

ANY QUESTIONS PODCAST
EPISODE 3: KINKY SEX

(INTRO MUSIC)

Emily: This is Any Questions. A podcast brought to you by the University of Maryland's University Health Center peer leaders. I'm Emily.

Liv: And I'm Liv. We're University of Maryland Health Center peer leaders. Last year we enrolled in the University Health Center peer education program and specialized in power-based violence prevention and education.

This year, we've been able to learn even more about various health and wellness topics and use our power-based violence prevention expertise to better understand those various topics.

Emily: With the new Fifty Shades movie in the headlines, many students have kinky sex on the brain. However, sexual violence and harassment have also been given a national spotlight like never before, which leaves a lot of us wondering where kink stands in the spectrum of healthy sexuality.

I mean, isn't kinky sex violent? Can't people get hurt? We've also heard that tenants of kink include really great models for consent that everyone can learn from. As peer educators who work very closely with our CARE to Stop Violence office, we had to learn more.

So, join us as we interview different sexuality experts, people who practice kink and mental health professionals to explore the fascinating world of kink.

(SEGMENT MUSIC)

Liv: Before we delved into the topic of kink, we realized that we didn't have a great definition of what kink really is. So throughout the podcast we'll be featuring the voices of sexuality experts and kink practitioners.

Emily: First, we spoke to Anna Stewart, a marriage and family counselor focusing on sexuality. Here's her definition of kink.

Anna Stewart, Marriage and Family Counselor: One of the most basic ways that I tend to describe kink or BDSM is kind of like cops and robbers for adults, almost like the adult playtime, in a way. Sometimes that involves sexuality and sometimes it doesn't. There's a wide spectrum of behaviors that can go into BDSM and kink and one person's version may be completely different from another person's version.

Liv: We also spoke to Nikki Falay, a couple and family counselor with kink expertise.

Nikki Falay, Couples and Family Counselor: I feel like people go straight to whips and chains and that's so limited, it is so stereotypical. I guess that's what happens to things that become taboo. You don't talk about them in depth and therefore definitions are never really solidified or expanded.

Liv: We spoke to an owner and educator at the Comfort Zone, which is the only adult retailer in College Park, who shared their perspective with us. Kink is defined by the soft and hard limits that people learn through their own experiences. Kink to this person is the middle of the road between the vanilla to fetish spectrum. Some people don't have time to make it a full lifestyle and some do. But, where that is on the spectrum is defined by the person that you're talking to.

Emily: So what we got from all of these definitions was that kink is an umbrella term and it can mean different things to different people. We love all of these definitions but we'd also like to supplement them with Tristan Taormino's definition.

Tristan is a sexuality expert, educator and activist and author of the book, "The Ultimate Guide to Kink", which we refer to often in our research. Her definition of kink is as follows: "Kink is the people, practices and communities that move beyond traditional ideas about sex to explore the edges of eroticism. Some practices that fall under this umbrella definition are, BDSM, dominance and submission, role play, fantasy and fetish."

Liv: So now that we have a basic understanding of what kink is, we wanted to define some terms that we heard our guests use throughout our conversations.

The first one is play versus scene. You might hear people saying the word "play" which refers to doing the actual act. Oftentimes, play is used as a verb. For example, would you like to play? "Scene" is used as a noun. So it might be described as actually doing the action or could be described as the community. So, it could be used in the context of wanting to do a scene as oppose to the scene of the kink community.

Another term that we heard our experts refer to is vanilla, which basically means anything that's not kink.

Now that we have some more of terms defined for us, we would like to continue to talk a little bit more about something that we learned that was very important through our research, which is the tenants of kink.

(SEGMENT MUSIC)

Basically consent is kind of more of the spontaneous, instantaneous part of play so consent is informed, it's verbal approval. So, consent is basically being able to communicate that it's pleasurable or safe and you're OK with it.

Consent is taken very, very seriously. It's really not OK to be under the influence of anything during a scene or during play because it's really hard to give consent under the influence of drugs or alcohol. And, you need to be able to interpret what no means for other people and what pain is and when pain crosses the line.

