NO MEANS NO

"NOT NOW" MEANS NO
I HAVE A BOY/GIRLFRIEND MEANS NO
MAYBE LATER MEANS NO
NO THANKS MEANS NO
YOU'RE NOT MY TYPE MEANS NO
FUCK OFF MEANS NO
I'D RATHER BE ALONE RIGHT NOW MEANS NO
DON'T TOUCH ME MEANS NO
I REALLY LIKE YOU BUT... MEANS NO
LET'S JUST GO TO SLEEP MEANS NO
I'M NOT SURE MEANS NO
YOU'VE/I'VE BEEN DRINKING MEANS NO
SILENCE MEANS NO

DATE RAPE = NOT UNDERSTANDING NO
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 and Books Listed]

Learning Good Consent 3.50
Support Zine 2.50 + postage
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Write for wholesale rates

[Order Information]

[Invisible Girls - Pati Feuerisen]
[Courage To Heal, Allies in Men's Work - Paul Rivel]
[Holy Viginity: the Social Construction of Masculinity - Raymond]
[Redefining Our Relationships - Wendy O'Meara]
[The Ethical Slut -素]
[The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love - Ward Halls]
[Men, Intimacy - Abbot]
[Cracking the Armor - Kaufman]

[WEBSITES]
[Generation Five - org]
[Myspace - com]
[Philly Spies - org]
[Survivor Support - org]
[Incite - National - org]
[Earl - Seattle - org]
[Men Can Stop Rape - org]
[ICARUS Project - Net]
[Sygnet Online - Net]
[Call To Men - Com]
[Radical Survivor - Asheville - Blogspot - Com]
[Girl Army - org]
[Motherlode - Com]
[Detox - Com]
[Social Detox - Wordpress - Com]
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 him/her to?
Have you ever felt that your partner used sex to control or punish you?
Has she/every 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 her 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?

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.

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 dominate 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

Cover art by the amazing ThomHerpich
thomsherpich.com

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Consent questions

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.

1. How do you define consent?
2. Have you ever talked about consent with your partners(s) or friends?
3. Do you know people, or have you been with people who define consent differently than you do?
4. Have you ever been unsure about whether or not the person you were being sexual with wanted to be doing what you were doing? Did you talk about it? Did you ignore it in hopes that it would change? Did you continue what you were doing because it was pleasurable to you and you didn’t want to deal with what the other person was experiencing? Did you continue because you felt it was your duty? How do you feel about the choice you made?
5. Do you think it is the other person’s responsibility to say something if they aren’t into what you are doing?
6. If someone does not express that they are not interested, how do you feel about asking for consent?
7. 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?
8. Do you think consent can be a positive experience?
9. Do you think about people’s abuse histories?
10. Do you think about people’s sexual histories?
11. Do you check in on things you do or do you assume the original consent means everything is okay?
12. Do you feel confident about your consent?
13. Do you feel confident about your ability to communicate your needs and desires?
14. Do you feel confident about your ability to express your boundaries?
15. Do you feel confident about your ability to ask for consent?
16. Do you feel confident about your ability to say no and still feel valued?
17. Do you feel confident about your ability to say yes and still feel valued?
18. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about consent?
19. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about boundaries?
20. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about relationships?
21. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about sex?
22. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about love?
23. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about commitment?
24. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about intimacy?
25. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about pleasure?
26. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about fun?
27. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about connection?
28. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-care?
29. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-love?
30. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-esteem?
31. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-worth?
32. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-respect?
33. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-acceptance?
34. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-compassion?
35. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-forgiveness?
36. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-love?
37. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-care?
38. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help?
39. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help groups?
40. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help websites?
41. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help books?
42. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help workshops?
43. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help seminars?
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46. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help books?
47. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help workshops?
48. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help seminars?
49. Do you feel confident about your ability to change your mind about self-help groups?
Below is a list of signs that are seen in people who are victims of domestic violence or abuse. A person who has been abused, even if it is just one of the following incidents, can be a victim of domestic violence:

1. Jealousy: Above is a list of signs that a partner may have if they are jealous. Jealousy is a natural feeling, but if it becomes intense and starts to affect your life, it may be a sign of domestic abuse.

