

How to Do the Right Kinky Thing

Ethical Principles for BDSM

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by david stein, slave to Sir Brian F.

The ethical principles offered here are neither esoteric nor theoretical. They're based in our common experiences of BDSM play and of human relationships, both kinky and more ordinary ones. Many will seem familiar, even obvious, but they can still be challenging to live by or to apply consistently. In a recent workshop I led on this material, a participant suggested that what it all boils down to is, "Don't be a jerk." Since the opposite of a jerk is someone who's as sensitive to the needs and desires of others as to his own, that seems like a pretty good starting point for trying to live ethically. Consider the following, then, as a guide to *not being a jerk* when it comes to BDSM.

The first three entries are *meta* principles, meaning that they set the terms of the discussion, and the fourth is a *master* principle that underlies the rest. Kinky folk tend to bristle at being told what to do by anyone whose authority they haven't explicitly accepted. No such authority is being claimed here. I'm not asking you to take anything on faith. If you want to do the right thing in the kinky parts of your life, and if the meta principles and master principle make sense to you, then you should find the more concrete principles that follow them here to be helpful guides. More could be added — this isn't a complete list, but it's a start.

Meta principle #1: Living ethically is a continual challenge. You can't become ethical once and for all — you'll always face new situations with new choices, including some hard ones you might not be ready for. Our human need to make choices and judgments in order to live is in continual tension with our limitations as merely human beings. Each of us has a unique but limited perspective, which tends to color our judgments, and none of us can know all the consequences of our choices in advance. Even the most well-considered decision can turn out wrong, but you still have to pick one option rather than another, and choosing thoughtlessly isn't likely to produce better results — nor is refusing to choose, which is the same as choosing the path of least resistance.

Morality and ethics overlap a great deal, and the terms are often used as synonyms. But it can be helpful to think of morality (from Latin *mores*, or customs) as about obeying tribal, social, or religious rules, and of ethics (from Greek *ethos*, or character) as about making the right choices — including deciding which rules, if any, to follow. On this view, ethics necessarily embraces both intentions and results: *behaving ethically means doing your best to obtain a good result for everyone with a stake in your actions*. Yes, well-intentioned folks may disagree about what would be a good result in a given situation, and sometimes all the options are more or less bad. Those facts of life are also consequences of our being human and imperfect. They don't change the principle that doing the right thing means aiming at a good result for all concerned — and being willing to change course as you learn more about the situation.

Meta principle #2: Forget about SSC and RACK. Neither "safe sane consensual" (SSC) nor "risk-aware consensual kink" (RACK) is an ethical principle; they're well-intentioned slogans that can at best remind us of some issues we need to think about in order to make good choices in BDSM. At worst, they promote complacency without providing any useful guidance. Nothing is absolutely safe — you're playing the odds even crossing the street — and simply being *aware* of risks doesn't help you decide if they're worth taking. "Sane" is also a relative term, and while it's vital to be in touch with reality and free of delusions, judgments of sanity are too often used as a tool to enforce conformity. Consensuality, as we'll see just below, is no solution to ethical dilemmas: instead, it raises a host of issues in BDSM, where so much depends on *trust* rather than explicit consent. We need to move beyond these slogans.

Meta principle #3: Consent alone is not enough. Many folks, in despair of ever reaching agreement about what's good and bad or right and wrong, have suggested that all we *really* need is mutual consent. Their view is that absolutely anything adults agree to do with or to each other is okay and nobody's business but their own. But consent is a surprisingly tricky criterion: How explicit does it have to be? Must it be renewed each moment, or can you consent in advance to give up your right to

withdraw consent (“consensual non-consent”)? Are some people unable to give consent, like children or the mentally infirm? Who decides, and on what basis? Sometimes people give blanket consent to those they trust to make decisions for them, and sometimes that trust is betrayed. Does that mean such trust is *never* warranted? Or that “anything goes” once your victims have signed away their rights? People sometimes consent to behavior that harms themselves or others, or that leads to results they regret for a long time. Is it really okay to harm people who say they *want* to be harmed? Enabling someone’s self-destructive impulses isn’t exactly aiming at a good result!