Emily: Yes. So, we're talking about consent first because it is the absolute essential part of any sexual interaction. So, within the timeline of discussing and then engaging in a kink activity, consent actually comes after negotiation, but we're going to discuss it first because it is the most important part of engaging in any of these activities, whether they include sexual behaviors or if they don't.

So, the whole point of consent is to make sure that both people are ready, willing, able to proceed, that they know what's likely to happen, that they discuss their concerns, they know what their limits are, they know the limits of their partners. And a really important part of consent is it's given willingly.

So, just like in any other type of sexual encounter, consent must be affirmative, it must be freely given and it can be removed at any time. That is the bare minimum for all sexual activities and also all activities within the umbrella of kink. The line between abuse or violence and kinky activities is consent. So, because both people are agreeing to participate in it, that's what makes it OK.

We can get into negotiation, which again is the step that enables people to give informed consent. So, the negotiation is kind of like the informing part. So, this is where people talk about their needs, their wants, their fantasies. You can get really specific about what you're OK with and not OK with. So this is where a lot of people use "yes, no, maybe" checklists, where you can really go down a long list of different practices -- sexual or not -- and each person can say whether or not, yes, I'm totally into this and want to do it; no, I'm not into it; and then maybe.

A lot of the time if maybe is the response to one of these practices, that requires a conversation. Maybe might be, I put maybe for this because I want to get to know you a little bit better before I trust you to do this with me. Or, maybe because I've never tried this and I'm not sure I'll like it or not. So, this is where a lot of the talking happens and this is what allows informed consent to even occur.

Liv: And there is a lot more when we think of the negotiation; we think about the risk in the terms of physical risk, essentially. But it's also important to remember psychological risk because what may be triggering for you. And even aside from trauma, knowing how much you want your boundaries to be pushed that day.

Emily: And so another part of negotiation is just letting the person that you're engaging with know the most important information that they need to know about you.

It's also where you can share important medical information. So, if you have any allergies, if you are taking any medication, if you are really fearful of something, if you have any STIs, when the last time you were tested for STIs -- those are all necessary parts of negotiation so that people can be aware, again, of the risks, and then take steps to make those risks less --

Liv: -- less risky.

Emily: Less risky, right. So if you know that someone is allergic to latex, then you won't use latex. And that could be a conversation that is agreed upon. This is also where people agree upon what aftercare might look like. And it's also where people agree upon what safer sex practices are going to be used throughout the scene.

Liv: I think it's easy to try to separate the sexual experience from the rest of it. It is an emotional, and like, physical experience, as well. So that's why aftercare is so important because you may not want that person to disclose that they even know you. Part of the negotiation encompasses all of that -- understanding what the norms are for that relationship moving forward.

Emily: So, safety, risk and responsibility are things that we've touched on throughout but we just want to delve into a couple specifics.

For a lot of kinky practices, some of that stuff can include a little bit more inherent risk and that's why mentoring, education and training are really essential in engaging in some of these practices.

If it's your first time doing something, you likely won't be doing it on your own or you will likely have had the training or education that enables you to be able to participate in those activities before you do them.

Liv: Yeah. And something that through the people we've talked to, especially like over at the Comfort Zone, it's all about being part of the community, knowing what your own boundaries are and then, like, through play, learning who can teach you, you can be mentored by, what you are physically capable of doing, what you're physical boundaries and emotional boundaries are, and then understanding how you can get training for that through the people that you're playing with or that are, like, part of your community.

Emily: So negotiation and informed consent are, kind of, the first part of ensuring safety and responsibility. But another key part of this and using safe words. So, many people have probably heard of safe words and there's a reason why that use is so widespread.

It's impossible to know how you will feel once the scene actually begins or once an action is actually occurring. That's what safe words are for. Tristan Taormina in her book, gives the examples of red. If someone says red, that means stop. If someone says yellow, that means slow down. So, you can kind of even invent a little bit of a language that expresses a range of behaviors and feelings that you're having in the moment.

And a really important part of safe words are also having non-verbal signals because in some kinky activities, you may not be able to use your voice.

