

Beginners Munch Intro

by Jay Wiseman

A Beginner's Guide to BDSM Munches

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Hello and welcome to the munch! Perhaps this is your first munch. Perhaps this is your first BDSM event of any kind. Congratulations for contacting what many of us call the BDSM community (or, more simply, the scene). You are on the threshold of meeting many new people, having many new experiences, and both learning and growing a great deal. By the way, BDSM is a general, overall term for what we do. The term is pronounced just like its letters B D S M and represents a compression of the phrases bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism.

1. What is a BDSM munch? In broad outline, a BDSM munch is an informal gathering of people with an interest in BDSM so that they can eat and socialize. Please note that munches tend to be social events, not educational events. If you'd like to learn more about BDSM, please see the end of this document. Most munches are held in restaurants, often in a special room or area of the restaurant. Munches tend to be informal affairs with relatively little structure or protocol. (If there is something special about a particular munch's structure or protocol, and you haven't already been informed of what it is, don't worry too much. You'll likely be told what you need to know about that before the gathering gets well underway.) Most munches are publicized primarily online, and the Internet figures prominently in their history and development.

2. How did munches get started? Munches were started in the early 1990s by people who had an interest in BDSM and who were also online. (The Internet had not yet gone really mainstream.) These people began meeting at local restaurants. On the west coast, the original gatherings were held in Palo Alto, California, and called "burger munches. After a while, particularly as the Internet grew in popularity, the idea caught on and similar gatherings began to be organized in other cities. Today, these munches as they are now called, are held in dozens of cities across the country and also in some foreign countries. Their number continues to grow. (Munches continue in Palo Alto to this day.)

3. What kinds of people attend BDSM munches? People who attend munches can vary widely, however as a group they tend to be highly intelligent, highly imaginative, and highly individualistic. Essentially all attendees have a personal interest in BDSM. Most munches have a designated host or hosts who are informally but firmly, if need be in overall charge of the event. Some munches are especially intended for certain types of people such as people of a certain age range or people with an interest in a particular aspect of BDSM play, and these are usually specifically advertised as such. While munches are definitely open to people of all sexual orientations, most have something of a mixed-gender, heterosexual/bisexual tone to them. People who cross-dress and transgendered people also sometimes attend. (If you have an interest in one-gender events, the munch hosts will likely be able to make a referral.) Munches are almost always for adults only and persons under 18 should not be brought unless the ground rules of the munch specifically state that they are welcome.

4. What should I wear? Most munches do not have a specific dress code so, in general, reasonably presentable clothing appropriate to the season will be fine. A bit of black will usually go over well. Dressing up in high fetish clothing is not necessary and may be inappropriate for the event unless you have been told otherwise beforehand. On the other hand, showing up in highly informal clothing may not make the best first impression either. Don't be too surprised if you see people wearing items of black leather clothing or footwear, and please try to not look too shocked if you see someone happily eating and chatting away while wearing a collar of leather or steel locked around their neck.

5. Confidentiality. There is a strong rule in this community, sometimes spoken and sometimes not but always there, that the privacy of event attendees is protected. Please remember that people are here to interact regarding a highly personal aspect of themselves, so once you leave keep your mouth shut about the identities of who you saw there, what they said and did, and so forth. For

example, if you saw a co-worker at a munch, keep quiet about that when you return to work. (Although you may find that you and the co-worker will want to arrange a private lunch or after-work coffee date, or at least trade the occasional knowing smile.) Violating the confidentiality rule can get you shunned and banned. Be advised that some people use scene names instead of their legal name, so please don't feel too surprised to learn that someone calls themselves Master Tom, Slave Pat, or Cruella. By the way, titles are often omitted in direct personal conversation, so you are not expected to address him as Master Tom unless he is your master. (And until you've both agreed that he's your master, he isn't.)

6. Special Terminology. BDSM people often use scene-related jargon to let others know what activities they enjoy. For example, if a woman were to refer to herself as a bi poly switch this would indicate that she was, to a greater or lesser degree 1) bisexual, 2) polyamorous (basically, someone who has intimate relationships, which can include sex, with more than one person) and 3) enjoyed at least some aspects of both the dominant and the submissive roles. People who prefer the dominant role may refer to themselves as dominants, masters, daddies, or tops. People who prefer the submissive role may refer to themselves as submissives, slaves, or bottoms. (I put dominant and submissive in quotes because the scope of these terms is subject to lots of debate within our community.) By the way, don't be surprised if you're asked if you're a top or a bottom, or something similar. If you're not sure yet, it's fine to reply that you're still exploring that question. Consider asking what those terms mean to them.

7. Behavior Tips. Because protecting the privacy of attendees is so important, it can be discourteous to ask someone direct, specific questions about what they do for a living, what company they work for, details about where they live, if they're in a committed relationship, and so forth. It's fine if they volunteer such information (some people are very out and forthright, a few almost too much so [grin]), but don't probe. If someone asks you a direct question that you don't feel comfortable answering, a simple reply of I'd rather not say just now is entirely appropriate. (They shouldn't ask again, at least at that event.) It's generally fine to have some beer or wine with your food if you wish, but make sure you don't drink alcohol to the point where your behavior becomes a problem. By the way, given that non-BDSM people, including children, are probably also at the restaurant and may be able to see into the room where the munch is being held, explicit BDSM behavior is generally frowned upon.

