

SLAP

HAPPY

In a spanking-new form of relationship therapy, self-described feminists are asking for it

"There are couples who can talk through something," John* says. "But that wasn't the case for us." For John and his girlfriend, Greta, the problem was closure. Settled disputes would rustle awake at new signs of tension. They threw coffee cups at each other and said things they didn't mean, like "fuck you." They tried counseling. And then John started spanking Greta.

*All names have been changed



I **T**he spanking is vigorous," John says. "It's not a love tap kind of thing." His tone is stern when he pulls Greta over his lap and spanks her with an intensity based on the degree of her transgression. By the time he asks her if that has been enough, she's usually in tears-but the ritual continues. Post-spanking, he sends her to a corner for a timeout, toddler-style.

After half an hour or so, Greta comes to kneel at his feet, eyes to the floor. John asks her if she has anything to say and puts his finger under her chin, lifting her head up until they've established eye contact. She apologizes, and John reaches out his hand and pulls Greta to her feet. "The part of me that likes a good spectacle likes him pulling me up to my feet," Greta muses. [It's like,] "You were humbled. Now, I lift you back up, and we're equal."

This is John and Greta's form of conflict resolution, and it's called domestic discipline (DD). For much of their six-year relationship, they have used corporal punishment as a relationship Band-Aid, establishing what behaviors are worthy of consequence and drawing lines that may not be

crossed. "Literally, take me and force me," says Greta of the guidelines. "Because, ultimately, that will be better for both of us."

Domestic discipline is not bondage, dominance, submission, and sado-masochism (BDSM), but like folks in the BDSM community, proponents of DD espouse the term "safe, sane, and consensual" when referring to what they do. The big question for those not in a DD relationship, though, is how sane it really is for a man to punish his female partner at all.

To be sure, many modern relationships can be classified as "traditional," with gender roles to match. But most don't involve routine discipline or spanking. Why would a contemporary woman knowingly take part in a relationship dynamic that seems laughably outdated, baldly infantilizing, and deeply misogynist? Are the men and women in DD relationships betraying years of feminist work? Are they eroticizing childhood abuse? And here's the big question: Why does domestic discipline seem to be working for some couples?

Pockets of DD communities can be found online, where they support and encourage one other, although it's impossible to gauge the number of on- and offline devotees from Yahoo!

Groups alone. Many women in DD relationships keep confessional blogs, but the web boasts several how-to sites as well. One of the more controversial of these is called Loving Domestic Discipline. Written by someone who calls himself MrLovingDD, the blog not only explains but champions how obedience to male authority will ensure marital harmony. In a DD relationship, MrLovingDD writes, the male is the "head of household,"

whose role it is to be "the leader of his relationship with his woman and the leader of his family. It means much more than just having the power to discipline or correct his woman for misbehavior. It means that he will take responsibility for guiding her development as a woman, a wife, and a mother."

MrLovingDD goes on to explain that the lifestyle appeals to every woman's feminine intuition. "This intuition, if she chooses to listen to it, tells her that she would be happier and more fulfilled if she were disciplined by her husband for her negative and destructive misbehaviors. It tells her that she would be happier if she allowed her self to express that feminine side of herself that wants to be taken care of rather than to have to take care of everyone all the time, that wants to

By Jessica Wakeman

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be guided rather than to lead, that wants to gently and sweetly submit rather than to dominate constantly, that seeks fulfillment through discovering and expressing her inner and outer femininity."

Haven't we heard this somewhere before? Oh, that's right—in centuries upon centuries of world history. Such gender generalizations fuel the misogyny that daily renders countless women compliant, quiet, dependent, and even abused or killed. Almost every site devoted to DD includes a caveat that its philosophy does not promote domestic violence or misogyny. And couples in domestic discipline relationships made it clear that what can be found online about DD does not always speak for them and that each domestic discipline relationship, like any relationship, is based on respect. But taken at face value, domestic discipline reeks of feminist backlash.

