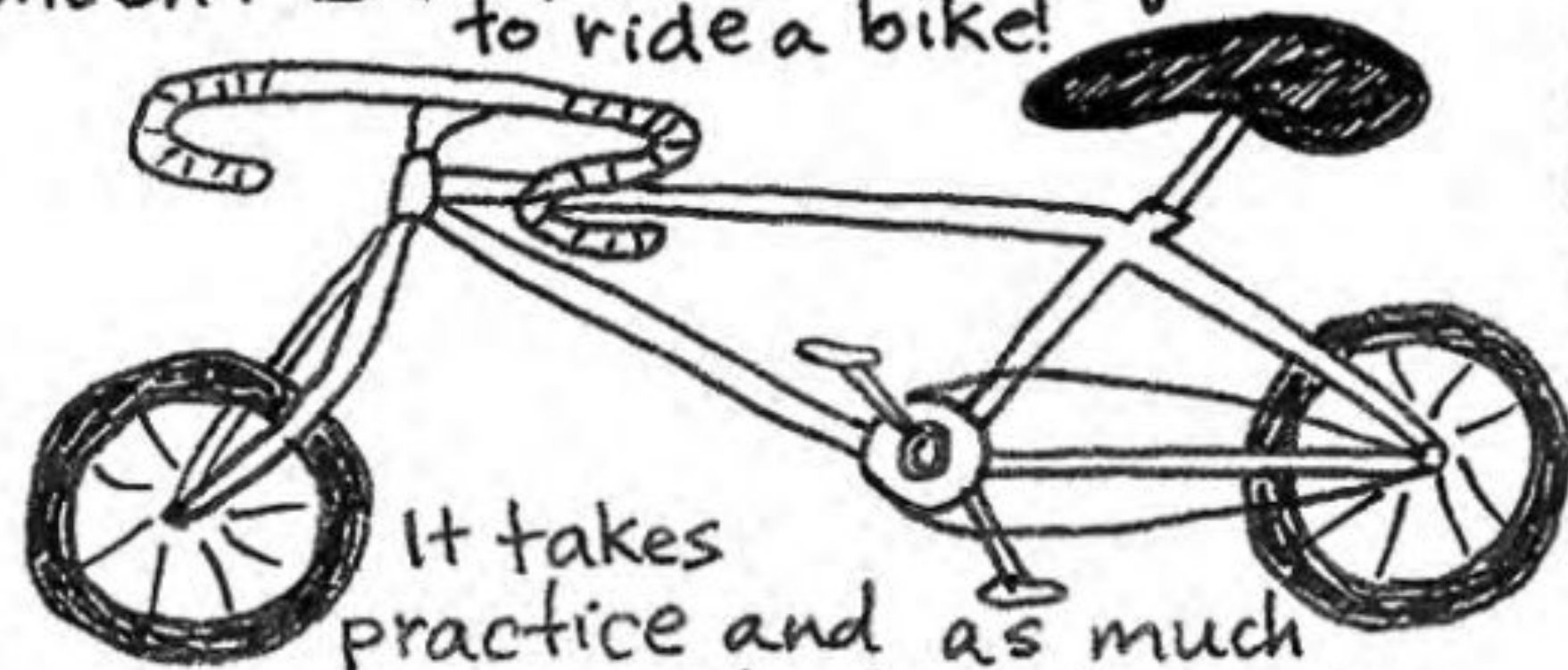


LEARNING GOOD CONSENT

a new edition

consent is **NOT** like learning
to ride a bike!



It takes
practice and as much
un-learning as it does learning.



intro

learning good consent

I remember when I first heard about verbal consent.

I was 22 years old and it was all over the news that Antioch college had passed a sexual assault prevention policy that said you had to ask before each new stage of making out, and that you had to get verbal consent.

In much of the media, it was attacked as some kind of uptight, anti-sex, feminist takeover, but for me, and for a lot of people, it was the beginning of being able to envision and work toward a more healthy sexuality.

Before the Antioch policy, I blamed myself for my inability to say 'no'. Saying 'no' was the only thing I could think of to avoid unwanted sex, and since I couldn't say it, I felt like I just had to go along with whatever. Learning about verbal consent opened up a whole world for me. I started practicing it.

Even though I wished other people would take the initiative and ask me for consent, there was something really empowering and sexy and sweet about constantly asking them 'is this ok?', 'do you want me to do this?'

Sometimes it helped me to realize I wasn't the only one who was scared or unsure. Sometimes checking in with them helped me check in with myself.

For the most part, I didn't know what my own boundaries were. and I think learning our boundaries is a life long process. We can do some figuring out on our own, but not all of it. and it changes.

and I think it is so very essential that we honor whatever ways we have survived. and that we honor the ways we are surviving now.

RESOURCES

All (& more!) of these books & zines are available at:

tinyurl.com/bznxxjpr

BOOKS

General/Multi-Subject

Enjoy Sex - Barker

Unfuck Your Intimacy - Harper

Tongue Tied - Harris

Sex Outside the Lines - Donaghue

Tomorrow Sex Will Be

Good Again - Angel

Big Big Love - Blank

Come As You Are - Nagoski

Good Sex - Graham

Quick & Easy Guide to Sex & Disability - Andrews

Trauma/Shame/Recovery

Sexual Healing Journey - Maltz

Healing Sex - Haines

Reclaiming Pleasure - Richmond

Beyond Shame - Roberts

Kink/BDSM

Fifty Shades of Kink, ch 2,
Ultimate Guide to Kink, ch. 9
- Taormino

Play Well With Others, ch 2
- Harrington & Williams

Nonmonogamy

The Ethical Slut - Hardy
More Than Two - Veaux

ZINES

Ask First

Let's Talk: Feminist Communication

We Are All Survivors,
We Are All Perpetrators

A Streetcar Named Consent

Taking the First Step

Fuck Abuse, Kill Power

Accounting for Ourselves

So You've Been
Accused of Abuse

Queer & Trans Sexual Assault

MISC.

RAINN.org

scarleteen.com

Thinking Through
Perpetrator Accountability

tinyurl.com/29frj85e

anarchalibrary.blogspot.com

Creative Interventions Toolkit
tinyurl.com/mat4ehe5

Self Help Guide for Trans
Survivors of Violence
tinyurl.com/nhcm3akw

Safe Sex is More Than Just Latex

If you answer yes to any of the following questions, you may be experiencing abuse:

- Do you feel pushed to have sex when you don't want to?
- Do you ever have sex to "keep the peace"?
- Does your partner want sex after a fight when you don't want it?
- Have you ever just laid there during sex because resisting felt more risky?
- Has your partner ever started sex with you while you were sleeping?
- Has your partner refused to practice safe sex when you asked her to?
- Have you ever felt that your partner used sex to control or punish you?
- Has she ever given you a hard time about wanting to stop midway through?
- Has your partner forced you to have sex against your will?
- Does your partner withhold sex or affection, or does she demand it on her terms?
- Does your partner use sexual name-calling against you?
- Does your partner ever put you down or make fun of you about sex?
- Have you ever had sex with her because you were tired of resisting?
- Does your partner accuse you of having affairs?
- Does your partner threaten to have, or have affairs when you both have agreed to be monogamous?
- Does she put you down during sex?
- Does your partner talk with others (ex-partner, friends, etc.) about your sexual inadequacies?
- Does your partner demand that you tell her your fantasies?
- Does your partner make you feel ashamed about your sexual desires or fantasies?
- Has your partner violated your limits, boundaries, or safe words?
- In the context of S/M, are you ever confused about when scenes begin and end?



A Personal Bill of Rights

I have the right:

- To ask for a date without being crushed if the answer is "no"
- To refuse a date without feeling guilty
- To suggest activities
- To refuse any activities, even if my date is excited about them
- To have my own feelings
- To choose to go to parties alone without feeling like I have to pair up with someone
- To say I think a friend's information is wrong or her/his actions unfair
- To tell someone I don't like her/him to interrupt me
- To have my limits respected
- To spend my money the way I want to, even if it's foolish
- To tell my partner I want affection
- To tell my partner I want physical closeness
- To refuse sex with anyone who just took me out on an expensive date
- To start a relationship slowly, to say, "I want to get to know you better before I get involved."
- To be myself without changing to suit others
- To tell my partner I want sex
- To refuse sex, or any other intimacy, anytime
- To be told a relationship is changing and not blame myself, or change myself to keep it going
- To an equal relationship with a man or a woman
- To not be dominated or be dominated
- To be quiet or assertive and not be misunderstood
- To act one way with one person and a different way with someone else
- To change my goals whenever I want to



Hearing people talk about their own experiences with consent helps me feel less crazy and less alone.

It gives me hope that we will be able to change the world we live in - that we will be able to change what gets taken for granted, and how we see and understand each other.

Things have already changed. I think it is important to remember this. From the founding of the first rape crisis center, the first feminist women's health center, the first workshop on consent, the forming of groups like Men Can Stop Rape, Sister Song, Philly's Pissed, Generation 5 - these and all the books and zines and conversations and art shows and speakouts and songs and friendships. they are changing things. I can see it. even when there is so much still.

Talking about our experiences with consent, our struggles, our mistakes and how we've learned, these are part of a much larger revolutionary struggle. I feel lucky to have been asked to compile this zine, and am amazed by the bravery of the contributors.

And I am amazed by your bravery too. Yes, you. In a world which asks us not to care too deeply or question too closely, it is brave to be here with this. Learning Good Consent.

not gonna press
pob 29
athens oh 45701

feel free to
copy and
distribute this
zine

VISIT TINYURL.COM/BZNXXJPR TO
PRINT & DOWNLOAD THIS ZINE

cover art by The amazing TomHerspich
thomasherpick.com

consent questions

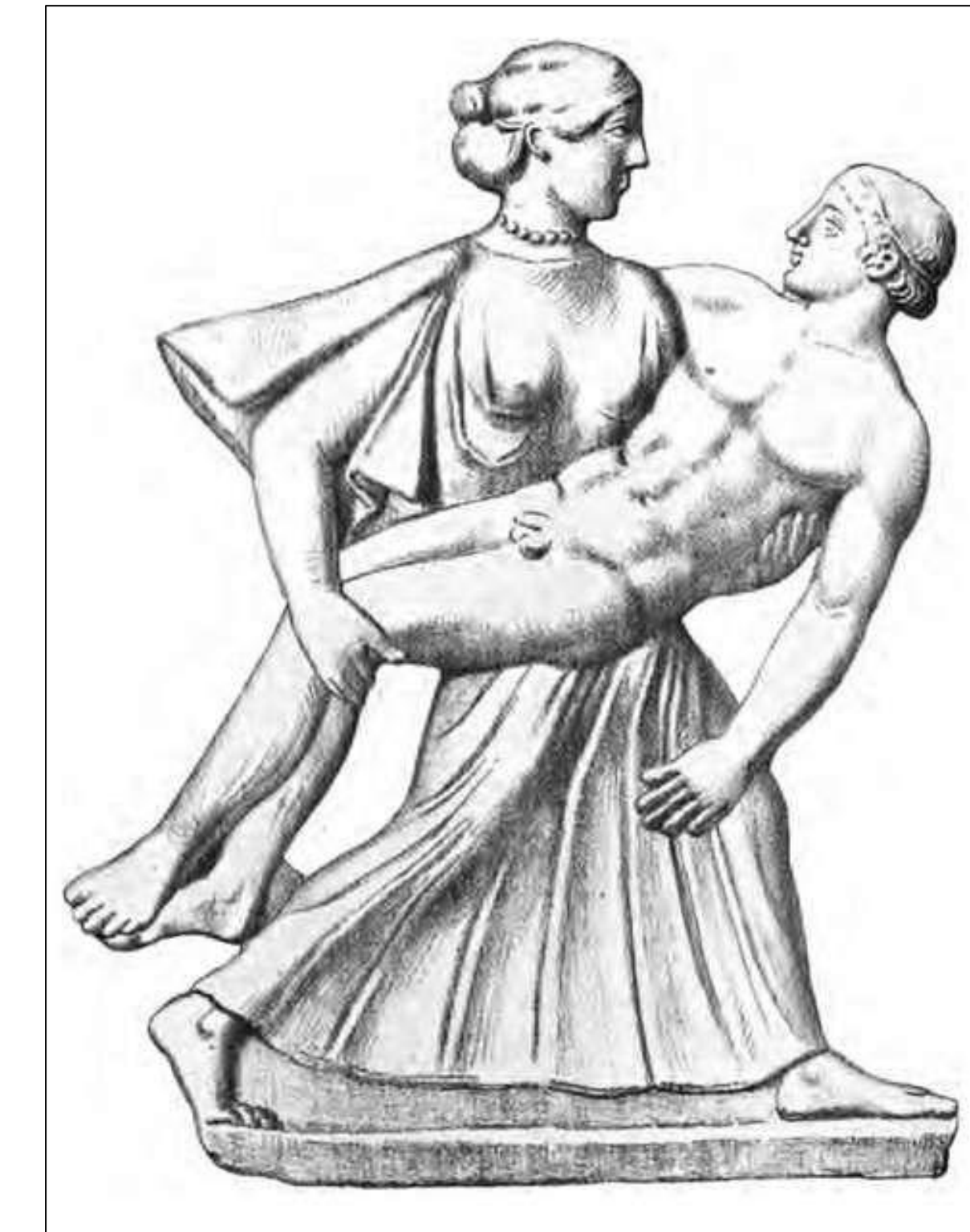
from SUPPORT zine

... Not all of the questions have right or wrong answers. We put them together with the hopes that it would help people to think deeply, and to help open up conversations about consent. I know it's a long list, but please read and think honestly about these questions, one at a time.

