

Ayzad

# NO SHADES OF GREY

What BDSM really is,  
in black on white

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## The author

Born in 1969, Ayzad is an Italian journalist, author and educator about unusual sexualities. He's been practicing BDSM for a rather long while and he wrote the best-selling book *BDSM – A guide for explorers of extreme eroticism*, endorsed by various sexologists and psychologists associations.

His [ayzad.com](http://ayzad.com) website collects news, articles, resources and free ebooks about the world of unusual sex.

### Note

Throughout this book the male form ('him', 'his' ...) is used according to literary customs, with no gender bias implied. In fact, every activity described within is perfectly suitable to any gender combination you can conceive of.

*The author wishes to thank Dr. Robert Rubel for his proofreading of this English translation.*

## Foreword

The summer of 2012 will be long remembered as a small sexual revolution. Thanks to an unprecedented global marketing feat, E.L. James novel *Fifty shades of Grey* and its two sequels drove over 100 million of readers worldwide to discover and appreciate the so called 'BDSM', or erotic domination games. Of course it wasn't the first time this topic came into fashion: in the recent past the successes of books and movies such as *The story of O*, *9 ½ weeks* and *The secretary* confirmed how much interest these practices raised. The real difference was in the size of this success. What until then had been a mysterious connoisseurs' passion suddenly became a mainstream phenomenon. With all the related problems.

Indeed, the *Shades* trilogy is just a romance inspired by – among all possible sources – *Twilight*'s vampires. Its goal is to let the female readers dream an updated and pornographic version of Prince Charming's tale, not to scrutinize the complexities of a real relationship, nor to describe how BDSM is actually lived in the real world. Unfortunately not all readers understood this. Just as in the story about the kid who ties a sheet around his neck and jumps from the window believing he can fly after watching a Superman movie, many readers (and several journalists) were convinced that extreme eroticism actually was what Anastasia and Christian Grey do, and threw themselves into emulating them without really knowing what they were doing.

The world press is reporting the results: a sudden increase of embarrassing or lethal accidents – which however are just the tip of the iceberg. In my counseling alone, in example, I am meeting more and more people whose careless approach to these practices has resulted in psychological, social or even physical damages they could have easily avoided with a little preparation.

The fault of course does not lie in the novels or in BDSM itself, that remains a wonderful form of erotic play safely experienced by hundreds of millions of men and women every day. The real risk is in the dramatization of sexual domination as portrayed by most media, which highlight the spectacular and exciting sides of it without presenting any hints of its underlying complexities. BDSM is really an "extreme" activity, and like all extreme activities, it must be confronted responsibly.

Given my 25 years of experience in these things, I then thought it would be useful to write a short guide to explain what BDSM really is. It is an effort to help others to avoid trouble while also enabling them to get the most pleasure and fun from a phenomenon that has lots to offer - if you just approach it sensibly.

Enjoy it!

*A*

## What 'BDSM' means

What I often call “extreme eroticism” or “domination games” involves many erotic practices with one common structure: one of the partners controls the nature and extent of the stimulation and the other partner receives whatever is being offered, actively contributing to the experience of both. It may sound awfully complicated, but in fact it is simply the actual realization of the «do whatever you want with me» that lovers have been forever whispering to one another.

In other words, BDSM represents a safe context within which it becomes possible to rediscover the pleasures offered by sensations, emotions and relations that are normally excluded by our daily lives. When speaking about BDSM and sex many special terms crop up, first of them...

### BDSM

...which is the acronym of:

**Bondage** – both in the sense of ropes and handcuffs, and of close relationship between two people;

**Domination** – or **Discipline**, depending on who you ask. Either way it means that one orders and the other obeys. Failure to obey is punished;

**Sadism** (or **Submission**) – the pleasure derived from inflicting suffering;

**Masochism** – the reflection of the above: pleasure derived from suffering for another's enjoyment.

As we will see, all of this is quite different from the mess depicted in *Fifty shades* and also differs from the pornographic excesses you can see on many websites – but most of all it has nothing to do with sadomasochism as meant by medical science.

## **BDSM vs. sadomasochism**

While the media tend to mix the two up, there is a huge difference between BDSM and sadomasochism. Both are born out of the natural domination and submission instincts shared by every mammal – human beings included – but everything depends on how these instincts are expressed.