2. Controlling Behavior: Often, people who are jealous will try to control their partner's behavior. This can include monitoring their phone calls, texts, and social media.

3. Isolation: A person who is jealous may try to isolate their partner from friends and family. They may try to prevent them from leaving the house or spending time with others.

4. Harassment: If your partner is jealous, they may start to harass you. This can include calling you names, threatening you, or physically harming you.

5. Rox: If you are having these feelings, it is important to seek help from a trusted person or a professionals who can help you.

6. Blame: Often, people who are jealous blame the other person for their own problems. This can include blaming you for not doing enough for them or for being unfaithful.

7. Blunt: If you are having these feelings, it is important to seek help from a trusted person or a professionals who can help you.

8. 33. Are you attracted to people with a certain kind of gender presentation?

34. Have you ever objectified someone’s gender presentation?

35. Do you think that a person who fits a certain perceived gender presentation will interact with you in the same way?

36. Do you think sex is a game?

37. Do you ever try to get yourself into situations that give you an excuse to touch someone you would say “no” if asked? i.e., dancing, getting really drunk around them, falling asleep next to them?

38. Do you make people feel “untouched” or “unwanted” if they don’t want to try certain sexual things?

39. Do you think there are ways you can make someone feel that even if it’s not what you’re trying to do?

40. Do you ever try and make bargains? i.e., “If you let me, I’ll do it for you?”

41. Have you ever tried asking someone what they’re feeling? If so, did you listen to them and respect them?

42. Have you used jealousy as a means of control?

43. Do you feel like being in a relationship with someone means that you have an obligation to have sex with you?

44. What if they want to abstain from sex for a week? a month? a year?

45. Do you white or threaten if you’re not having the amount of sex or the kind of sex that you want?

46. Do you think it’s ok to initiate something sexual with someone who’s sleeping?

47. What if the person is your partner?

48. Do you think it’s important to talk with them about it when they’re awake first?

49. Do you ever look at how you interact with people or how to treat people, positive or negative, and where that comes from? Do you think it makes sense?

50. Do you behave differently when you’ve been drinking?

51. What are positive aspects of drinking for you? What are negative aspects?

52. Have you been sexual with people when you were drunk or when they were drunk? Have you ever felt disappointed or embarrassed about it the next day? Has the person you were with ever acted weird to you afterward?

53. Do you seek consent the same way when you are drunk as when you’re sober?

54. 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, is it because it’s uncomfortable or because you think something might have happened that shouldn’t have? Is or is because you think that’s just the way things go?

55. Do you think people need to take things more lightly?

56. Do you think these questions are repressive and people who ask critically at their sexual histories and their current behavior are uptight and should be more “liberated”?

57. Do you think liberation might be different for different people?

58. Do you find yourself repeating binary gender behaviors, even within queer relationships and friendships? How might you do this make others feel?

59. Do you see sexuality and gender presentation as part of a whole person, or do you consider those to be exclusively sexual aspects of people?

60. If someone is dressed in drag, do you take it as an invitation to make sexual comments?

61. Do you feel that people because of their gender presentation?

62. Do you think only men abuse?

63. Do you think that in a relationship between people of the same gender, only the one who is more “manly” abuses?

64. How do you read if someone becomes uncomfortable with what you’re doing, or if they don’t want to do something? Do you get defensive? Do you feel guilty? Does the other person end up having to take care of you and reassure you, or are you able to step back and listen and hear them and support them and take responsibility for your actions?

65. Do you tell your side of the story and try and change the way they experienced the situation?

66. Do you do things to show your partner that you’re listening and that you’re interested in their ideas about consent or their ideas about what you did?

67. Do you ever talk about sex and consent when you’re not in bed?

68. Have you ever raped or sexually abused or sexually manipulated someone? Are you able to think about your behavior? Have you made changes? What kinds of changes?
69. Are you uncomfortable with your body or your sexuality?

70. Have you been sexually abused?

71. Has your own uncomfortable ness or your own abuse history caused you to act in abusive ways? If so, have you ever been able to talk to anyone about it? Do you think talking about it is or could be helpful?

