

HOW TO BLOCK PAIN ... and how to break blocks

Handout for class taught by John Pental 3 August 2023

Disclaimer/ Warnings

You must find out from your medical practitioner if you are healthy enough to engage in any SM activities – as should anyone you intend to play with.

I am not recommending that you repeat anything I show you to block a medical condition. You should seek treatment from a medical professional instead.

A key concept we need to be clear with as SM players is the difference between INJURY & HARM ... as SM players we may play with "injury"– but not "harm".

I only want you to block injuries – not real harm. Don't stay in an abusive situation or relationship because I taught you to block pain or you are blocking your feelings.

Just because you consented to be with someone in a playroom, they can still assault you.

When I trained as fire marshal at work, they were very clear that you should only tackle a fire: if you know the cause/ when it started/ what combustible materials are present – otherwise call for a professional fire fighter. Same with blocking pain – only do so if you know what the cause of the pain is, otherwise see a medical professional.

PAIN IS GOOD, A CRITICAL PROTECTIVE DEVICE – like warning lights on a car dashboard. Ignore them at your peril. Yes, the wiring MIGHT be faulty - but unless you're a trained mechanic how do you know?

Watch out for a BDSM player who is emotionally NUMB or UNCONSCIOUSLY BLOCKING what's going on – may be a sign of trauma/ abuse/ bereavement that needs counselling.

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This workshop is all about pain: What is it? Why do some people like it? How does it help a scene? And what techniques do people use to process pain or block it out completely? And how do you break blocks?

Why might you use these techniques?

- To go deeper into a scene
- See how much you can take
- Enjoy further submission or surrender
- It's a game to escalate the scene
- You're a pushy bottom and want to be a challenge
- It can help you in fear based play
- It's learning to take control of our bodies
- You like pain and would like to be able to take more, to increase pleasure
- You want to get over a part of a sensation you don't like, to enjoy the other parts you do

- I do it because I didn't like being stuck of the shallow end of the pool doing widths – I wanted to swim in the deep end
- It's also for Tops who want to know what their bottoms might be getting up to!

Pain is completely subjective. Given the same stimuli we'd each experience pain in a different way, and that can be altered by how secure we feel or what mental state we're in. People who realise they are in control of their pain ask for fewer painkillers in hospital after an operation and recover quicker than people who feel at the mercy of their pain and let it control them.

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What is pain?

Lots of definitions, one of my favourites is: "*an intense sensation you don't like*"

PAIN IS CREATED BY THE BRAIN, NOT THE NERVES

Pain isn't created by nerve endings. They send data to the brain about what's going on and any damage to the body. That's not pain, that's information.

Pain is created in the brain as a RESPONSE TO A PERCEIVED THREAT, AND A CALL TO ACTION.

That's useful in SM terms if we can reduce the threat (I'll cause you injury but not harm), or the need for action (by knowing more), we can reduce the pain.

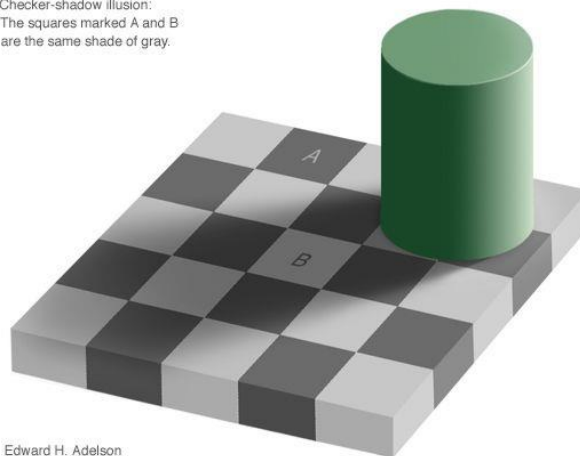
Pain isn't literal guide to how much threat you're in, it's an interpretation

A study was done of people attending ER comparing how much pain they are in to the danger they are in. On the day the highest pain scored were for an in-growing toenail and a grazed leg. The lowest scores were for a dislocated knee and a claw hammer embedded in someone's neck.

The brain makes the decision based on sensory input, but your senses can be fooled based on your previous experiences and what your brain knows to be true.

OPTICAL ILLUSION:

Checker-shadow illusion:
The squares marked A and B
are the same shade of gray.



