with sprinkles on top

Everything Vanilla People
and Their Kinky Partners
Need to Know to Communicate,
Explore, and Connect

STEFANI GOERLICH, PhD

sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

Contents

The worksheets in this book are available to download and print at stefanigoerlich.com/with-sprinkles-on-top-worksheets.html#/.

INTRODUCTION

I Promise, I'm Not a Pervert

When I first sat down to write this book, I kept getting caught up with the question of punctuation—specifically, quotation marks. Beginning our time together with a bold, declarative statement that "I promise, I'm not a pervert" might make you think that I sound rather defensive. After all, there is a strong possibility that someone close to you has uttered this same sentence fairly recently. And there's an equally strong possibility that you're not entirely confident that you believe them. If so, you have likely picked up this book looking for reassurance, information, perhaps even some guidance; and the last thing I want to do is sound defensive.

This is especially true because so many of the folks who come to my office seeking therapy begin their first session with these same words. "I promise," they tell me, "I'm not a pervert." Sometimes I am told, "I'm afraid my partner is some kind of pervert." When these conversations happen, I ask the person sitting across from me what the word *pervert* means to them. Their answers are remarkably consistent. They tell me that they are *not* a:

"Creepy guy lurking in the bushes."

"Predator."

"Weirdo into messed-up sex."

"Child molester."

"Freak."

"Sinner."

"Some broken creature with fucked-up fantasies."

And you know what? I have never met someone who meets the criteria for perversion that they describe when I ask. So who are these people who find themselves in my office talking about their secret fantasies and sexual behaviors? The ones who can tell me oh-so-easily what they are not? They are . . . ordinary.

My clients are college kids and business executives, attorneys and auto mechanics, clergy and kindergarten teachers, and everything in between. Which makes sense because kinky people, to quote Wednesday Addams, "look just like everyone else." The media tends to portray kinky folks in one of two ways: dangerous predators (*Body of Evidence*, *American Horror Story*) or the butt of jokes (*Bonding*, *Exit to Eden*). Very rarely are kinky people portrayed as happy, healthy people with well-rounded lives and fulfilling relationships. And this stereotype is not only unfair but also incorrect.

That's not to say that there aren't some traits that BDSM practitioners have in common. In general, kinksters tend to be white, well educated, and affluent.[1] (Which is not to say that you have to be any of these things to thrive as a kinky person! Kinky people exist in all forms and places and are valid and welcome in the BDSM community.) Their mental health is the same as that of the general population. Multiple studies show that kinky people tend to be just as mentally healthy as their vanilla peers. Along the same lines, they are no more likely to commit a crime than a nonkinky person. By almost every metric, kinky people truly are "just like everyone else." In fact, surveys show that somewhere between 2 to 8 percent of people identify as kinky. That means that BDSM practitioners are about as common as redheads or people who are left-handed.

In 2018, I conducted an unofficial survey of just over two hundred BDSM community members.[2] The majority of those who responded were female—with women outnumbering men two to one. The majority (51 percent) held college degrees, which is significantly higher than the general population, and 37 percent held jobs in management or professional services such as medicine or law. Half of them identified as monogamous in their relationships, while another 21 percent said they preferred a polyamorous dynamic with their partners. (Polyamory is one form of consensually nonmonogamous relationship.) Twenty-two percent of surveyed kinksters described themselves as "spiritual but not religious," while 14 percent identified as Christian.

One of the most fascinating things that I learned while doing this survey was the frequency with which the respondents liked to engage in BDSM. Half told me that they like to engage in kinky play every week or every few weeks. Roughly one in four said that they tried to include elements of BDSM into their everyday life. This took different forms for different folks. For some respondents, giving their partner a spanking every few weeks was all they needed to feel happy and sexually fulfilled. Others told me that they were kinky every day because they called their partner "Ma'am" or had a set of relationship rituals that they enacted together daily. For the people who shared their lives with me, the most important element was the relationship they had with their partners. For them, BDSM is always relational but only sometimes sexual.