72. Do you avoid talking about consent or abuse because you aren’t ready to or don’t want to talk about your own sexual abuse?

73. Do you ever feel obligated to have sex?

74. Do you ever feel obligated to initiate sex?

75. What if days, months, or years later, someone tells you they were uncomfortable with what you did? Do you grill them?

76. Do you initiate conversations about safe sex and birth control (if applicable)?

77. Do you think that saying something as vague as “I’ve been tested recently” is enough?

78. Do you take your partner’s concerns about safe sex and/or birth control seriously?

79. Do you think if one person wants to have safe sex and the other person doesn’t really care, it is the responsibility of the person who has concerns to provide safe sex supplies?

80. 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?

81. Do you complain or refuse safe sex or the type of birth control your partner want to use because it reduces your pleasure?

82. Do you try and manipulate your partner about these issues?

83. 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 (shaming pertinent health information, using barriers, checking in about boundaries, checking in about gender/body identity, etc.)

a potential date or hook up is upon y'all 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 flirt talk. You kiss...

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.)

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 with had some 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 talk 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. Heteros 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. Part of that is talking openly and honestly about behavior I’ve asserted in the past...”

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 an established trust with, or it may feel irrelevant because they aren’t...
  - you do not want to repeat the experience of violating boundaries by
    - with holding 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 affective 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 didn’t 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 discussing 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, you’re getting each other’s 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 action 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 screw up, that screwing 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 screw up in the same way over and over again. We engage so we don't keep screwing up in the exact same ways. I want to screw 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 from 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 accountable 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 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.

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?

how do you define consent?
write it down
and keep it in your pocket

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
**THE BASICS**

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,
1. Giving and recognizing consent / non-consent
   a. What are ways to give consent? How do you (personally) expressed consent? What signs (verbal and non-verbal) do you look for to know if someone is consenting?
   b. What are ways to express non-consent? How have you (personally) expressed non-consent? What are signs (both verbal and non-verbal) that you look for to know someone is not consenting?

2. How to talk about consent with a partner
   a. When do you bring it up?
   b. How is this different for a long-term partner vs. a casual encounter?
   c. Ideas for improving communication around consent?
   d. What can you do if you or your partner aren’t sure what you want in the moment?

3. Making consent hot
   a. What’s hot about consent?
   b. How can we incorporate clear consent into “doin’ it” and make it fun and erotic? (examples: practice verbal consent with massages; role play)

4. Communicating about STIs
   a. How can you bring up STIs and your feelings about safe sex?
   b. When can you bring this up?
   c. What is safe sex to you?
   d. How can you help partners feel comfortable talking about it / bringing it up with you?
   e. How does how you feel about someone, your assumptions about them, or the type of relationship affect how you talk about STIs?

VI. (Re)defining consent and Closing (20 min)

REPORT BACK

DEFINITION OF CONSENT
1. What are some key thoughts/phrases/words for a “holistic” “Yes! Yes! Yes!” (which implicitly includes No).
2. What are some key elements that need to be taken into account in a radical definition of consent?
   a. How do power and privilege relate to our ability to give, receive, and understand consent? How did the issues in that part of the discussion figure into your definition of consent?
3. Did your definition change throughout the workshop?

WRAP UP
4. Hope we opened up questions for people.
5. This is an ongoing process in understanding our desires and boundaries and communicating this with others.
6. Encourage you to talk about this in our communities, to break down barriers to talking openly about this. Improving communication and understanding is both healthy for our relationships and can prevent problems.

It made me feel terrible about myself. But what felt worse was that he refused to tell me when I was pushing him too far, or to get angry with me. I began to realize that I was scaring my own partner so much, and was too absorbed by my own trauma, that he didn’t feel safe telling me when I was hurting him. Because he didn’t want me to feel like the kind of person who would willingly coerce their partner, or couldn’t see their own bad behavior. He wanted to protect me from myself, while I dealt with the trauma of being raped. I love him for it still, but I do wish that we could have found some way to deal with my coercive behavior too; I’m still learning how to do this. I need to be called out on my shit. But we just couldn’t seem to do that with one another; we broke up after three years together.