1. How do you define consent?
2. Do you know people/or have you been with people who define consent differently?
3. Do you talk about consent and boundaries with a new sexual partner? If so, when?
4. Do you ever talk about sex and consent when you're not in bed/in the "heat of the moment?"
5. Do you only ask about these kinds of things if you are in a serious relationship or do you feel able to talk in casual situations too?
6. Do you think talking ruins the mood?
7. Have you ever been unsure about whether or not the person you were being sexual with wanted to be doing what you were doing? What did you do, and why? Did you talk about it afterwards with the person?
8. Do you think it is important to follow up the next day w/ the person you've been sexual with?
9. What if days, months, or years later, someone tells you they were uncomfortable with what you did? How would you react?
10. Do you ever feel obligated to have sex?
11. Do you ever feel obligated to initiate sex?
12. Do you feel like being in a relationship w/ someone means that they have an obligation to have sex with you, or that you have an obligation to have sex with them?
13. Do you usually assume consent if this person has consented on past occasions?
14. Do you check in as things progress, or before touching in different ways, or taking things to more intense levels? Or do you assume the original consent means everything is okay?
15. How might someone express that what is happening is not okay?
16. Do you consider silence or lack of a "no" to be giving consent?
17. Do you look only for verbal signs or are there other signs?
18. Have you ever asked someone what kinds of signs you should look for if they have a hard time verbalizing when something feels wrong?
19. Do you think it is the other person's responsibility to say something if they aren't into what you are doing?

Even in the most loving relationships, asking for what we want may be hard...

- We feel that sex is supposed to come naturally, and having to talk about it must mean there's a problem.
- We are afraid that being honest about what we want will threaten the other person.
- We are embarrassed by the words themselves.
- We have been making love with the same person for years, and it feels risky to bring up new insights.
- We aren't communicating well with our partner in other areas of our relationship.
- Our partner seems defensive and might interpret our suggestion as a criticism or a demand.
- We don't know exactly what we want at a particular time, or we prefer to react to something our partner does.
- Even with a willing partner, we may feel inhibited about asserting our sexuality openly and proudly.



If we do ask for what we want, we may be relieved and gratified to get our desires met. However, if our partner has different preferences, we may have to do some negotiating or look below the surface and figure out the underlying needs. For example, let's say that you want to spend long hours in bed on a Sunday morning making love, but your partner wants to get up and go for a run. What are your needs that aren't being met? Do you want more intimacy? Do you need time to unwind? Do you want more sexual attention? What are your partner's needs? Instead of getting locked into positions over whether to cuddle in bed on Sundays, you and your partner can focus on how to get your needs fulfilled in other ways. Perhaps you can create special times throughout the week for relaxing together. Expanding the focus to include your underlying needs can open up a lot of possibilities.

What is Safety?

Excerpt from *Survivor's Guide to Sex*

Most people think of safety as a "feeling" of being safe. While this is one way to judge safety, it is not always reliable. You can be in a very safe situation and feel unsafe because you are dealing with an aspect of your abuse. Or, because you are a trauma survivor, you may be in an unsafe situation and feel just fine. While feeling safe is important, it does not necessarily give you reliable ground on which to determine if you are safe, or safe enough to proceed.

What tells you that you are safe?

1. How do you feel in your body?
2. Is your physical environment safe and free of violence and abuse? (No one is biting, kicking, punching, or pushing you. No one is calling you names or threatening you or anyone you care about.)
3. Does your partner, lover, or friend consider your needs, wants, and desires as important and relevant as his or her own?
4. Can your partner, lover, or friend really meet your needs? Does he or she have the know-how, the tools, and the good intention?
5. Do you have the power in this situation to act upon your own behalf? To take care of yourself fully?
6. Are you making your own choices? Not being pressured, pushed, or manipulated?

Asking yourself these questions gives you a way to assess whether or not you are safe- even when you do not necessarily feel safe.

Write about the following:

1. Take a sexual self-inventory. What have you experienced sexually up to now? What did you like? What did you not like? What do you know about your sexuality? What would you like to learn
2. Take a piece of paper and make three columns, titled "yes," "maybe," and "no." In the "yes" column, list all the sexual activities that you enjoy or think you would enjoy. In the "maybe" column, list all the sexual activities that you enjoy under certain circumstances or that you might be willing to try. In the "no" column, list all the sexual activities that you do not enjoy and do not want to explore. Include both masturbation and partner sex.
3. Imagine an activity that is physically pleasurable to you, enlivening to your senses. It could be walking on warm sand, feeling the breeze against your face, touching your partner, having oral sex. Imagine yourself in that scene now. What kinds of sensations are you feeling while you experience this specific pleasure?

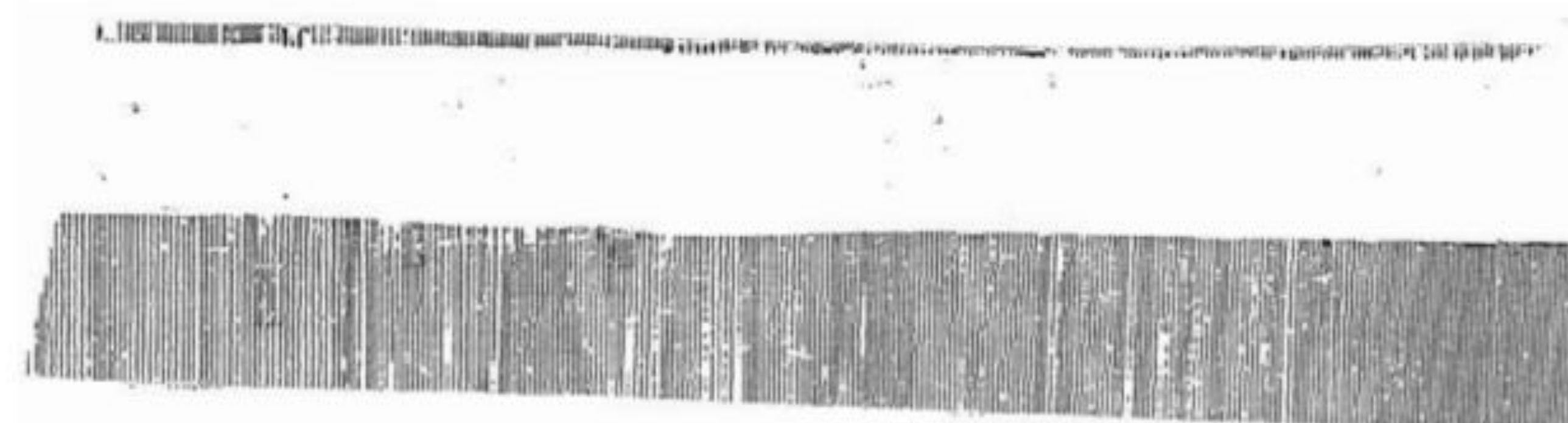
20. How do you react if someone becomes uncomfortable with what you're doing, or if they don't want to do something?
21. Do you think you've ever made people feel "unfun" or "unliberated" if they don't want to try certain sexual things? Do you think there are ways you act that might make someone feel that way even if it's not what you're trying to do?
22. Have you ever tried to talk someone into doing something they showed hesitancy about doing?
23. Do you ever try to bargain? (i.e. "if you let me _____, I'll do ____ for you")
24. Do you complain or threaten or sulk if you're not having the amount of sex or the kind of sex that you want?

25. When you're interested in someone, are you clear about your own intentions?
26. Have you ever tried to get yourself into situations that give you an excuse for touching someone (especially if you think they would say "no" if you asked?) e.g. dancing, getting really drunk around them, falling asleep next to them?
27. Have you ever misinterpreted someone's behavior or actions as flirtatious or inviting sexual contact?
28. Do you assume that if someone is affectionate they are probably sexually interested in you?
29. Do you think hesitancy can be a form of flirting?

30. How do you think drinking and drugs impacts consent?
31. Do you seek consent the same way when you are intoxicated as when you're sober?
32. Have you been sexual with people when you were intoxicated or when they were intoxicated? Have you ever felt uncomfortable or embarrassed about it the next day?
33. Has the person you were with ever acted weird to you afterward?
34. Do you think it is important to talk the next day with the person you've been sexual with if there has been drinking involved? If not, why not?
35. Do you think it's ever okay to initiate something sexual with someone who's sleeping or unconscious?

36. Do you initiate conversations about safe sex and birth control (if applicable)? How much (or little) detail do those conversations go into?
37. Do you worry about discussing these topics making things uncomfortable or ruining the mood?
38. Do you think that if one person wants to have safe sex and the other person doesn't really care, then it's the responsibility of the person who has concerns to provide safe sex supplies?
39. Do you think if a person has a body that can get pregnant, and they don't want to, it is up to them to provide birth control?
40. Do you complain or refuse safe sex or the type of birth control your partner wants to use because it reduces your pleasure?
41. Do you try to debate with your partner about these issues?
42. Do you take your partner's concerns about safe sex and/or birth control seriously? Where in your body do you feel them? How much pleasure or desire can you take in?
4. What sexual activity or fantasy would you like to try out? Be explicit. What's stopping you?

43. Do you think that if someone is promiscuous that makes it okay to objectify them, or talk about them in ways you normally wouldn't?
44. If someone is promiscuous, do you think it's less important to get consent?
45. Do you think if someone dresses a certain way it makes it okay to objectify them?
46. If someone dresses a certain way do you think it means they want your sexual attention or approval?
47. Do you view sexuality and gender presentation as part of a whole person, or do you consider those to be exclusively sexual aspects of people?
48. Do you think only men abuse?
49. Do you think that in a relationship between people of the same gender, only the one who is more masculine abuses?
50. Do you assume that each person who fits a certain perceived gender presentation will interact with you in the same way?
51. Do you find yourself repeating binary gender behaviors, even within queer relationships and friendships? How might you make others feel?
52. Are you usually attracted to people who fit the traditional standard of beauty as seen in this country?
53. Are you primarily attracted to people with a certain kind of gender, race, ethnicity, body type, age range etc.? Why? Do you ever fetishize people because of those characteristics?
54. What sexual stereotypes can you think of about people of a certain gender, race, ethnicity, body type, etc.? Do you believe them?
55. Do you ever look at how you interact with people or how to treat people, positive or negative, and where that comes from/ where you learned it?
56. Are you uncomfortable with your body or your sexuality?
57. Do you think people need to take things more lightly?
58. Do you think these questions are repressive and people who look critically at their sexual histories and their current behavior are uptight and should be more "liberated"?
59. Do you think liberation might be different for different people?
60. Do you think there is ongoing work that we can do to end sexual violence in our communities?



If you can get through any of these scenarios, regardless of how they go, you should pat yourself on the back, give yourself a hug and treat your self to something sweet, because you just took a really big step and exercised a LOT of bravery.

All of these scenarios are vague starters to doing really hard work. But, if you are committed to change and radical revisioning of how we interact with one another, you've got to be committed to consent. The culture of consent is one which we are all responsible for shaping. Commitment to consent does not mean being the make-out police, being a stick in the mud, being overly sensitive, or any other hoo-ha type of myth that you might think of. The moment of an assault and the painful aftermath has a ripple effect through the community and reveals how interconnected we all are to each other; tangled up in matrices of relation to one another. While we often see how harm to one or a few touches so many of us, the reverse is true as well. Positive, trusting, respectful, creative relationships and friendships are part of our survival. This tangible type of love is what moves us closer and closer to collective liberation. Our liberation, autonomy, and progress are bound up in each other. We need every member of our big beautiful community to flex those muscles of compassion, thoughtfulness and integrity. Once you practice and learn yourself within the context of consent, you may be able to tap into creativity, confidence and communication you never thought possible. And we don't know what's hotter than that...

ways to start...

- + "I know we just met, but I really want to talk to you about this..."
- + "So, I make it a real priority for myself to be upfront with people I meet..."
- + "I'm really excited to be friends/organizing buddies with you, so I want to start right."

then maybe,

"In the past, I've violated/crossed boundaries. Talking to people about it is part of my process/ way of staying accountable. If you want to talk more about it, I'm open." (then of course, follow up and be available to talk with them if you say you will).

3. POTENTIAL HOOK UP

why it's important:

- it is NOT consensual if they don't know all the information they might need to make an informed decision.
- you are establishing trust.
- you are setting the scene for all kinds of other important communication that should take place around sex (sharing pertinent health information, using barriers, checking in about boundaries, checking in about gender/body identity, etc.)

a potential date or hook up is upon yall. here's the scenario:

The two of you have been around the same scene for a while, but really hit it off at a puppet workshop. You were both flirting with each other via your puppets. It was totally hot and adorable. Now you're back at their house after drinking tea. There have been some deliberate hand squeezes, arm brushes, and lots of flirty talk. You kiss...

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here are some ways to start...

- + "I'm into you/ I want to do XYZ with you/ this feels good. But before we go any further, I want to check in about a couple things..."
- "In the past I've broken peoples' boundaries, and I'm really committed to talking about that and making sure it never happens again..."
- "I think consent is hot and important. I want you to know that I'm working on respecting peoples' boundaries and bodies and I have a history of struggling with that. I'm open to talking about that now or some other time, but I want you to know that."
- "I want you to know that I wouldn't be here if I didn't trust myself to seek out and respect your boundaries..." (If you can't honestly and confidently say this, you should NOT be intimate with other people.)

queers, kissing and accountability

By Shannon Perez-Darby

I have this muscle memory of distrust. My first instinct is to pull away; it's to push you away. I want to distrust you,

I want you to push a little further because that's familiar

because, "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't..." or however that goes. I want to learn how to do it differently. I want to teach my body another way of being. For me all of this learning, sex, abuse, power, crossed boundaries, panic attacks and anxiety, it all lives inside my body. My body reacts from its memory, from the ways it's learned to be.

So how do I do it differently? I work at a domestic violence organization and my job is essentially to talk about relationships. My job is healing and triggering all at once. When I think back to crossed boundaries, to consent, to the moments I've been asked about what I want, how I want to be touched and how I don't want to be touched my answer is silence more often than not.

You can ask for consent, be willing to hear yes and no, you can be engaged and present but if I'm too hurt to sit with you, to sit in my body with my responses and feelings then where does that leave me? When I think about accountability I think about all the ways I've learned to go along with it, to make things easy and to not make waves. There are so many moments when it's easier to say nothing, to not have to speak up or define my edges for you. I get to hide in the blurriness. It feels less scary to say nothing and pickup the pieces inside of myself than say no and have to discover where I start and you stop. I get lost in the messy places between us and that's not love and that's not accountability. For me accountability is showing up with my whole self, it's being present and brave enough to actually be somewhere with someone instead of hiding in my own insecurities, fear and internalized shit. I want to do better than hiding. I know I can do better than sort of showing up.