And really, that's why you're here. Numbers and data are nice to know, but the reason you picked up this book is because you're worried about what these differences between you and your partner mean for your relationship. You might be afraid that your partner is dangerous. You might be afraid your partner won't accept you. More likely, you're afraid that one or both of you are just plain weird. And not weird in the wearing-quirky-glasses-and-taking-up-the-banjo way, but weird in a way that indicates some kind of fundamental flaw you failed to notice in the beginning. There are many ways that the kinky elephant in the room may have been revealed. Best-case scenario, it came up during a direct conversation. Maybe the kinkier person sat their partner down and said that there was something they'd held secret that they now wanted to share in the relationship. Maybe the knowledge came to the vanilla person when they stumbled across an email, an open browser tab, or an illicit text message. If knowledge of our partner's kinky nature is accompanied by deception or infidelity, the pain is compounded exponentially. But it is important, for our conversation, to separate the two discoveries. Being kinky is not an excuse for infidelity. But fear of revealing our kinky interests often results in secrecy. In fact, 50 percent of kinksters say that they are afraid of how their partner might react to their interest in BDSM.[3] Fear breeds secrecy, and secret-keeping can feel very much like betrayal. If these words feel familiar to you, it's time to bring BDSM out of the shadows.

WHAT ARE BDSM AND KINK, ANYWAY?

Throughout this book, you're going to see me use the terms *BDSM* and *kink*—sometimes interchangeably. Heck, we've already started! So it probably makes sense to take a minute to define these terms for you. **Kink** is an umbrella term that simply means "anything that falls outside of the sexual, erotic, or relational norm." That's a pretty big umbrella! And it means different things in different places. In America, for example, heterosexual monogamy is the statistical norm. In America, we might consider it kinky to have multiple spouses or to be married without being sexually exclusive with our spouse. In other parts of the world, however, those choices are *not* the norm and so would not be seen as "kinky." On the other hand, **vanilla** is a term used to describe all that is normative (as in "what the largest number of people do") within a given place or culture. That's why you'll hear many sex therapists say, "Normal is just a setting on the dryer."

A **fetish** is a sexual attraction to an object or body part that is not usually seen as sexual. Again, that "usually seen" piece means that fetishes are also culturally specific. In some parts of the world, it is considered criminally indecent to see a woman's hair, for example. Hair, in those cultures, is sexualized and considered an erotic attribute in a way that it is not in America or other parts of the world. Here, we might see someone who gets turned on when they see high-heeled shoes, who fantasizes about sex with a partner wearing high heels, or who perhaps even needs their partner to be wearing high heels in order to be turned on and sustain their arousal. Shoes in our culture are not typically seen as sexual objects, so that would be considered a form of fetish. There are many who consider BDSM to be a kind of fetish. The assumption is that this kind of intimacy is rooted in desire and arousal. And sure, it can be! But BDSM can also be a relationship style, and there exist many BDSM practitioners who incorporate elements of BDSM into their lives without any sexual contact at all. If this all sounds complicated or confusing, I understand. Let's take a closer look.

We often think about BDSM as a single thing: a universe built out of leather, metal, rubber, and rope inhabited by only two kinds of people—demanding, egotistical sadists and their groveling, pathetic slaves. The reality is that *BDSM* is an umbrella term composed of three smaller abbreviations—each of which carries distinct meaning and can be explored

in isolation or in a myriad of combinations, depending on the desires and boundaries of those involved. **Bondage and discipline** are best described as an exchange of *control*. **Dominance and submission**, on the other hand, are an exchange of *authority*. **Sadism and masochism** often sound like the scariest of the three, but at its core, SM is all about the giving and receiving of *sensation*. Let's take a look at each of them in greater depth.

Bondage is often identified as many kinky people's point of entry into BDSM. They recall childhood experiences of wearing toy handcuffs while playing cops and robbers or being tied up during a vigorous game of pirates, and they realize that their reactions to these experiences went a bit beyond what others might have felt. Bondage, at its most basic, is the practice of using rope, ties, cuffs, or other tools to restrict movement. In a study of adults, 4.8 percent of women and 4.1 percent of men say that they have either tied up their partner or have been tied up as a part of sex.[4] The sensations of being restrained—the squeeze of the rope, the challenge of maintaining a specific position, or the tension in their muscles as they do so—feels quite pleasurable to many; and they enjoy incorporating these feelings into their sexual interactions—or even their relaxation habits, similar to the way others might use a weighted blanket.