Now, I’m with someone who will tell me when I’m pressuring him; if I slap him during sex and it doesn’t feel right, we stop and talk about it. We’re trying our best to make a non-monogamous relationship work, dealing with our jealousy and abandonment issues, while still allowing each other the space we need to do what we want, have sex with who we want, and ultimately not drive each other so crazy that we don’t want to be together anymore. Being with this partner is amazing in other ways for me though, in that I’m learning how to give up control in sex, and engage in sex that allows me to slip into roles where i can (safely) be controlled.

It’s amazing to think about myself becoming capable of expanding what sex can be for myself, and learning to overcome so many of the feelings that stemmed from my rape, shit i couldn’t put together while i was with my last 2 partners. It’s also really amazing (and terrifying) to have someone around to point out when I’m engaging in coercive or manipulative behavior. We continue to have discussions around the understanding that “perpetrator” and “survivor” are not mutually exclusive terms. And while it’s hard to hear someone i love tell me that I’m making him feel unsafe and being manipulative, I’m also really grateful that there is someone willing to stick with me while i deal with this shit.
What Is Safety? 
excerpt from Survivors Guide to Sex by Staci Haines

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 hitting, 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 need? 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. Then, have a conversation with a friend or therapist about what you wrote.

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. Now, look at your lists. Which column most closely resembles your current sex life?

3. Imagine an activity that is physically pleasurable to you, enfrowning 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? 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 next? Be explicit. Why's stopping you?

It is commonly interpreted that silence=consent and verbal signs=non-consent.

Are the signals you are sending clear? Do your words match your body language? (ex. saying no while continuing movement); consistency in words and actions? How do you address it when someone else's words and body language don't match up? (ex. saying yes but moving away or not responding)

How do you react when someone expresses non-consent?

2. Consent in long-term relationships vs. hook up?

What assumptions do you make once someone's consented?

Have you made assumptions about consent with a long-term partner?

How do different types of relationships impact how and when we talk about consent? (ahead of time / in the moment)

1. How can you communicate about STI's?

What might be a good time to bring this up?

What is safe sex to you?

How can you help partners feel comfortable talking about it / bringing it up with you?

How does how you feel about someone, your assumptions about them, or the type of relationship affect how you talk about STIs?

C. Power and Privilege

What power dynamics might factor into communication and consent? (privilege, gender, sexual preferences, size, race, age, class, organizational structure, sexual histories)

How do you address different histories or unequal power dynamics?

How do you honor the experience of the person you're with when it has been different than yours?

How do you bring differences up and communicate about them?

How can we talk about histories of sexual assault?

How can we bring it up? When?

What about coming from a background where sexual assault is the norm?

How does inebriation effect consent giving / asking?

Trying to prove something - cool, liberated, ready (reaction to non-consent)

Sexuality / gender expression

V. Small Groups - Practical "tools" (15 min)

* ask groups to do intro's first. Clarify - we want groups to come back with ideas and specific examples to share. Take home with knowledge, phrases, etc. Role play if time/comfortable.
II. Puppet show (15 min)

As you watch puppet show please think about:
1. The factors, dynamics and issues that play into the way the characters give and receive consent.
2. Positive / negative examples of consent
3. The questions at the end of each scene (also hanging up)

II. Large Group Discussion (about 20 -30 min, depends on start)

Factors that play into the ways we give / receive and understand consent

A. Puppet Show

2. What did you notice in the puppet show? First / Second / Third / Fourth Scene
3. What are some of the un-spoken issues at play?
4. Positive / negative examples of consent?

5. Think about how you perceived the characters? did you assign them a specific gender? races? what assumptions could you make about their past? the relationships the characters are in?
6. What are clear ways they expressed consent or non-consent? What seemed to work?
7. What problems did you see? What might be the root of some of the problems?
8. What are some factors that can get in the way of real, honest consent?

** Bring up questions from scenes **

B. Recognizing Boundaries - your own and others

1. How do you give yourself or someone else space to figure out what you want?
   Do you know what you want? How do figure this out for yourself?
   How do you communicate what you want or don't want?
   Have you ever been unsure? What did you do?
   How do you give a partner space to communicate what they want?

