with your partner
- The excitement to transgress all the “good manners” imposed by society and routine
- Reclaiming a sensoriality largely lost to modern comforts and online, “virtual” lives
- The experience of ordeal, or to put oneself to the test and becoming stronger for it
- The arousal from the adrenaline rush caused by experiencing extreme situations

And, for the submissive partner, there also is the possibility (under especially favorable circumstances) that the mix of mental excitement and physical sensation will release **endorphins** – neurotransmitters that give a sense of well-being so intense to be identical to the ecstasies experienced by ascetics from every religion and culture. And I mean this literally: lab tests proved it is the very same phenomenon. BDSM enthusiasts call it ‘*subspace*’.

What 'BDSM' means

The advanced definitions

At this stage of our primer, you can probably better understand a few more definition of BDSM I have grown to use with time and a deeper understanding of it:

BDSM is an exercise in radical honesty

It takes courage to look inside yourself and confront what psychologist Carl Jung called 'the Shadow', or the part of ourself that harbors "bad" desires, "dark" thoughts, "unacceptable" behaviors and so on – and yet remains a defining trait of our character (and more importantly, of our distress). When you do, however, you can make peace with it and find unforeseeable balance in your life.

The same goes with communication, especially with your partners. So many of us believe they need to keep up some sort of façade to be loved, while that is exactly the first cause of relationship issues and discontent. If you manage to sincerely express yourself, everything becomes so much easier for everyone involved.

And again, honesty is also embracing the good, bad and unknown sensations and emotions life throws at us. All in all, BDSM is a sort of safe training ground that allows you to see how most of your fears are in fact unfounded – making you far more resilient when the need actually arises.

BDSM is the art of making yourself vulnerable

It is up to us to allow beauty – and maybe even transcendence – to touch and permeate our soul. A good erotic experience does exactly that, teaching us ways to let countless forms of pleasure in.

BDSM practices can be seen as a craft, with its rules, tools and all, that anyone can learn. And any craft can turn into art when it is so interiorized that it becomes effortless; come to think of it, 'art' is how we call anything that deeply moves our emotions, isn't it?

The good news is that BDSM implicitly puts into play a number of elements (sensoriality, intimacy, complicity, excitement, curiosity, fun...) that greatly facilitate entering that liminal state where both partners turn down their defenses against change and, frequently, greatness.

The tools of the trade

The exotic tools and clothing commonly associated with BDSM are perhaps its most distinctive aspect. Specialized websites love to show these implements in unsettling locations full of torture machines, commonly known as ‘dungeons’. What you surely won’t need is to build a dedicated scenic set. If you really have special aesthetic requirements, it is much simpler to make use of the many theme clubs and hotels, rental dungeons and the such. But are all those complicated devices actually useful?

In reality, everything depends on how you live the eroticism of domination. Unless you play hard and often, there is usually no need to obtain any tool, also because part of the fun can lie in inventing new sensual uses for common everyday items. The only trick is, as always, to check ahead how whatever tool you select is used in order to avoid “unpredictable” accidents.

For example, using precious silk scarves to tie someone’s wrists as described in *Fifty Shades* is very romantic... until you find out that tying knots in that fabric tends to make them very difficult to untie without cutting them. Many substances frequently used as sexual lubricants must be avoided because they can promote infections - or even damage condoms... The examples could go on forever.

Just like in every field, if you are serious about BDSM it is worth your time and expense to get specific tools for specific types of play. Specialized tools have the undeniable advantage of offering unique sensations. If you get serious about kink, you will easily meet other people who are eager to share their experiences and tips. And talking about that...

Meeting the others

Since having fun with any sexual practice requires two people at the least, all the BDSM philosophy and knowledge is rather useless if you don't have anybody to share it with. Therefore, one of the main worries of kink enthusiasts is to meet their ideal partner. But how easy is to actually find them?