The crux of domestic discipline is that women's behavior is inherently rife with transgressions, and the discipline provided by their intimate partner will be a leveling force. Discipline-worthy infractions vary from couple to couple: Some are explicitly gendered—a woman might be punished for cursing at her husband or not doing the laundry—while others are tailored to an individual woman's goals. The preferred punishment for these transgressions is spanking. In addition to disciplinary spankings, MrLovingDD also advocates "maintenance spankings,"

which, he explains, "hel[p] to build on the existing levels of the woman's obedience, respect and honesty."

Mija, a 39-year-old from Santa Monica, Calif, describes DD simply. "To be really trite, take the Volkswagen ad. 'On the road of life, there are passengers and there are drivers.'" In their figurative VW, Pablo, 38, disciplines Mija so she can stay focused on her schoolwork. "[I discipline her for] bedtimes and being honest, and getting schoolwork done on time," says Pablo. "Kind of stereotypical things, to be honest."

"I decide that there's some sort of goal I want to achieve, and he enforces it," explains Natty, 34, an academic in Portland, Ore., who writes about her DD relationship on a blog called The Punishment Book. Natty's boyfriend lives in the UK, so he saves up spankings for when they are together; recently, however, she started spanking herself while on the phone with him. Natty is the first to admit that whacking herself on the ass with a hairbrush sounds a little silly. But while spanking is a big part of the discipline, the psychological dynamic of the relationship is, for her, far more intense.

Mija and Natty control the nature of their DD relationships with a power referred to in the BDSM community as "topping from the bottom." In such situations, it's the submissive partner who's actually in control; the "top" is required to have permission from the "bottom" before

inflicting any BDSM action. Neither woman-in fact, none of the women I interviewed-described themselves as weak. What each of them did talk about was feeling scattered: they miss deadlines, they're late to doctor's appointments, they fall asleep with a roast in the oven. Their fallibility frustrates and overwhelms them. They want someone to be profoundly disappointed in them when they are disappointing; being spanked is comforting because it shows that someone cares enough to punish them. Domestic discipline is not control by their husbands, they reason, but control of themselves.

"This makes me seem really juvenile, doesn't it?" writes a Kentucky woman who pens DD romance novels under the pseudonym Leah Kelley, in an instant message. "I just do better when someone holds me accountable. I am not a very self-disciplined person."

Most women interviewed for this article, as well as some of the men, describe themselves as feminists. And as such, they feel conflicted by their desire to be punished and spanked. Even though she has "veto power" over what she can be disciplined for, Natty laughs when she describes her struggles with her inner feminist. "I had to explain to her that this is a construct he and I create together and that within the construct, we do things that are unfair and crud outside of the construct." Greta echoes Natty's statement: "It took me a long time to realize I could be a feminist and a progressive and still have this really deep need." Adds Mija, "There's nothing feminist about sublimating your desires because society says you shouldn't have them." The men agree. "We both find the patriarchal stuff a little bit creepy, to be honest," Paul says. (Theoretically, a man can be the submissive in a heterosexual domestic discipline relationship, and a DD relationship can be same-sex, but based on both Internet presence and the couples that I interviewed, it's far more common to find heterosexual, female-submissive practitioners.)

Several of the women I spoke with stigmatized aspects of their typically "female" behavior as undesirable—a mindset that's both the engine and the paradox of contemporary domestic submissives. Despite their PhDs and careers in the public sphere, woman after woman interviewed for this article described herself as not wanting to be a "bitch," and pinned the deterioration of romantic relationships on her own misbehavior. Kim wrote in an instant message that she and her husband of eight years,

Christian, bitterly battled over the cleanliness of their home. "For ages, I'd secretly think, 'If he's so upset, I

wish he'd just spank me.' But who'd ever heard of such a thing?" Then, three years ago, they had the fight to end all fights. "In response to whatever accusation he'd thrown out, I screamed, 'Well, if you get so mad about it, maybe you should just spank me!' Radio silence. We looked at each other like the stove had started talking. But then we both started thinking, 'Well, what is it?'"

Many real-world practitioners of domestic discipline see men and women as distinctly different, and report that the problem is, as John puts it, "So many couples are fighting over both being male, and male energy, that nobody has energy left to nurture each other." Greta agrees: Not submitting to John—in other words, attempting to claim male ground—throws the yin and yang of their partnership out of whack. Perhaps at its core, domestic discipline is a way of embracing traditional gender roles. If an imbalance of power, based on centuries of socialization, is bubbling just below the surface of a relationship, some couples deal with the conflict by establishing some boundaries and choosing to accept them.