2. How do you know when someone else is consenting?
   How do you know when someone wants to be kissed or to kiss you?
   How are you sure they are fully present?
   That they are excited to be doing what they are doing?
   Do you account for cultural differences?

1. How do people communicate their boundaries?
   Have you interpreted passivity or silence as consent?
   What factors were at play?
   Do you feel it's the other person's responsibility to say something if they aren't into what you're doing?
   How often do you check in as things progress?
   What signs do you look for? Verbal? Other signs?
   When do you feel it's ok to use non-verbal signs? When isn't it?

I was raised to believe that guys wanted sex all the time, and that if they didn't get off when they were turned on then they'd get blue-balls which was totally painful and terrible. I was raised to believe that it was my job to do what was needed. I was abused when I was young, and then dated much older guys, but when I was 18 I was in a relationship with someone my age. One time when he was out of town, I read his journal. (Which, needless to say, was a really terribly wrong thing to do). In the journal it said something about how tired he was of always having to have sex with me in the mornings. The thing was, I didn't want to have sex either. I thought because he was hard, that meant I had to do it, and so I would initiate. I generally initiated when I thought someone wanted it, so that I wouldn't have to try and say no, and then be raped (even though this boy would have never ever raped me and I knew that). Reading his journal was the first time I realized that I could be the one who had power, and that I could control it even when I didn't want to. This led me to really commit myself to reading about childhood sexual abuse, and looking at how my abuse history could make me do abusive things. Of course, it was a long task. I am still learning.

For me, it is important to remember that it is a long unlearning. I try and be really conscious, but sometimes can fall into old patterns when I least expect it. For awhile polyamory was really important in trying to figure out my own sexuality and how to have healthy relationships, and sometimes I was good at it, and sometimes I used polyamory as an excuse to be dismissive of other people's feelings and needs. Reading Wendy-O-Matic's book Redefining Our Relationships was really useful to me in helping me figure out how to be ethical in my poly-amoury and not just to use it as a holier than thou manipulation tactic. Eventually I decided polyamory fed into my over sexualization of everyone I knew, and that I didn't want to be thinking that way about everyone. I wanted to be able to have clear friendships and clear boundaries. It was really good for me to stop flirting and to stop figuring out my friends that weren't sexual. I started to form much closer and more stable relationships with my friends, which has helped me learn about setting boundaries and respecting boundaries in all areas of my life.

I still struggle with always turning closeness into sexual feelings. I don't really blame myself for it, because I know that it comes from childhood abuse. I am trying to learn ways to be really upfront with my friends when I am trying to get physical, non-sexual comfort, even when it seems obvious, it's completely important to me to state from the beginning "I want to cuddle but don't want to do anything sexual." even when it is with my best friend and I have said it a hundred times before. I just almost always think that when someone touches me they want to have sex, and then I start responding to this assumed want. So around what we are doing before hand helps.

There have been a couple times recently when I have been sleeping next to a new friend, who I felt pretty clearly like we wouldn't do anything but then we ended up doing sexual stuff that felt consentual. In both cases, I knew I should have talked about it as it was happening, and in both cases, I was older and so felt like it was my responsibility to bring it up, but I try not to beat myself up about it and I have made sure to talk to them later to make sure it was ok. These talks went really well.
POSITIVE CONSENT FOR DUDES WHO GET IT ON WITH DUDES
By Nick Riotag

I could feel his hard-on pushing through the front of his scrappy 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 thrashing against each other. Finally, the making out ebbed to a point where 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 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 “but,” but the gender bit means by boy, in the not much more identified with gay culture... or something. It’s complicated. In any case, I’ve largely doted 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 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 I hold 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 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 examples 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

Please be sure to check in with yourself and be aware of your emotional state. Just because this discussion is happening now does not mean that you need to deal with this stuff now.

Feel free to leave at any time, if you want to get some water or go to the bathroom, and come back, or not come back, its okay. Take a friend with you if you want. And please try to be aware of your friends too, and check in about how they are feeling.

