

Psychotherapy Newsletter

Volume 22, 2nd Quarter, 2013

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Sadomasochistic Dynamics

Sometimes sadomasochistic tendencies add some spice to a relationship. We could say flirtation holds a certain 'cat and mouse' flavor that provokes an element of mystery, intrigue, and seduction. We could say passionate sexual relations have moments when one is 'in charge' momentarily and the other 'receptive' and then the roles reverse. In childhood we have exhilarating, transitory moments of being the 'chaser' or being the 'chased' and alternate between active and passive roles, playing both attacker and victim, which provides diffuse sexual excitement. The common notion in the general population is that sadomasochism has to do with dominant/submissive sexual activity, but in the world of psychotherapy, it is considered a style of relating to another and can have nothing or little to do with sexuality – or perhaps best stated, sexuality is only one manifestation of the dynamic.

If we were raised with an attachment style and family dynamic where mutual respect was the primary model, then our sadomasochistic personal tendencies will remain transitory. Sometimes our upbringing breeds sadomasochistic tendencies that dominate our relational interactions. Disturbances in the pleasure economy of mother and infant seem characteristic of those who grow up to be sadomasochistic in their relationship style. A child learns that safety and attachment resides in a mother that induces pain rather than pleasure. Sadomasochistic research seems to reveal a preponderance of mothers who were unable to absorb or contain their infant's helplessness, neediness, or rage, and instead blamed the child. Rather than a relationship being based on the sensitive mutual repair of inevitable moments of misattunement, the infant who later develops sadomasochistic pathology, most likely grew up in a milieu of painful externalizations. We can speculate that projection of blame, failure, and devalued aspects of the mother onto the infant were characteristic of the early mode of relating, leading to the evolution of the sadomasochistic structures. One person, in treatment for their sadomasochistic tendencies, stated, "Feeling bad is something I know; it's safe; it's the smell of home."

Healthy families produce children that have the capacity to generate personal interests and passions. Children from sadomasochistic upbringings tend to focus their attention on how they can dominate others. By school age, these children

have established a magical omnipotent system of thought which undermines alternate means of competent interactions based on skill and cooperation. Struggling with intense feelings of failure in major areas of functioning, sometimes a person will oscillate between externalizing and internalizing the blame for the failure. Either solution is painful, and they soon obtain relief by finding another to blame, to hate, and to reject by turning that person into a failure. Painful experiences in infancy are translated into a mode of attachment, then into an embraced marker of specialness and unlimited power, and then into gratification through the coercion of others.

If someone is sadistic, they also have moments of being masochistic, and will flip-flop back and forth. Sometimes someone is an aggressive sadist and sometimes one is a compliant type – because they are so helpless or ill, the other should do things for them. They may make others insecure in a quiet way, by their readiness to withdraw. It gives them a chance to live out their sadistic tendencies through someone else without having to face their own sadism. They can feel innocent, morally indignant, hoping all the while they will get the better of the partner.

A sadomasochistic relationship may have the following features:

- One partner who wants to ‘enslave’ the other – offering just enough that serves to ‘lure’ the other with the promise of better times
- Usually there is a quality of isolation
- The partner tends to be compliant and has a deep fear of being abandoned
- The mutual dependences created arouse resentment in both
- Power and control, grasping, clinging are characteristic
- Exploitive – gets the better of others
- The partner should, by whatever means, fill a life that is emotionally empty
- Discovers the weak spots in others and points them out
- Tendency to frustrate others
- Kills the other’s joy and disappoints their expectations
- Any satisfaction or buoyancy provokes an effort to spoil it in some way
- Tends to dish out derogatory criticism and rationalize it as honesty
- Humiliating and degrading sexual practices can be one of its expressions
- When frustrated, dominated, exploited or scorned themselves, they go into a state of intense rage
- Has a profound feeling of futility regarding their own life
- Bitter envy, tendency to devalue
- Extreme discontent
- Makes insatiable demands

- Self-loathing reaches such dimensions that they cannot take a look at themselves and must fortify against it by reinforcing an already existent armor of righteousness
- The slightest criticism, neglect, or absence of special recognition can mobilize self-contempt and so must be rejected as unfair and untrue
- Compelled to externalize self-contempt and therefore to blame, berate, and humiliate others
- When defeating others, a triumphant elation occurs which obscures their own hopeless defeat
- When exploiting others emotionally, it provides a vicarious emotional life that lessens their own sense of barrenness
- Almost all feelings except anger and triumph have been split off
- Dead inside, needs powerful stimuli to feel alive
- Sadistic dealings with others provide a feeling of strength and pride which reinforces unconscious feelings of omnipotence

In psychotherapy treatment, a person's attitudes toward his sadomasochistic trends can undergo profound changes. Though they may have a critical attitude toward their behaviors, and have moments of self-loathing, they also tend to feel they are about to lose something precious. Their sadomasochistic traits are precious to them only because true strength and true pride were unobtainable. They may fear relinquishing their sadistic power will render them a contemptible weakling. The destructive trends are undeniable; but when we seek to understand them in treatment, we see a suffering human being behind the provocative, controlling behaviors. The fact that they are seeking help - stands as a positive indicator.

Resources: Karen Horney's book, *Our Inner Conflicts* (1945) and Jack and Kerry Novick's book, *Fearful Symmetry: The Development and Treatment of Sadomasochism* (1996).