Master principle: First, do no harm to oneself or others. People engage in BDSM because it gives them pleasure or makes them happy, so why elevate avoiding harm to the status of a master ethical principle, especially given that SM often involves hurting someone? Because *hurt* and *harm* are different: hurt is temporary, but harm is lasting — whether it’s physical, like loss of a limb or function; psychological, like PTSD or reduced self-esteem; or spiritual, such as despair. What makes avoiding harm suitable as the master principle for BDSM (though not of *all* ethics) is precisely that it doesn’t prescribe what people *should* find pleasurable or conducive to their happiness. Whatever your turn-ons and sources of satisfaction — and everyone’s are different — harm is **lasting damage that diminishes your ability to enjoy life or pursue happiness**. In other words, the principle of avoiding harm helps us decide how far is *too* far to go with a clean conscience in BDSM play or relationships.

Does this mean that things like degradation, objectification, or dehumanization have no place in ethical BDSM? Not necessarily: making someone physically, mentally, or spiritually *less* than before can be okay — and may even, paradoxically, empower the “victim” — when it’s a temporary, reversible effect. What’s *wrong* is to diminish someone permanently. So there’s ample room for ethical puppy play or for scenes where a person is used as a seat, table, or toy, but fantasies of permanently converting a human into an animal or an object ought to remain fantasies only, not plans for action.

The following principles of ethical BDSM behavior all aim at avoiding or reducing harm in various ways.

Be truthful and transparent. Dishonesty undermines both trust and consent, so don’t tell lies or be complicit in lies by others, withhold no necessary information, and never promise what you can’t deliver. Aside from explicit role-playing and fantasy scenarios, don’t pretend to be something or someone you’re not. Eventually you’ll be found out, and your partner’s disappointment could be the least of the problems that result. Also, we humans have an immense capacity for self-deception, so be honest with *yourself*: don’t believe your own hype or rationalizations.

Avoid unintentional pain. The whole point of SM is for the pain or suffering to be *intentional* and *meaningful*, resulting from deliberate choices that *connect* the one hurting with the one who hurts, instead of random or mindless as in ordinary life. Causing someone pain without meaning to suggests carelessness or indifference, while assuming that suffering is your particular lot in life supports an unhealthy “victim” mentality. Ethical sadism and mastery start with control of the sadist or dominant’s *own* behavior so that it doesn’t lead to unintended suffering. But bottoms, submissives, and slaves need self-control, too, because they can inflict unintended emotional pain on their BDSM partners by acting — or speaking! — without forethought.

Don’t mess with anyone’s livelihood or family. Unless folks explicitly invite you into these parts of their lives, assume they’re off limits. As a top or dominant, you should do nothing that might threaten a BDSM partner’s job or family relations — like shaving the head or eyebrows, permanent piercings or tattoos, keeping someone out of work or away from family, or posting explicit photos online — unless you know *in advance* that it’s okay. By the same token, a bottom, sub, or slave should never encroach on a top or dominant’s private space, like calling a phone number you’re not authorized to use or interacting with work colleagues or family members without being introduced.

Respect your partners’ limits. *Everyone* has limits: these are either things you *can’t* do because of physical or mental limitations, or that you *won’t* do because you prefer not to or believe it would be wrong. With patient effort, both kinds of limits can be extended, but the safer *and* more ethical course may be to accept them as they are. For most kinksters, it’s fairly straightforward to discern their own limits and preferences, to make these clear to potential partners, and to respect whatever limits those

partners may have. However, what *some* bottoms, subs, or slaves want is precisely to let someone else determine their limits, and some tops and dominants enjoy taking on that additional responsibility. This doesn't mean those limits no longer exist or can be ignored, only that all of the responsibility for avoiding harm has consensually shifted onto one partner rather than being shared by both.