8. Dealing with the restaurant staff. Be exceptionally courteous and friendly to the staff. Violating this rule can make a seriously bad impression on the munch hosts. When it comes time to pay, be sure to pay your full share plus a generous tip. You can score a few extra points as a team player if you bring along some one-dollar and five-dollar bills to help the other attendees make change.

9. The etiquette of touching and personal space. The BDSM community is a bit touchy about when, where, and why it's OK for one person to touch another. While ordinary social handshakes are usually fine (some old school men observe the etiquette rule that a gentleman never offers his hand to a lady but rather waits for her to offer hers, if she chooses to) more intimate touching such as hugging and so forth is reserved for people who already know each other well. (Because a lot of the people attending already know each other well, you may see a lot of hugging.) A good general rule is to not touch another person's body, clothing, or BDSM equipment without first obtaining their specific permission □ and do □'t be too aggressive about asking for that permission. It's especially wise for men to be cautious regarding touching women that they don't already know very well. Whatever you do, don't touch another person in a dominant manner unless you're very certain that you have permission. (If the person is wearing a collar, there's a good chance that they are in an ongoing dominant/submissive relationship and that the person they are collared to is also at the event, so it's wise to get explicit and specific permission from that person beforehand as well.)

Also, if another person touches you in a dominant manner without your permission, it is entirely appropriate to let them clearly know that you didn't appreciate that, and also to notify the munch hosts about this. This is true even if this is your first event and the other person seems to be well-known and prominent. If they are making you feel uncomfortable with their behavior, there is a very good chance that they are also making other attendees uncomfortable as well and the hosts need to know about that.

Make sure that you keep a respectful distance from the other attendees. Men need to be especially mindful on this point. Sitting too close to a woman whom you don't know well, friendly hugs or other touching, and looming over a woman in a dominant manner can quickly get you a bad reputation that is hard to shake. (Women in the community tend to be somewhat close-knit. Offend one of them with boorish behavior and many other women will quickly learn about it.)

10. Munches are not highly screened. Munches are often publicly advertised and are generally open to all attendees who can observe a few basic rules of social conduct. What this means is that very little can be certain about a person's level of knowledge, experience, or trustworthiness from the mere fact that they are at a munch. While most attendees are fine in this regard, every now and then someone attends that you most definitely do not want to find yourself alone with particularly if you're tied up! An excellent way to deal with this is simply to give things time. There is certainly no need to go back to somebody's house and engage in BDSM play with them on the same day that you meet them. Doing so can be especially risky. Remember this saying because it's very important: Time is your best friend. Take your time, give it time, and let time do its work on your behalf. With enough time and often a surprisingly short amount of it, the right thing to do usually becomes clear. Never let anybody rush you.

11. Exchanging personal information. Because preserving the privacy of attendees is so important, if you'd like to have further contact with someone after a munch a good general rule is to offer your telephone number or email address to them instead of asking them to give you that information about themselves. (Ladies, this means that if you meet a man that you'd like to see again and he gives you such information about himself, you'll have to make the next move and contact him.) Some people have special email addresses created to handle scene-related emails. (YourRealName@YourWorkplace.com might not be the best email address to give to someone until you get to know them really well.) Some people create special business-type cards that contain contact information that they're willing to have fairly widely available, such as their scene name and their special email address. You can either have these printed in quantity or use your word processor to print them out in small batches. (Your local office supply store will have business card paper.)

12. Reputations, references, warnings, and politics. If you meet someone and you're thinking about engaging in BDSM play with them, perhaps particularly if you're thinking about taking the submissive or bottom role when you play, you might want to ask around a bit to see how this person is generally regarded. Because genuinely dangerous predators are usually spotted and driven from the mainstream community fairly quickly, if someone is well-known and generally well thought of, the probability that they are genuinely dangerous is fairly low (but not non-existent). The BDSM community is somewhat known for attracting people with strong personalities and strong opinions. (Some of the people with the strongest personalities and opinions usually take the submissive role during BDSM play.) Therefore, a certain amount of social/political feuding is something

of the norm. This is usually very low-key at a munch, but there may be good reasons why two people are sitting on opposite sides of the room from each other. How this pertains to you is that if someone comes up to you and gives you an unsolicited warning about another person, you might want to keep in mind that your helpful friend may have an agenda regarding that other person that they are not being candid about. Once again, time is your best friend.

