

Consensual Sadomasochistic Sex (BDSM): The Roots, the Risks, and the Distinctions Between BDSM and Violence

Eva Jozifkova

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Abstract When practiced consensually, sadomasochistic sex is being increasingly accepted as an alternative sexuality. Here I suggest the possible evolutionary roots of the preferences, draw distinctions between violent, abusive and “healthy” practitioners’ partnership, provide clear behavioural markers of the respective situations, and underline some specific problems connected to this sexual preference. Some of the problems are well-known in the community of its practitioners, although they have not yet been described in medical nor scientific sources.

Keywords Consensual sadomasochistic sex · BDSM · Violence · Domestic violence · Abuse · Sexual disorders · Psychiatry · Sadomasochism · Sadism · Masochism · Sex · Dominance · Submission · Submissiveness · Bondage · Intimate partner violence · Evolutionary biology · Psychology · Social hierarchy · Hierarchy · Minority · Sexual practices · Paraphilia · ICD · DSM-5

Introduction

When practiced consensually, sadomasochistic sex is being increasingly accepted, in both official documents and the everyday practice of sexologists, as an alternative sexuality [1•, 2•, 3•]. In opposition to traditional approaches, practitioners of consensual sadomasochistic sex (BDSMers) do not suffer from psychological disorders [4, 5] nor were victims of child sex abuse [6].

BDSMers themselves have summed up their preferences into the term ‘BDSM’, an abbreviation that includes bondage [B] and bondage and discipline [B&D—i.e., the use of physical restraining devices or psychologically restraining commands [7]), domination and submission [D/s] and sadomasochism [SM] [8–11]. It must be noted that the term SM, in its narrow sense, denotes strong stimuli practices now (I am avoiding the word “pain” because a substantial part of the participants describe their practices not as painful, but as strongly stimulating—see [8, 12, 13, 14•]). The frequently used terms include ‘dominatrix’, ‘dominant’, ‘dom’ and ‘submissive’, ‘slave’ and ‘sub’ for D/s participants; ‘sadist’ and ‘masochist’ for SM participants; ‘top’ for those who participate as dom or sadist; ‘bottom’ for those who participate as sub or masochist [4, 15, 16]. The term ‘switches’ covers those who change their roles from tops to bottoms, and vice versa [4, 15, 16].

Please note that 21.6 % of respondents with these preferences became aware of their interest by the age of 13 and 19.1 % between the ages of 14–17: e.g., 40.7 % before the age of 18 [17•, 18].

In this paper the findings under the heading *The Roots* are based mostly on previously published research [19•, 20•]. Suggestions under the heading *The problems* are based on literature further cited in the article, or on my own observations (whenever there is no citation, or in the statement that refers to reference 21). I have followed BDSM Internet discussions since 2001 when I started to look for an evolutionary explanation of the BDSM-related behaviors. Unlike Newmahr [22•], I did not actively participate at the meetings. My observations are based on reading and listening to the problems, experiences, and life stories of the BDSMers mainly in cyberspace (the chat sites: www.mageo.cz, www.xchat.cz (xchat.centrum.cz today), www.nyx.cz, www.lopuch.cz; the personal pages and club pages: www.zlazelina.sk, www.BDSM.cz, www.Ds-life.cz, www.darkclub.cz, www.slunecnitrz.eu). Around 200 Czech and Slovak personas were observed this way. The specific

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E. Jozifkova (✉)
Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, J.E. Purkyně University
in Usti nad Labem, Za valcovnou 1000/8,
Usti nad Labem 400 96, Czech Republic
e-mail: evasmid@centrum.cz

problems that I am reporting on occurred at least three times in distinct personas (excluding the behavioral change due to hormone change after BDSM interaction that was reported frequently in submissives but only once in dominant personas).

The Roots

According to evolutionary biology, sexual arousal by over-emphasized hierarchical status (e.g., dominance and submissiveness) during sadomasochistic interaction is probably a strengthened manifestation of a proximate mechanism for accomplishing a common reproductive strategy [20••]. Sexual arousal by a higher-ranking or lower-ranking partner (considering within-pair hierarchy) correlates positively with markers of reproductive success in the common population [20••]. In fact, hierarchical status is associated with reproduction success, due to high quality genes and/or access to resources of the high status winner in many species of mammals. In humans, high hierarchical status has been associated with a higher number of offspring [23–26], higher frequency of copulation [27] and/or a higher quality partner [28]. Low hierarchical status is probably associated with an increased need for a high status partner as lower-ranking individuals tend to be less prone to infidelity in both men and women (see [29, 30]).

