

a streetcar
named
CONSENT
Tactics for Sexual Consent and Delight

by sassy sophia



This is your guide to catching the consent train.
Your destination: sexual respect and mutual delight.

What is the best thing about going to college? Hooking up! That is, when it's a mutually exciting experience for both parties. So put that junk back in your trunks for just a minute. Unfortunately, most of us are subject to the prevailing sexual habits of our culture, and the results aren't always pretty. Our habits can lead us to mindlessly pressure others into sexual relations they don't want to have. Alternately, our conditioning can make us vulnerable to unwanted sexual pressure. Most people don't want to, or mean to, pressure another person into unwanted sexual relations, yet it happens all the time. You can prevent sexual boundary transgressions and sexual assault (and promote happy, healthy getting-it-on instead) by taking a critical look at your own habits, and then adventuring to the delicious, harmonious land of sexual consent.

Our habits are not all simple, but some of them can be named. First, we have gendered habits. We've all been raised in a patriarchal world, one in which it is assumed that women normally are submissive and men normally want to make a show of power. Much of what we experience in our lives directs us toward believing these things about ourselves: that we fit naturally into the category of female or male, and all that goes with those labels. We form habits that uphold the norms, and we play them out every day, often without even noticing.

Second, clear and honest communication isn't taught to us as kids. Straightforward communication can feel uncomfortable, and being sensitive can disrupt our confidence. Instead, we act without asking. We make assumptions in order to avoid awkwardness or rejection.

There are other reasons we might pressure someone to have non-consensual relations with us, misread another's words or actions, or be reluctant to say "no." But there's no reason we can't work to end this fucked-up cycle. Bringing

consent – mutual agreement, mutual desire – into the picture again will not only keep sexual assault and rape out of the picture, it will let the positive love river really flow.

So, what exactly is consent, that blessed key to empowerment and vanquisher of assholeness? In this case, consent isn't legalese terminology, and it isn't a form that your parents sign so that you can go on a field trip. Consent is when a person freely proclaims wanting to engage in certain emotional or physical relations with someone else. That the person "freely" agrees means no coercion or pressure was used on them. That the person agrees to "certain" relations means that consent should be a part of each new level of intimacy – asking once is never enough. The word "proclaims" should also be deciphered: any old "okay" to any old question doesn't mean that a person consents. Consent means you must hear (and speak) a definitive and resounding "yes!" Obviously, all involved parties must consent to any action.

Consent isn't simple. But it will achieve one or more of the following:

- keep depressing, negative sexual encounters at bay
- prevent rape and sexual assault
- show that you care about the feelings and personhood of your partner/lover
- provide you with an effective way to fight the system
- make you better in the sack

Tools and tips for catching the consent train

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

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

Tool 1 Asking

Always, always ask before making a move. Whether you'd like to put your arm around someone's shoulder, give her a good night kiss or go down on her, ask first. Whether it is your first time with him or you have done it together dozens of times before, ask first. Whether ze is acting seductive or sweetly timid, ask first. Whether she invited you to her house or you rode her to your campsite on

On the Word "Ze"

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

a tandem, ask first. Whether you are in love or not, ask first.

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

Some good ways to ask:

"What would you like to do?"

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

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

"How far do you want to go right now?"

"Do you want me to...?"

Okay ways to ask:

"May I...?"

"Is it okay to...?"

A bad way to ask:

"I want to nibble your ear now, okay?"

Tool 2 Listening

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

Sassy Sophia: Lover Boy, do you want me to rub your ass with my slippery, sweaty foot? It just came out of a clipless cycling shoe.

Lover Boy: No thanks. I'd prefer to cuddle.

SS: Okay. I'm a little embarrassed for suggesting such a thing.

LB: I still think you're cool.

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

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

Tool 3 Checking in With the Other Person

Checking in begins with talking about what each of you wants or doesn't want from your romantic encounter. It can also include letting the other person

know that you have assaulted someone in the past, or that you are an assault survivor. Checking in creates a time to say if you're feeling awkward, wary, sad, joyous, expectant or sensitive. Check-ins bolster confidence, define boundaries and prevent embarrassment. When someone is checking in with you, take all of his concerns seriously, even if they sound absurd to you.