Edward H. Adelson

A and B are the same shade of grey. Your brain is fooled by the shadow (soft edges), which it tries to compensate for and remove, plus previous experience of chessboards (dark and light squares). Even when you've had the illusion explained to you – it's still very hard not to see square A as darker than B.

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Our eyes are not very good at being a physical light meter, but they are good at helping our brain break the world down into make meaningful parts. In the same way pain is not a very good physical damage meter, but it does help your brain decide if action needs to be taken.

PAIN CAN GO AWAY WHEN THE BRAIN THINKS ACTION HAS BEEN TAKEN

Pain can go away when brain thinks action has been taken – even if the action is not enough or not had time to work. One cup of water for dehydration can cure your thirst, even though you still need to go on a drip. Taking pain pills for migraine can cure the headache before the pills have had time to work, if your brain decides enough action has been taken. Toothache can disappear when you sit in the dentist's chair.

Pain can resurface when there's no actual threat, the brain just thinks there's a threat. The author of "Painful Yarns" tells a story about when he was walking in the Australian Bush and was bitten by a snake, only it felt like he'd been scratched by a bush which he'd experienced many times before. He had no symptoms despite being in a life threatening situation. Next time out he was scratched by a bush and got all the symptoms of a snake bite, as his brain when into protective overdrive. His brain was 'tricked' by past experience.

This is why BDSM players can hit mental landmines due to our past experiences.

A NOTE ON MENTAL LANDMINES/ TRAUMA RESPONSE

There are several reasons why someone in an SM scene might begin to panic: they might have lost trust in the abilities of the Top, perhaps intensity was increased too quickly or someone went further than they felt able to go, or maybe the scene has triggered the recall of an unhappy memory.

Anyone can be triggered in a scene, top, bottom or bystander. Although we can be Tops and bottoms in a scene – we should all be aftercare switches.

Also people can be triggered at any time. It can happen during negotiation, warm up, the scene itself or afterwards.

Triggering can look like increased breathing (*hyperventilating*), upset (*tears*), absence of response (*freezing/ inability to speak*) or reliving a memory.

If this happens, go straight to aftercare. Talk to the person calmly and confidently. Let them know that nothing bad is happening to them and they are safe.

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If reliving a memory: Reassure them of today's date and time – that thing they think is happening is in the past.

Remove blindfolds and anything to do with sensory deprivation. Loosen anything around their neck (even if you think it's already loose).

If possible let them see daylight or the natural world.

Get them to slow their breathing by matching yours or breathing into a paper bag.

Go slow – let them sit up slowly, then stand slowly, then walk with you. Don't let them walk too soon or go anywhere alone.

Even if it's a regular play partner I like to do a pre-flight checks before every scene: have we all had enough to eat and drink, had enough sleep, aren't carrying negative emotions (*e.g. a recent argument*)

We might call these events panic attacks, being triggered, mental landmines – and they don't necessarily mean the scene was a failure. If you didn't know the trigger was there are you handle it correctly – it can increase the bond between players allowing for greater trust and surrender next time.

However, if someone ignores triggers or repeatedly hits them – then I would see that as a cause for concern and step in.

Here are some of the stages where you can reduce the chances of a panic attack occurring:

- **Have you asked the bottom for a full disclosure of their physical and mental health BEFORE the scene begins?**
- **Are you both fit and mentally alert? "Pre-flight checks" – enough to eat, enough sleep, not carry negative emotions**
- **Acknowledge your mistakes.**
- **Watch out for changes in their behaviour.**
- **Does the bottom appear to be in another place or time?**

Tops can hit mental landmines and/ or and use safe words too.

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PAIN ISN'T FELT IN YOUR REAL BODY

Recommended video: The Rubber Hand Illusion
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxwn1w7MJvk>)

Pain is felt in your mind in a virtual body. When people lose a limb sometimes the brain's virtual body isn't changed, which is why they can still feel pain in the missing limb (70% of people who lose a limb experience "Phantom limb pain")

It is your brain which decides whether something hurts or not – and it can get it wrong.

