

THE BASICS *by Philly Stands Up*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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

1. YOU KNOW THEM WELL

why it's important:

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

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

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

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

2. YOU DON'T KNOW THEM WELL

why it's important:

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

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

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

ways to start...

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

then maybe,

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

3. POTENTIAL HOOK UP

why it's important:

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

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

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

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here are some ways to start...

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

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...