I am going to sit by the door and am here if anyone wants to talk to someone more privately during or after the workshop. I am going to check in with every one who leaves, and its fine to just walk by me, but you can also utilize me if you want to.

(If have - Pass out sexual assault/domestic violence resource list)

ASSUMING:
1. We have a diversity of genders, bodies, sexualities, and experiences in the room (so we’ll try to make this discussion as inclusive and participatory as possible)
2. Survivors of sexual assault in the room, and that this presentation could possibly be triggering for some folks (so we have a support person)
3. Most all of us have received conditioning thru this culture, ranging from body issues to imposed beauty standards to sexism and misogyny to heterosexism to religious/ssexual morality, etc – one result is that it can be really hard to speak openly about sex. We ask that no one judge other people’s consensual sexual behaviors or talk by having large & small group discussions and open ended questions)
4. Our Definition of Sex –

NOT ASSUMING:
1. We know anyone’s gender or body - try to use gender neutral pronouns.
2. We know anyone’s sexual orientation – hence neutral pronouns for partners unless specified
3. Anyone’s level of previous knowledge about any of these topics - try to be accessible as possible in language
4. We all have the same values around sexuality

AGREEMENTS:
5. If you usually speak a lot, step back to give space to others. If you usually don’t speak much, step up and give it a try.
6. Don’t name names or identifiable info during the workshop or afterward (please talk about the workshop later though)
7. Speak from your own experience
8. Please address what’s said, not the person saying it.

We know this can be tuff subject to approach openly and honestly especially among strangers. So we’re gonna open up to you and be a little silly and ridiculous and we hope you’ll open up to us.
CONSENT - Sex and Communication

On a piece of paper, please write your personal definition of consent, add to this definition during the workshop as new thoughts and ideas occur to you.

I. Intro to collective and our goals for the workshop (10 min)

INTRO:
1. Introduce the Collective.
2. See No, Speak No, Hear No zine sparked our interest and internal discussions about consent.
3. Share personal story or goal, why we're interested in this workshop.

OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP / AGENDA

Consent and communication could be week long workshops in themselves. Facilitators will be moving the discussions along so we can touch on a variety of areas.

GOALS:
1. We want to redefine consent - to question and broaden our ideas. Defining what consent means to each of us.
2. Transforming society to one based on consent and non-violence; apply to other aspects of life.
3. We want this workshop to focus on communicating, being upfront, and being positive. Equip you (and us) with examples of how to be more proactive in creating safe consensual spaces. (Will not focus on assault)
4. We want to discuss dynamics/factors that might be influencing how we give or receive consent - age, power, relationships, etc.
5. We want to look honestly at patterns in our own relationships.
6. One of our goals of this workshop is improving your sex life! We think that consent can be hot and liberating.
7. We want to create an open area for a healthy conversation in this workshop. We want to provoke thought and further discussion. There aren't many places where there are right or wrong answers. There will be a lot of questions and unanswered questions.

II. Support Person Presents
- This workshop is exciting because it's an opportunity to work through ideas, construct how we want things to be, propose ideals.
- Discussion could trigger difficult memories or feelings for those who identify as having abuse or assault in their history.
- And potentially for all of us, because we do not live in a culture of consent and may have had negative experiences of boundary violations that we don't think of in concrete terms.

So why hasn't this trend translated into loss of hot punks 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 talk about consent is not the way women are being lead this subcultural shift towards consent and challenging rape culture. Defining as many as possible for the collective are following along and participating actively in the movement to transform sexuality in this direction. I've encountered far fewer punk guys who speak of consent sexuality in this context. So far, in a way that I think is not as common among punk guys, I think it's more often found myself in bed with someone who may have... and terms around who takes attended a consent workshop, but not someone who's been more conversing with sleep with other men. Of course, this definitely doesn't mean that men should be raped and men should be unraping the consent of other men. At this, this definitely doesn't mean that men should be being raped and men should be unraping the consent of other men. And this, this definitely doesn't mean that men should be being raped and men should be unraping the consent of other men.