Discipline in BDSM is also about control. But rather than controlling movement, this discipline is about exercising control over behavior—sometimes during role-play scenarios (teacher and naughty student, for example) and sometimes in everyday life. This often takes the form of observing mutually-agreed-upon rules that apply to one or more person(s) in the relationship. These rules are put in place to strengthen and enhance the relationship between the rule maker and the rule follower. Discipline, in this case, is often realized through the self-discipline of the rule follower to consistently abide by a structured routine. Likewise, there are often consequences when the rule follower fails to follow the routine, which often takes the form of discipline from or as directed by the rule maker. For example, in 2017, 20 percent of women and 14.2 percent of men told researchers that they had been spanked as a part of sex.[5] However, that doesn't mean that all discipline needs to be physical! A couple might agree that the rule follower will bring the rule maker a cup of coffee in bed each morning. If the rule follower forgets one morning, the rule maker might require them to write "I

will bring my spouse a coffee in bed each morning without fail" one hundred times. Both developing the habit of making the coffee and the willingness to write the lines when they forget are acts of discipline.

Dominance and submission occurs when one person (the submissive) agrees to cede some of their personal authority to another (the dominant), an arrangement typically abbreviated as D/s. D/s takes many forms, from very modest (perhaps a wife agrees to let her husband select her panties each morning) to what is known as "total power exchange," where the submissive partner defers to their dominant in every area of their life. Often D/s and discipline blend together, with rules and structure built into the exchange of authority; but it is quite possible to only practice D/s. Perhaps this means that partners agree to maintain a "traditional" home with a male head of household and his supportive wife, taking on clearly defined roles and tasks based on gender. Alternately, D/s can look like a female dominant who takes over decision-making authority across the board; she gives her submissive partner a weekly allowance and a set of assigned tasks, and maintains a strict hierarchy between herself and her partner. D/s in one form or another is the most common form of BDSM, often including elements of the other practices, but primarily centered around the roles of decision maker and decision follower. In one study exploring BDSM relationships, 41.1 percent of participants identified as submissive (or a variation of the term), 28.2 percent as dominant (or some variation), and 22.5 percent as switch—someone who enjoys taking on both roles at different times or with different people.[6]

Why do people choose to cede authority to another person? Why would someone want to take authority over their partner? There are as many answers to these questions as there are kinky people on Earth, but there is a persistent theme that tends to shine through: it relaxes them. There are many folks in this world who feel most comfortable and confident when they have a degree of influence over their environment. They like being the person with the answers, calling the shots, and influencing those around them. On the other hand, there are people who find giving up this task just as relaxing. They enjoy shrugging off the day-to-day responsibilities that they must carry and just let someone else be the one to call the shots for a time. When these two kinds of people find each other, it often results in a relationship that feels easy, supportive, comforting, and safe.

Then there is a group of people who might leave the casual bystander feeling distinctly unsafe: those who call themselves sadists. The idea that there are people—our friends, neighbors, coworkers—who enjoy inflicting pain on others can be discomfiting. And that reaction makes sense when we think about where we usually hear about sadistic people! We usually encounter the terms *sadist* or *sadistic* in the context of horror movies or *Law & Order* episodes, and it often evokes images of serial killers and movie monsters. In her memoir *Sex with Shakespeare*, about life as a spanking fetishist, Jillian Keenan observes that "coming to terms with the details of our sexual identities is hard for everyone. . . . This process is often even more difficult for sadists. I can't imagine how scary and confusing it must be to realize, in the early stages of sexual development, that you long to 'hurt' the people you desire."[7] The fear that they will harm us results in a great deal of stigma toward folks who enjoy sadistic play. This fear is based in part on the stereotypes of the malignant sadist that we see on screens. It is reinforced by the fact that both sadism and masochism continue to be included as disordered behavior within the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), the guidebook used by mental health providers to identify and diagnose mental illnesses.