As we saw in the beginning there is plenty of people who are intrigued by the world of domination and submission, so usually you just have to propose BDSM tactfully, taking care of not appearing to be a dangerous kook. If you are careful with your conversation, you are likely to discover quite a few people with whom to explore new erotic possibilities. Of course, your chances will be limited if you have especially peculiar or complex needs, but in these cases you can always try other approaches:

Live meetings

Forget secret *Eyes Wide Shut*-style events, that never existed in reality anyway. BDSM enthusiasts meet much more normally over cocktails and appetizers in public meetings called '**munches**'. To attend, you only have to confirm your presence and behave politely, since everyone will just chat and be trying to make new friends. Similarly announced on your local BDSM website, you might also find technical workshops where different play techniques are taught – usually in a pretty non-erotic way.

When you feel ready, you can go to a play party – and *Google* will assist you finding them, too. For your safety I suggest to avoid private parties unless you know most other participants, and stick to “public” events. Different local laws make for different requirements to select a legitimate party, but realistic-looking galleries, good reviews and a non-street dress code are generally good signs. You will probably find these events much nicer and cleaner than “normal” clubs, so there is no need to be scared. To get an idea of how they look, you can check out my own monthly party: it is called **Sadistique** and it has been running for 19 years now.

Professionals

It is a fact that many people go to professional dominatrixes to fulfill their fantasies – professional submissives and male dominants are somewhat rare. Real prodommes are serious, refined, competent experts who often own spectacular studios and costumes. They don't allow sexual contact – and they tend to be a very small minority among countless sex workers improvising a difficult role, sometimes with dangerous results. If you really have to choose one, you want to select her by her investment in expensive paraphernalia and her openness in discussing how she cleans her toys between sessions – both signs of a serious professional.

Online searches

Between the social networks, the dating apps and the specialized personals, the Internet offers nearly infinite possibilities to introduce yourself to potential partners in all of your erotic richness - without having to hide your private tastes. The important thing is not to be inappropriate: vulgar, insincere or exaggerated profiles will turn away any sensible person. And just like in the real world, the best results are obtained not by desperately hunting around, but simply by letting them find you.

Tip: start with **Fetlife.com**, the largest BDSM community worldwide. By taking part in its thousands of discussions on the on the most byzantine aspects of extreme eroticism you will at least get a sense of the get a culture, and in the friendly climate you even risk to meet the right person. Possibly. In fact, before going for that you should read the next page...

Online BDSM

With the turn of the millennium, the Internet served a pivotal role in the creation of the current BDSM culture. For the first time in history, extreme eroticism pioneers could easily get in touch with thousands of other enthusiasts worldwide, compare their experiences, and assemble a body of knowledge unimaginable before. Better yet, they could make this information available to everyone.

However, that thrilling first phase was followed by an unstoppable flood of characters who had nothing to do with eroticism: mythomaniacs running from reality; exhibitionists; trolls; wretches believing that the domination/submission dynamics were a permit for their inability to relate; pornographers; sexual predators; pranksters and – lots of – frustrated people looking for titillating fantasies to masturbate over without personal investment.

Later still, some proper educational resources started to appear online, yet correct information and competent people on the Web are still hidden in a sea of futility –or worse. This means that approaching the fascinating world of BDSM from the Internet requires your utmost prudence. A common consequence of this confusion is that many disgusted serious kinksters left the virtual dimension altogether, leaving the digital world in the very hands of the most questionable characters. Depending on where you live, you may want to keep in mind that real and online BDSM might be two almost completely separated worlds.

The best way to avoid risks and to prevent pointlessly wasting energies is to consider the online dimension strictly as the springboard for live meetings. See someone you click with? Invite them for a face-to-face chat (not to play) – possibly at a BDSM party, where both the “dungeon monitors” and your peers will ensure your safety and, should you not like each other, you’ll have plenty of other opportunities to enjoy the evening. This arrangement does wonders to weed out anyone not seriously interested in meeting you, in kink, or posing as something they are not.

Further resources

I hope you found this brief guide useful for a first orientation to the reality of BDSM. While I have done my best to explain this world, it is such a vast culture that it would require a much longer book to do it justice – or two, if you want to check out my ***I Love BDSM*** too.

Also, you can find lots of resources listed in the ***Recommended books*** section of my website, and of course hundreds of articles, podcasts, videos and stuff I have made available on ayzad.com.

See you there?