As someone who mostly has sex with other folks socialized as girls, communication around consent in my life and communities is different than how I was taught growing up. For me, being a homo has meant a shift in how I understand my role when it comes to sex. When I was younger I was less of an active participant in the sex I was having and more of a referee. I never said "touch me here" or "I like it like this" but instead let whatever boy I was kissing do whatever he thought was sexy and my job was to make sure it never went too far over the (my) line. I was a gatekeeper always guarding whatever felt like the most vulnerable part of myself. Generally, by the time I was willing to use my voice we were several steps ahead of where I actually wanted to be. I would wait until the scales tipped, until whatever sexy place we were going was scarier than saying "stop."

When I think about these interactions I'm filled with all of these contradictory things. I would call some of these experiences coercive and I struggle with the language all of the time. These are the moments when accountability feels muddled. I believe the guys I was having sexual interactions with were doing the best they could. I believe that they wanted to have mutually pleasurable sex and that they wished the best for me. For me it doesn't feel like an answer to say that they were all jerks or "evil perpetrators" that I then get to demonize. I believe that the men I was being sexy with had some pretty shitty skills and fucked up expectations and they didn't know how to do it better, which doesn't mean that they shouldn't be accountable for their actions but they also shouldn't be demonized for them either. When we make people evil it dehumanizes everyone.

I'm not sure how much energy it makes sense to put into this idea because then again I'm centering on them on their experiences and not mine. But I do want to push my communities to look at community accountability models. I'm not sure we have all of the skills to be enacting sustainable community accountability models at this exact moment but I think we can be talking more about sexual assault within our own radical communities and how we extend the values of community, social justice and anti-oppression into our conversations around consent and accountability in our sexual interactions.

Saying that I don't want to demonize the people who have been sexually coercive has become easier to talk about because for the most part these interactions are far away, they're in the past and none of these guys are in my life anymore. We were working off of this hetero script that says that guys are the drivers, they will go as far as they can with a girl and it's the girls job to be the breaks, always guarding against men who will try to get as much as they can from her sexually unless we put a stop to it. This script is a setup for everyone. It's a setup for the folks doing masculinity because there is no space to have a full range of emotions, to not want to have sex, or to feel anything other than sex crazed, always looking for and wanting sex. It's a setup for women because whatever happens is our fault. Either we don't say anything and silence is consent or we say speak up and we are trouble makers or prudes.

I don't want to setup a false dichotomy that straight men are inherently coercive and queers are radical and thus having only equitable (sexual) relationships because that's not true, and that idea is getting in the way of creating community accountability models. Homos protect the fucked up things we do to each other and it's scary to talk about because what if that proves all of the fucked up things homophobic society says about us? What if we can't have equitable relationships? What if we are pedophiles? What if we really can't have healthy relationships? Not talking about it is not keeping us safe, it's keeping us isolated and it's making sure that we perpetuate the same shitty coercive dynamics that we have learned. It means that when coercion and sexual assault happens in our queer communities we don't talk about it, we internalize our oppression and we stay hidden.

Ok, let's go through three potential scenarios of disclosure. The first, is disclosing to a friend or people that you know well in a non romantic way. The second, is disclosing to a new friend; someone you don't know very well who you don't have a romantic relationship with. The third is how to talk to someone about your past right before you might cuddle/make-out/ have sex/ play/ do-it with.

1. YOU KNOW THEM WELL

why it's important:

- so they hear it from you before they hear it somewhere else.
- this is a crucial way to be accountable to your community.
- you are doing important, hard work of disclosure. You are deepening your trust. And hey, after you make the first move in your vulnerability, maybe they will feel brave enough to share something with you...
- your own healing. Keeping a big scary secret can eat away at you.

your pal/housemate: here's the scenario...

It's a lazy Sunday morning. You are both awake, sipping tea while you cook a leisurely breakfast. The conversation moves into talking about dates and sex. Now might be the time... Starting the conversation might be the hardest part. Here are some ideas for how to start:

- + "I've been wanting to talk to you about something that's going on with me..."
- + "Listen, I want you to hear this from me..."
- + "I'm working hard to be accountable to my community, people I care about. I care about you. Part of that is talking openly and honestly about behavior I've asserted in the past..."

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2. YOU DON'T KNOW THEM WELL

why it's important:

- * while it may feel riskier to disclose to someone that you don't have established trust with, or it may feel irrelevant because they aren't in your immediate friend group it is important to disclose anyway... *
- you do not want to repeat the experience of violating boundaries by withholding information.
- a radical goal we have is to break the cycle of assault. It starts here...

a new friend/ potential organizing buddy. here's the scenario:

Your hanging out at the park eating plums. Your hands and faces are kind of sticky, but you're still having a good conversation. They are a new buddy, but someone you are obviously going to be spending time with. There's a lull...

Now onto the details! A great way to prepare to talk about consent is by role playing. Having a few handy ways to open conversation is both empowering and an effective way to make sure consent conversations happen. We offer a few specific scenarios below—practice these conversations alone, with a trusted friend, or even in a group of other folks who all want to become better communicators at a consent party. Think about them, write them down, speak them aloud.

Disclosure is hard. Let's be up front about that. It's hard for a lot of reasons:

- 1) We may feel shame. Ashamed of the actions we made, ashamed of how we hurt someone, ashamed that we didn't know what we were doing. Ashamed that we did know what we were doing.
- 2) Sex negativity is pervasive! Often, talking about an incident of sexual assault means we have to skate near or on top of the icy issue of S-E-X. Yikes! Even in cultures and communities where dishing about sex is accepted or encouraged, most of us have been exposed to negative messages about sex for most of our lives! This can make us feel disgraced, dirty, humiliated, and exposed, and not in the good way...
- 3) Fear of losing friends/dates. It is a very real possibility that once you talk to some folks about your past, they will feel nervous, angry, scared, or confused. Fear of losing friends or potential dates is totally valid fear.
- 4) Killing the vibe. It might be hard to imagine a steamy moment with a new friend or date. Where the music is perfect, the sound of the passing trains is so picturesque, y'all are getting each others' humor, your hands naturally fall into just the right top/bottom position, it's awesome! How do you bust that vibe with something as heavy as your sexual assault past? Well, like we said earlier, folks used to (and lots still do...) say the same thing about condoms. But there are infinite ways to be creative and smooth while remaining honest and for real. And hey, what's a bigger turn on than bangin' communication skills? No seriously, nothing.

One more thing: These conversations can go a million different ways. It's important to remember that you can't control the reaction and feelings of the person/people you are talking to. Focus on your own goals for this conversation. Your goals might include: staying honest, not omitting certain information, just getting through what you want to say, speaking calmly, etc. However, you should be ready for reactions. The person/people you tell might feel upset, mad, supportive, sad. They might not want to talk about it. Additionally, this might be much bigger than one conversation over tea. However this goes, it is important that you allow them to have that reaction. Take a deep breath and just be brave...

I want more models for the relationships and kinds of sex I want to be having in my life. Sometimes the queers in my life pretend that we're more radical than coercion and abuse, that this stuff doesn't affect us, and that it doesn't seep into our sex lives and relationships. Pretending that I'm more "down" than you, that I'm more radical and liberated reinforces the same stuff I'm trying to unlearn. It makes us feel like we are not enough. I'm tired of us all feeling like we're not ok. What would it look like to believe that we could do it another way, that we could do it a million other ways? What would our sexual interactions look like if we believed that we were ok, if we were allowed to be our whole selves, if we saw ourselves as whole? What would it look like to be able to sit with our fears and to engage in a process of accountability with each other? What if we were able to show up in a centered, solid, whole, and graceful way? What would accountability look like? What would we need to even imagine this?

The scariest thing I can think to say to someone that I'm having sex with is that I don't want to have sex. What does my accountability process look like around this? What does consent look like when I'm not even sure I could tell you no? I don't think this is the most loving way I can show up. When our scripts shift and I'm the one touching you, I'm initiating sex and I'm no longer the brakes but actively engaged then what does consent look like? All of a sudden my responsibility shifts. I've trained myself to go with the flow and now I have a more equitable role in asking how you like to be touched, how you don't want to be touched, what's too light and what's not hard enough and not just once but all the time, it's a constant process of engagement. When I look at this power shift it's a re-envisioning of the sex I had when I was younger. I can feel the complexity and layers to the ways that we learn how to treat each other. You can have someone's best intentions in mind and that doesn't mean that you won't fuck up. That's the scariest thing, sometimes when it comes to crossing people boundaries it doesn't matter where your heart is. That is to say that we can be trying our best and still cross each other boundaries.

That's not to say that intention isn't important. Intention sometimes makes the difference in my healing process but mostly my experience has been that I can't really know what's happening for other folks. We have a lot invested in people that perpetrate sexual assault as evil villains and people that are surviving sexual assault as perfect angels. This narrative hurts us all because it's not about good or evil but about power. Often we get power without asking for it and giving power away can feel counter intuitive because it's something we're not taught to do and have almost no models for. Mostly people who have power and privilege don't necessarily feel like they do. So if coercion is generally about power and most people that have power don't feel like they do then where does that leave us when we're trying to negotiate sex; when we're talking about consent, how to say yes and how to say no? How do we know when we have the power, how do we figure out how to shift power dynamics and what do we do when we use our power (intentionally or not) in fucked up ways? How do we hear and respond when someone says they're not feeling heard or that they feel like their lines have been crossed? How do we honor what an amazing thing it is that someone is even able to say that at all?

Accountability is a process and part of that process is screwing up. That's so scary and so real because when the stakes are this high screwing up doesn't really feel like an option. But what if instead we see accountability as a process we get to engage with when we fuck up, that fucking up is going to happen and instead of denial and hiding, instead of saying that we didn't know any better (whether that's true or not) we apologize, figure out what was going on for us, what places inside of us our actions are centered in and then figure out what we're going to do about it. Because screwing up is a part of the deal but that doesn't mean we get to fuck up in the same way over and over again. We engage so we don't keep fucking up in the exact same ways. I want to fuck up in totally new ways.

In order to do this we have to be coming from a place where we assume that people are trying their hardest and where people really are trying they're hardest. Because the reality is that people do really shitty things to each other all of the time and frankly I don't know how to make sense of that. As a survivor of abuse, as a domestic violence advocate, as a friend and a person in community with other people I've seen and heard some of the really shitty awful things that people do to each other. Folks call us all of the time with really heavy hard stories and those are true and real and everyone makes sense of their experiences and finds healing in ways that are real for them. I feel like I can't say it too much, healing is a process.

Accountability is not taking all of the responsibility and apologizing forever. We all know the script; someone screws up and when they're called on it their response is, "It's all my fault, how could I do this, I am a terrible person, how could you even like me?" In this script the person who didn't necessarily mess up ends up comforting the person who is trying to be accountable. It's a way of looking like we're being accountability without actually having to apologize and look at our actions. Sometimes this seems almost like accountability but really it's a mask that keeps us from sitting with ourselves and getting real about what's going on with us. I choose to believe that the people in my life are doing the best they can. That doesn't mean that they get to treat me badly or do shitty things. Holding this complexity has often been very painful for me, jumping from unearned trust in people who keep crossing my boundaries and not respecting me to martyrdom, so that someone fucks up I keep throwing myself into the fire saying, "they're doing the best they can". I believe there can be a place in between, a place where I can be real with myself and present for the constant engagement it takes to be good to the people in my life and demand respect and kindness.

Another piece of the consent puzzle specific to perpetrators is disclosure. If someone does not have all the relevant information, they cannot give informed consent. Negotiating sexual contact in the present DOES include an assault in your past. This is really difficult to talk about, and also completely necessary. Once again, if you don't feel like you can negotiate that conversation, you should rethink your decision to be in a given romantic or sexual encounter. It's pretty simple: NOT disclosing BEFORE hooking up means you aren't engaging in full consent.

We must take a moment here to offer the following disclaimer: disclosure must fit in with the needs of the survivor first. Sexual assault for a survivor equals a loss of control. A survivor loses the ability to determine what happens to their body & surroundings. A huge part of the process of healing is regaining that lost sense of control. A perpetrator's accountability process must serve that imperative—if you disclose details about the assault that the survivor doesn't want communicated, you are repeating the violation.

There are ways to talk about consent and sexual assault without naming names or breaking boundaries, and we'll offer some suggestions below.

It is up to you to figure out what kind of disclosure is within a survivor's boundaries. If you don't know, you could explicitly ask them (if that would be appropriate), or see if you can find out through your collective support networks. If you don't know and can't find out, err on the side of caution. You can talk about having a history of breaking boundaries, and offer people the opportunity to ask more questions about what that looked like, without divulging sensitive details like names. Make sure you warn people in advance if you talk about details that might be triggering—you might be speaking to another survivor!

Talking about your history with perpetrating sexual assault is important for many reasons. Being accountable to your actions and your community means owning your mistakes and working hard to restore trust. This trust goes beyond partners or potential dates. It exists among friends, housemates, comrades, and folks with whom you do organizing work and activism.

We are doing this work because it's worth it; because we believe that radical change is not just possible, but necessary. Because we are struggling with oppression and injustice everyday and because that change and that possibility begins with ourselves; with our own relationships to each other. Because without genuine love, compassion and trust, we are all screwed.

as a perpetrator, you can not deal with sexual assault without improving your communication skills. If you can't communicate your boundaries, ask about someone else's boundaries, and act appropriately once you know a person's boundaries, you shouldn't be in romantic relationships. We also want to emphasize that good communication and consent do NOT only apply to folks you have romantic and sexual relationships with. Trust and boundaries are key elements of any sort of relationship, whether it's based on friendship, organizing, work, kinship and/or romance. You have abundant opportunities to practice!

The most basic things to know & remember about consent are:

1) YOU ARE NEVER ENTITLED. You aren't entitled to sex or people's bodies or minds. You aren't entitled to sex because someone gave their consent last time, or it seems like they want it. It's your job to make sure that you & your partner's boundaries are on the table and respected, every time.

2) You DO deserve positive, fulfilling sexual experiences. The shame and stigma around assault can be overwhelming. People are greater than any of their individual actions—you are not solely defined by it, but you are accountable for it.