Factors influencing the amount of pain you feel:

- Drugs (painkillers, ketamin, tranquilizers)
- Alcohol dulls pain
- Age (jury is out. People used to think older people experience less pain, but could just be they are less responsive)
- Gender (straight cis-men have a higher pain threshold when being tested by a woman)
- Menstrual Cycles
- Mental Illness (depression)
- Fear (volunteers were told that if they put their hand inside an empty box they'd feel an electric charge running through their body. The more afraid the more pain)
- Day of the week (is your pain worse on Mondays?)
- Stress/ your situation (a pimple will hurt more before a business meeting or date)
- Perceived cause (if you think the cause of your tummy pain is cancer it will hurt more than if you think the cause is constipation)
- Culture & beliefs (Acupuncture works best if performed by a Chinese Man on a Chinese Woman in China, and worst if performed by a non-Chinese woman, on a Chinese man, somewhere other than China)
- Pre & post orgasm
- How many endorphins are in your body

As SM players we need to be aware of all of these factors before, during & after our play.

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Pain is increased by fear, misunderstanding, and loss of control.

Video for fun: Timothee Chalamet replaced by Elmo in Dune
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHK5fBm1YWk>)

Likewise pain is decreased by knowledge of what's going on, a caring Top, feeling you are in control

How can we reduce fear?

- 1) Appreciate that pain is subjective and it can be changed.
- 2) Understand as much as you can about the SM scene in progress and what's happening to you. "Know pain or no gain"
- 3) Remind yourself that what hurts you doesn't necessarily harm you
- 4) Play with a Top you can trust.
- 5) Visualisation

There are two ways of measuring pain: UNPLEASANTNESS and INTENSITY

If we want to change the pain we feel we can tackle the intensity (by blocking) or the unpleasantness (by changing its meaning).

WAYS TO REDUCE UNPLEASANTNESS

Change your emotional state

Embracing the pain/ surrender/ acceptance/ concentrate on how you're giving them enjoyment/ being forged in steel/ cathartic crying

Picture a suffering hero – someone you look up to.

If you can find the pain funny it won't hurt as much ... or change the pain's meaning and see it as beneficial (*swatting a mosquito*)

OR break down the sensation into its component parts (*warming, tingling, stinging, bruising, scratching*) and focus on a part you like

Try sitting in a car on a hot day with aircon on. You can either focus on the heat from the sun or the cool from the aircon. Practise shifting your attention.

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WAYS TO REDUCE INTENSITY

BLOCKING

Distraction is one of the most powerful tools if you wish to reduce the intensity or block pain completely. For example you can distract yourself by listening to music, losing yourself in a memory, staring at a bright light, listening to a ticking clock, or concentrating on a different part of your body.

Making noises can help your mind to process pain. You can use singing, animal noises or any other vocalisation you find useful.

Visualisation – (space ship through planets)/ being in a cinema running the film backwards, speeding it up until it's a blue

When I first started blocking pain I used the phrase "dial it down" and visualised turning down a dial to reduce pain.

Memory – either losing yourself in a memory or laying down new ones. Imagine yourself doing the scary or painful activity without it hurting or being scary.

Meditation/ clear your mind

Attaching the block to an anchor takes practice. I use bright lights/ patterned wallpaper/ ticking clocks. You can teach yourself that these anchors will block pain, but sometimes just varying what you're looking at will change your pain experience. It's like having a mantra or routine to get you into sub headspace: to begin with it meant nothing, but attached a meaning with repetition and association.

WARNING

Don't lose yourself so much that you get injured. Come back from time to time.

One way to return to your body is to do a breathing exercise with full body scan

Even if you're blocking still give the Top some feedback. Most Tops get off on your response. If you're not responding they may get bored and stop, or escalate the scene too far for you.

Play with a Top you can trust.

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STRATEGIES FOR BREAKING BLOCKS

If they are using a visual anchor interrupt their line of sight.

Play a different piece of music.

Tickling.

Spray alcohol or ice water.

Rub a knuckle across their rubs (periosteal membrane).

Rapidly change what you are doing or where you are hitting.

Use something they hate to distract them (a one hour remix of Celine Dion?)

Use bare hands rather than sticks.

Say numbers backwards or different letters of the alphabet.

Resources

PAINFUL YARNS by Dr G. Lorimer Moseley, published by Dancing Giraffe Press.
ISBN: 978 – 0 – 9803 – 5880 – 3

EXPLAIN PAIN by David S. Butler and G. Lorimer Moseley, published by Noigroup Publications. ISBN: 0 – 9750910 – 0 –X

THE TOYBAG GUIDE TO DUNGEON EMERGENCIES AND SUPPLIES by Jay Wiseman

My coaching website: <https://www.johnpental.com>

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