Emily: And that's like part of the negotiation. And how you're communicating what safe words you're OK with using, making sure you're on the same page for what those mean and how those should be interpreted. It's important to understand if I'm going to zone out, is that normal for me, or is that a space for you to check in?

Liv: Definitely.

Going off of checking in is the next principle of kink, which is communication. So, communication is crucial, as you have probably figured out. That's something that's happening throughout. That's happening before, it's happening during and it's happening after. And none of these other things that we're putting in place, like negotiation and consent, can happen without communication.

So, a really important part of that is being able to count on people to both give feedback and being receptive to feedback. Again, it's that idea of checking in, it's the idea of maintaining eye contact, reading non-verbal communication, reading body language, like, someone's breathing rate, their facial expressions, their body reactions.

And, that's also why it's so important, again, like Emily said, to know what someone's typical reactions are to certain things so that you are aware of when this is putting someone into extreme pleasure or when this might be not OK anymore.

Emily: And this is no different than the sex education that we give. Communication and consent is the bare minimum for any kind of sexual experience, or really, like, any encounter at all, not even just sexual.

Liv: And communication is also something that, again, in both kink and any other type of sex, it's something that can really enhance the experience.

Emily: It's about making sure that what you're doing is what the other person likes, that everyone is having fun, that your needs are being met throughout and overall, it's a really positive thing that's one of the main takeaways that we get from the principles of kink.

And then lastly, moving forward, aftercare. We touched a little bit on this but I think that, again, this is one of major differences that I've learned about things that we might not necessarily think about in general hook up culture but I think is so important.

Emily: Yeah.

Liv: And it's a part of where the miscommunication happens. So it's really just about checking in on their performance, checking in on physical, emotional, psychological well-being and it can also include self-care. So, what you expect or what you need afterwards.

Sometimes a scene might be a little bit intense and a little bit overwhelming and that could be what you wanted. But then what you wanted to make sure that you were OK afterwards is a conversation, hanging out or cuddling. And then also, like, we've talked about earlier, you might not want to see that person ever again and it could be get up, leave and I don't want to -- I'm going to delete your number, I don't want to see you again.

Emily: Yeah.

Liv: And that's a part of self-care, too, and that's just as valid.

Emily: Definitely. And so we mentioned this earlier, I think, but aftercare is a part of the negotiation. So before any of this even happens, there's a conversation like, OK, after this scene, I really need you to say really sweet, loving things to me because I know I'm going to be emotionally fragile. Or, after this scene, let's just leave and let's not speak.

A lot of the time aftercare not only includes emotional aftercare, but it can sometimes include physical care. Maybe someone is really cold and they need a sweatshirt. Maybe there's a wound or a cut that needs to be addressed.

Liv: I feel like aftercare is where all of it just kind of wraps together. It's part of negotiation, it's making sure that consent and communication was present the whole time, just getting feedback on how everyone's feeling. And, also it goes back to that training. You can't have physical aftercare if the person that you're with isn't first aid savvy, like, they don't know anything about first aid. That's why it's part of negotiation.

If I'm going to subject myself to physical wounds, I need to make sure that I either I can tend to them or the person I'm playing with can, too. And they know what it's like to make sure -- they know how to make sure that there's not going to be an infection, they know how to make sure that I'm physically OK and that's part of the compatibility. You need to be compatible to the type of play that you want.

Emily: Absolutely.

Liv: And that's most of the key principles that we wanted to touch on.

It's a lot but I think that every step of this has been, like, such an incredible learning experience. We talked about it earlier, about how the aftercare made the most impact on me because I always hear about people who, like, get upset when someone they hooked up with didn't text them back or the way that something happened afterwards.

And not to the degree necessary there was trauma, but to the degree where it really did upset someone. And if we could just normalize having a -- that's one of the bigger parts of our presentations, is normalizing having a conversation, normalizing having a check in. So, why aren't we also talking about normalizing what you expect out of that person after a sexual experience?

Emily: Definitely.

(SEGMENT MUSIC)

We thought it would be important to share some on campus resources for those that might be interested in learning more about kink or their own sexual health in general. One of the most important supporters and contributors to this episode has been Jenna Beckwith Messman. She is the Sexual Health Program Coordinator at our University Health Center. And she offers birth control counseling and can be a really great resource on campus to connect you to support regarding sexual health.