This can't be said without repeating: YOU ARE NEVER ENTITLED

When you are tearing apart the negative patterns and poor communication that lead up to an assault, it can be overwhelming to imagine what getting consent actually entails. This is especially true in the heat of the moment, when you are face to face with a person you're interested in having romantic or sexual contact with. You should carefully and SPECIFICALLY think out your plan to talk about consent BEFORE you're in the sack with someone. If you do, you will be more likely to communicate clearly and less apt to cling to silence and shame. You should also make consent of all types a part of your relationships with all sorts of people—it's important to have consensual honest relationships across the board, and to be intentional as you create them.

We know that it's impossible to enter every situation knowing exactly what you want or what to expect—unpredictability is a part of what's exciting about any kind of relationship. The more you can be intentional about what you want out of a relationship or encounter, however, the easier it will be to navigate it with integrity. We've heard lots of perpetrators say, in the aftermath of an assault, "I didn't mean for things to happen the way they did." It's likely that a lot of people, after they've made mistakes, certainly regret it and would do it differently if they could. Knowing what acting with intention feels like is a key piece of healthy relationships for everybody, and maybe especially people with a history of sexual assault.

ASK

here are some ways to ask in the heat of the moment. but don't forget talking about it when you're not half naked is always better

may i _____?
touch _____?
kiss _____?
put my _____?

Are you into this?

How are you feeling?

What would you like me to do?

I think it's hot when my partner does _____ to me.

What do you like?

Would you like it if i _____?

Where do you see this going?

What should I look for if you start to shut down?

DEFINE

how do you define consent?

write it down

and keep it in your pocket

HOMEWORK

write a list of your goals for future sex and then write how to achieve them.

keep it in your pocket

write a list of current boundaries
keep it in your pocket

Reimagining Connection through using CONSENT

A short guide to the revolution of consent culture

Created by Carey French

What is consent?

(and why does it matter?)

Consent is often defined as an **enthusiastic yes**: spoken in the absence of coercion, intimidation, or drugs or alcohol.

I like to define consent as **mutual agreement**. (All parties are informed and free to make a voluntary choice.)

What is your definition?

Consent is....

Consent matters

because without asking questions and making agreements, we end up making assumptions about what's ok and what's not ok -- and too often these assumptions lead to harm in the form of crossed boundaries and violation.

When we build our skills of practicing good consent, we radically shift the non-consensual world we live in by affirming and respecting each other's agency and autonomy!

WOO HOO!

Sounds simple, right? Well...

There's some things that make consent complex... like **power**.

[Power: the ability to influence.]

When unbalanced power dynamics exist, our ability to give and receive consent is compromised. (It is tough to say **no** to someone who holds more power if I fear the consequence of that **no**.)

AND IF NO IS NOT AVAILABLE, YES IS NOT VALID.

Power shows up between students and teachers, and employees and bosses -- but we also hold power when we have privilege attached to our social identities like: white, middle-class, male, cis-gendered, citizenship, straight.

What are some ways that you hold power/privilege?

THE BASICS by Philly Stands Up

There are lots of folks who aren't familiar with the deliberate practice of getting consent. Some people know about it, but assume it applies only to people who've assaulted someone.

And many folks who talk about consent publicly still think to ourselves, "Shit, I probably should check in about consent every time I get busy, but it's not fun or sexy; it sounds like a big old drag!"

Learning the vocabulary of consent is like learning a foreign language. At first, you can spend a lot of time groping for words and awkwardly putting sentences together. These are the basics! Persistent practice will give you confidence to be creative, and you will eventually become fluent & able to express yourself in a way that feels less forced.

Discussions about consent echo similar ones folks were having at the beginning of the AIDS crisis—the initial resistance to using condoms gave way as it became clear safer sex could keep people alive. Today, condoms, gloves, dental dams and safer sex are a normal part of people's sexual lives and our shared dialogue about sex. Consent is a huge piece of healthy, affirming and safe sexuality, and we want to see consent check-ins become as normal as rubber and latex in public discourse and private practice.

When it comes to the actual mechanics of talking about consent, there are no set answers. Writing this article, we were continually struck by the ongoing nature of the work. It's a process, and it can be a struggle. We're peeling back layers of silence and shame about sex—it can seem terrifying. We're inspired to keep moving because we're excited for a world without sexual assault, where all sex is consensual, and people communicate their boundaries honestly in all of their relationships.

Philly Stands Up works with perpetrators of sexual assault. Our definition of assault is very broad—we roughly define assault as a situation where people's boundaries are violated, and there is a huge spectrum of actions that fit into our definition. Everyone needs to work on developing their consent vocabulary, but for perpetrators, it is especially important, since a perpetrator has failed to get consent in the past.

It is appropriate & necessary in the aftermath of sexual assault for a perpetrator to go to Consent 101. We made up that term to describe the learning process we talked about at the beginning of the article—in Consent 101 you are exploring the fundamental ideas and language of consent and communication; the basics, the main ideas, how it feels to practice consent and develop your consent vocabulary. This process can look really different in different circumstances, but we want to emphasize that,

Here are some of the questions our workshop asks that you might want to think about yourself, with a group of friends or with sex partners. These aren't questions with "one right answer" but just ways to get thinking about the topic:

- How do you give yourself or someone else space to figure out what you/they want?
 - How do you know when someone else is consenting?
 - Have you interpreted passivity or silence as consent?
 - How do you react when someone expresses non-consent?
 - How can you communicate about STT's? When might be a good time to bring this up?
 - What power dynamics might factor into communication and consent? (privilege, gender, sexual preferences, size, race, age, class, power, sexual histories, sex-worker status)
- How can we talk about histories of sexual assault?
- What's hot about consent? How can we incorporate clear consent into "doin' it" and make it fun and erotic?
 - What are some key elements that need to be taken into account in a radical definition of consent?
 - How do power and privilege relate to our ability to give, receive, and understand consent?
 - How does inebriation affect consent giving/asking?

How does this relate to our larger political goals as a health collective and as activists? We want to see our society transformed into one based on consent and not coercion. We view this as one small piece of that. This is an ongoing process in understanding our desires and boundaries and communicating this with others. We encourage you to talk about this in your communities, to break down barriers to talking openly about this.

With great **power** comes **great responsibility**.

So what do we do when we have more power than someone else?

- Leave people room to physically exit an interaction
- Leave lots of room for a "no." ("It's totally ok to say 'no'...")
- Try expressing interest and then leaving, to give space for them to decide and choose to engage.
- Sometimes, NOT pursuing anything sexual is best!

What if someone says **no**?

(we don't have to take it personally!)

No can be a scary thing to hear. Turns out it's also a hard thing to say! (the more we practice saying and hearing **no**, the easier it gets!)

When someone says **no**, REMEMBER: They are saying **YES** to themselves. They are also sharing their authentic boundaries with you, which is a brave thing -- and a gift!

When you get a **no**, you can try saying: "Thank you for taking care of yourself."

Boundaries: What are they?

Our boundaries mark the edges between what is ok for us and not ok for us. We can get more familiar with our boundaries by feeling into our bodies and noticing sensations that communicate comfort or discomfort in response to situations.

Verbal AND non-verbal cues!

Look for...

- leaning away
- leaning toward
- smiling/laughing (sometimes smiling indicates comfort, and sometimes it can cover up for discomfort... notice it!)
- crossed arms
- looking around

Disclose important information!

"I'm sick." "I'm really high."
 "I have an STI."
 "I'm married and in an open relationship"

Try asking...

Can I take a picture of you?
 Would you like to share a hug?
 I'd like to kiss you... What are your boundaries around?

The skills of practicing good consent are revolutionary! When we:

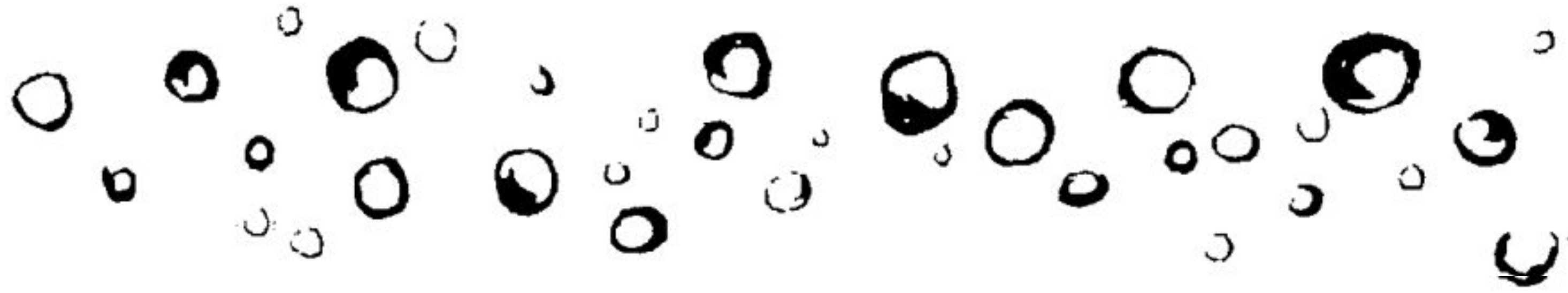
- Recognize our power and minimize the effects
- Ask rather than assume
- Know our boundaries and communicate them
- Receive a no gracefully
- Remember that we can always change our minds

WE CREATE SAFE & MUTUALLY EMPOWERING CONNECTIONS!!

blocks to communication

- What Triggers Look Like

For good, sexy consent, it's important that everyone involved to be present -- meaning with it and available. Besides cultural influences that we've discussed, a couple of things can get in the way of that. Be aware of the ways that substance use impacts folks' ability to communicate. Emotional and physical states play a role, too; stress, sleepiness, mental health, and illness are all important to check in about. Additionally, a person's experiences and history can also cause difficulty with communication. Shutting down or "freezing up" in a sexual situation is one of the most pervasive side effects of abuse, and sadly sometimes leads to more boundary violations if the other person isn't aware of it. Remember that consent is the continual presence of a yes, not the absence of a no. If it's going hot and heavy and the other person doesn't say anything but suddenly seems less present -- stop and check in. People who have been assaulted or abused often have triggers, and when these are tripped, the person will often "check out" and mentally go somewhere else. A trigger response is when some kind of event or stimulus causes a person to respond in a way that either regresses them back to a time in which they were being abused or causes them to have a sudden, very intense emotional response. Physically this can look many different ways: a sudden quiet when there had been noise, going still or corpse-like, or staring off into space. Everyone's triggers look different so prior conversation can really help; but it's also important to be sensitive to where your partner's at.



So, what do you do for someone who's been triggered?

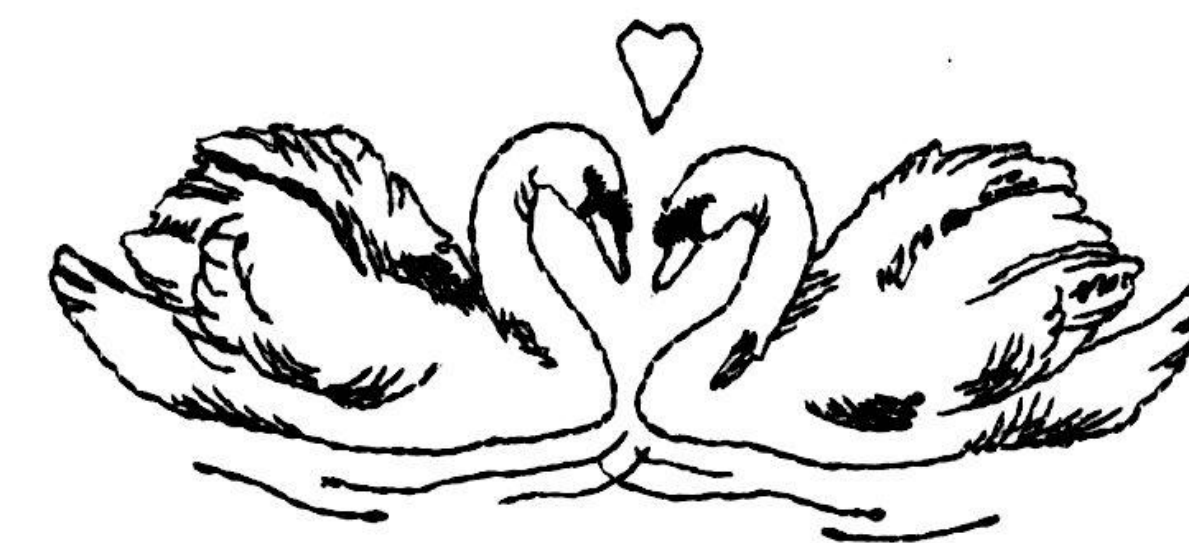
The most important thing is to try not to take it personally or demand to know what you've done wrong. The focus needs to be on your partner in this situation. Triggers remind people of a time they lost power, so they need to be the one calling the shots. Different things might be appropriate at different times; they might want you to leave or they might not want to be alone, they might want to talk about the memory and the past or they might want help staying present. Ask what they need. You can offer a couple suggestions if they don't know, but don't push. When triggers come up, it can be really important to talk about them, but not in bed. Wait until things calm down to check in about ways in which you can best be supportive.

