

# Kink, BDSM & Autism

Exploring kink, BDSM, and other sexual spaces and communities as an autistic person

There are aspects of kink/BDSM that may appeal to autistic people, for instance very clear and direct communication about needs and boundaries and clear and continued consent. It offers opportunities to express and explore sensory desires, needs, interests, and pleasures with like-minded people. Numerous SAAIL participants shared about their positive experiences with BDSM/Kink.

This toolkit is produced by Dr Amy Pearson and Dr Sophie Hodgetts, in collaboration with SAAIL and Undressing Disability.

Research study: “Comforting, reassuring, and...hot”: A qualitative exploration of engaging in BDSM and kink from the perspective of autistic adults.

In this study, Amy and Sophie produced ground-breaking research on the topic of autism, BDSM and kink, with the following findings and tips for autistic adults:

## ***What is BDSM?***

BDSM, bondage, domination, discipline, submission, sadism, and (sado)masochism and kink are alternative intimate practices.

## ***Why is BDSM and kink an important issue?***

Autistic intimacy is an under-explored area, with very little focus on the lived experiences of autistic adults and their preferences. There are aspects of BDSM/kink that may appeal to autistic people (e.g. sensory experiences such as being restrained during intimacy). However, to date there is very little research to explore this. This study aimed to explore the experiences and motivations of autistic people who engage in BDSM/kink from their own perspectives.

## ***What did the researchers do?***

We conducted online video interviews with 6 autistic adults. We purposefully recruited a small number of people, choosing to use a method called 'interpretative phenomenological analysis' which emphasises deep explorations of the experiences of a small number of people. This method is particularly suitable for areas where very little research exists.

## ***What were the results of the study?***

We found 3 key themes:

- Theme 1 "Practising safe 'sex'".  
highlighted how the clear communication and explicit focus on consent present in BDSM/kink facilitated a feeling of safety for our participants, who found uncertainty during intimacy stressful. The sense of safety fostered within these interactions also provided the participants with a space to be their authentic selves, and 'switch off' from the outside world.
- Theme 2 "So many ways to touch and be touched".  
was focussed on the sensory lure of BDSM/kink, and how it provided exciting ways to explore sensory joy (and sometimes revulsion) for autistic people.

- Theme 3 “Subverting (neuro) normativity” showed how autistic people can find pleasure in intimate practices which other people might find unusual.

### ***Strengths and weaknesses***

To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore autistic engagement in BDSM/kink from a first-person perspective. Our findings show that some alternative ways of being intimate might attract autistic people, because they provide stability, pathways for sensory exploration, or because they are fun in ways that other people sometimes find unexpected.

However, we only interviewed a small number of people, and most of them shared similar interests within BDSM/kink. In the future, it would be good to find out about the interests of a larger number of autistic people.

### ***Important takeaways***

There is very little research exploring autistic intimacy from a validating perspective. Our findings will help to de-stigmatise autistic intimacy and normalise conversations about things that people might think of as ‘taboo’.

Some quotes about kink and BDSM from autistic people that took part in the research study are as follows:

“It’s not that there’s no unexpected wild cards, but it’s more like when wildcards appear they’re within the scope of what you already imagined” (Bucky)

“It’s surrendering responsibility. You spent so much time being responsible, managing, acting, having to mask having to...it’s like or so almost in your head having...a version of you that’s looking back at you, that you’re always self-analysing. You live in such a strict, controlled way...that to just not have any power, to not have any control is, it’s, it’s here as well [gestures to head]” (Noel)

“We are taught to endure as autistic people, and again, I think it's something about naming the unknown. It's empowering in the way that in naming something you assume the power of it, and then you can choose what to do with it...there are a lot of things [as autistic people] we must endure, and I think the flip side and the unspoken side of that is that our pleasure isn't equivocal? I think we get that lesson a lot, that like, the things that we take joy in aren't enough or equivalent to neurotypical joy. And that's why you get people being shamed over like special interests and their hobbies” (Bucky)

[Read the full journal article: “Comforting, reassuring, and...hot”: A qualitative exploration of engaging in BDSM and Kink from the perspective of autistic adults.](#)

## Helpful tips for people considering exploring kink

### ***Consent***

Consent is one of the cornerstones of kink. If you meet someone in person or online, and they immediately start engaging with you in a sexual manner without asking, this is a bad sign. You do not have to do anything that someone else tells you to unless you really want to.

### ***Preferences***

Think about what you are interested in trying, what you might want to try, and things you absolutely under no circumstances want to try ever. There are a lot of online tools you can use to get an idea of the kind of things you might enjoy, for example. (Please see our Resources section below for more information).

### ***Go at your own pace***

Meeting people who have the same sexual interests as you can be really exciting, but this can be overwhelming and make us more likely to say yes to things we aren't sure of. Some people say that they can become

'frenzied' when they first start engaging in kink and can become really focussed on trying more new things, or upping the intensity very quickly. Remember you have time to explore at your own pace, and don't let anyone pressure you.