Interestingly, the different sadomasochistic preferences as distinguished in the research of Alison et al. (2001) and defined by practitioners' themselves may have different evolutionary roots. In general, alternative reproductive strategy co-occurs frequently with the main reproductive strategy [31–34]. When individuals are unable to compete for hierarchical rank, they may choose the alternative strategy to grab a chance to reproduce. The answers to questions dealing with social hierarchy did not correlate with a preference for bondage, but did correlate with sexual arousal by hierarchy disparity in urban young adults [19••]. Moreover, the answers to questions focused on sexual arousal by hierarchy disparity clustered separately for bondage from the answers to questions focused on sexual arousal by bondage, instead of the expected cluster for “dominants/tops” and another cluster for “submissives/bottoms” in both hierarchy and bondage [19••]. Thus, while sexual arousal by dominance and submission is probably connected to a main reproductive strategy respecting rank, the preference for bondage might be derived from an opportunistic strategy [19••]. The different roots may explain why some BDSM participants prefer bondage, but not dominance/submissiveness play. As for the cause of sadomasochistic practices based on physical sensation, the authors describe the rush caused by hormonal levels increase during the practices [14••, 35, 36]. We can summarize that sadomasochistic sex appears as a strengthened adaptive behavior based

on natural patterns of reproduction, rather than as pathology [19••].

The Problems

How to Distinguish Between Consensual BDSM Sex and Violence

There are profound differences between consensual BDSM sex and sexual assault. BDSMers engage in their sexual behavior voluntarily [13]. They declare their sexual desire to their partner/partners, claim their consensus, and respect the consensus or rejection from their partner/partners. They discuss their sexual preferences beforehand and the development of the sexual interaction during the activity (e.g., they discuss the scene [37•, 38••]). Practitioners use a *safeword* (a word or a gesture) signaling their wish to terminate the activity [38••]. Respecting the safeword and the ability to use the safeword signalize consensual activity. Using the safeword is a skill that needs to be learned, and this is worth noting. Persons suffering from previous abuse may have problems in using the safeword and/or in protecting themselves. Nordling et al. [39] have reported a higher frequency of seeking medical help due to SM injuries in the participants who suffered child sexual abuse. Not only submissives or masochists use the safeword. The dominant and/or sadist should also be encouraged to use a safeword to stop the activity when his/her partner asks him to be harder or when he/she feels himself/herself or his/her partner are not ready for interaction. The safeword is used not only for physical discomfort, but also for psychological discomfort [21].

People who are not aware of their sexual interests and do not have enough information about how to practice BDSM safely (as well as highly-sexed individuals) may fail in the signaling. When such an accident happens, the communication between partners should help to improve the practice. Lack of communication and the repeated disrespect of the safeword are markers of abuse. It helps us to tell apart the cases where the sexual interaction started consensually but continued as violence.

The respondents may use “soft” or “hard” limits for their play [22•]. Soft limits are the limits that are allowed to be slightly pushed in so-called “edge play [17••]”. Edge play is risky and as such is not acceptable in pairs or groups who have not practiced together for a longer time.

Two other approaches might help to judge the situation. One of them is the willingness to use a condom. The severe domestic violence abusers reacted negatively to a condom request [40] when compared to moderately violent and non-violent men. It must be noted that submissive practitioners who tend to be highly sexually submissive may not ask their dominant partner to use a condom, leaving the decision to the

dominant [37•]. Leathermen, in whom a large portion of this population practice dominance and submissiveness in sex, are 61 % more likely to be HIV-positive when compared with non-leathermen [37•]. Thus the submissives should be encouraged to ask for the use of a condom from their partners.

The participant's source of information may serve as another safe approach. The person who gets information from more sources and even stays in touch with other subgroups' participants with the same preferences has a lower chance to be manipulated via biased information from a partner or by the psychological pressure of the subgroup of the participants. The problems occur when the partner is the only source of information; such a person may easily profit on non-informed others. Namely, inexperienced BDSMers may cross the line between consensual and abusive behavior due to a lack of information and skills. As a result, they accomplish their sexual preference in an unhealthy way. For example, a person who believes that it is difficult to find an appropriate partner may withstand some sexual practice (or being videotaped etc.)—not for his or her own sexual satisfaction, but for the reason not to lose his/her partner.

