

## What is abuse?

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Abuse is an individual and community issue. It affects all types of families and communities including BDSM, traditional, straight, polyamorous, monogamous, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Abuse crosses all social, ethnic, racial, and economic lines.

Abuse is a behavior pattern where one person tries to control the thoughts, beliefs, or actions of a partner, friend, or any other person close to them. Abuse is sometimes referred to as domestic violence, battering, and intimate partner abuse.

Abusers may use a number of ways to control their partner, none of which are acceptable in the context of a consensual, negotiated BDSM relationship. These actions cannot be stopped with a safeword and can include:

**Physical Abuse** (i.e. hitting, punching, choking, kicking).

**Emotional Abuse** (i.e. verbal abuse, lying, undermining self-esteem).

**Sexual Abuse** (i.e. forcing sex, rape, forcing sex with others).

**Economic Abuse** (i.e. controlling resources, forcing you to live above your means).

**Outing** (i.e. BDSM, polyamory, LGBT)

## BDSM is Safe, Sane, and Consensual

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Over 30 years ago, the BDSM/Leather/Fetish Community established a community-wide ethic known as “Safe, Sane and Consensual.”<sup>1</sup>

**Safe** is being knowledgeable about the techniques and safety concerns involved in what you are doing.

**Sane** is knowing the difference between fantasy and reality.

**Consensual** is respecting the limits imposed by each participant. One of the most easily recognized ways to maintain limits is through use of a “safeword” - whereby participants can withdraw consent at any time with a single word.

## BDSM is also Risk-Aware Consensual Kink

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Recently some members of the BDSM community have allied themselves with a personal ethic known as Risk-Aware Consensual Kink or RACK.

- **Risk-Aware** stresses the need for players to educate themselves about the potential risks involved in proposed activities and then make decisions accordingly. When players understand the potential risks involved in proposed activities they can then give informed consent to BDSM play.
- **Consensual** refers to the consent that is given based on negotiation and an agreement to respect established limits and/or safewords.
- **Kink** is another term used to describe the myriad of activities contained in BDSM.

## Is it BDSM or Abuse?

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### You might be abused if:

- You cannot withdraw consent and stop what’s happening at any time.<sup>3</sup>
- You cannot express limits and needs without being ridiculed, criticized, or being coerced into changing them.<sup>1</sup>
- Your partner threatens to out you for being into BDSM or being polyamorous, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.
- Your partner prevents you from interacting in the BDSM community or learning more about BDSM.
- Your partner ignores your safewords or tries to convince you not to use safewords.<sup>3</sup>
- You cannot refuse to do illegal activities.
- You cannot express feelings of guilt, jealousy, or unhappiness.<sup>1</sup>
- You do not feel free to talk to family and friends whenever you choose.
- Your partner has threatened to harm your children, family, and/or pets.
- Your partner has threatened to hurt themselves or you if you leave the relationship.
- Your partner has destroyed or broken your personal belongings.
- Your partner claims the right to control your behavior by virtue of their BDSM identity, gender, income, or other external factor.
- You are confused when a scene begins or ends.<sup>3</sup>

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**If you think you or someone you know is being abused contact:**

**The Network/La Red**

**Voice: 617.742.4911 TTY: 617.227.4911  
info@tnlr.org**

## The difference between BDSM and Abuse:

The most basic difference between BDSM and abuse is Consent.

**It is not consent if...**

- You did not expressly give consent.
- You are afraid to say no.
- You say yes to avoid conflict.
- You say yes to avoid consequences (i.e. losing a job, losing your home, being outed).

**BDSM is...**

- Always consensual.
- Done with respect for limits.
- Enjoyed by all partners.
- Fun, erotic, and loving.
- Done with an understanding of trust.
- Never done with the intent to harm or damage.

**Just because you consent to play does not mean you consent to everything.**

**You have the right to set limits.**

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## Resources

New England Leather Alliance (NELA) is an organization dedicated to making a safe place in the world for all BDSM/Leather/Fetish people through education, advocacy, and charitable giving. We sponsor events through the year, produce the semi-annual Fetish Fair Fleamarket in New England, and contribute to a range of charitable causes.

P.O. Box 51361, Boston, MA 02205-1361  
857-293-9502 - [board@nelaonline.org](mailto:board@nelaonline.org)  
<http://nelaonline.org>

The Network/La Red is a domestic violence program that offers free, confidential services and referrals to LGBTQ, poly, and BDSM communities. Our services include: Hotline· Emergency shelter· Support group· Advocacy· Safety Planning· Legal & other referrals· Newsletter· Community Education.

P.O. Box 6011, Boston, MA 02114  
Hotline: 617-742-4911 (V) Hotline: 617-227-4911 (TTY) [info@tnlr.org](mailto:info@tnlr.org) [www.tnlr.org](http://www.tnlr.org)  
Office: 617-695-0877 v/tty

This pamphlet was written by Sabrina Santiago, MSW. Portions of this pamphlet were adapted from:

1. The SM vs. Abuse Policy Statement created at the Leather Leadership Conference in 1998.
2. SM 101: A Realistic Introduction by Jay Wiseman, Greenery Press 1998.
3. What is S/M? by Susan Wright and Charles Moser, [www.ncsfreedom.org](http://www.ncsfreedom.org).
4. The Difference Between SM and Abuse- A statement from Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM).
5. S/M is Not Abuse- Buckeye Region Anti-Violence Organization (BRAVO).

## Is it BDSM or Abuse?



**A guide for people  
who practice BDSM**

**theNetwork|aRed**



**A Collaboration between:  
The Network/La Red  
and  
The New England Leather Alliance**

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