13. Getting together after the munch. Munches are social affairs, and it is not at all uncommon for people who meet at a munch to wish to get together later on. This can be for further socializing, for a private meal, or even for the purpose of a BDSM play date. This can be, and usually is, just fine. However, remember that munch attendees are not highly screened so take your time in getting to know this person (that time thing again) before meeting them for a BDSM play date, particularly in private. Note: a standard safety precaution, especially recommended when doing BDSM play with someone new in private, is to tell a trusted person where you'll be, who you'll be with, and when you'll be back in touch, and then before you play to politely let your potential partner know that you've done so. This is known as a silent alarm or safe call and you should be taught the details of how to set one up very early in your BDSM education. Reputable players should have little problem with this and may even take the initiative in telling you that you should set one up. (Don't be surprised, or offended, if they do so as well. Such a device is a standard safety precaution.)

14. Special symbols. Sometimes people wear their keys on their left hip to show that they prefer the top or dominant role or wear their keys on their right hip to show that they prefer the bottom or submissive role. If you see someone wearing a collar of metal, leather, or some other material, there is a pretty good chance that they are the submissive or slave in an ongoing BDSM relationship. Sometimes people wear colored handkerchiefs in their left or right hip pockets to indicate an interest in a particular activity. For example, a gray handkerchief often indicates an interest in bondage. In general, wearing the handkerchief in the left hip pocket indicates an interest in being the dominant or active partner during the activity and in the right hip pocket often indicates an interest in being the submissive or passive partner. Note: sometimes a handkerchief is just a handkerchief. If you're not sure, it's fine to ask someone if their handkerchief has some sort of special significance.

15. Cruising and Aggressive Cruising. Munches are social events, and one of the main reasons people attend munches is to meet new people. Their goal regarding meeting new people can range from socializing together, attending events together, playing together, some of the above, all of the above, and even more. Indeed, it is not particularly unusual for people to meet at a munch and eventually end up in a long-term, committed relationship. Cruising is a term describing the behavior of people who are making special efforts to meet new people. Aggressive cruising is a term for people who come on so strongly, especially to new attendees, that the other person becomes uncomfortable. You don't want to get a reputation for doing this. There is no sharp distinction between cruising and aggressive cruising, but there is an old joke about how anybody (particularly somebody that you don't like) who gets the phone number or email address of a person that you're attracted to before you get that information is guilty of aggressive cruising.

16. Swarming and Chopped Liver. Swarming is a condition in which a newcomer gets a lot of welcoming attention. It happens with some frequency to women who attend by themselves. In such a situation, the woman may be approached by numerous men, and even some women or couples, for conversation and may leave the event with a large handful of phone numbers and email addresses in their possession. If you're a woman and are concerned about this, you might want to attend your first munch with a companion. Chopped liver, on the other hand, is a condition in which someone attends a munch and receives very little attention. Sadly, this often happens to single men who are not yet well known. Fortunately, if such men continue to attend munches and other events, they should make friends before too long. There is always room in the BDSM community for another ethical, friendly single man.

17. Introductions and announcements. Many munches have a special time period, usually shortly after the starting time, where people are asked in turn to say something about themselves to the group. This is usually a short statement about their name and their general interests. For example, I might stand up and say, □My name is Jay, I'm a switch, and I really enjoy rope bondage. Someone else might say, My name is Patricia, I'm a dominant, and I'm really into giving spankings. A third person might say, My name is Kelly. I'm a submissive and a pain slut, and I'm a slave to Master John. You get the idea. When your turn comes, if you're not sure what to say, simply state either your first name or the name that you'd like to be called by, and that you're a novice. If you're attending your first munch, it's fine to mention that as well. There may also be a period where people announce various BDSM-related events, workshops, and so forth.

18. Arrive on Time. Munches tend to operate on something of a timetable. For example, food is often mostly ordered by a certain time, announcements are given at a particular time, and so forth. Therefore, arriving fashionably late may not work out well at all. Arriving no later than about 15 minutes after the official starting time usually works better.

19. Don't make up your mind too quickly about a particular munch. If you attended a munch, had a good time, and plan to return, that's great. If you attended and didn't have such a good time, and are not sure about returning, please don't feel too discouraged. Consider coming back at least another time or two before writing off a particular munch forever. Given their highly variable nature, you can have a very good experience at a munch that you previously didn't have all that good an experience at. However, if you've attended three times and not enjoyed yourself or connected with the people to any significant degree, it may be time to seek another munch or other activity.

20. Where to learn more about BDSM. Munches are not educational events, however there is almost an embarrassment of riches available to people wanting to learn more about BDSM. Literature regarding some of these resources may be on hand at the munch. Available resources include websites, books and videos (ahem), classes, workshops, parties, socials, and private lessons. Excellent resources exist in every major city, and also in quite a few smaller-sized cities. Some cities have events especially intended for BDSM newcomers, so you might want to be especially alert for information about those events. To get you started, I will refer you to two excellent gateway resources one on the east coast and one on the west coast. (These are called gateway resources because they will quickly lead you to numerous other equally excellent resources, all over the country, including resources near you.) On the east coast, check out the website of TES in New York City, <http://www.tes.org/>. On the west coast, check out the website of the Society of Janus in San Francisco, <http://www.soj.org/>. By the time you've spent half an hour on each website exploring its content and links, you should have a good overall idea of what educational resources are available to you.

My best wishes to you in your explorations. Please remember that time is your best friend. See you at the munch!

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