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 the heteronormative 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 male experiences and almost never refer to specifically same-sex relationships. Now, don't get me wrong - I recognize that a majority of sexual violence is committed by men. And I'm not saying we should stop talking about consent. But here's the problem: the exclusion of queer relationships and same-sex sexuality from consent models means that we don't discuss these relationships and that our bodies aren't being talked about in the ways that they should be. Likewise, I've seen a certain kind of consent that only applies to straight men, and directed against people sexualized as women. As much, it's important to target straight men with the messages that will encourage them to be more consensually. Likewise, it's important to target straight men with the messages that will encourage them to be more consensually. 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. And I think this is partly internalized homophobia - the idea that queer sex and relationships aren't as important or as "real" as hetero ones. And I think this is partly internalized homophobia - the idea that queer sex and relationships aren't as important or as "real" as hetero ones.

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

From gay and bi men, I learned the crucial importance of safe sex practices. From as early as I can recall, 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.
Gay/hi men and verbal consent

It's an uncomfortable but consistent part of my experience—among gay and bi men, I have not very often found partners who prefer verbal consent. On the one hand, this sounds frustratingly authoritative even if the dominant social anxiety is about socializing with body language and acts, often through the filter of alcohol or drugs, particularly those who have grown up learning that their partners aren't always, and have found it more culturally acceptable to simply not leave their unspoken acts unspoken. Especially with sexual acts that are stigmatized more heavily for being "female," such as giving feedback, a verbal acknowledgment of one's desire can feel humiliating in a way that detracts from the pleasure of the act itself.

Another factor that diminishes the importance of verbal consent is the fact that a significant amount of gay sex is negotiated through online hookup sites or public cruising, both of which involve engaging in sexual acts with strangers. If you wish to have sex without consent, it is not immediately obvious how the other person is feeling or whether they are interested in continuing. In many cases, especially online, the participants agree upon their desires and activities in advance, but even so, verbal consent is still important. Even if a person is comfortable with their sexual activities, verbal consent is still necessary to ensure that the other person is also comfortable.

Still another reason why verbal consent isn't more prominent amongst men who have sex with other men is that in the case of gay men, casual sexual encounters often involve some reflections of the dominant culture's sexual socialization around masculinity and desirability. "Real" men (who, of course, we love men for things they want and get it)
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-positive 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 it, they 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 heter 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 fool-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.

Positive consent for hot man-on-man action

So in light of all these barriers to verbal consent, what does a hot man-on-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 villages 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 gay man getting it on with guys. So when I think about looking up with a cute, 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. Queer 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 without regret. The more we know 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 reasonably hot, even if they claim can’t get off with a condom, even if they won’t let you blow them if you insist on a barrier—you forgot what. Keep condoms with you and handy at all times when there’s a possibility of having sex— don’t try to talk your partner into having. 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 STDS/STI status, and don’t assume that they’ll tell you the truth. Remember that acts that are safe 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 been challenged some of the creepy 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 someone 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 bonded the unbreakable, 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 forced to do it, or blurring their way through awkward sex silently. It’s also safer - wait out for rough trade, u.k.a. dudes who’ll let you suck them off but then work themselves into a homophobic rage at your other 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 bad 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 dignity 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 interconnected 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-consensual 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 men as openly as we would like. Other men see it as a chance to explore new things. I’m not sure what they’re doing, but 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 shifty the consumers 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 wants and desires, we can create a safety net for those who want to talk about this stuff, and we can ask for people who want to talk about it. 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 to believe that there’s no need to check in verbally, to be aware of body language and nonverbal cues, to make space for panic 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 shapes 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 heteronormative culture that conceives of sex so narrowly that it asks same-sex couples “Who’s the man?” or “Who’s the woman?”, and 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!), sex has to be consensual for me. This is not to say that everyone involved has some consciousness about how gender impacts our expectations about what we should do, and that we’ve all chosen to respect those imposed expectations in favor of focusing on our actual desires.

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 checkout 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.
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 I learned from listening to people talk about consent. These conversations were really awesome and helped me learn to define consent and 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?
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 relaxed and her body opened and a warmth sensation would be there when she knew it was 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 big 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 your body communicating 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 pull-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 many 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 connect 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 feel turned on during the sexual molestation that my body just 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.”

