BDSM vs. Abuse

The following Principles and Guidelines are intended to help law enforcement and social services professionals understand the difference between abusive relationships vs. consensual sadomasochism (BDSM). BDSM includes a broad and complex group of behaviors between consenting adults involving the consensual exchange of power, and the giving and receiving of intense erotic sensation and/or mental discipline.

BDSM includes: "Intimate activities within the scope of informed consent that is freely given." Abuse is: "Physical, sexual or emotional acts inflicted on a person without their informed and freely given consent."

Principles
The BDSM-Leather-Fetish communities recognize the phrase "Safe, Sane, Consensual" as the best brief summary of principles guiding BDSM practices:
- **Safe** is being knowledgeable about the techniques and safety concerns involved in what you are doing, and acting in accordance with that knowledge.
- **Sane** is knowing the difference between fantasy and reality, and acting in accordance with that knowledge.
- **Consensual** is respecting the limits imposed by each participant at all times. One of the recognized ways to maintain limits is through a "safeword" which ensures that each participant can end his/her participation with a word or gesture.

Guidelines
Informed consent must be judged by balancing the following criteria for each encounter at the time the acts occurred:
- Was informed consent expressly denied or withdrawn?
- Were there factors that negated the informed consent?
- What is the relationship of the participants?
- What was the nature of the activity?
- What was the intent of the accused abuser?

Whether an individual's role is top/dominant or bottom/submissive, they could be suffering abuse if they answer no to any of the following questions:
- Are your needs and limits respected?
- Is your relationship built on honesty, trust, and respect?
- Are you able to express feelings of guilt or jealousy or unhappiness?
- Can you function in everyday life?
- Can you refuse to do illegal activities?
- Can you insist on safe sex practices?
- Can you choose to interact freely with others outside of your relationship?
- Can you leave the situation without fearing that you will be harmed, or fearing the other participant(s) will harm themselves?
- Can you choose to exercise self-determination with money, employment, and life decisions?
- Do you feel free to discuss your practices and feelings with anyone you choose?

*These guidelines were created at the Leather Leadership Conference in 1998 with the participation of NCSF staff.*