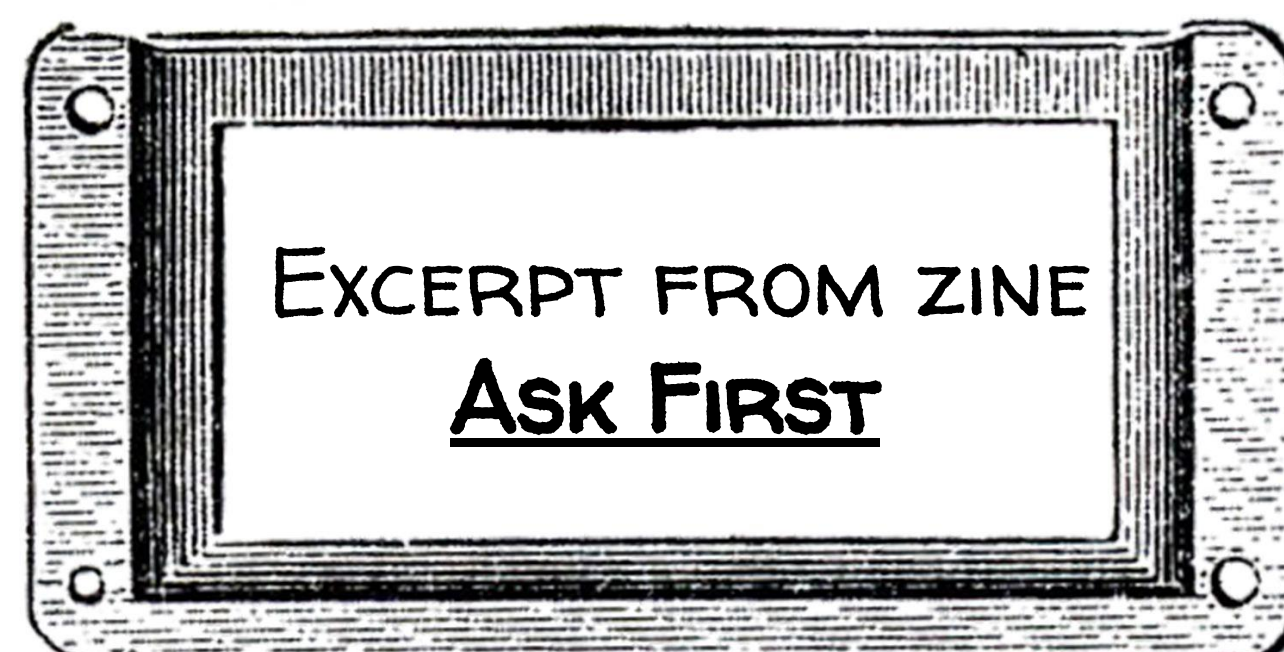
Remember that your partners are every bit as complicated as you are -- with unique histories, boundaries, and hang-ups. It is playing it safe to assume that someone could be a survivor of assault or abuse. If someone isn't a survivor of sexual violence, they are likely a survivor of one of the many other kinds of violence that are super pervasive in our society. We carry our life histories on and in our bodies, and we live in a culture that is violent upon our bodies and our desires, leading most of us to carry hangups about our bodies and violence in some form. So, regardless of someone's history, check in often about boundaries. Practicing this stuff gets easier, and allows us to focus on what we want instead of what we don't want.

If you can, try modeling the kind of communication you want to have happen. For example, you could say, "I wanted to let you know that I'm not comfortable with Is there anything you're not comfortable with?" Try to agree about language or actions to express "no" as soon as possible, like a hand on the shoulder or a safe word that has nothing to do with sex, like "potato." Some other ideas for facilitating consent "in the moment" are giving options, such as, "We could do this, or just this, or we could take a walk, get some food, etc." If the other person is not giving a clear yes, take a step back literally and figuratively. Ask, "What do you want, what would feel good to you?" rather than, "Can I do this?" or "Is this OK?"

Also, there are lots of ways to make talking about consent with a partner fun and HOT! The book *The Ethical Slut* has a great list of different sexy acts with boxes you can check on how you feel about them - ranging from "let's do that!" to "maybe one day but not now" to "never ever." Sharing responses can be fun. Some partners like to have a "fantasy journal" where each person writes down fantasies and they share them together. Other ideas are writing a letter, drawing a picture or diagramming hot zones and not so hot zones. Personally, I find verbal consent and communication very hot, when I know that the person yelling "yes, yes, yes" can and will say or communicate "no."

Having these conversations is an important part of being present in a relationship (even if it's just for a night) and letting the person you're with know that you care about them.



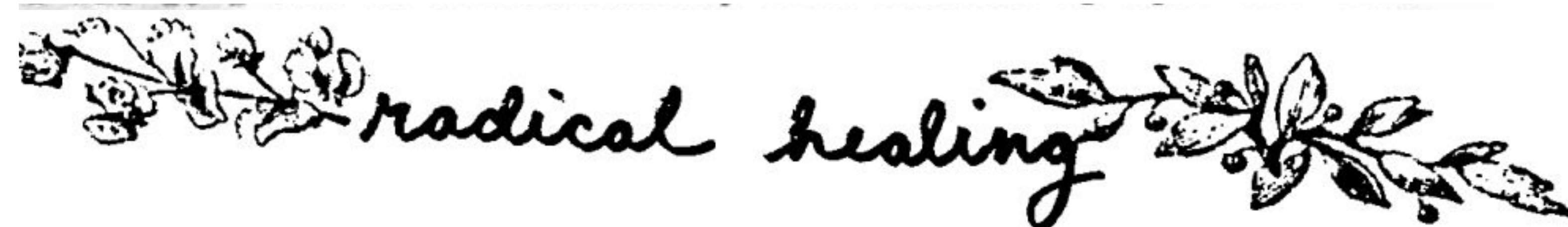


For me, consent always means a space free of pressure, expressing what we do and don't desire, and checking in regularly. And, of course, to have that hott, orgasmic yes, there always has to be the space to comfortably say no to stuff that is not hot for me!

If you are trying to open up the subject of consent with a partner, here are a few suggestions. Think about what you want: What are your boundaries? Desires? Needs? Set a time to talk when you both are feeling up for it and ideally when you're not "in the moment," so you can focus on the conversation. Try starting with checking in on how you're both doing and if it's a good time to talk about this. Next, you can try each sharing your views and ideas about consent and what it means. How do you like to communicate that you are into something-or not into it? Are there things that you are not comfortable with? What are your expectations for the relationship (both sexual and otherwise)? How do you feel about polyamory? What is your STI status? What kinds of birth control (if that's an issue) do you prefer?

Some of this can seem easier with a long-term partner or someone you know well. But, even in a casual hook-up it's still important to talk about consent. If it's your first time with someone try taking time to talk before things get too "hot and bothered." It may seem hard to bring up but the other person just might be glad you did. Try easy conversation starters like, "Do you wanna kiss me?" "I wanted to let you know that I really like you/think you're cute," "Before this goes to the next level I want to talk about STIs/what we're each comfortable with sexually /what you're interested in doing."

n terms of checking in with partners about -- What are some examples of things that are good to communicate to people you're dating, or new lovers, or long-term partners even? What are some things that you think would be important to check in with your lovers and partners about? What are things that you would want to have communicated to you?



We've talked a lot so far about how crucial it is to talk about your limits and desires, and to listen to the those of your partner(s). However, the experience of previously having your boundaries violated or denied can often make the already difficult task of talking about and defining your desires feel near impossible. It's easy to devalue your judgment and lose trust in yourself if you feel like your safety and needs have been disregarded by others.

A common response to sexual violence is for survivors to either put up a ton of boundaries or none at all. People might feel like they need to have a ton of control to make sure they stay safe, or they might give up control, so that they don't have to deal with the possibility of having someone else take that away again. If you don't set any limits then your limits can't be violated, right? While these are both totally reasonable and normal reactions, that's just what they often are -- reactions; ways to cope with an experience where power has been taken away.

Part of healing is taking that power back in way that offers more choice, that lets you get back in touch with what *you* want, and that helps you find the means to communicate that to others. In fact, learning what your boundaries are and how to communicate them is the first step to forming healthier sex relationships for everyone, regardless of whether you are a survivor or not, and whether you are negotiating a one-time playdate or a long term partner. Most of us need healing in some ways from the sexual culture we were brought up in. It's good to ask yourself about your default sexual behaviors, and to ask yourself how they are serving you. If you feel like you might want to stretch yourself, ask yourself what you would need to help you feel safe doing this. This isn't to say that you're not healed unless you can participate in any and all sexual activities, but rather that being able to take risks *and* maintain a sense of safety are great steps towards giving ourselves a whole range of experiences to choose from, and not be limited by past experiences of trauma. It comes down to choice -- are you choosing to do what you want (with your partner's consent)? Or are there constraints from past trauma? From cultural norms? From other internalized fears? Being able to choose what we need and want and to really respect other peoples' choices is a huge part of what makes healing possible, and is one small, radical way to stop cycles of abuse.



POSITIVE CONSENT FOR DUDES WHO GET IT ON WITH DUDES

By Nick Riotfag

I could feel his hard-on pushing through the front of his scraggly cut-off shorts, against my own swelling crotch. I was in a bit of a daze, electrified by his arousal, thirsting for the salty taste of his neck, intoxicated by the friction of our sweaty bodies throbbing against each other. Finally, the making out ebbed to a point when we each paused to breathe, smile and make eye contact. I was hot, I was horny, I was ready for anything. Just ask, I'm yours, take anything you want from me.

With his arms around my shoulders, my ass in his lap, and our eyes locked, he opens his lips, pauses - briefly in a smile, and murmurs in a gruff, soft, sexy voice:

"I'd really love to fuck you. But... I want to get to know you first."

Huh?

Hold on, back up. Maybe I should provide some context.

So I'm a punk and an anarchist, and I also identify as a queer guy. Well, moreso as gay, but I sometimes sleep with non-male people. So maybe as 'bi', but the gender binary is bullshit, and I feel much more identified with gay culture... or something. It's complicated. In any case, I've largely dated and slept with men, and I came out as queer and started participating in queer culture and activism before the punk/anarchist scene became my primary "home." In punk/anarchist scenes, I found the passionate political engagement, the unapologetic rejection of the mainstream, the fierce music, and the lifestyle that feels most compatible with my needs and desires. At the same time, even if I feel more at home at a squat or basement house show than at a mainstream gay bar, it gets old having most of my anarchist male friends be totally straight, or "queer" in a way that doesn't involve dating men, least of all me. So I've always felt like I have one foot in each of these two very different scenes, and never really able to exist only in one without the other. This subcultural split has been the primary influence on the development of my sex life and how I experience and practice consent.

Some pretty significant differences exist between mainstream gay male sexual culture and that of punk/anarchist communities. As I think through my experiences, my desires, the norms and values held around sex, I can see how each community has shaped me differently. I recognize that each one has left me with certain things that I cherish, and certain things that I'm still struggling to overcome. Since I'm assuming, rightfully or not, that the readers of this DIY zine will probably have more context for punk/anarchist sexual culture than mainstream gay male sexual culture, I'm going to focus more on the latter, in hopes of showing some of the influences that have shaped me and some of the things that gay/bi male experiences can offer in learning about the complexities of consent. But first...

...Some thoughts on punk/anarchist sexual culture, consent, and queer men

In my opinion, the courageous kids who've pushed punk/anarchist scenes and communities to recognize sexual violence and transform norms around consent have begun to create a genuine shift in our shared culture. Over the past years of my involvement in this motley world of travelers and rabble-rousers, I've experienced significant qualitative differences in my sexual interactions with folks who've been socialized within these settings versus folks who haven't. Namely, I've found the punk/anarchist folks who've found their way into my pants to be notably more open to verbal consent and adept at practicing it (and finding it hot rather than mood-killing), less confined by gender stereotypes and narrow conceptions of what constitutes "sex", more comfortable with check-ins and communication about boundaries, and generally more compatible with my preferred style of getting it on.

Obviously, these are one person's experiences, and severe problems persist in every punk/anarchist community: continued belief in rape myths and survivor-blaming, "talking the talk" of feminism or consent while acting out the same shitty patterns, resistance to accountability or acknowledging abusive behavior, and innumerable other examples. Still, I've encountered so many steps in the right direction: the presence of consent-themed workshops and discussions at most radical gatherings, the widespread circulation of zines and writing about consent and positive sexuality, emerging reading/study/discussion groups to focus on these issues in more depth, solid collective structures for community accountability in towns and at gatherings... These and many other signs point towards a shift in our whole way of thinking about sex and consent. In particular, absorbing and applying the feminist principle of politicizing the personal by insisting that these conversations must be PUBLIC and COMMUNITY- WIDE ones, rather than privatizing them as just our own personal business, indicates that we as punks and anarchists are striving to radically change the way we collectively and individually do sex and consent.

Tool 2 Listening

Your sweetheart cannot read your mind. He simply can't. And you can't read his. When you try, you are in danger of hearing only your own desires echoing hollowly off of him. Listen to his words, not what you hope he will say. And be prepared to hear "no." Until you really get to know a person's likes and dislikes, you may hear a lot of "no"s. You'll probably hear plenty of "no"s even after years of dating.

More about listening: "No" means no, but so do other things, so pay attention. If your date is saying "Maybe," "I guess," "But we've been drinking," "I'm thinking about it," "Later would be nice," or anything except an adamant "YES!" then it means no. If you ask several times, and badger a yes out of her, it doesn't count. This is a very important point, and bears repeating. "YES!" means yes. Everything else means no.

Why be so narrow? Why does "Okay, um... sure," have to count as a no? First, because it can feel impossible to give a cold, hard "no," especially for people socialized as female. Second, because you don't want to accidentally hurt someone you have a crush on by mistaking ze's words. Don't get apprehensive. Your crush will say "YES!" when ze actually wants to do stuff.