(SEGMENT MUSIC)

Now that we have that down, we can see a lot of the stigma about kink is misplaced. Rather than a violent, scary thing, it actually requires a lot of awesome communication and collaboration to ensure the safety and pleasure of everyone involved. Here's what our experts had to say about the stigma related to kink.

We talked to Hannah May, a sex educator, about "Fifty Shades of Grey" and how it was received by the public versus how the general kink community is received by the public. And heard a potential explanation behind that.

Hannah: I definitely agree with you that there's a stigma. It's interesting that "Fifty Shades of Grey" doesn't have that stigma and I think that's because it's a Cinderella story with attractive, white, cisgender, straight people.

Emily: Next we heard Nikki's perspective on the cause of the stigma.

Nikki: I think the stigma is partly there because there is a correlation to causation issue. And, what I mean by that is I think there is, indeed, a lot of correlation between people who are kinky and people who have experienced trauma. I think the causation that people pull from that is all the screwed up people are kinky. All the kinky people are screwed up.

Emily: So that's something that we really want to make clear is not true. A lot of the experts that we wound up talking to really emphasized how healing and empowering participating in kink can be for many people.

Liv: Yeah, and actually speaking to experts from the Comfort Zone really emphasized how important education about kink and kinky practices is to upholding that environment of safety and consent and negotiation and addressing that stigma, as well.

We also really wanted to reiterate that vanilla is valid and because we know that vanilla is valid, it's OK to normalize non-vanilla practices and those also deserve to be valid in our society.

Emily: Definitely.

Also speaking about the stigma, if you're kinky or exploring kink, it can be kind of difficult to talk about. We had our experts tell us a little bit about their perspectives about talking to a clinician about kink. Here are Anna's thoughts.

Anna: I think it's a very important part of any conversation that people have with their healthcare providers, depending on what type of healthcare provider they're seeing at the time. In terms of therapy, I think it's very important to talk about this with your therapist. Depending on comfort level, I encourage everyone to talk about it early in the process of speaking to a therapist as possible. I think it's just very, very important -- very, very important that you find somebody who's going to be sex positive and kink positive and there are plenty of therapists out there who are.

Emily: And this is what Nikki had to say.

Nikki: When you're coming into therapy, you're talking about your goals. You're presenting problems, the more central themes. And if sexuality is a part of that, which it is for a lot of people, but especially if kink is a part of that, I think not disclosing that is going to severely hold you back.

Emily*: We also wanted to ask our experts how they thought that kink can serve as a positive example for consent.

Here's Anna.

Anna: In many ways, I think that there are a lot of things that people who are not kink aware could learn from the kink community about consent and open conversation.

Emily: Here are some more of Hannah May's thoughts.

Hannah: I think that the checking in that very often get in kink scenes is really important, too, right? Especially when you're doing something new with somebody. It's like you do it a couple of times and you're like, hey, are you OK down there? You know? (LAUGHTER)

Here's Nikki.

Nikki: Ideally, there is a lot of negotiation in the kink community, there's a lot of consent, there are safe words that are not necessarily just one word but multiple words that mean different things. Like, people tend to use green, yellow and red for that. That's not something I've heard much about in vanilla sex. I don't mean to idolize the way kinksters go about sex, there is no purority (sic) of kink over vanilla or kink over anything and none of that's what I'm trying to say. Having said that, I do think the vanilla world in a sexual context has a lot to learn from the kink world.

Once you start deviating from the norm, therefore being non-vanilla, therefore being kinky in one way or another, you kind of have to think more about certain things, you have to put more effort and labor into certain things. I think something that's very, very engrained in the kink community is aftercare. And aftercare can look a lot of different ways. It can be holding for a lot of people. But a lot of people hate touch and hate touch in the context of aftercare. So, for some people it can be go make me a tea after we play. But I just think that the idea of first checking in during, not just assuming that because they said to this thing, they're also saying yes to the next.