The inclusion of these labels within the DSM-5 is controversial. Many sex therapists believe that they should be removed because there is a clear difference between the kinky person who enjoys making their consenting partner wiggle and gasp and the malignant person who actively seeks to cause lasting harm to people who do not ask for their attention. For our purposes, the important things to know are that the criteria for calling sadism a mental health disorder is carefully written to exclude consensual BDSM and that kinky sadism is more common than we might realize. Approximately 3 percent of women and 7.5 percent of men identify as sadists and enjoy giving their partner a variety of intense sensations and observing their reactions—the winces and gasps, the writhing, and the moans.[8] Watching their partner as they process and move through the physical experiences that they create for them is a sensory delight to the sadist. And sure, for many people these sensations feel like pain. But pain is a very subjective thing, and even when giving their partner painful sensations, the goal of the kinky sadist is never to cause them harm. They simply want to savor the deep trust, intimate connection, and sensory symphony

of inflicting intense sensation on a willing partner who enjoys a bit of temporary suffering.

Where sadists are feared, masochists are often pitied. We assume that they must be broken, traumatized, or otherwise dysfunctional. This is a flawed stereotype based on our own limited understanding. After all, we usually try to avoid pain, don't we? So isn't it logical to think that there must be something wrong with those who seek it out instead? Perhaps. Yet research shows us that masochists are no more likely to have a history of trauma or mental illness than the general population. So what's the deal? Why do 24 percent of women and 14 percent of men enjoy taking pain as a part of their sexual play?[9] The elegant, counterintuitive answer is "because it feels good." Receiving pain causes the body to release endorphins. Endorphins not only inhibit the brain's ability to receive pain signals but they also increase the sensation of pleasure.[10] In the same way that adding sea salt to a caramel magnifies its sweetness, so too does a bit of pain enhance our experience of pleasure. And it's not just the physical that sees a boost; sadomasochistic play has been shown to evoke a measurable increase in the relationship closeness reported by partners afterward.[11]

This is not to say that masochists enjoy any and every kind of pain. Just because there are painful sensations they enjoy in one setting does not mean that they enjoy experiencing pain in any setting, as there is also "bad pain." Bad pain might mean a dental cavity or the results of a broken arm or even a particularly bad bout of stomach flu, and research indicates that even the most hardened masochist does not enjoy a migraine.[12] Good pain is often experienced after a hard workout or during childbirth. The hallmark of good pain is the notion that it is constructive rather than destructive. A constructive outcome to masochistic play might be a sense of pride and strength in being able to endure a challenging experience. It might be the strong bond and sense of connection a masochist feels with their partner afterward. It can also be as simple as the pleasure they receive from the rush of endorphins. Masochism in this form is not a type of self-harm. The DSM-5 makes a clear distinction between consensual sexual sensory exchange (even intense sensations that we might call painful) and a desire to purge oneself of deep emotional distress through self-injury. Masochism in consensual kink is not an expression of depression or distress. Rather, it is a powerful, multisensory quest that takes

the masochist deep into their awareness of their own physicality before bringing them back again into a space of connection and partnership with the sadist who facilitated the journey and kept watch over the physical and emotional safety of their masochistic partner during this scene.

The theme in each of these BDSM practices is that of relationship. Kinky people enjoy BDSM because it feels good, sure. But more importantly, it helps them build stronger, closer relationships. This includes the relationship that they have with their own body, which can be incredibly powerful in a world where we are bombarded with messages telling us we'll never quite be young, sexy, or fit enough. It is also about the relationship they have with their partners—the deep trust that comes from being willing to take or give control even just for a while; the feelings of peace and support experienced when both partners know who has the authority in a given moment or situation; and the physiological bond that is created when giving and receiving intense sensations. The goal of BDSM is never to harm (although admittedly sometimes it might hurt a bit) either partner. BDSM is about creating intentional, cocreated, deeply fulfilling, physical, emotional, and sometimes sexual bonds between people.

MEET YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD SEX THERAPIST

But why on earth should you take my word for it? Most likely I have never met you or your partner. Why should my opinion carry any weight at all when you are trying to wrap your head around the knowledge that your partner enjoys the sights, sounds, and perhaps experiences of something you might find mildly off-putting, confusing, degrading, or even completely abhorrent? Who am I to offer reassurances without any direct knowledge of your specific situation? Perhaps it's time I introduced myself:

Hi, I'm Stefani. And I promise, I'm not a pervert.