People often speak confusingly of a “no limits” scene or relationship when what is meant is consensual non-consent: that the bottom/sub/slave gives the person in charge permission in advance to ignore protests and do whatever she or he wants. That's a huge risk, but it *may* be a reasonable one if those involved know each other well and have a strong basis of trust. In rare cases people say they have “no limits” because they don't care if they're harmed — or even *want* to be harmed. An ethical top or dominant will decline to play with such people and refer them for trained psychological therapy.

Take responsibility for your own risks. Don't leave all risk management up to the folks you play with. *All* those participating in a BDSM scene or relationship not only need to inform themselves about the risks in whatever they're going to do but should also do their part to reduce or eliminate any that are unnecessary. Taking needless risks may excite you, but in the end the cost could be more than you — and those who care about you — are prepared to pay.

Right is better than “right now.” Don't push anyone into scenes or relationships they're not ready for — nor let anyone pressure you when *you're* not ready. Even with good intentions, rushing things may end in an injury, a scandal, or at least resentment. Don't be afraid to respond to an invitation to play with “Thank you, no” or “Not now.” As you gain experience, learn to listen to your gut the right way — not to the part that screams, “I want this!” but to the one that whispers, “No, there's something wrong here” or “Yes, this is right for me.”

Honorably finish what you start. If you can't continue a scene, don't just walk away. Provide closure for your partner(s) and yourself by explaining why you have to stop and whether you're willing to try again at a later time. The same goes for ending relationships: just because sex may be involved, or practices that mainstream society frowns upon, is no reason to enter *or* exit a BDSM relationship frivolously or without careful thought and attention to the needs and feelings of everyone concerned.

Starting and ending D/s or M/s relationships raise special issues. For instance, don't begin training a sub, slave, dogboy, ponygirl, or whatever without realistic, *transparent* goals. “Training” that continues indefinitely at the whim of the trainer tends to be exploitative. On the other side, don't submit to a training regimen or commit to provide obedient service without doing your best to fulfill your part of the bargain. Typically, while the subordinate party may request to be released from service, it is up to the dominant whether to grant the request. But there'd better be a good reason for refusing, such as a sincere determination to resolve whatever problems led to the request — a dominant who persists in refusing to release a sub or slave who wants out can get into big trouble! While there may be no legal consequences for a sub, boy, or slave who quits without being released, unless there's been abuse by the dominant, quitting is considered dishonorable and may damage your reputation in the community.

D/s and M/s “contracts” are not legally enforceable, but other agreements between the parties may be, such as those pertaining to ownership of a business or dwelling. Nonetheless, people do change over time, so some agreements include provisions for honorable release if *either* party comes to find the terms intolerable. In contrast, an “Owner/property” (O/p) relationship typically has the explicit premise that, once committed, the property *will not be allowed to leave*. While that's illegal almost everywhere, it *may* be ethical if that's how the “property” wants to live *and* they're clearly none the worse for it. As with other ethical hard calls in BDSM, to judge an O/p relationship fairly — assuming it's any of your business in the first place — you have to examine both intentions and results.

Don't use BDSM as a mask for therapy. A play or training session can bring up deep issues and *may* have a therapeutic effect, but unless you discuss this possibility with your partners ahead of time, and they're okay with it, keep your personal shit out of the dungeon. Don't trick or trap someone into serving as your therapist — and that goes equally whether the person is going to be top or bottom, dominant or submissive. While we all have a right to seek whatever healing we need, whether through BDSM or otherwise, none of us wants to feel, afterward, that we were just being used to work out someone else's issues. And if you know that you have specific psychic trigger points, help your partners avoid them.