Liv: Our expert from the Comfort Zone thought that kinky people were a really great example of finding more meaning to sexual experiences. And what that really means is that there doesn't have to be a traditional end goal to sex. It can be so much more than that. Also, kinky people are fastidious about their before and aftercare, which means they are able to develop strong communication skills regarding their own sexual health and sexual practices. This is something that we think should be encouraged more in society because it empowers people to be more proactive about their health.

Emily: Yes. This was something that really impactful to us because it shows how many different aspects of kink are a lot more positive than is often perceived by the general public.

We really want to make a point in this podcast that by no means are we trying to sensationalize this community or say that everyone who's in this community handles these things perfectly. But, we do want to bring light to how positive this communicate can be and how these practices are things that can be positively integrated into everyone's lives.

(SEGMENT MUSIC)

Liv: Since we've mentioned on campus resources, we also wanted to provide off campus resources for our listeners. The Comfort Zone is an adult shop in College Park that offers not only access to toys, but also education and other local resources. The Comfort Zone offers classes each month to help educate shoppers on safety practices, types of play and other topics regarding sexual health.

Thank you to them for connecting us to other local resources like the Black Rose, which is a group for education and support within the kink community. These local resources that we want to encourage listeners to access if they're interested in learning more about these topics.

And finally, the reason we wanted to discuss this is because we typically present about standard, heteronormative, cisgender relationships but we still feel that it's important to understand non-traditional ways of connecting to each other, the way that kink can be. Because we feel like there's a lot to learn from that.

We think that integrating tenants of kink into any kind of interpersonal interaction can improve the ways that we communicate to each other.

Wrapping up, we definitely want to reiterate that this is just such a small percentage of everything that we learned about while doing research about this topic.

Emily: We really wanted to talk about what we did learn because we felt like it could be positive for the student community to have access to this knowledge, especially coming from a campus resource.

Liv: As sexual assault prevention peers, and that being our focus for a better half of our college careers, it's really important to us that we make clear that these behaviors can be considered as risky by many people. And we don't want this community to be perceived negatively for survivors or for even the culture of sex in our society.

Emily: Yeah. What separates kink and some of the risky activities in kink from actual violence or harm is affirmative, informed consent and also context. These activities are OK because of the long negotiation, communication and informed consent process and discussion that occur before any of it happens.

Liv: And that's reflective of a lot of different sexual health practices and even, like, language that we've seen change. We don't use the term "safe sex" anymore because it's about safer sex, it's about being knowledgeable about the risks, being educated, informed and still making decisions that are safer for you and safer for anyone else that might be involved.

Emily: And whether you're interested in kink or not, we hope that after learning a little about this, you can take away some messages about what consent can look like, how powerful communication and negotiation and aftercare can be with a partner. And, as educators we often get told that it's unrealistic to expect there to be communication and expect people to be open to having these conversations and I think that this community shows how that works and how that can be integrated and how people can do that and practice that in real life.

And that's even more reason that we want there to be less of a stigma about the community and have them be less perceived as bad people, hurt people, broken people, because in the end, we've learned so much from talking to the people that we have.

Liv: And we've learned so much that could be and is really empowering for people whether they practice kink or not. So, we want to thank you for joining us and we hope that you tune in for future episodes of Any Questions.

(EXIT MUSIC)

Narrator: Tune in next time when Nick and Maggie discuss the pleasure gap.

Maggie: It's definitely a complex topic. Essentially research has shown that there's a disparity between how frequently heterosexual men and heterosexual women have pleasure during sex and how much they climax. We see that the only conversations happening about women's pleasure and orgasms is when it's presented as a gag, a joke, or in a competitive nature.

Nick: When I think back to my high school sex ed classes, I really don't think I learned that much besides being afraid of getting a girl pregnant and STIs.

Maggie: Think about how impactful learning about this could have been for us, like, seven years ago.

Nick: Yeah. I think we've all been duped.

Narrator: Join us on May 4 for the next episode of Any Questions

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Narrator: We would also like to give a very special thank you to Franklin for providing us with music for this podcast. You can find him on either SoundCloud or Spotify at frankliin.

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