*If they are let loose in an uncontrolled manner:*

- They are lived out as a form of masturbation, in which the other person is treated only as a tool to realize one's fantasy
- They elicit discomfort in oneself and others
- They can possibly transform into crimes and cause social damages

The above constitutes a rather rare pathology, technically called **sadomasochism**, which obviously must be cured.

*If however the same instincts are controlled, filtered through intelligence and awareness:*

- They are lived out in harmony with a consenting partner
- They are an instrument to better know oneself and the partner
- They do not cause any social problem

This is called **BDSM**, the subject of this guide and a pleasant erotic game played by more people than you can imagine.

## What it is about

It is hard to summarize what BDSM is in a few words because it literally includes **hundreds of possible practices** and each couple picks and chooses from among the various options to combine the activities in the way they find most pleasing and suitable. Once decided who will take on the dominant role and who the submissive one, the good part is to let the fantasy free according to one's preferences. Certainly, however, healthy BDSM is...

- ...something that *enriches* sex, but does not substitute it  
Nothing prevents you from inventing situations that go on even for days, during which erotic tension builds up without any sexual contact – yet it would be unwholesome to think that any alternative practice could take over a fundamental part of a couple's relationship.
- ...*play*, not a lifestyle  
Enthusiasts use the term '24/7' to indicate a relation in which BDSM roles are maintained even out of the bedroom, full-time. That however doesn't mean to renounce a normal social life, a job, hobbies, friendships or anything else: to subordinate your whole existence to *any* form of sexuality is a symptom of something wrong.
- ...*fluid*, constantly evolving  
With the exception of a few safety rules we'll see later, nothing is immutable in extreme eroticism because we ourselves are continuously changing and evolving – it is then just logical to adapt our play to our momentary desires, abilities and fantasies.
- ...made of extreme *emotions*, not of pushing the limits  
Those who choose to engage in BDSM are moved by the wish to experiment with something more intense than can be found in their daily routine. For some people this means getting whipped or to perform multiple piercings; for others it may be sufficient to feel the excitement of spending the day wearing the clothes chosen by the partner – thus feeling like his doll - or allowing themselves to be blindfolded and tied at the wrists. The only necessary thing is to really "feel" what you are doing.
- ...both an *inner* and a physical experience  
BDSM – just like any other erotic activity – can be done mechanically, as a pure search for performance. However, it is best enjoyed when it is used as a chance to better know oneself and one's possibilities, limits and prejudices. In fact, BDSM can be used to help improve communication with one's partner and to help build mutual trust and bonding. And it does offer lots of opportunities for that, believe me.

## Who practices it

A common prejudice is that BDSM is only practiced by few very weird individuals. As you might have already guessed reality is however quite different.

Surveys and studies over the last decades show constant results. By the definition I gave at the beginning, grouping under the term 'BDSM' every domination game from the most gentle to the most extreme, throughout the industrialized world:

*1 person in 6* has erotic fantasies of this kind;

*1 person in 10* has put them into practice.

This means, for example, that according to official 2012 census data, in Europe there are roughly **33 million** men and women between 18 and 65 who practice BDSM. That would be slightly fewer than the whole population of Canada, or about the same number of people who live in the 23 most populous North American cities *combined*.

All kinds of people enjoy BDSM: young and old people, the rich, the poor, stupid people and geniuses, heterosexuals and gays, cultivated and ignorant people, singles, married, balanced individuals, and even a few basket case – every sort of person, just as you would expect in such a vast group.

Clearly, many of them only play occasionally and very gently, yet it is also clear that such a widespread phenomenon cannot be considered an "oddity". As a matter of fact, the only ones treating it as such are the mass media, who often benefit from having some scandal available to use on a slow news day. Other than the popular press, others who discuss BDSM have much more reasonable opinions, including two important professional groups.

## The position of...

It can be baffling to find yourself interested in alternative sexuality, as it forces you to confront aspects of yourself which society taught you to repress since your childhood, and which we normally keep hidden even from ourselves. The initial confusion often brings you to ask yourself naïve questions that nonetheless appear upsetting in the heat of the moment, among which the classic: «do I need to be cured?» Before moving on, let's then spend a moment to learn how civil society judges BDSM.

### Medical science

Psychologists and psychiatrists use as their diagnostic tool a manual called *DSM* which – in layman's terms – adopts the following criterion:

*«The only pathological behaviors are the ones which cause difficulties to those having them or to those with whom they interact with»*

So, as we said, sadomasochism is bad, but BDSM is perfectly acceptable .