Aim to end a scene or relationship with “no regrets.” Ideally, a play session should be so satisfying, even when some pain lingers for a while, that everyone involved will want to do it again sometime. But even if you never want to repeat a particular experience, it should still feel good to have done it — because you learned something, pleased your partner, proved your mettle, or another positive result. That’s part of what “aftercare” is about (and it’s *not* just for bottoms): helping each person put the experience into context so there are no lingering fears or regrets. And that “no regrets” feeling should persist over time; if it doesn’t, something may have gone wrong that wasn’t clear earlier. Whenever possible, BDSM *relationships* should also end without regrets, which is often harder to achieve than for play sessions but is even more important for the ex-partners’ long-term emotional health.

Respect everyone you engage with. Even when we’re puppies or ponies, masters or goddesses, slaves or toys, we’re still people. No one is invulnerable, unfeeling, or unworthy of at least initial respect. Not everyone is turned on, or off, by the same things or to the same degree, *and that’s okay*. Not everyone does things the same, *and that’s okay, too*. There’s more than one way to swing a cat, to process pain, to wrap a mummy, to train a slave, to serve a mistress, to scare an adrenaline junkie out of his skin, or to bring the biggest smile ever to a hard-working top’s face. Be very grateful if you can master *one* of these ways, and don’t put down someone who takes a different route to the same goal.

Never take your partners for granted. Depend on them, lean on them as needed and appropriate, but never forget that their presence in your life is a grace, not an entitlement, nor even a quid pro quo. This is true whether you identify as a top, bottom, or switch, a master or slave, a dom or sub, a pet or trainer, or anything else. Having a partner you *can* count on — whether for a scene, a lifetime, or any period in between — is an incalculable gift. Don’t devalue it by taking him or her for granted.

Aim at excellence. Doing the right thing means doing *the best you can* in whatever situation you find yourself. If you don’t have an idea of what would be the best outcome, how can you choose among your different options? Whatever your role, whichever techniques are used, learn all you can and aim to perform at the highest level you’re capable of reaching. Even when you’re just having fun, you’ll have *more* fun, and more satisfaction when you finish, if you play your heart out than if you merely go through the motions — and so will your partners. Slapdash technique or halfhearted commitment decrease the chances of a deep connection between you. Superficial BDSM, like superficial sex, isn’t wrong, but it might not be worth the effort. Good play *can* be casual or spontaneous, but only with a solid foundation of skill, empathy, and desire. If you don’t do the prep work, you can’t reap the highest rewards. Lots of practice won’t make you perfect, because no one is, but it will help you become the best *you* can be, and you’ll have a great time along the way.

Treat others at least as well as yourself. The Golden Rule — “Treat others as you would like to be treated” — is a great ethical principle, but for use in BDSM, where we typically desire a distinct *inequality* of power or status, it needs a qualification: “Treat others as you would like to be treated *if you were them*.” So if you’re flogging a pain pig, the right thing to do is not to hold back but to provide the most challenging session you’re both up for. If you’re a slave, the right way to treat your master is not “like yourself” but how you’d want a slave to treat *you* if you carried the same weight of responsibility. And similarly for other roles and relations.

Another fine principle, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” also needs modifying. It’s a bad maxim if you don’t love yourself! Plenty of hard-driving, Type A personalities — on both sides of the slash marks — treat others badly because they so often shortchange themselves for all kinds of reasons. Aim at a higher standard and treat others the way you’d treat yourself . . . if you had time for it . . . if you weren’t feeling guilty . . . if you didn’t have all these deadlines . . . if you didn’t have higher priorities . . . if you weren’t ashamed of your kinky desires . . . or whatever excuses you use. You and your BDSM partners will both be the better for it!

The earliest version of these principles was presented in a workshop at the 2005 Leather Leadership Conference in Phoenix, AZ. That version was extensively revised in 2013 for workshops at the Northwest Leather Celebration in San Jose, CA, and the Master/slave Conference near Washington, DC. This handout was again revised to clarify the language and sharpen the logic. You may reprint these pages or post them online without charge or permission, but please include my byline. Anyone, however, may adapt and build on this starting point. Feedback is welcome — please email me at davidsteinnyc@gmail.com.

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