

SexSense[©]

BY DEBORAH CAUST, PH.D.

S & M

Q: It seems to me your column on S/M (Sept 28) is awfully naive. There are women into S/M who have terribly low self-esteem, and can only feel good, or normal, if some man is hitting them, emotionally abusing them, locking them up, denigrating their worth, etc. I know a woman who wants to be cut and bled and beg the person to stop and be refused...one woman who is heavily scarred with deep cuts and cigarette burns from S/M...another woman who gets whipped so hard she has to stand up for days and put ointment on her butt so she's not infected. Aren't these women in need of psychiatric help?

A: In my column of Sept. 28th, I responded to a letter about spanking and S/M (for a copy, please send a SASE to me c/o *Pacific Sun*). The position I took is that S/M is a loving and consensual experience in which there is an erotic response to "pain." I defined "pain" as intense (as opposed to painful) tactile stimulation.

Your letter refers to a much heavier form of S/M. These behaviors do appear to be dangerous and I'm concerned about these women. According to a study by Dr. Charles Moser, however, the more extreme and dangerous S/M practices occur with only minimal frequency. The organized S/M community has become very conscious about providing safety information, education and support through the Janus Society and QSM. Their motto is "safe, sane and consensual."

I consulted with Bill Henkin, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in San Francisco and co-author of a forthcoming book on S/M and safety (FYI: 415-923-1150). Dr. Henkin said that S/M is a sophisticated form of sexual play. In order to play consensually, one must have a thorough understanding of what one is doing as well as the capacity to consent. It's unclear from your examples whether these women are capable of determining what is safe and consensual for them.

Dr. Henkin pointed out that attitudes toward S/M of the "vanilla" (non-S/M) community may actually reflect attitudes toward sex in general. When a friend breaks a leg from playing a sport we think nothing of it, but when a friend bruises as a result of sexual play, we go nuts. It is important to determine whether S/M behaviors occurred consensually, how much damage is really done (reddening the skin vs. causing scar tissue), are participants well informed about playing safely, do they have the capacity to judge when something is going too far, etc.

In every sport and activity, there are individuals who go to the extreme, pushing their limits until these activities are no longer safe. I would agree with you that, at least as you have described, these women would benefit from psychotherapy. Each woman would have to be evaluated on a case by case basis to determine the extent and meaning of these intense experiences as well as her mental status.