### ***Safety***

Make sure to keep yourself safe. You do not have to share your real name or personal information with anyone if you don't want to. Lots of people use different names in the kink scene to remain anonymous and keep their personal and public lives separate.

### ***Etiquette***

If you attend an event, try to find out about the etiquette prior to attending. Is there a dress code? Are there certain areas that are generally private? Do they have a quiet space to relax if things get overwhelming? Contacting the organiser and carefully reading the event listing can help you to work out what might happen on the day. The organiser is also the person to speak to if someone acts inappropriately towards you at an event (though some events may also have monitors depending on the event type).

## Resources

### ***Sexual inventories and tests to find out more about your own interests.***

- **BDSM Test**  
This anonymous online test is helpful to determine what kind of kinks you might be into. It is designed for anyone interested in kink, from beginners to experts.
- **Scarleteen**  
As part of their inclusive sexuality and relationships education, Scarleteen provides a helpful sexual inventory stocklist for you to

answer “yes, no, maybe” to help you figure out how you feel about a range of topics, from body boundaries to relationship models and choices.

### ***Finding kink-friendly support***

- The Undressing Disability Love Lounge  
This is a free service providing 1-1 advice for anyone seeking support with issues relating to sex, relationships, and dating as a disabled or neurodivergent person, including kink and BDSM. You can submit an email query to <mailto:lovelounge@enhancetheuk.org> and an Undressing Disability resident sexpert will respond, or alternatively you can book in for a virtual (online) chat.
- The Counselling Directory  
[This article from the counselling directory](#) provides advice on finding a kink-aware or BDSM-friendly counsellor should you need someone to talk to about kink or BDSM related topics.

### ***Places to meet kink-friendly people online.***

- FetLife  
FetLife is a popular social network for the BDSM, fetish and kink community. Our tips for using the site are as follows:
  - If you want to create a FetLife profile, you can share information about yourself, your interests, and your general location (if you feel comfortable).
  - Like Facebook you can ‘add’ friends, or ‘follow’ people with shared interests.

- Sometimes people will share information about local events and meetups (sometimes known as 'munches') in the 'events' tab where kinky people meet up to make friends and talk.
  - Some of these are kinky events (e.g. parties that might involve sexual activity), and some of them are not (even though they are full of kinky people), and may be at a café or pub.
  - You can also join groups for finding people with shared interests (kinky or otherwise). The 'novices and newbies' section is a good place to start.
- r/BDSMAdvice  
This subreddit on social network platform Reddit is a great source of information and advice.
  - Feeld  
This dating app describes itself as a dating app for people open to experiencing people and relationships in new ways and is particularly aimed at those interested in BDSM and kink. It also has a particular focus on facilitating connections between queer people, and people interested in consensual non-monogamy, polyamory, and swinging.

### ***Places to meet kink-friendly people in-person.***

- Pinky Promise  
Pinky Promise is a creator of in-person queer-focused, sex positive events. From workshops to pleasure parties, their events strive to be inclusive and accessible for anyone wishing to explore kink, BDSM, and beyond.  
Most of their parties include quieter calm areas particularly helpful for neurodivergent people who may need a moment to rest from sensory-charged environments, and there are on-site medics and support staff should you need any support while in attendance.

## About us

### ***Dr Amy Pearson and Dr Sophie Hodgetts***

Dr Amy Pearson is an Assistant Professor based in the Psychology Department at Durham University and is part of the Centre for Neurodiversity and Development. Her work focuses on understanding neurodivergent interpersonal relationships, victimisation, social identity, and stigma.

Dr Sophie Hodgetts is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Durham University. Their research focuses on developing our understanding of sex/gender differences in the brain, behaviour and cognition, and mental illnesses that are directly affected by sex/gender-related factors. Alongside this work, Sophie has developed an interest in neurodiversity and, alongside their collaborators, is developing several projects that aim to identify the ways in which the lives of neurodivergent adults can be supported and improved.

### ***SAAIL (Supporting Autistic Adults Intimate Lives)***

Supporting Autistic Adults' Intimate Lives is a participatory research project exploring how adult social care in England can better support autistic people around sex and relationships. The project is led by Dr Monique Huysamen, who is a Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University. [Visit the SAAIL website to find out more.](#)

### ***Undressing Disability***

Undressing Disability is a global campaign which aims to raise standards in sexual health and sexual awareness for disabled people and neurodivergent people. As a user-led charity, we want to change the way people view disability for the better, removing the 'fear factor' that so often surrounds the subject of disability and sex.



We also support businesses to be more inclusive by providing disability awareness training, British Sign Language workshops and accessibility audits. [Check out the Undressing Disability website for more information and resources.](#)