Still, there's no way around the fact that domestic discipline, still involves hitting one's wife or girlfriend, some times to the point of bruising. While one of the most admirable successes of second-wave feminism is that it brought domestic abuse into the public sphere as a deplorable and indefensible act, the resulting taboo pushes couples in DD relationships into the closet. They hide the true nature of their relationships from their children, their parents, their coworkers, and their friends.

Hitting his wife, even with her blessing, at first worried Christian. "He was afraid he'd look like an abuser," Kim writes. "It took time and a lot of DD literature to convince him that it was truly something I needed and that there was a world of difference between DD and domestic violence,"

In other cases, men aren't simply afraid to appear violent toward their partners—they fear they're not "man enough" to be the head of their household in the first place. John admitted that being responsible for disciplining Greta was sometimes "scary and off-putting." Pablo initially felt physically ill upon punishing Mija—"It's not how I saw myself"—but as time passed, he realized that it's part of his personality to be a "problem solver" and "find solutions to things," even if those things are Mija's shortcomings. Now, he says, domestic discipline

"makes me feel good and useful and protective of somebody I love."

But if contemporary domestic discipline derives from a long-running cultural thread that sees male dominance and female submission as the norm, it's also tied

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another taboo that is equally wedded to power: erotic spanking.

While it may not be a subject discussed in polite company, spanking has become a sexual ubiquity: kinky for some, totally vanilla for others, and a cornerstone of moral kitsch. Men's magazines and website advice columns long fielded questions about the nuts and bolts of erotic spanking, and the likes of *Cosmopolitan* aren't shy about treating a little over-the-knee action to shake things up in the bedroom. In 1996, essayist Daphne Merkin shook the pineshell eyeglasses off the very noses of *New Yorker* readers with a candid think piece about her deep desire to be spanked by a man. Playful, sexual spanking spices up mainstream pop culture, from classic TV (*I Love Lucy*) to modern-day Broadway (*Spring Awakening*). Even Justin Timberlake's 2006 hit "SexyBack" featured the spanky come-on: "I'll let you whip me if I misbehave." Lady-swatting popped up in John Wayne movies, Elvis Presley paddled a young girl in the 1961 film *Blue Hawaii*, and 2002's *Secretary* made spanking—and what it stood for—the centerpiece of an alternately stirring and troubling film about BDSM and domestic discipline.

Obviously, not everyone who enjoys spanking or being spanked is in a domestic discipline relationship. For those who are, the line between spanking intended for a boudoir and spanking as an outside-the-bedroom consequence can be blurry: How different is paddling

as foreplay from a spanking reminiscent of a childhood punishment, with its attendant humiliation and pain? For DD women, there's no readily apparent thread connecting actual childhood discipline with their current lifestyle. Some women interviewed for this story were spanked as children; just as many were not. But each and every one considers herself a "spanko" whose fantasies have long revolved around being spanked. Each said she enjoys spanking sexually, but came to a point where erotic spanking simply wasn't enough. They didn't just want a few swats on the ass—they wanted discipline. Natty, a survivor of childhood abuse, ponders her need for spankings thusly: "My sexuality expresses itself as a child. If I were a child, [this punishment] would be absolutely inappropriate. But because I am an adult, I can choose to express my sexuality in this way." Nevertheless, she adds, "[T]here's a tendency to go back to that head space. There are times when I've wondered if this is a healthy thing to do."

That the road to a harmonious heterosexual relationship is paved with female submission is hardly a new notion. Historically, it was gospel that "it was a man's duty to 'correct' his wife," explains Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*. Legal codes once described in detail how a husband could hit his wife and with what size instruments, and relationship advice books explained the

"fair" and "right" way for a man to discipline his wife. In the '60S and '70S, however, the institution of marriage changed more in a matter of decades than it had in thousands of years prior. As gender roles within a marriage shifted, so too did the tone of the advice. "Instead of telling men how to keep order in the household, they [started] telling women," Coontz says.