When I started my career in social work twentyish years ago, while I was studying to earn my bachelor's degree, I began as a first response survivor advocate. In this role, I carried a pager (yes, I am carried-a-pager-years-old!) and was on call for one twenty-four-hour shift per week. If the pager went off, this meant that someone had been sexually assaulted and was being

brought to my agency for a forensic medical exam and, often, a police interview. It was my job to be present with this person (usually a woman, but far too frequently a child) who had been raped within the last forty-eight hours. I provided comfort, crisis intervention, and prophylactic medication to reduce their risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted illness. I sat with them during the police interview and tried to protect them from hostile or judgmental lines of inquiry. Sometimes I had to tell the parents of my child survivors that we had placed a mandatory call to Child Protective Services and that I would be present to support them during the interview that would shortly follow—assuming they didn't hate me for having to make the call in the first place. It was my job to bear witness to the suffering of the survivors who came to us for help and to try to mitigate this suffering where and when I could.

After graduation, I worked at an agency serving high-risk women and girls in Detroit, Michigan. Many of my clients were commercial sex workers, walking the streets of Michigan Avenue or dancing in clubs (with or without the required "cabaret license"). Some were trafficking survivors, coerced into sex work they never chose for themselves. Others were young teens, struggling to stay safe while feeling trapped between an abusive homelife and the unforgiving city streets. Once again, my role was crisis interventionist and advocate. I gave out condoms and dental dams like candy, and provided baby formula, winter coats, and prom dresses. I learned what the term *survival sex* meant, and I gained a deep appreciation for the strength of women who, with nothing else to their names, chose to feed themselves and their children by leveraging the only resource they had left—their bodies.

A few years after completing graduate school, I started my private therapy practice, Bound Together Counseling. I had spent over a decade witnessing what could happen when our sexuality and our physicality were weaponized against us. I had taken a little girl's Easter dress and placed it into an evidence bag for the state police to collect. I had coordinated a multiagency plan to evacuate a sexually exploited young woman from her father's home and move her to an undisclosed location. I had begged foster parents not to send away young children in their care who were acting out after years of abuse. I had helped throw holiday parties for beloved clients whom others derisively called "streetwalkers." I was and still am proud of

the work I have done for victims of domestic and sexual violence, but I was also tired. I wanted to flip the coin and help my clients reclaim their sexuality. I wanted to help people have happier, healthier relationships with their bodies, their partners, and themselves. So I decided to return to school and pursue certification as a sex therapist.

One of the steps in becoming a sex therapist is to complete a multiday learning experience called the Sexual Attitudes Reassessment (SAR). It is an intentionally challenging experience, designed to expose potential sex therapists to the full spectrum of human sexuality—both that which we find lovely and empowering and that which we often find repellant or even criminal. The purpose is to create a space for us to learn more about the myriad of ways in which humans express and explore their sexuality and to take time to reflect on our reactions to these expressions. It is a time to normalize some behaviors and to understand others. It is a space for us to sit with our own feelings and to recognize where our therapeutic limits, interests, and biases might be.

Sitting in the room with a group of people who were my peers (fellow therapists, nurses, sex educators, and ob-gyns), I listened as they sighed romantically at the video we watched of a couple in their eighties making gentle, careful love. I watched their faces as they confronted their own questions and presumptions around disabled bodies and sexuality. I helped brainstorm strategies to support the emotional health of men and women experiencing sexual dysfunction. Then came our hour-long presentation on BDSM and fetishes.

The mood in the room shifted. The reverence was gone. There were quiet jokes and not-so-subtle giggles. The audience's gaze shifted from respectful to something more akin to amusement. The people we were watching on screen, in their leather and chain, were not seen as potential clients so much as they were a midafternoon spectacle, something entertaining to break up the day. My heart broke and my hackles rose. To be fair, the SAR process had done exactly what it was intended to do; it had revealed a point of tension, discomfort, resistance, and misinformation within the audience around this particular community. I decided then and there that these people were my people, that I would strive to do for them what I had done for every person I'd ever sat beside as their sexuality and relationship choices were second-guessed, criticized, and shamed.