This problem leads us to re-consider how voluntarily practitioners participate in the plays. Beliefs that withstanding non-pleasurable practices is the only chance how to experience this behavior, or that bearing non-pleasurable practices is the only way how to realize BDSM, or that it is something that must be done in order not to lose the partner, or that it must be done to be accepted in the subcommunity, or to be a proper dominant or proper submissive, signalize behavior driven by fear much more than by free will. Additionally, sometimes the experienced person may provide support and build trust and subsequently gain sexual or financial profit by applying pressure or manipulation similar to “grooming”. The presence of pressure and manipulation should be watched for carefully.

When considering free will and voluntariness, another issue connected to natural human behavior may arise. People are likely to follow a decision proposed by a higher-ranking individual in the social hierarchy, in addition to agreeing with him/her [41–43]. The lower-ranking individuals often make concessions instead of protecting their own benefits [41, 43–45]. Thus naturally submissive people may be easily influenced by their dominant partner. As both dominance and submissiveness in sex and even in relationships may play a role in BDSM, practitioners and the therapists should be aware of this natural tendency. Submissives should be encouraged not to omit their own interests.

How to Recognize Domestic Violence, Abusive BDSM Relationships, and Healthy BDSM Relationships

It is relatively easy to distinguish between the “consensual scene” and sexual assault. However, it may be very difficult to recognize domestic violence and/or abuse in BDSM

relationships. The minority sexual preference itself is not protected from domestic violence nor from abusive relationships. From my point of view the differences between domestic violence or an abusive BDSM relationship and a healthy consensual BDSM relationship are:

- 1) The victim of domestic violence feels fear from the abuser [46]. The fear increases over time [46]. The victims of domestic violence feel that their home is not a safe place [46]. The healthy consensual BDSM practitioner is not afraid of his/her sexual partner or partners. The healthy consensual BDSM practitioners feel safer when having a sexual partner and/or healthy partnership. They feel more self-assured. They often feel “more normal” when having such a partnership (see [5])

Contrary to healthy BDSM relationships, the abuser is disrespectful to his/her partner [46]. The abuser makes the victim feel worthless [46]. The victims of violence (including victims of abusive BDSM relationships) blame themselves for the abuser's behavior [46]. “Victims of violence experience anxiety, guilt, shame and powerlessness. An SM relationship can be loving, intimate, and involve personal growth” [38••]. Contrary to abusive relationships, the “healthy” BDSM partnership is characterized by the absence of guilt, blaming, and worthlessness.

- 2) Contrary to victims of violence or victims of abusive BDSM relationships, the proper BDSM practitioner is able to use a safeword to stop the activity and the partner/partners respect the safeword [38••]. Both (or all) the partners discriminate between sexual activity and common everyday life—e.g., sexual practices are not used as a punishment for something that happened in everyday life in a healthy consensual BDSM relationship. Verbal humiliation may occur during BDSM sexual interaction called a “scene”, but only when all the partners agree, and when the activity has a sexual meaning for all of them. The scene with dirty words and verbal punishment has a theatrical meaning as a form of a play. Destructive criticism, pressure, threats or manipulation must not occur in everyday life [46]. The line between the scene and everyday life must be clear.

So-called “mind games” and “any other form of emotional manipulation” were listed as risks for BDSMers' mental health [47]. Manipulation should not occur even in a sexual scene because it has a devastating influence on mental health (namely conscious or unconscious (subliminal) orders of what somebody must and must not feel or must and must not think [48]).

- 3) Contrary to healthy BDSM relationships, the victim of violence is isolated from his/her relatives, friends, and colleagues and/or has limited access to money [38••, 47, 49, 50]. The abuser may be cruel toward other members

of their family or to animals [49, 51, 52]. The abuser tries to control the everyday life of his/her partner [38••]. In healthy BDSM, the dominant person does not aggressively force his/her dominance.