In 1963, Helen Andelin published the book *Fascinating Womanhood*, which condensed the advice she taught in her marriage classes. The book has enjoyed numerous reprints and produced certified Fascinating Womanhood educators. According to the Fascinating Womanhood website, the book "teaches the true meaning of femininity and how it differs from masculinity [and] provides a role model for women to pattern from, the ideal woman from a man's point of view, the kind men adore." In 1974, *The Total Woman*, written by born-again Christian and antilibber Marabel Morgan, was published; according to a 1977 profile in *Time*, the book "argue(s) that every housewife can find happiness by pampering and submitting to her husband."

And then there's Laura Doyle's how-to manual, *The Surrendered Wife*, which appeared in 2001 and was soon followed by *The Surrendered Single*. (Just because you're not married doesn't mean you can't surrender!) *The Surrendered Wife* is a bit more modern than its predecessors: Doyle reasons that you should respect the man you married because it was your choice to marry him, and in doing so, you will show that you respect your own decisions. Each chapter offers up another way for a woman to "surrender," urging women to think of marital equality as a burden they shouldn't have to shoulder. Managing the finances in a marriage is a chore, so relinquish it! Male-female equality is a myth, so don't worry your pretty little head about it! *The Surrendered Wife* is a hard book to take seriously: It was roundly criticized upon its publication, and a current Amazon editorial review suggests that its best use may be as a bridal-shower gag gift.

The big- and small-screen spankings, and the new books celebrating female submission that appear each decade, don't really tell us anything we don't know: Egalitarian relationships are still difficult-and, for many people, unpalatable. Though Coontz says she hadn't heard of domestic discipline before, its existence didn't surprise her. "Marriage has changed more in the last 35 years than in the previous 3,500 years, and the result is that we have more choice in how relationships [can be] conducted than we have ever had before." And though none of the books in the submissive oeuvre advocate that a husband punish his wife like a child, their understandings of femininity are similar, if not the same~each one, at its center, is

designed to save women from themselves.

But with all this supposed choice in how we conduct our relationships and partnerships, there's still a huge swath of the world that sees the tenets of domestic discipline not as an unconventional relationship fixer with a frisson of kink, but as *The Way Things Should Be*. Organized religion, for instance, has never really stopped stipulating that a woman's submission is divine. Presidential candidate and ordained Southern Baptist minister Mike Huckabee made headlines this fall-before going on to win the Iowa caucus-when his 1998 speech to Southern Baptists came to light: In it, he said, "a wife is to submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ." Along with other religious leaders, Huckabee and his wife signed a full-page ad in *USA Today* that same year supporting that statement. As Greta puts it, "It's a little disconcerting to have something in common with the religious right, (but) they come at it with a much more fundamentalist and abusive and misogynist point of view."

It is unlikely that Huckabee is an advocate for domestic discipline, but his statement stems from a belief system that is just below the surface in some relationships, highly visible in others: men and women are not equals. That idea supports Greta and Mija's statements that they need domestic discipline to be better, more organized, more successful, more confident women. Many American women strongly feel the drive to be perfect: to be educated, to be a breadwinner, to be a good mother, to be a good wife, and to be beautiful, to boot. Is it possible some women-whether kinkily inclined, formerly abused, neither, or both-turn to domestic discipline the same way others find solace in punishing behaviors like eating disorders, cutting, or obsessively working out? Those of us who are repulsed by a relationship where a woman is punished by a man can still gaze through the same lens as Greta, Mija, Kim, and Natty, and empathize with the relief that comes from absolution.

Domestic discipline will never sit right in everyone's stomach, and it shouldn't. The long history of socially sanctioned submission, legislated inequality, and intimate partner violence against women makes it dizzying to determine if DD is empowering or dangerous. How to "do" a relationship, as Coontz put it, is each couple's struggle-and it is thought-provoking that some couples have found their answer in DD. Indeed, we're all finding ways to "do" our relationships, and for some couples, the way to do it may not be so egalitarian.

Jessica Wakeman is associate blog editor at *The Huffington Post*. She interviewed Susan Faludi for *Bitch*, no. 38.

