

Consensual Kink 101: The Difference Between BDSM and Abuse

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Earlier this week, New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman was accused of assault and abuse by four different women. In response to the accusations, Schneiderman initially wrote them off as instances of “role-playing and other consensual sexual activity.” This is a common excuse presented by alleged abusers, who claim that the alleged abuse was actually just “rough sex.” A few hours after making this statement, Schneiderman resigned from his position as Attorney General.

If you’re new to kink — or completely unfamiliar with it — these kinds of assertions can make exploring non-vanilla sex feel much more confusing. Does being kinky mean that you’re automatically agreeing to being slapped, choked, or called names you don’t like? If you start exploring BDSM, do you have to go along with everything your partner tells you to do?

Queer kinksters can feel particularly vulnerable, especially if they’re not out about their identities. It’s hard enough to come forward about abuse when you’re a straight, cis person who has vanilla sex. Being queer and/or trans and kinky in a world that sees those identities as incompatible with what a “real” abuse victim looks like can make things even more difficult.

But there’s a very big difference between kink and abuse, and being kinky doesn’t obligate you to do anything you don’t want to do. Exploring kink and BDSM doesn’t mean foregoing consent entirely — consent is crucial in any and all sexual activity. If you’re thinking of getting into kink, here are a few tips to help you stay safe.

What is kink?

In many people's minds, kink is a very specific sexual practice — one that involves handcuffs, whips, and one person ordering their partner around. But even though consensual power exchange and rough sex are part of many people's kink experiences, they're not the sum total of kink. You can be super kinky and never go anywhere near a flogger or call someone Master — and kinky people aren't required to wear leather or dress in all black.

According to Kinkly, kink is best thought of as “an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of sexual activities that are considered to be unconventional or unorthodox.” What counts as “kinky” depends a lot on what your community defines as “normal.” In heteronormative spaces, crossdressing and playing with gender roles is often considered to be kinky, but that doesn't mean that every nonbinary, trans, or gender-nonconforming person considers themselves a kinkster. And as this comic about an asexual person attending a play party makes clear, sometimes kink can be very soft, sweet, and innocent. Kink can be whatever you want it to be, and being kinky doesn't obligate you to have sex or explore your desires in any particular way.

What is consensual kink?

At its most basic level, “consensual kink” is just like any other kind of consensual sex: It's an experience that everyone is on board with, happy about, and enjoying the entire time. But because kink can involve power exchange, role-play, and even exploring painful, difficult sensations, a consensual kink experience can look very different from how we envision consensual vanilla sex.

Kinky people navigate this tricky territory by having extensive conversations about boundaries well before any play starts to take place. That might take the form of a yes/no/maybe list, where partners let each other know what kinds of activities they are and aren't into, or it might include explicit instructions about what kinds of sensations or dirty talk are acceptable: “I like having my nipples touched but not pinched,” or “You can call me Sir, but I don't like being called Daddy.” When people are planning elaborate scenes and role-plays, it's a good idea to outline how everyone expects the encounter to unfold.

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Mainstream depictions of kink often make it look like the person guiding the scenario — referred to as a top or Dom(me) — is always in charge, with the bottom or sub waiving their right to say “no” or reject any orders. But that's not how consensual kink works.

In order for a scene to be truly safe, the more vulnerable party always needs to be the one who sets boundaries and calls the shots. If someone is going to be submissive or at the receiving end of pain or sensation play, they get to say what is and isn't acceptable, and establish what counts as going too far.

A pre-established “safe word” is also a good idea. In scenes where “no” or “stop” might be part of the role-play, a safe word — a mutually agreed upon designated word that takes the place of “no” or “stop” — gives a submissive a direct way to let their partner know they need to slow down or end a scene. Many people like to choose their own safe words, but one common set of safe words is inspired by traffic lights: Red means stop, yellow means slow down, and green means everything is going fine. In scenes where a verbal safe word isn’t possible (for instance, because someone is gagged), partners will work out non-verbal safe words to ensure everyone’s boundaries are respected.

When does kink turn into abuse?

“Kink always allows for somebody to end it. It always gives someone the opportunity to say no, and the other person will always respect it,” says Kae Burdo, a Vermont-based alternative sexuality and relationship educator. If you use your safe word and your partner continues the scene, that is abusive. If your partner doesn’t allow you to set boundaries, or ignores your requests in pursuit of their own desires, that is also abuse.

And because of some of the particulars of kink, some things that might look totally okay from the outside can actually feel like abuse. Burdo notes that during a scene, people often go into “subspace,” a mindset Burdo says is equivalent to being drunk or high. When someone is in subspace, they’re often more susceptible to suggestion and less likely to make rational decisions about their own safety and wellbeing — which means they’re not capable of renegotiating boundaries or giving consent to something new. Changing the terms of a scene while someone is in that headspace might not seem like that big a deal, but it can easily change a consensual, fun experience into one that feels violating and upsetting after the fact.

Kink can be thrilling, terrifying, emotionally exhausting, and sometimes incredibly overwhelming. But it should always be consensual, and everyone participating in a kink experience should always feel respected, supported, and like their boundaries are inviolable. Without that respect, it’s not kink, it’s abuse. And being kinky does not make abuse okay.

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