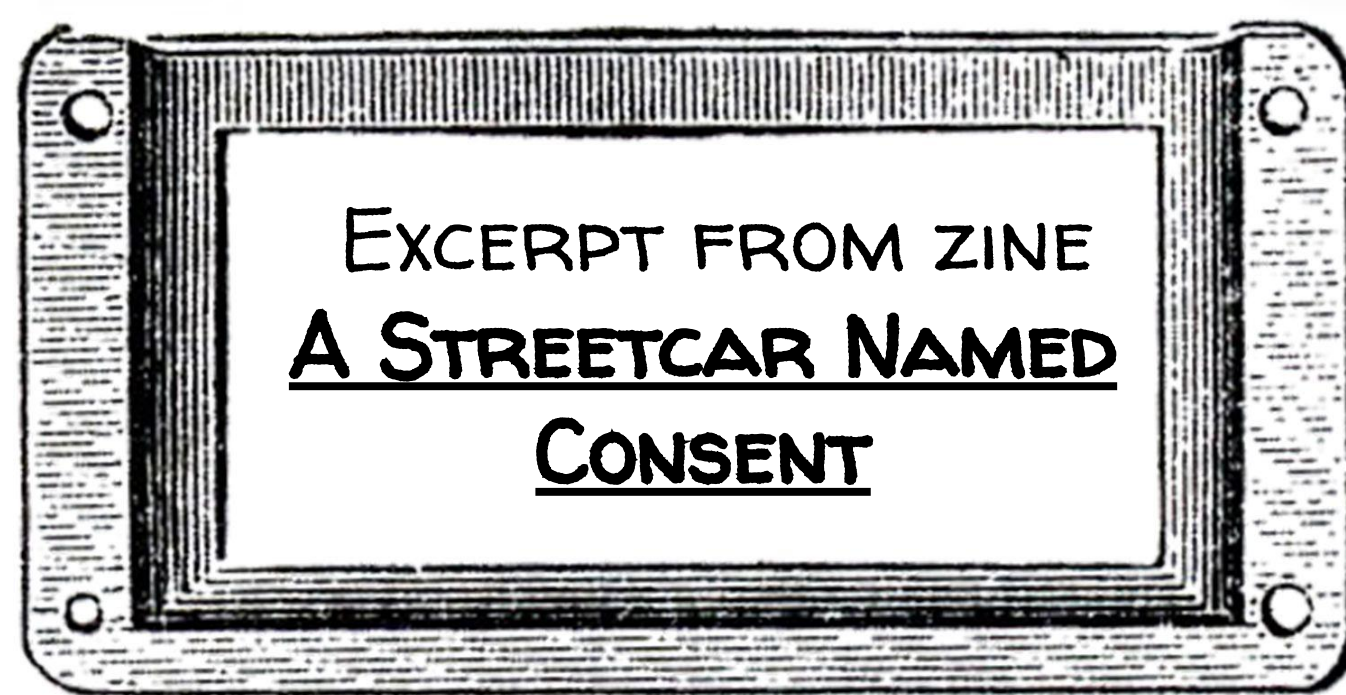
Tool 3 Checking in With the Other Person

Checking in begins with talking about what each of you wants or doesn't want from your romantic encounter. It can also include letting the other person know that you have assaulted someone in the past, or that you are an assault survivor. Checking in creates a time to say if you're feeling awkward, wary, sad, joyous, expectant or sensitive. Check-ins bolster confidence, define boundaries and prevent embarrassment. When someone is checking in with you, take all of his concerns seriously, even if they sound absurd to you.

Tool 4 Checking in With Yourself

Take moments here and there to check in with yourself. Are you sober? Is ze sober? Are you feeling safe? Are you really asking for consent? Are you saying one thing and meaning another? If you remember to check in with yourself, you are much more likely to find yourself happy and healthy in the morning.





Tools and tips for catching the consent train

By now, you are probably bursting with questions. What about a body-language “yes”? If I have to ask for consent several times in order to get a “yes,” is that okay? What if I hurt someone’s feelings? What if I can’t even say the word “boob” out loud without blushing? What if I’ve overstepped someone’s physical boundaries before? Will being sensitive to others make me less hot or studly?

Not all of your questions can be answered in this article. But we can provide you with four essential tools of consent, as well as some tips for making consent more fun and less daunting.

Tool 1 Asking

Always, always ask before making a move. Whether you’d like to put your arm around someone’s shoulder, give her a good night kiss or go down on her, ask first. Whether it is your first time with him or you have done it together dozens of times before, ask first. Whether ze is acting seductive or sweetly timid, ask first. Whether she invited you to her house or you rode her to your campsite on a tandem, ask first. Whether you are in love or not, ask first.

Ask in words, not with a questioning hand or a raised eyebrow. Don’t ask silently through your special, romantic, moon-powered psychic connection to your lover. Ask in a way that leaves room for “no.” Ask open-ended questions. Ask before every move you make.

Some good ways to ask:

“What would you like to do?”

“Would you like to make out more or stop for now?”

“What is your ideal goodbye at the end of a date?”

“How far do you want to go right now?”

“Do you want me to...?”

Okay ways to ask:

“May I...?”

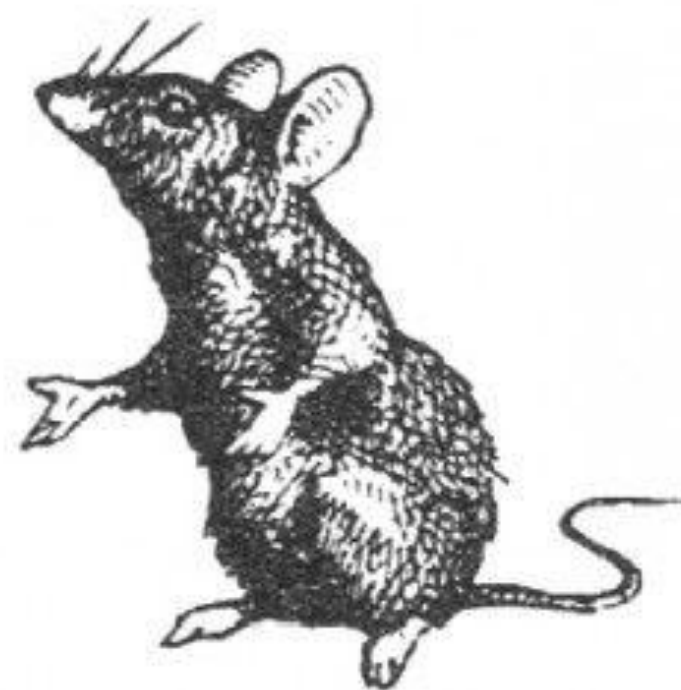
“Is it okay to...?”

A bad way to ask:

“I want to nibble your ear now, okay?”

On the Word “Ze”

Ze is a gender-neutral version of the pronouns “he” and “she.” Sometimes it is used as a way to get around having to choose either he or she. Other times, folks whose gender doesn’t fit the accepted male-female binary choose to use ze as a preferred pronoun.



So why hasn’t this trend translated into lots of hot punk dudes loving each other with verbal consent as an established norm? There are a couple of factors that I think play into this. For one, although there are certainly all kinds of exceptions to this, in general I’ve observed that predominantly non-male folks are leading this subcultural shift towards consent and challenging rape culture. Definitely many anarchy-feminist men are following along and participating actively in the movement to transform sexuality in more consensual directions, but I’ve encountered far fewer punk men who speak consent fluently than punk women, both sexually and in all sorts of interactions. So for me, as a guy who primarily sleeps with other guys, I much more often find myself in bed with someone who may have attended a consent workshop, but not someone who’s led one.

Until the norms around who takes seriously and gets involved in pro-consent organizing shift so that men see it as every bit as much of a priority, then I think that one outcome is that consent will remain under-emphasized amongst men who sleep with other men. Of course, this definitely doesn’t mean that men should be usurping the leadership of pro-consent organizing and education away from women (as has happened in so many organizations and struggles), but rather than men should recognize our responsibility and our stake in promoting and modeling consensual behavior in all areas of our lives, and participate equally in working towards that change on a community level.

And another unfortunate and frustrating dynamic that helps explain why punk/anarchist consent norms haven’t rubbed off on queer guys more is that many consent discussions, workshops, and such still frame sexual consent in really hetero terms. I’ve seen consent talked about as part of a man’s responsibility in protecting women, almost some kind of weird chivalry, rather than a mutual responsibility to be practiced reciprocally between partners of any gender. Even gender-neutral presentations are usually based on hetero experiences, and almost never refer to specifically same-sex situations. Now, don’t get me wrong - I recognize that a majority of sexual violence is committed by men, and directed against non-men. As such, it’s important to target straight men with the messages that will encourage them to act more consensually. Likewise, it makes sense that the people who are designing and communicating these messages, who in my experience are primarily women whose partners are most often straight men, would see a clear interest in encouraging their current and potential partners to think more about consent. But here’s the problem: the exclusion of queer relationships and same-sex sexuality from consent models means that we dude-loving dudes aren’t hearing really important messages that could transform our sexuality in positive ways. And this has a lot of negative consequences.

Even in my own life and sexual relationships, I have felt as if careful verbal consent was more necessary or important in sexual situations with women than with men. Why? I think it’s partly internalized homophobia - the idea that queer sex and relationships aren’t as important or as “real” as hetero ones, thus don’t require the same care and consideration between partners - and also partly because we as queer dudes almost never have pro-consent messages directed at us from the punk/anarchist world. I have had sexual interactions with men that felt considerably less communicative or consensual than what their other female partners would lead me to believe they should be. Likewise, I have seen kinds of harassment, objectification, and boundary-crossing directed from one man at another downplayed, laughed at, or even encouraged, when similar types of behavior directed by a man at a woman would be immediately condemned. Clearly, in spite of all of the positive progress in our community’s sexual norms around consent, we haven’t always managed to make these shifts relevant to queer men - and as I’ll talk about next, we don’t get much pro-consent support from gay male mainstream messages about sex, either. Along with the norms I learned from punk/anarchist partners and our infrastructure of consent zines, workshops, discussions, etc, I learned a lot of separate and often very different lessons about consent and sex from gay/bi male sexual culture.

What I’ve learned from gay/bi male sexual culture

From gay and bi men, I learned the crucial importance of safer sex practices. From as early as I came out, I had older mentors and peers who would talk with me openly about the pleasures and risks of sex, spaces and organizations where I could get condoms and lube, considerable awareness and education around HIV and other STDs and their transmission, and a historical sense of how incomprehensibly crushing the losses of the AIDS epidemic proved to gay and bi individuals and communities. I also learned to accept with minimal judgment the diversity of tastes and preferences people experience around sex, from BDSM to fetishes to sex with strangers or multiple partners. I learned that we could talk openly about intergenerational desire and sex without denial and sensationalizing. I learned that sex for sex’s sake can be found almost anywhere, in bars, on the street, in parks, online, and just about anywhere that men congregate. And I learned that no one can define my desires but myself, that together with my queer comrades we can reject everything the “experts” try to say about us, and that free, open expression of sexuality can be a part of a revolutionary struggle to transform society from the, ahem, bottom up. (tee hee...)

At the same time, I learned of a sexual consumerism of the worst variety: a system mediated through internet



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My suggestion is to learn how to be verbal about your needs. As a person who has been sexually assaulted, it took me a long time to learn how to talk about my abuse history and learn how to have a sex-posi attitude and now no one can take that back from me. I am not a victim. I have learned my strengths and how to fulfill my desires and I am pro-sex. And as far as I can tell, everyone has the ability to feel this way; it's not always easy, but it's possible! Sometimes therapy can really help and I say this with the knowledge that therapy can take many different forms. I found that one of the most important things for me was finding other friends to talk about sex with and learning how to share my experiences with others. Learn your triggers and how to articulate them, if you have them, it can really help in having healthier sex and helps to define boundaries.

Another issue that has come up a lot is consent and gender. While talking to many of male friends, it has come to my attention that in the heterosexual world particularly, consent is thought to be a male directed action. That men must always initiate sex and women say yes or no. I must admit that I am always in shock about this idea that women are not supposed to or don't initiate, but this assumption really does come up a lot. I'd like to just remind everyone that consent is not a gendered activity, in the het or queer scene. Consent is every individual's responsibility and communicating about sex is important no matter where you fall in the gender spectrum.

At this point, most of the discussions that I have about consensual sex are self-initiated. I have been practicing this kind of dialogue for long enough that I no longer find it embarrassing to talk about my sexual desires and boundaries with another person. Whether they are a one-night stand or a potential longer term lover, everyone gets the same speech. And it turns out that lots of people find it really hot to talk about what kind of sex they are going to be having before it happens. In most cases prior negotiations about sex have really worked out for me. This is not a fail proof method, but my success rate has been startling.

Depending on the kind of sex you like to have, informed verbal consent is absolutely necessary before any type of sexual activity is gonna happen. If you are into kinky sex, then chance are you've already learned a lot about consent. Due to the kind of sex involved in BDSM, that scene has some of the best definitions of consent and practical ways of discussing sex that I have seen.

When you are participating in activities that can be potentially physically harmful and cause hospitalization, it is absolutely necessary to have a negotiation and consent process. As long as sex is consensual, there is no limit to the things you can do and places you can explore.

pressure to be a sexual mind-reader and please one's partner without having to ask. Gay and bi men play both sides of that dynamic, both the butch top stud who aims to impress with action, not words, and the guy who's turned off by anyone who doesn't just take charge but stops to ask and check in.

Positive consent for hot man-on-man action

So in light of all these barriers to verbal consent, what does a hot man-to-man encounter with solid, positive consent look like? Well, it looks different for everyone, but for me at least, there are some key components. There are lots of zines and essays that lay out the most important basics: knowing your boundaries beforehand, asking at each new level of sexual activity, acknowledging nonverbal cues and body language as well as verbal cues, everyone should be sober enough to be clear on what's going on, and all that important stuff. What I want to add are just a few other things formulated with queer dudes specifically in mind. Pretty much all of these are relevant to people of any gender and sexual orientation, but they come out of my specific experience as a guy getting it on with guys. So when I think about hooking up with a cutie, here's part of what I'm thinking:

RESPECT YOURSELF

Cheesy as it may sound, this is by far and away the most important part. Queers who love and respect ourselves are more likely to think about, decide on, and stand up for our boundaries; more likely to insist on safer sex; and more likely to be able to walk away from any encounter that seems sketchy knowing that we will be able to find love, affirmation, and sexual release elsewhere. It is so hard to know what consent means, let alone give it and receive it, without first believing that we are WORTH being afforded the respect of consent. So please, take the time to learn to love yourself- you're worth it!

NEGOTIATE SAFER SEX FIRST

Don't fuck around with your health. Before you start fretting over positions or roles, cover your bases around safer sex. Know your limits, communicate them clearly, and don't compromise even if they're reeeeeeally hot, even if they claim they can't get off with a condom, even if they won't let you blow them if you insist on a barrier, no matter what. Keep condoms with you or handy at all times when there's a possibility of having sex- don't rely on your partner(s) to have them. Get tested regularly, and if you have an ongoing partner, make sure that they do, too. Don't assume your partner(s) HIV or other STI status, and don't assume that they'll tell you the full truth. Remember that acts that are safe for HIV aren't always safe for other painful or even incurable diseases (syphilis, herpes, etc.), and that even if you're already HIV positive, staying healthy means avoiding other infections. Make sure that you're consenting just to the sex, not to an infection or disease that could last a lifetime.

ASK WHAT STYLE OF CONSENT THEY LIKE

Truth is, some people just don't like verbal consent. It may be for some of the reasons that I discussed above about gay/bi male sexual culture. It may be because they haven't challenged some of the crappy mainstream conditioning they've received from media, pop culture, and so forth. It may be for totally different and valid reasons that you don't have context to understand. In any case, the important thing is for you to know what works for you- if you can't have a positive experience without clear, consistent verbal consent, then maybe you shouldn't hop into bed with someone who isn't willing to try it. So ask up front, gauge how somebody prefers to communicate their desires, preferences, and boundaries - and be clear enough on your own to say no thanks if theirs don't line up with yours.