- 4) Periods of violence and reconciliation are typical for domestic violence. The aggressiveness increases in every violent phase over the time of the relationship. The offender is sorry for his/her behavior while the victim hopes for improvement in the “honeymoon phase” [53]. The healthy BDSM relationship does not exhibit this pattern. There is frequently an “aftercare” [36] (fondling, cuddling [38••]) shortly after BDSM interaction but there is no such change in behavior that would last for days or weeks. Healthy consensual BDSM participants do not hope that the partner will change (see [46]). The practitioner looks forward to the BDSM interaction (“scene”) in a healthy BDSM relationship. Victims do not look forward to the violent phase [38••]. Abused practitioners may have ambiguous feelings. Courtesy, love and care are not payment nor compensation for hard or painful sexual practices in a healthy consensual BDSM partnership.
- 5) Detectable social hierarchy disparity exists between the partners in domestic violence [49, 50], abusive BDSM relationships, and in a portion of healthy BDSM relationships [54]. What matters is the level of the disparity in

everyday life. The everyday hierarchy disparity is very mild in all functional healthy relationships, including the BDSM ones. The quality of communication, as well as the ability to respect partners’ appeals and needs, serves as a marker of “non-harming” and “harming” disparity.

Theatrically graduated disparity may appear during hanky-panky, and/or during courtship in BDSM relationships. It is because the hierarchy disparity, e.g., overemphasizing of dominance and submissiveness, has an erotic meaning for the greater portion of the participants. The disparity graduates during the sexual scene. Then partners decrease (the differences in) the hierarchy disparity after the scene, via aftercare. Non-experienced or over-sexed partners may fail at this narrowing of the hierarchy.

There is a lifestyle called D/s 24/7 (e.g., uninterrupted dominance and submissiveness) when the partners prefer to live in a polarized relationship (master/mistress-slave) continually [54]. Although the hierarchy disparity is dramatically overexpressed (for example by calling the partner “master” etc.) the real-life hierarchy disparity of D/s 24/7 does not show such an extent [54]. In fact the 24/7 disparity is similar to the disparity between husbands and wives in the first half of the last century (see [54]). Nevertheless the D/s 24/7 inclination to having an unhealthy relationship when one of the partners

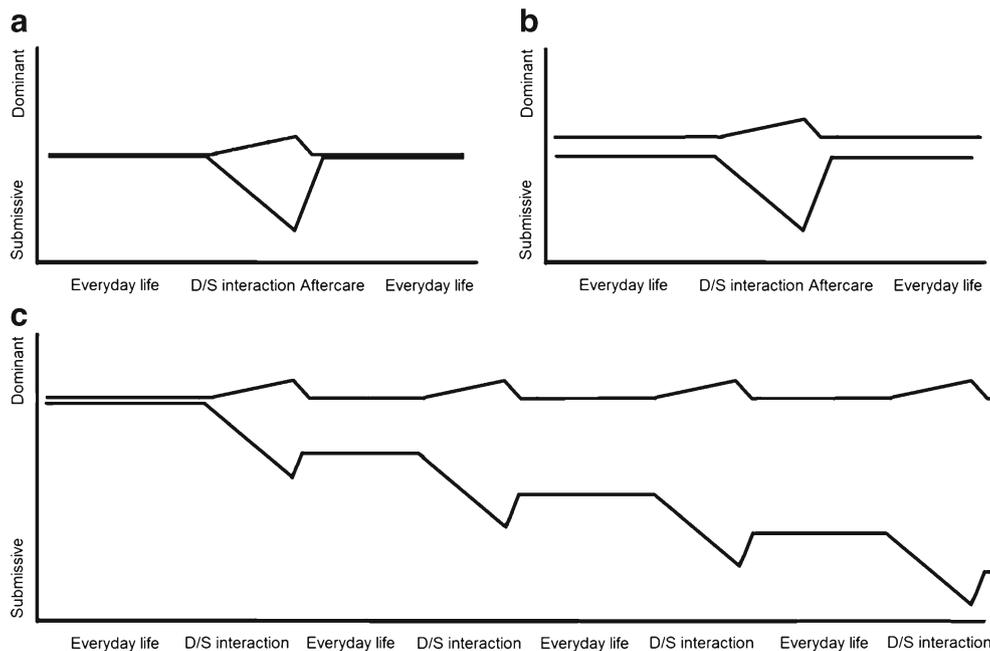


Fig. 1 Hypothetical depiction of changes in hierarchy disparity during D/s interaction and aftercare in **a**) “healthy” BDSM relationships, **b**) “healthy” “24/7” BDSM relationships, and **c**) abusive BDSM relationships “During the ‘scenes’, cortisol rose significantly for participants who were bound, receiving stimulation, and following orders, but not for participants who were providing stimulation, orders, or structure” [36]. “Female participants who were bound, receiving stimulation, and following orders also showed