### The law

The laws regulating BDSM play vary widely between countries, but they are usually based on the same general principle: people have the right to freely express and enjoy their sexuality – but not to actually harm one another. Some see governmental restriction as intolerable State interference in their private lives, yet it is also a good way to keep vulnerable people from being abused, and from keeping violent people from wounding others. However, this is just a framework, often allowing for some reasonable leeway when it comes to clearly consensual, harmless and private behavior.

Having said this, the precise approaches of the various governments can be so different that I cannot but urge you to personally check the legal status of erotic play in your local territory. At the very least you should check out the *Wikipedia* entry called [BDSM and the law](#).

Note: the above-mentioned approaches are simply the *most frequently* held by professionals. Their assessments of BDSM can be biased by their personal culture, open or closed mindedness, context and more. A good rule of thumb is not to take someone's kindness or intelligence for granted and to prevent unpleasant situations. Let's see how.



## The principles of BDSM

The very point of erotic domination games is to live intense experiences, so it is not surprising that most practices come with some risk of physical or psychological harm. What is surprising is that people generally don't get hurt by the most dangerous-looking activities, but by minor details going wrong without being noticed. A thorough preparation constitutes the best prevention, and when practiced by responsible people, BDSM always respects three important risk-reducing principles:

### Collaboration, not competition

Although some scenes involving whips, restraints, humiliating practices and the such may lead to think of *competition* based relationships («Let's see if you can stand it or break»), the normal BDSM approach is founded on *collaboration* instead. The partners commit to explore the intense sensations and the emotions arising from such uncommon situations. There is a sharing and an equal give-and-take during BDSM play: resistance and violence are most definitely excluded from this.

### SSC – Safe, Sane and Consensual

The acronym is quite well known, but it might be worth it to remember what each letter precisely means:

**Safe** – To minimize risks you must not improvise, but thoroughly know yourself, your partner, the activities you want to engage in and the correct use of any involved tool. Keeping full control allows to prevent and deal with possible emergencies;

**Sane** – To avoid physical and psychological damages, every activity must be approached with a mature and responsible attitude. Knowing at the least the basics of physiology enables you not to exceed the limits of the human body;

**Consensual** – Each partner has wishes and limits that must be clarified before the play begins and respected throughout the play scene. To do this you must be lucid, only involve people who have agreed to, and agree on a signal (a word, gesture or both) to be used to immediately stop the scene in case of problems.

### RACK – Risk-Aware Consensual Kink

This abbreviation means that – *in addition to* what *SSC* says – the partners trust and respect each other, they consciously choose to explore extreme activities, and *both of them* take the responsibility for working together to deal with any accidental problems that arise from their BDSM play. This refers to both the normal yet intense psychological and physical effects, and the consequences of possible, imponderable accidents.

## The practices

«All right, but what BDSM players *actually do*?» This is a legitimate question, especially because all these references to risks and dangers seem to clash with the outrageously romantic concepts I described a few pages earlier. It's impossible to give a comprehensive answer, as the safety and responsibility rules we just saw also have an important collateral effect:

*When you clearly know what you must not do, **everything else** becomes available to experiment with.*

To clarify, when I tried to briefly describe all the practices of this erotic art in my book *BDSM – A guide for explorers of extreme eroticism...* I needed over 700 pages! You might wish to come and have a look at my [ayzad.com](http://ayzad.com) website to find some inspiration, but the truth is you just have to keep in mind one concept, common to every practice: **intensity**.

Let me repeat that 'intense' doesn't mean 'excessive' or 'without control', but simply whatever evokes the strongest emotions *for those particular people, in their particular conditions, in that particular moment*. There are four main aspects:

### Physical intensity

The exploration of unusual bodily *stimulations*, such as restraints (bondage and sensory deprivation), temperature (hot wax or ice play), extreme sex (dilations, forced orgasm), pain (from a spanking to whipping, play piercing, clamps, electro-stimulations...)

### Psychological intensity

The experience of *behaviors* far from normal daily life: exhibitionism, humiliation, pony play, orgasm denial, submission in general...

### Relational intensity

Practices based on the strong *power difference* in the partners' roles, such as role play, discipline, objectification, toilet games...