It becomes clear that 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 joyful. 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.
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 and 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 down there 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.

Everything escalated slowly and she would stop kissing me and look me in the eyes and say, "How are ya doing?" She would stop to check in with me even though I always said yes, and it made me feel like I was respected. It made me feel like I was safe. Because in the back of my mind, I knew that if, for some reason, I should stop feeling comfortable and if, for some reason, I didn't feel like I could speak up, she would ask again and there would be the space to back out or slow things down. I didn't feel trapped, the way I had always felt before, like "I've gone this far, now there's no way to get out of it." She gave me a choice at each new level, and just because we had already done something before didn't mean she didn't ask for permission before doing it again.

Consent can be so fucking scary because you're opening yourself up to rejection. You're creating a safe space, a space where your partner can say no. But what's so hot, so empowering, so fucking amazing about consent is that the yes's really become yes's. The first time you hear no, it validates all the yes's. The first time you hear no, it's not really a rejection, a failure of any kind. It's a reassurance that when you hear yes, it's a yes, and they'll tell you otherwise when it's not. The yes's become erotic and the no's are signs of the safety and the trust that have been built, that consent actually works, that what you are doing is worth all the work, is right.

I assume everyone I come in contact with is a survivor. If they tell me otherwise at some point, then great, but I'd rather be conscious of my behavior than to hurt someone and find out after the fact that it could have been avoided with some simple consent practices. I've learned to ask people if I can give them hugs. I ask children if I can pick them up. I ask a crying friend if they want to be held, if they feel comfortable if I hold their hand. I have a friend who is a massage therapist. "The first rule of massage is to always obtain consent first," he said. "But I realized," he continued, "that it's not just about massage...that I have to apply the principles of consent to every interaction I have in my life..." I think about what he said when I sit next to strangers on the bus, when I help people at work, when I talk with friends. Consent isn't inherently sexual. It's about communication, about working towards creating safe spaces. I want intimate, private experiences to be safe, but I want to feel safe in public, too. Thinking about consent in all of my interactions makes me feel like I'm making a start on some level, doing my part to make that happen. When we practice consent we create our own safe spaces, and then see where those spaces overlap with others'.
This was my introduction to an experiential understanding of the practice of consent, of what it really feels like and why it's so important: I remember sitting on the edge of the bed, making out, but making out really sweetly, with soft kisses, and I remember thinking to myself "this is the best part..." and then I remember jumping off the bed, pacing, my heart pounding, scared to death, with a pit in my stomach that felt like it was swallowing me alive. I felt like a little kid. I started muttering shit to myself and it just got worse and worse. I tried to force it, to go back and just keep going. I couldn't stay in my body, couldn't keep myself from being pulled into the vortex that left me curled up in a ball under the covers crying. I couldn't open my mouth and I couldn't look at her. I wanted to tell her that it wasn't her, that she didn't do anything, that it wasn't her fault, that I loved her - but I couldn't say anything. She sat there for a minute and then I heard her say, "Do you want me to stay here with you or do you need space?" I couldn't answer so she made it a yes or no question and she asked again, "Do you want me to stay here with you?" I nodded my head yes underneath the protective layers of bedding. "Can I touch you?" she asked and I nodded yes again and felt her hand on my shoulder. "You're okay," she started saying softly, "everything's okay, you're safe... you're safe... you're safe..." She asked if she could hold me and I nodded yes, so she curled around me and held me softly and I started shaking and crying. She stopped asking me questions and just let me cry and held me. When I was done crying I moved the blankets down off my face and I turned around and faced her. I wouldn't look into her eyes but she held my head softly until I did and she asked me where I was. "Are you here?" "It's safe now, everything's okay," she said. I had never dissociated and come back before. I had always had to sleep it off, wake up the next day groggy and confused. But we had talked before about triggers, about how sometimes I dissociated and what that meant for me, about what I needed when that happened. We had sat there together and read the Support zine, we went through the questionnaire about consent in the beginning of it... we had prepared for experiences like this. She practiced what we had talked about, and it was the first time anyone had ever been able to bring me back, and bring me back safely.

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 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