increases in testosterone during the ‘scenes’” [36]. The increase of cortisol is connected with submission in social hierarchy despite the increased level of testosterone [56]. Cortisol levels at 40 min after a “scene” still exceeded cortisol levels before the “scene” [36]. Surprisingly, the hormonal changes during the scene were more obvious for “bottoms” than for “tops”. Participants learn how to go back to reality after the “scene” (namely via aftercare)

insists on a long time of “total slavery” or a long time of “absolute submission” and the phase of the decrease of the hierarchy disparity is omitted (Fig. 1).

Effective communication means a healthy partnership. A great increase in hierarchical disparity in everyday life damages the communication. The therapist should focus on 1) the reaction to the communication 2) the quality of the communication.

Sometimes the higher-ranking individual pretends to discuss or to listen to their partner, but in the end, he or she will not respect their partner’s requests. This disrespect is the marker of abusive behavior.

It may happen that the lower-ranking partner may feel himself/herself not eligible to ask anything from the higher-ranking partner. The lower-ranking partner may be afraid to report his/her real feelings and needs when he/she considers that their feelings or needs are not in accordance with his/her BDSM role (bottom, slave) or with his/her partner’s ideas. The higher-ranking partner could disregard the feelings and needs of the lower-ranking one. This behavior results in the loss of touch with the lower-ranking partner.

The social hierarchy is connected to the actual level of hormones—namely testosterone [55], cortisol [56], and oxytocin [57]. The changes in the hierarchy rank cause the changes of the levels that influence human behavior; e.g., the individual behaves more dominantly or more submissively. BDSMers showed changed levels of cortisol that lasts after the “scene” [36]. Since the hormone change lasts longer [36], the participants should avoid events where they may suffer harm from the increased submissive behavior or cause harm by acting too dominantly (university exam, serious decision, business issue) after the “scene”. Experienced BDSMers do learn how to return to reality after the “scene”, inexperienced practitioners need to be aware of this biological phenomenon.

For example, the person who is ranked lower in the social hierarchy tends to self-blame while the higher-ranked one blames others [58]. The BDSM practitioners who experience a high level of submissiveness may face an increased amount of negative feelings if the level of submission is not corrected after accomplishing the scene, or when it is inappropriately high.

Love and Relationships

Sadomasochists are traditionally seen as sex consumers, not as people who successfully manage and highly treasure a loving partnership or friendship. BDSM sex participants report increased closeness after a scene [36]. Dancer (2006) found long-lasting functional relationships in full-time owner-slave role participants [54]. Gay leathermen who identify themselves as dom, sub or switch find the community more important than those without such preferences [37•]. Thus, the sensitivity to hierarchy disparity may not exclude, but actually increase the need for a loving partner and friendship—e.g., D/s

practitioners tend to be highly social and vulnerable when the relationship is broken or when public opinion is bad. For bondage and SM we cannot exclude the ability to love, only due to the preference of a specific sexual practice.

Some BDSM Partnership Problems

As was mentioned above, practitioners may prefer different subforms of BDSM [59]. Some combinations of sub-forms of BDSM are more likely to result in unhealthy practices or an unhealthy relationship. For example the submissive who tends to a high level of submission, but does not prefer strong stimuli, may remain in a partnership with a sadist, despite finding the practices are too hard. The individual with a need to dominate (to have “power”) may feel disappointed when asked to do specific practices on the preferred level of stimulation by a masochist. People who do not switch between roles may feel stress when their dominant partner switches to a submissive, or vice versa. A person who prefers a dominant partner or submissive partner may fall in love with a partner ranking higher or lower on the social hierarchy [21]. Moreover, the person who prefers both to be submissive or to be dominant may or may not have a tendency to behave rather submissively or to dominate in everyday life. It is possible to meet a shy dominatrix or a dynamic masochist in the consulting room, too.

Some practitioners may prefer a specific physical sexual practice (spanking etc.), while others may need to experience feelings of dominance or submissiveness. For example the person focused on spanking may not wish to experience feelings of submission during the “scene”. Some practitioners may feel stressed by the fact that is not them, but the fetish itself, or everybody else wearing the fetish, that arouses their partner [21].