### Transformative intensity

Practices which radically modify the *very understanding* of your identity and of your body, such as fixed behavioral rules, body modification (permanent piercings, branding...), 24/7 relationships...

## But where is the fun in that?

Reading the previous list probably left you a bit perplexed. While it is easy to see the fascination in some of those games, others sound absurd or gross... Are we sure that harboring such passions is not deranged? The most precise answer can be found in a famous saying of sufi master Rumi, who lived in 1200:

*«Who doesn't hear the music thinks those who dance insane »*

Or, if you prefer a more contemporary source, you can trust Louis Armstrong, who sighed :

*«If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never understand it »*

Fact is, many profoundly moving activities are inexplicable under the lens of logic. To understand some of these, you must be willing to abandon yourself to it. But, if you really need a scientific explanation, there is one. What makes BDSM pleasurable is:

- The feeling of complicity and intimacy which arises from sharing extreme experiences with your partner
- The excitement to transgress all the “good manners” imposed by society and routine
- Reclaiming a sensoriality largely lost to modern comforts and online, “virtual” lives
- The experience of ordeal, or to put oneself to the test and becoming stronger for it
- The arousal from the adrenaline rush caused by experiencing extreme situations

And, for the submissive partner, there also is the possibility (under especially favorable circumstances) that the mix of mental excitement and physical sensation will release **endorphins** – neurotransmitters that give a sense of well-being so intense to be identical to the ecstasies experienced by ascetics from every religion and culture. And I mean this literally: lab tests proved it is the very same phenomenon. BDSM enthusiasts call it '*subspace*'.

## The tools of the trade

The exotic tools and clothing associated with BDSM in the media are perhaps its most distinctive aspect. Specialized websites love to show these implements in unsettling locations full of torture machines, commonly known as '*dungeons*'. But are all those complicated devices actually useful?

In reality, everything depends on *how* you live the eroticism of domination. Unless you play hard and often, there is usually no need to obtain any tool, also because part of the fun can lie in inventing new sensual uses for common everyday items. The only trick is, as always, to check ahead how whatever tool you select is used in order to avoid "unpredictable" accidents.

For example, using precious silk scarves to tie someone's wrists as described in *Fifty shades* is very romantic... until you find out that tying knots in that fabric tends to make them very difficult to untie without cutting them. Many substances frequently used as sexual lubricants must be avoided because they can promote infections - or even damage condoms... The examples could go on forever.

Just like in every field, if you are serious about BDSM it is worth your time and expense to get specific tools for specific types of play. Specialized tools have the undeniable advantage of offering unique sensations. In the **Resources** section of my [ayzad.com](http://ayzad.com) website I selected hundreds of online shops, each one of them specializing in some particular type of items.

What you surely *won't* need is to build a dedicated scenic set. If you really have special aesthetic requirements, it is much simpler to make use of the many theme clubs and hotels, rental dungeons and the such.

## Fetish and fetishisms

Talking about aesthetics: domination websites are full of strange characters dressed in rubber, hooded, perched on absurdly high stiletto heels. How are they related to BDSM?

Surprisingly, the answer is: 'very little'. Erotic submission games are – as the name imply – based on power and control, which can be expressed through physical stimulations, soft or hard. But none of them require any special clothes.

Those unquestionably fascinating pictures are part of **fetish**, which is a whole different world founded on *hypersexual aesthetics* – or the unabashed glorification of sexually appealing traits. For example, if high heels shape the legs and push buttocks up in a more appealing shape, then towering heels will be even better; if a thin waist is a biologically arousing feature, the fetish use of hourglass corsets to highlight it is the natural progression; if wearing latex on the bare skin gives an odd and very pleasant "second skin" feeling, many fetish enthusiasts cover themselves in it from head to toe.

The reason for the confusion comes from two things: first, the fact that journalists find it easier and more spectacular to show fetish imagery than BDSM, and second, the partial overlapping of the two worlds. In other words, some fetish lovers also enjoy BDSM play and vice versa – but they usually are two very different and unrelated things.

Another independent erotic variation which is often confused with the two are **fetishisms**, or the uncontrollable attraction to some specific detail – but not for the partner's whole body. The most common of them is foot fetishism, but there are countless fetishisms for the most diverse objects, even including specific sounds or scents.

To recap:

- *Fetishism* – The love for or actual sexual attraction toward something
- *Fetish* – The flaunting of the aesthetic of seduction taken to excess
- *BDSM* – A power and control game distinct from the preceding two

But let's go back to us... Or even better, on to the others.