FUCK OUT OF THE CLOSET

Here's a suggestion which is sure to be controversial, but comes from my experience: it might not be worth the trouble to hook up with guys who aren't comfortable enough with their sexuality to be able to say what they want. Making it with straight guys may be hot, and it may give your ego a boost knowing you've bedded the unbeddable, but in my experience, in most cases it's not worth it. Save yourself the trouble and hook up with folks who are comfortable enough with themselves and their desires to be able to talk about them openly. It's not important what identity or label they use for themselves, what's important is if they're able to communicate directly about what they want, without having to be wasted to do it, or blundering their way through awkward sex silently. It's also safer- watch out for rough trade, a.k.a. dudes who'll let you suck them off but then work themselves into a homophobic rage at you after orgasm.

FIGHT HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM

One of the major barriers to being able to love freely and consensually is the oppressive systems set up by our society to make us hate ourselves and our desires. There are tons of rad ways to fight them, though! First and foremost, we can come out and live openly as who we are - every person makes it a little easier for everyone else. We can organize for the same rights, acknowledgement, and dignities afforded to straight people, but we don't have to assimilate into their norms of monogamy, marriage, and nuclear families. We can challenge the blatant and subtle ways that queer people get excluded- for example, demanding that consent workshops and discussions have gender neutral frameworks and include queer-specific examples. We can provide space for queer youth to exist freely, acknowledge them as sexual beings without being exploitative or objectifying, and serve as mentors and positive role models. And fuck homophobic religious assholes - we can refuse to tolerate fundamentalist bullshit that denies our humanity under the guise of the Bible, the word of some god or some preacher, or some idiotic sense of what's "natural". All of these things are interrelated parts of how we can transform our culture to create more space to openly acknowledge and ask for the things we want sexually, which will lay the groundwork for pro-consent sexual norms.

NEGOTIATE ONLINE

For better or for worse, a lot of sex between men gets arranged on the internet. Some think this is in part because the constraints of a homophobic society prevent us from meeting each other as openly as straight people can; whether or not that's the case, this is the reality we're dealing with, and we can take advantage of it to promote consent. Talking through a computer screen can lessen the fear of rejection, desire to appear coy or indirect, and other things that make talking about consent harder. And however shitty the consumerism of online sex may be, the vast array of postings can serve as a reminder that if we don't feel comfortable with someone, there will be other options for sexual release. By posting our preferences in an ad or profile, and chatting with someone beforehand specifically about the kind of sex we want to have, we can set up whatever norms of consent feel best for us. The risk of this, of course, is that pre-arranged agreements for what to do and how to do it with someone may lead them (or you) to believe that there's no need to check in verbally, to be aware of body language and nonverbal cues, to make space to pause or stop completely if something doesn't feel right. But if we choose to go the internet route, we can use it as a lower-pressure way to set up consent practices beforehand that reflect our own needs and ideals.

THINK ABOUT CONSENT AND GENDER

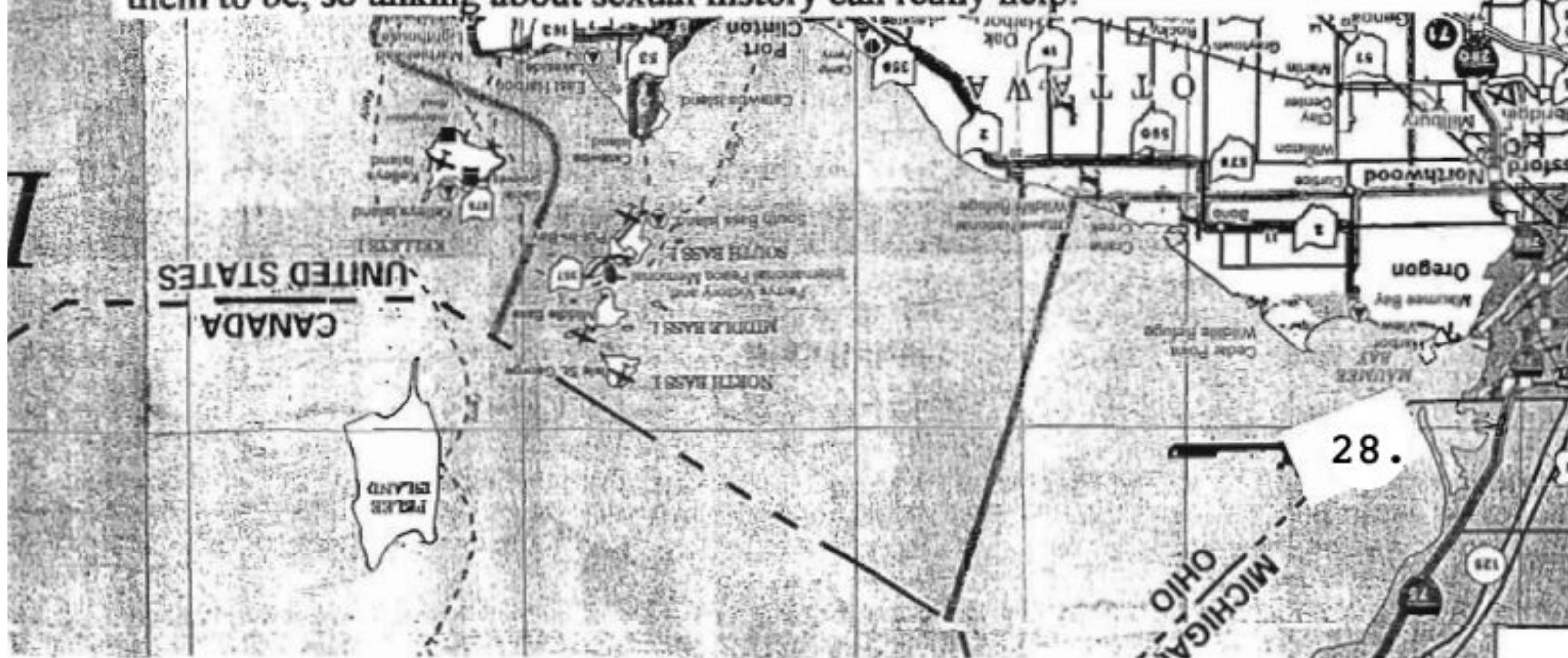
For me, good consent requires being aware of, and rejecting, gender roles in sexual settings. I know that I can't feel solid in the consensuality of a sexual interaction when everything - from who initiates to what acts we do together and who's penetrated by what - is determined by the gender role conditioning that strangles us, rather than by our own desires, needs, preferences, and boundaries. The impact of this socialization shows itself most clearly in cross-sex interactions, but pops up in same-sex adventures, too. For instance, if a same-sex couple includes a more masculine or butch partner, gender conventions may dictate that that person shouldn't be penetrated, or should take the lead, or should act in a certain way based on gendered dynamics. This is understandable. In a mainstream heterosexual culture that conceives of sex so narrowly that it asks same-sex couples "who's the man" or "who's the woman" it's hard to avoid absorbing the constant denial and ridicule of our right to sexual and gender self-determination. In any case, regardless of the gender of the partner who's hot for me, and regardless of whether I'm wearing a pink mini-skirt or overalls and boots (or both!), for sex to be fully consensual for me I need to be confident that everyone involved has some consciousness of how gender impacts our expectations about what we should do, and that we've all chosen to reject those imposed expectations in favor of focusing on our actual desires.

(Of course, sometimes our desires may fall along starkly gendered lines, in ways that may feel uncomfortable to self-defined radicals who love to fuck with gender but can't seem to fuck without it. We can get stuck in guilt and reject ourselves for our illicit desires, just as christian anti-sex bullshit wants us to, or we can stubbornly defend our most conventional longings without regards to the patriarchal and abusive patterns they may seem to uphold. Between this rock and hard place, the only way I've been able to find a place that feels good is just to talk with my partners as honestly as I can about my desires and how I feel about them and how they do or don't relate to my politics, and go from there. The point for me isn't to get our desires to conform to our political aspirations- desire will never submit to being civilized into such tidy ideological constructs. The point, as far as I see it, is to set out towards being as consensual and as critical and honest and as self-loving as possible. If there's any beauty we can find between our quaking bodies in this fucked up culture, it might be along those paths.)

Figuring out what you like and don't like is a huge part of defining your boundaries and through the definitions of your boundaries it is possible to consent to different activities. Boundaries are applicable to all aspects of your life. They are the barriers we develop and articulate in order to understand why we say yes or no. Sometimes boundaries get pushed and occasionally they get crossed. When a boundary is crossed it can be a liberating experience or a violating one, depending on the situation. In many cases, the act of boundary crossing is the source of a lot of the sexual assault that occurs. In other cases, you learn that something you didn't think turned you on, in fact does. I cannot stress how important it is to know your boundaries. A good way to figure out what your boundaries are is talking with your friends and lovers about what you like, what's happened to you in the past, and what your future fantasies are.

Boundaries, like consent, are not fixed. Consent may be given at the beginning of the night and taken away by the end of the night. There is no set of rules about consent, as there is no one definition of consent. Defining consent is a personal process, as you think about the situations you don't ever want to be in again and the kinds of places you want to go with your sex life. Unfortunately, many of the people reading this zine have probably experienced some sort of sexual assault in their lives and that complicates things as well.

For those of you who are reading this who have not experienced sexual assault first hand, I would like to leave you with a couple of things to think about. Many people have been assaulted, not just *women*. First I'd like to encourage people to talk about sex and abuse history prior to sleeping with each other. Sometimes people are not ready or don't want to talk about assault histories, so don't push a subject that a person doesn't want to talk about, this should be obvious. Second, people who have been abused usually, not always, have triggers. When these triggers are tripped, the person will check out of reality and probably go somewhere else in their heads. Physically this can look many different ways: a sudden quiet when there had been a lot of noise, going still or corpse like, or staring off into space. Everyone's triggers look different and this is where prior conversations can really help. Sometimes there are certain actions that will cause the trigger to go off, like being grabbed from behind or feeling like you're getting smothered and you are more likely to be aware of when a person is being triggered if you've talked about it ahead of time. As far as I can tell most humans are not mind readers and not always as observant as we'd like them to be, so talking about sexual history can really help.



UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF SEX IN YOUR LIFE IN GENERAL

Positive, full, life-affirming consent for me also requires an awareness of the role that all sex in general, and individual sexual encounters specifically, play in my life as a whole. At different times, I have longed for, pursued, and engaged in various kinds of sex for a litany of different reasons: horniness, profound love and emotional connection, loneliness, curiosity, affectionate friendship, a sense of adventure and daring, boredom, indifference in the face of another's strong longing, a desire to please or to avoid hurting feelings, a need for resources controlled by someone else (rent money, a place to crash for the night, status or prestige), the pressure of masculine socialization, to impress someone, to flaunt social norms, to sustain a lagging relationship, to piss off a third party, to avoid awkward silences... and those are just the reasons of which I'm consciously aware! Can I be confident that I (or my partner, for that matter) are choosing freely and eagerly to have sex if I'm/we're not conscious of the motivations behind our desires and choices? Of course, it's possible to get swallowed into feeling so anxious about our motivations that we over-analyze everything and never muster the courage for a kiss! Still, while avoiding that extreme, I've found that it's crucial for me to have ongoing dialogue with others, and most importantly myself, in non-sexual situations about how sex and sexuality fits into my present life. That way, when I'm stricken with longing or presented with opportunity, I can make a decision based on a more holistic sense of myself, which more accurately reflects how I feel about a particular encounter.

This of course relates to people of any gender and sexual orientation, but it stems in part from my recognizing the pressure on gay men to define ourselves as part of a community through sex. I've wanted to have sex at times to shore up my sense of gayness, to affirm the feeling of connection to community that I get through my identification as queer. But what I'm really longing for at those times isn't actually sex, but the warm feelings of inclusion and affirmation that come from being a part of a community. That realization shook me up a bit, and prompted me to ask myself difficult questions about whether or not sex I had based off of those desires was truly consensual on a deeper level. The important thing, I think, is that now I have a whole new level on which I think about consent, one that considers the whole context of myself and my life in my sexual decision-making. Yeah, it's complicated, but it's important, and ultimately really positive for me.

Anyway, back to me and E.

I smiled and exhaled, feeling more relief than I had realized, more than made sense in that hot and horny moment before having had the time to look back on it and appreciate just what that statement meant to me. I liked E because he was attracted to me, because he was a flirt and a slut and seductively charming. But whether or not I would have anticipated it, I liked it WAY, way more when he affirmed that he wanted me to be more than just a body to get himself off on- he wanted to experience a connection with me that included but went beyond just our bodies.

Let me be clear- this is not to pass judgment on anyone whose preferred type of sexuality is much more anonymous or less connected on non-physical levels. It's just an acknowledgement that my ideas of consent had to expand when I admitted that even with this gorgeous guy to whom I was quite attracted and with whom I would have gladly committed a litany of perversities, consent meant more than just getting horny and going with it. It meant for me in that moment a mutual recognition and affirmation of one another's humanity, one that truly created the space for me - or him to say no, or yes, or let's wait, or any number of other things. It meant listening to my body as well as my heart as well as my brain, and recognizing that I can't separate out those parts of me as if I'm not a whole, integrated person.

So that's what I mean by positive consent for dudes who get it on with dudes. I welcome any thoughts or feedback on this article at xriotfagx@riseup.net

Best wishes for a world full of hot queer loving,

Nick

Desiring Consent
By Lee Hunter

For a couple of years I co-facilitated workshops about consent and got to hear a lot of people talk about how they bring up consent and talk about sex. It is my hope to avoid wasting all the interactions I had over the years by conveying some of the wisdom that I learned from listening to people talk about consent. These conversations were really awesome and helped me learn to define consent and my boundaries. Thanks to everyone I have ever been in a workshop with! Talking about consent can be difficult at first, creating awkward situations. But as you continue talking about your desires, it becomes easier and easier, and for most a prerequisite to any sex that occurs.

