

Abuse vs. Consensual BDSM

some ways to tell the difference

Although discriminatory legislation sometimes likes to let you believe otherwise, there are fundamental differences between erotic power exchange and domestic violence (abuse). Erotic power exchange should always be based on the "VICSS" concept. Anything else is abuse. What is VICSS?

VICSS is an acronym whose letters stand for these concepts:

- * Voluntary: all partners involved in erotic power exchange activities of whatever nature should decide to do so of their own free will and choice and without any force applied. Sometimes the element of "force" may be hidden. Such can be the case if either of the parties faces (or fears to be faced with) economic or social repercussions if he or she does not go along with what the other partner(s) wants. This may be the case, for example, if colleagues at work enter into EPE-activities, or within a marriage. If either of the partners feels forced, for whatever reason, the situation is non-voluntary.

- * Informed: all partners involved in erotic power exchange should base their decision to do so on correct information and should be able to judge the situation and possible consequences. A simple "yes" often is not enough, especially in cases where it is doubtful whether the person saying "yes" does or can know what the implications are or can be.

- * Consensual: all partners involved should agree to what's going to happen (or is happening) and should have the possibility to evaluate previous decisions in the event they're faced with emotions, reactions or information they feel is of importance to their situation.

- * Sane: decisions with respect to erotic power exchange activities should be made when all partners involved are of a clear mind. Consent that results from the use of drugs, alcohol or the rush or the situations is not consent.

- * Safe: erotic power exchange activities should be safe, both physically and mentally and in the event physical or mental risks are taken - for example in an edge play situation - people should be well informed about the possible risks, implications and repercussions.

Moral or ethical code

Although the majority of the people involved in erotic power exchange usually have very high moral and ethical standards, there's no standard moral or ethical code when it comes to erotic power exchange. Since EPE is such a personal and intimate activity it's questionable if such a moral code can be produced at all. This means that people who are into erotic power exchange activities very much depend on their own judgment, often without references.

Seeking advice is difficult, since it may be very hard to find a reliable source - in general terms as well as with respect to your own personal situation. However, there are some general rules of thumb to go by when evaluating your personal position or a situation you are about to enter:

- * Respect: Any erotic power exchange relationship should be based on mutual respect. In the event you have doubts about this, it is very likely there is something wrong.

- * Communication: Communication is paramount when it comes to erotic power exchange. Communication is a two-way street. If you feel your arguments, feelings and thoughts are disregarded you have stumbled on another warning signal.

- * Relationship: In general - disregarding incidental kick-seeking - erotic power exchange can only flourish within a sound and solid relationship.

- * Dominance and ego: Dominance is not male chauvinism. Although it's sometimes very hard to draw the lines in individual cases, ego trips are out of the question when it comes to erotic power exchange.

It's a mistake to think only the submissive can be "persuaded" into something s/he does not want. It happens to dominants as well - submissives can sometimes be very persistent.

Recognizing domestic violence

Domestic violence is a pattern of intentional intimidation for the purpose of dominating, coercing, or isolating another without his/her consent. Abuse tends to be cyclical in nature and escalates over time. By asking yourself the following questions and watching for the following signals you can evaluate the situation you're in (note that evaluating anyone else's situation is often nearly impossible):

Physical signals

- * Does your partner ever hit, choke, slap, or otherwise physically hurt you? (erotic power exchange scenes excluded)

- * Has he or she ever restrained you against your will, locked you in a room or used a weapon of any kind?

- * Are you afraid of your partner?

- * Does your partner constantly or frequently criticize your performance, withhold sex as a means of control or ridicule you for the limits you do set?

- * Do you feel obliged to have sex?

- * Does your partner use sex to make up after a violent incident?

Isolation

- * Does your partner isolate you from friends, family or groups?

- * Does your partner prohibit you from taking part in social events or activities?

Property

- * Has your partner ever destroyed objects?
- * Has your partner ever threatened pets?

Economic

- * Does your partner limit access to work or to material resources?
- * Has he/she ever stolen from you or run up debts?

Emotional/Psychological

- * Are you or your partner emotionally dependent on one another?
- * Does your relationship swing back and forth between a lot of emotional distance and being very close?
- * Is your partner constantly criticizing you, humiliating you, and generally undermining your self-esteem?
- * Do you feel you can't discuss what's bothering you with your partner?

Abuse within an erotic power exchange relationship

Although it doesn't occur often, abuse within an erotic power exchange relation does occur. Rape and forced sexual acts are not part of consensual S/M. Battering is not "agreed" upon. Domestic violence is not the same as consensual S/M. As a result of their sexual orientation, abused persons who are in an erotic power exchange relationship may suffer additional isolation and may hesitate to turn to available resources for fear of rejection or of giving credence to stereotypes. These are question that may help you evaluate whether or not your situation is an abusive one:

- * Are you confused about when a scene begins and ends?
- * Does your partner ever ignore your safe words or pressure you not to use them?
- * Has she or he ever violated your limits?
- * Do you feel "trapped" in a specific role (submissive or dominant)?
- * Does your partner use scenes to express or cover up anger and frustration?

General reflections

No one has the right to abuse you - and you're not responsible for the violence. You're also not alone. If you feel you're in an abusive relationship or situation interact with other survivors. You'll find them in local or regional support groups.

There are many reasons why people stay in abusive relationships. Fear of or feelings for the abuser may be one of them. Lack of economic or emotional resources is another. If you stay, help is still available. Find out about shelters, support groups, counselors, anti-violence programs and 24-hour crisis lines in your area. Ask a friend to help you make these calls.

And, if you are planning on leaving, plan a strategy if you have to leave quickly. Line up friends and family in case of an emergency. Battering is a crime. Find out about your legal rights and options.

Abuse in an erotic power exchange relationship can have an even greater impact than if it happens in another relationship. The amount of trust given can have been extremely high, thus the aftermath, the disappointment and the guilt feelings can be enormous. One word of advice to aid workers: someone who's been in an erotic power exchange relationship did not bring the abuse upon him or herself. Especially in an erotic power exchange relationship, the breach of trust by the abuser is enormous.

If you're a submissive - man or woman - confronted with abuse: you did NOT bring this upon yourself. You showed your trust and submissiveness and what happened is that both your trust and your body have been abused. Yes, you may even have been naive, you may have disregarded the warning signals, and you may be partially responsible for the situation but still ... NO ONE has the right to abuse you, not for ANY REASON and abuse is ALWAYS wrong. You deserve to be helped and supported, no matter what exactly may have "caused" the situation. And you have the right to be respected.

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