## Meeting the others

Since having fun with any sexual practice requires at least two people, all the BDSM philosophy and knowledge is quite useless if you don't have anybody to share it with. Therefore one of the main worries of extreme eroticism enthusiasts is to meet their ideal partner. After you won't find it so easily... or will you?

Actually as we saw in the beginning there are lots of people who are intrigued by the world of domination and submission, so usually you just have to propose BDSM tactfully, without appearing to be a dangerous madman. If you are careful with your conversation, you are likely to discover quite a few people with whom to explore new sexual possibilities. Of course, your chances will be limited if you have especially peculiar or complex needs, but in these cases you can always try other approaches:

### Online searches

Between the social networks, the dating sites and the specialized personals, the Internet offers nearly infinite possibilities to introduce yourself to potential partners in all of your erotic richness - without having to hide your private tastes. The important thing is not to be inappropriate: vulgar, insincere or exaggerated profiles will turn away any sensible person. And just like in the real world, the best results are obtained not by desperately hunting around, but simply by letting them find you.

### Thematic meetings

Forget secret *Eyes wide shut*-style events, that never existed in reality anyway. BDSM enthusiasts meet much more normally over cocktails and appetizers in public meetings called '**munches**' or at informal dinners announced online just like other common-interests groups do. To attend, you only have to confirm your presence and behave politely, since everyone will just chat and be trying to make new friends.

Similarly announced on your local domination website, you might also find technical workshops in which different play techniques are taught – usually in a pretty non-erotic way.

To go further, you can go to a play party – and *Google* will help you find them, too. For your safety I suggest to avoid private parties unless you know most other participants, and stick to “public” events. Different local laws make for different requirements to select a legitimate party, but privacy-protected galleries, good past reports about a party, and a non-street dress code are generally good signs. You will probably find these events much nicer and cleaner than “normal” clubs, so there is no need to be scared. To get an idea of how they look, you can check out my own monthly party at [www.sadistique.com](http://www.sadistique.com).

### Professionals

It is a fact that many people go to professional dominatrixes to fulfill their fantasies – professional submissives and male dominants are rather rare. Real **prodommes** are serious, refined, competent experts who often own spectacular studios and costumes. They don't allow sexual contact – and depending on the country you live in, they can be a very small minority among countless prostitutes improvising a difficult role, sometimes with dangerous results. If you really have to choose one, you want to select her by her investment in expensive paraphernalia and her openness in discussing how she cleans her toys between sessions – both signs of a serious professional.

### Communities

Apparently, the simplest alternative is to join one or more BDSM forums on the Web, look around and slowly become part of what are often referred to as 'communities'. By taking part in their thousands of discussions on the most byzantine aspects of extreme eroticism you will at least get a sense of the get a culture, and in their friendly climate you risk to meet the right person. Possibly. In fact, before going for that you should read the next page...

## Online BDSM

The Internet served a pivotal role in the creation of the current BDSM culture. For the first time in history, extreme eroticism pioneers could easily get in touch with thousands of other enthusiasts worldwide, compare their experiences, and assemble a body of knowledge unimaginable before. Better yet, they could make this information available to everyone.

However, this thrilling first phase was followed by an unstoppable flood of characters who had nothing to do with eroticism: mythomaniacs running from reality; exhibitionists; trolls; wretches believing that the domination/submission dynamics were a permit for their inability to relate; pornographers; sexual predators; jokers and – lots of – frustrated people looking for titillating fantasies to masturbate over without personal investment.

The result is that today, correct information and competent people on the Web are hidden in a sea of futility – or worse. This means that approaching the fascinating world of BDSM from the Internet requires your utmost prudence.

In some countries, a clear consequence of this confusion is that many disgusted serious players left the virtual dimension altogether, leaving the Net in the very hands of the most questionable characters. Depending on where you live, you may want to keep in mind that real and online BDSM might be two almost completely separated worlds.

## Further resources

I hope you found this brief guide useful for a first orientation to the reality of BDSM. While I have done my best to explain this world, it is such a vast culture that it would require a much longer book to do it justice. If you want to learn more, I suggest to visit my [ayzad.com](http://ayzad.com) website, in whose *Resources* section you will find a **constantly updated list** of the best books and websites through which to know the world of extreme eroticism.

See you there?