Consent is a term that people have to define for themselves and people define consent in a number of different ways. Here are some examples from past workshops:

"Consent is never assumed, consent isn't defined the same way by everybody, consent is verbal, consent can be nonverbal including body language, consent is never assumed with strangers OR long term partners, consent is an ongoing process at each new stage, consent is only possible when healthy communication is possible."

"Consent is knowing and respecting my personal and sexual boundaries and learning, knowing, and respecting the boundaries of my partner."

And another definition from the now defunct *Blackthorn* (Issue 3, 2004), a paper from Portland, OR.

"Consent is hard to define because there are many different levels of communication (body language, flirting/innuendo, conversing, etc.) The only way to be certain that there is consent is through explicit verbal communication: "Can i touch you here?" "yes/no you can/'t touch me there."

There is no set definition of consent. Developing your own definition of consent is an important part of the process of defining your desires and learning how to communicate them to others.

Healthy communication is a huge part of consent. Consent does not have to be a process that involves stopping and asking the person that you are with if they are okay all of the time or if it is okay if you touch them on the breast or on the genitals—unless of course it needs to be that way. People communicate about sex in different ways, some are more verbal than others, while some find talking in the heat of the moment to be a real turn off. The important part is for you to figure out what method works the best for you and the person or people you're with. Do you like it when someone asks before they kiss you or touch you in sexy ways or would you prefer to have a conversation and negotiate the kind of sex you would like to have prior to even getting to the sex?

EXCERPT FROM ZINE
SUPPORT

...If you think you have never been with someone with a history of abuse or rape, it is much more likely that you simply aren't coming across as someone who people feel they can tell these things to. You might read this and think, well, that's not my friend, I know they can take care of themselves! Like as if some girl who throws bottles at cops (or whatever) would definitely be able to say no! But that is not so! ... Actually a person can be very outspoken and still be unable to stick up for themselves sexually. And in fact, survivors of violence are very often these very same tough-as-hell seeming people.

...Aside from the practical advice part of this, the how to make out with someone without unknowingly causing them to relive their histories of abuse or just be a jerk, I want to say a few things. One is that, no matter what you think about all this, whether you think you need this advice or not - consider this! If you take my advice and you treat everyone in this way, you will be so popular! People will tell each other, oh, s/he was so sweet and great and...do you see where I'm going with this? I'm trying to say you'll be better in bed, OK?? And everyone will want to get it on with you!

Another is that just because you're a girl doesn't mean you can't do things to people that might be triggering or putting pressure on them... Same goes for survivors of abuse. Being a victim does not make it impossible for you to victimize, and in fact we are statistically much more likely to pass on our fucked up shit... And! just because you do it only with boys doesn't mean you don't need to worry about these thing either. Yes, more girls that guys are sexually victimized in this society, but given that pretty much every girl I know has some kind of fucked up story, that's not saying much. And the fact is, it can be even harder for male victims to talk about these things, that there may be even less space where they can feel safe dealing with these issues, and even less consideration for their pain. So please, be careful with everyone, OK?

The absolute, number one most important thing is to pay attention to the person you're with! Even if you're really drunk, or really turned on, or both. If you can't tell if they're into it or not, if they're being real quiet, Stop! It is your job to stop if you suspect your partner is not having fun! The most sure sign you will ever get that something is definitely wrong is if the person who you're with seems to change suddenly, to become quiet or more withdrawn, tenses up, stops looking at you, or anything that makes

you feel more alone suddenly. Do Not assume they are all right! And then, don't just hear what you wanna hear. If you stop and then you say "hey, you OK?" well sure, pat yourself on the back for being so rad if you need to, but then! If the person you're with kinda looks down or up or off to the side and says real quiet like, "no it's nothing don't worry, I'll be fine," you know

Embodied Consent

The information that you receive from your body in the form of sensations, feelings, and intuition is key to the process of making choices. Survivors learn to override their feelings and acquiesce to others' wishes. I want to invite you back into your body now. From inside your own body, you can decide what you want sexually based on your own needs, desires, and values. I call this embodied consent.

The first step in embodied consent is noticing your own body sensations and signals. What are you feeling in your chest, your pelvis, your stomach? When you are doing something that you want to do, when your insides are saying "yes," how do you know this? For example, one survivor I worked with said her stomach relaxes and she gets a warm sensation there when she knows it is okay for her to go ahead. Another survivor reported that she felt an openness and warmth in her pelvis and a connection to her voice and throat when she felt a "yes." Check this out for yourself. How do you know when your body says "yes"?

Conversely, what signals and sensations appear in your body when you do not want to engage in a certain sexual experience? How

do you know when it is not feeling right anymore? Another survivor reported: "I start to feel panicky in my chest and want to pull away physically. I usually try to talk myself into sexual contact, telling myself, 'what's the bid deal? Nothing bad is happening.' Then in I don't listen to my body, I usually check out and have sex without being there." When you do not want to be sexual in some way, you may notice your breathing getting short, your stomach getting tight, or your body wanting to pull away. Pay attention. This is you communicating to you. What sensations in your body communicate a "no" to you?

And what about maybe? Sometimes there are a number of seemingly contradictory feelings happening in your body at once. You may feel sexually turned on in your hips and vulva, and feel pulled away in your chest. You may feel a warmth in your solar plexus, indicating go-ahead, and be afraid or tight in your throat. What do you do then?

Actually, experiencing contradictory feelings is familiar territory for most survivors. Consent then becomes a matter of distinguishing what sensations are what. One workshop participant noted, "I feel the consent to be sexual in my belly, it is a settled, sure sensation, and I can feel anxious in my chest at the same time. I am anxious when I am getting close to someone. I can count on this happening. It does not mean I do not want to be sexual. It just means I am feeling scared while I am being sexual." Another survivor shared, "I usually stop having sex when my stomach gets tight. I see now, though, that my stomach being tight is me feeling stressed about being turned on. It was so awful to get turned on during the sexual molestation that my body still tries not to do it. If I just relax and acknowledge my stomach and the fear there, I can go right on being sexual. My stomach being tight does not mean I do not want to have sex."

Sometimes we make choices about sex in our heads, because it seems like a good idea, seems to make sense, when we may be feeling something entirely different in our bodies.

You can end up feeling used, angry, or self-loathing after such a decision.

Consent does not always feel comfortable, easy, and joyous. Sometimes a consensual experience can bring up sadness, anger, or feelings of abandonment. It is important to learn the difference between experiencing feelings and wanting to stop what you are doing. You can do this by paying attention to your body and learning its language.

FROM SURVIVORS GUIDE TO SEX

to be able to be asked for consent and to give consent. If people don't even try, then that's frustrating too.

So, talking beforehand, and also trying to figure out ways to talk about what's happened during sex, but later. like when we are not in bed. and trying to figure out ways for them to not get freaked out if I admit to faking it or having a flashback or just not wanting to do something. It's important for me to be able to talk about it later, because I can't usually talk about it at the time, but that usually makes people feel like shit and feel guilty and then question every move they make, and they feel like they can't get anything right and I have to take all initiative and give so much reassurance, and that makes me never feel like doing it, and that sucks too.

One of the things that happens a lot is that I am really sexual in the beginnings of relationships but when they get more serious or when they have been going on for awhile more things start to come up. My last partner came up with an idea. I have to say that the fact that he came up with an idea instead of me having to do it, helped so much! He came up with a number system He would ask me 1-6 We worked together to come up with what the numbers stood for.

1. I feel like being held. No sex. Nothing. Not even sexual energy.
2. I want kissing but nothing past that. No moving against me in a sexual way.
3. I want to kiss and might be open to other stuff too.
4. I want to do stuff, but check back in a lot as we go.
5. I want to do stuff, and don't want much checking in, just check in before doing anything with the downthere parts and check in if you feel like I might be feeling weird.
6. Let's do it!

Something about the number system took the weight off things. It made it more easy and a little bit funny. I was totally able to say 2, where as I would never say "I want to kiss right now but nothing else". Saying those words would make me feel totally guilty where as saying "two" just felt like fact.

It didn't always work perfectly, but it was way easier for both of us.

something? It is not OK to be like, "well, I tried, no one can say I didn't, so fuck it." I mean, do you like this person or not?! Sex is supposed to be fun! For both of you! You can tell the difference between someone who's having fun and someone who isn't, I know you can. The problem is that most people second guess themselves, they think, well, I must be wrong, it must just be how this person is, maybe she's always quiet, or it must be fine because he's a dude and guys always want to have sex, and because otherwise they'd say something, right? Well, no. Not necessarily.

One of the first and most common causes of misunderstandings in a sexual context, and one of the most pervasive side effects of any kind of abuse history, is many survivors' inability to stick up for themselves in the ways that matter most. Abuse, especially if it happened when we were children (...or teens) teaches us that it doesn't matter what we want, it won't be respected, and if we don't say anything we don't have to face the fact that that is what is happening. If we say no, and someone does what they want to our body anyway, we have to face the fact that a violation has occurred. However, if we don't say anything we can later say to ourselves, "well, they didn't know, so they aren't so bad and I don't have to deal with the things I would have to if I admitted to myself what I know and feel, which is that they should have known, and that I secretly hate them." ... The person you're making out with may be actually literally unable to advocate for themselves, to say to you, please stop. Please don't. They may be frozen by the fear that you will not like them anymore, or that you may think that they don't like you, or they may just be so far inside themselves that they cannot do anything.

Because that is what happens. We freeze. Basically what happens to most of us when something is going on that reminds us of the bad things that have happened to us in the past is that we shut down, mentally and emotionally. We turn inward so that we do not have to experience the things that are happening to our bodies, because it is so painful emotionally and/or physically, and so terrible, to have someone disregard you in this way. It's kind of hard to explain, but anyone who has been through this sort of thing can tell you that it's true. And your goal is not to cause anyone to have to do this, every, because it is a terrible, traumatizing feeling. If you do this to someone, it's fucked up, even if it was not on purpose....

Which brings up the other really big thing. If someone tells you something about their personal experiences with sexual trauma, however unlikely it may seem, you must believe them. Period. If someone says to you, "if you touch my elbow while I'm kissing you I will freak out," I don't care how silly it seems to you, just don't do it! And furthermore, try really hard to understand, to really understand that it's important. ... and it won't always be as easy as that, their needs might cost you something. Like this person you're hooking up with might say "I can't have intercourse, and also I can't go down on you." And you might think, "but that's the only way I can come," but you are gonna have to figure something out, because it's really really not OK for you to try to talk them into it, even by telling them how gentle and how great you'll be about it. You must respect them and their needs! It is not easy for a survivor (or just a girl in general in this society) to reach the point where they can even figure out what it is that they need, let alone tell you, so for god's sake, take it seriously when they can!

It's not easy to do these things. Mostly, it's really hard to learn how to be truly present in sexual situations. But it is possible, and I think it's

desirable to try to change the way we are with relation to sex... This is something our society just doesn't teach us how to do or encourage us to learn, and in a way we are all survivors of the fucked up things we're taught about sex. We learn that we're suppose to want it all the time, but also that it is shameful. We are bombarded with sexual imagery every day, yet we are told that we shouldn't talk about sex, especially not honestly; that sex is only okay to talk about if it's in alienating gross ways that aren't good for anyone's sexuality. And so lots of times we're so busy trying to prove something that we can't just relax and have fun, and ... I think everyone can benefit from thinking about this stuff.

And while it doesn't come naturally, neither does relating to each other in these fucked up ways. We were able to learn that; we can unlearn it. It isn't something that happens all at once; it is a constant process, even for someone who thinks about this stuff all the time. But it can happen!

A couple other random things --

---It's great to ask people what's up and be ready to talk to them about it, but if they're not ready or up to talking about it, please respect that too. It doesn't help to be all macho about your new role as a supportive partner and go around demanding that people open up and share with you, right now!

---Try not to take in personally if your partner says, "yes, actually I am feeling freaked out and I don't want to do this right now." Don't give the person a guilt trip. They're having a hard time already and probably a lot of guilt issues too.

---One thing doesn't not mean or imply another. If someone says they are OK with kissing, it doesn't mean they are OK with being felt up, etc. It means they are OK with kissing.

---Just use protection. Your partner shouldn't have to ask, and they damn sure shouldn't have to argue about it. And if you can't get it together enough to carry any....then accept that you may not get to do certain things as a result. No arguing!

---OK, this is a tricky one, and you all can write me and tell me how fucked up I am...but listen -- If you're under 30 and you're dating someone who is more than five years younger than you, then consider the possibility that there may be a serious power imbalance in your relationship, which probably rules out any possibility of honest communication. You may think you're different, and you may really be, but everyone thinks their relationship is the 1% that is fucked up, and 99% of them are wrong, you know? I spent my whole teenage years dating people much older than me, and ... saying that it wasn't like that, but it wasn't until I had a boyfriend of my own age for the first time when I was 19 that I realized how different it was to be in an actual relationship of equals where I felt like I could actually speak. Does my experience mean everyone is like this? No, of course not, but I've talked to plenty of other punk girls who know exactly what I'm talking about and have the same history. And an unequal dynamic means that the chances of someone enduring sex that they are not comfortable with or that may be damaging to them are increased many many time over.

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numbers

I have never been able to figure out a way to talk comfortably about consent.

I think I am pretty good about asking other people, but figuring out a way to explain whether or not I want to be doing something is pretty impossible. I mean, if I want

to be doing something, it's usually fine, but if I don't, or especially if I'm unsure, it's

impossible. If someone asks, "is this ok," I always say "yes." Everything is "ok" I mean, I can

survive anything, right? So even the best of intentions don't usually work for me, and just the

words like "do you like this?" or "do you want me to be doing this?" they are triggering, or even if they're not specifically triggering, they make me doubt myself - like "Oh, I thought I wanted this, but do I? What if I don't? shit. How do I know for sure?" So generally when people ask me for consent it not only ruins the mood I'm working so hard to maintain, but it triggers me, then I have to try and navigate whether or not I'm going to be able to get out of the trigger, stop thinking so much and get back to just feeling good. And if they notice me flinching or withdrawing for a second and they stop and want to talk about it, then it is just over, and may be I don't want it to be over, I just want to be able to work through it myself and forget.

So I've never really known what to do. There are some things that have worked - like talking beforehand about what I need - like being held after sex. And asking them not to ask me things like "how was it for you". There are just too many words and sentences that are triggering for me. But I love sex and want to be able to do it. I want