Manipulative or narcissistic persons with the BDSM preference, or even without such preference, may easily confuse the BDSM practices with approaches that lead to violence or abusive relationships [21]. Previously abused people may have problems in avoiding abuse. They may incline to behave submissively in everyday life [60] and this makes them attractive for a dominant partner. Sometimes participants might be disappointed by a partner who is only seeking adventure [21]. Lots of problems can lead to indecent or exhibitionistic behavior of a partner who would enjoy being depicted in sexually explicit materials, sharing private photos, or talking about personal sexual events on social networks. Similarly to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders, the BDSMers are endangered by outing the private information of a trusting person, such as his or her sexual orientation or sexual preferences [47]. There is one more effect connected to BDSM sexual preference that can cause a problem in the partnership. BDSM practitioners are likely to choose their partner from a limited number of potential males or females due to specific

sexual preferences, so the partners with varying lifestyles or future expectations may try to maintain such a partnership [21].

The Risks and the Importance of the BDSM Community

Real life or cyberspace BDSM communities were and mostly are the only way how to get information, the only place to meet a sexual partner, and the only place without stigmatization. Thus the participants depend tightly on the BDSM communities. Bullying inside the community or spreading misinformation affects the participants significantly. Spreading “the only true ideas”, such as “proper slavery does not include love or a relationship”, “every newbie must serve others”, “the person must participate in sexual activities in the community” or conditioning the supply of BDSM information by sharing personal information or sexual fantasies, signals an increased risk of abuse [21]. Individuals may be induced to spend money on sexual services (money slave [61]) in the community. Since the BDSM clients might have been influenced by the opinion that BDSM does not include love and partnership, they should be encouraged by a therapist to search for relationship that includes love. Lasting loving relationships are not just possible but even common between BDSMers (see [54]). I have noticed that participants leave the BDSM community after finding a long-term partner. Thus only people who were not able to find a partner, or whose relationships always failed, might be found in the community with a greater probability.

BDSM subgroups supply practitioners with information about how to date safely, how to practice safely, and how to cope with the preference in everyday life (see [22•]). Do’s and don’ts for BDSM sex are often listed and summed up under the acronym SSC (safe, sane, consensually) [17••] or RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink) [62]. Not every community organizes meetings with sex play between participants. Some of the gatherings are just supportive. Not only BDSMers, but other “kinky” people may gather in the community [22•]. In the clubs with sexual activities, bottoms earn their reputation from their responsive performance, by their high pain tolerance, and by willing to experiment in risky play, while tops reach (social) status by practicing BDSM well and safely [22•]. The possible risks for bottoms who are trying to reach social reputation in the sub/society are self-evident. Not every BDSM practitioner chooses to participate in semipublic club activities. It seems that only a minority of the people with the BDSM preference practice this form of interaction.

Conclusion

Consensual sadomasochistic sex (BDSM) appears as a strengthened adaptive behavior based on natural patterns of reproduction. BDSM preferences per se do not lead to sex

crimes, abuse, an incapacity to feel love, nor the inability to manage a functional relationship. It is not the BDSM preference itself, but the ability to practice the preference consensually that prevents sex crimes and abuse. To achieve this, functional society 1) should facilitate access to truthful information and 2) should not stigmatize the BDSM preference.

The markers distinguishing BDSM sex from violence include 1) voluntariness 2) communication 3) a safeword (the ability to stop the activity) 4) safe sex and 5) access to information about BDSM. The “healthy” BDSM partnership is characterized by 1) the absence of fear from the partner, 2) no feelings of guilt or worthlessness, 3) respect to the partner 4) the sexual meaning of the “scene”: distinguishing the “sex scene” from real life, no psychological violence (no manipulation, no psychological pressure, no destructive criticism) 5) the absence of the failure and compensation cycle but stable behavior 6) no isolation from family, friends, colleagues; access to money; no aggression 7) only mild hierarchy disparity between the partners in everyday life.

The hierarchy disparity that was maintained during sex play (the scene) may last for some time. The hierarchy disparity between partners itself influences participants’ behavior in everyday life, including communication.

There are subforms of BDSM preferences that should be respected when dealing with partner problems. The BDSM participants who both try to get information and contact partners in the BDSM community face specific risks.

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Compliance with Ethics Guidelines

Conflict of Interest Eva Jozifkova declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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