

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE S/M COMMUNITY

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Domestic violence is not the same as consensual s/m. Yet, abusive relationships do exist within the leather-s/m community, as with all groups. Unfortunately, due to our sexual orientation, abused persons who are into s/m may suffer additional isolation and may hesitate to turn to available resources for fear of rejection or of giving credence to stereotypes. No group is free of domestic battering; but fear, denial, and lack of knowledge have slowed public response to this serious social problem.

Domestic is not restricted to one particular group within the s/m community. A person's size, gender, or particular sex role (top-bottom, butch-femme) is irrelevant; anyone can be subject to abuse.

Abuse tends to be cyclical in nature and escalates over time. It is a pattern of intentional intimidation for the purpose of dominating, coercing, or isolating another without her or his consent. Because of the intimidation factor, where there is abuse in any part of the relationship, there can be no consent.

Defining the Problem: The following questions can help a person to define the problem, which can have characteristics that are physical, sexual, economic, and psychological.

- Does your partner ever hit, choke, or otherwise physically hurt you outside of a scene?
- Has she or he ever restrained you against your will, locked you in a room, or used a weapon of any kind?
- Are you afraid of your partner?

- Are you confused about when a scene begins and ends? Rape and forced sexual acts are not part of consensual s/m. Battering is not something that can be "agreed" upon; there is an absence of safe words or understandings.
- Has she or he ever violated your limits?
- Do you feel trapped in a specific role as either the top or bottom?
- Does your partner constantly criticize your performance, withhold sex as a means of control, or ridicule you for the limits you set?
- Do you feel obligated to have sex?
- Does your partner use sex to make up after a violent incident?
- Does your partner isolate you from friends, family, or groups?
- Has your partner ever destroyed objects or threatened pets?
- Has your partner abused or threatened your children?
- Does your partner limit access to work or material resources?
- Has he or she ever stolen from you or run up debts?
- 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?
- Does your partner use scenes to express/cover up anger and frustration?
- Do you feel that you can't discuss with your partner what is bothering you?

No one has the right to abuse you. You are not responsible for the violence. You are not alone; connect with other survivors. There are reasons for staying in abusive relations: fear of (or feelings for) the abuser, and lack of economic or emotional resources. If you stay, help is still available. Find out about shelters, support groups, counselors, anti-violence programs, and crisis lines in your area; ask a friend to help you make these calls. 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. You can get the court to order the person to stop hurting you through an Order for Protection or Harassment Restraining Order. You do not need a lawyer.

WE CAN REDUCE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence does exist in the s/m-leather-fetish community. We can make it clear that we will listen to those who have the courage to speak out. Understand that leaving is difficult. Let the person make his or her own choices. Keep all information confidential. Encourage survivors to take legal action and seek support. Help find safe housing and legal advocacy. Hold batterers accountable and urge them to seek treatment. Deny that drug or alcohol use can excuse battering. Support changes in that person's behavior.

Leather groups in our area are crucial to reducing violence. Invite knowledgeable speakers; lead discussions; print up a list for members of what resources in your area are s/m-supportive. Educate your local legal and social service system about our lifestyle; encourage their appropriate intervention.

Safe Link is a clearinghouse for materials and questions about domestic violence, specifically for persons who are into leather, s/m, or fetish sexuality. It offers a list of readings and is currently compiling a roster of supportive speakers, shelters, and therapists, and information on understanding and using the law. Write to Safe Link c/o the Domestic Violence Education Project, National Leather Association, 548 Castro Street #444, San Francisco, CA 94114; or call the NLA at 415/863-2444, or email NLA International

Here is a link survivors in the BDSM lifestyle might also find helpful:

<http://www.leathernroses.com/abuse/crimsonlordabuse.htm>