Tool 4 Checking in With Yourself

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

Now you know the basics, but here are some tips to make the consent ride smoother.

Tip 1 Body language: Body language can augment (though not replace) your use of verbal consent. Body language can let you know when someone is feeling uncomfortable or flirtatious. An ambiguous verbal reply along with positive body language does not equal yes.

Tip 2 Embrace the awkward: Making things funny always makes them less awkward. Making fun of your awkwardness also releases tension. Put the awkwardness up front. Remember that awkwardness will pass, but the warm fuzziness of consent will stay.

Tip 3 Code: If you have been seeing someone regularly, try making up a code that make talking about your sexuality easier for you. For example, if you don't want to say, "I am comfortable with prolonged, protected cunnilingus tonight, but not penile penetration," make up code words: "I'm into going to sixth base with you tonight, with my coffee pot covered, extra sprinkles, vegetarian!" Or even: "Level three sounds good."

Tip 4 Talk first: Checking in before you are "in the heat of the moment" to get to know one another's communication styles, preferences and boundaries will streamline your sexual experience.

Tip 5 Tough topics: It may seem challenging to bring up consent and your personal assault history. Creativity and transitional phrases can help. For example, you might say, "So, I was reading this zine the other day, and...." or "Before we eat more curry, I need to share a personal story...."

Tip 6 State your boundaries: If you are feeling bold enough, let your crush know what your boundaries are before he needs to ask. Along with letting him know what you don't want to do, let him know what you would be into doing. Setting boundaries doesn't just mean showing your sweetie where the gate closes, it also means showing her where it opens.

Tip 7 Establish rules: Setting up rules with a long-term lover is practical and still consensual, though the original tools of consent should remain an active part of your relationship. For example:

LB: I love back massages. You never have to ask me about them again. You

can massage my back any time.

SS: Okay. Fun!

Time passes and so do many massages. One day, Sophia walks up to Lover Boy and begins a back massage...

LB, twitching: Ow, that hurts today.

SS: Oh! I understand. Just let me know if you ever want a massage again.

The trainwreck, part 1: Screwing up

It's likely that you have at some point transgressed someone else's boundaries, whether or not you were called out on your actions. When this happens, it's a time for reflection, introspection and asking for help. It's a time to apologize to the person you had that interaction with. It's a time to see if there's anything you can do to make up for your actions. It's a time to listen to others. Don't get defensive. Don't get angry. Don't pity yourself. Listen to advice and requests from others, and try to accommodate them as best you can.

If your transgression (your screw-up) was more serious, and you are called out on your actions, you will likely be named a "perpetrator" of sexual assault or rape. You may be asked to make amends, do internal work on yourself, or to go through an "accountability process." You may be asked to avoid leadership roles for a while, or to stay away from certain people or places. This can seem harsh, but try to learn from what happened, and know that many people will want to help you though this tough time. Also, remember that the reason you have been called out is because, out of your ignorance, power issues or carelessness, you hurt someone badly.

There are as many different outcomes to an incident of assault as there are perpetrators. Some perpetrators run away from the situation, only to be haunted by it for years. Other perpetrators work hard to make amends, and succeed. Some people will find an accountability process to be endlessly difficult, while others will find it an important time for self-reflection. Perhaps the best possible outcome is when a perpetrator is able to make amends, transform ingrained habits and attitudes, and become an outspoken educator on sexual assault and consent.

The Movie Consent Game

Next time you are watching a movie with your friends, keep tabs on the characters' consent practices. Take a swig of each time you catch one of the characters acting nonconsensually, and talk about what the characters could have done better.

Variation for lovers: Re-enact the movie scene but with good consent practices....

The trainwreck, part 2: If your boundaries are crossed

If your boundaries are crossed, remember that it was not your fault. There is

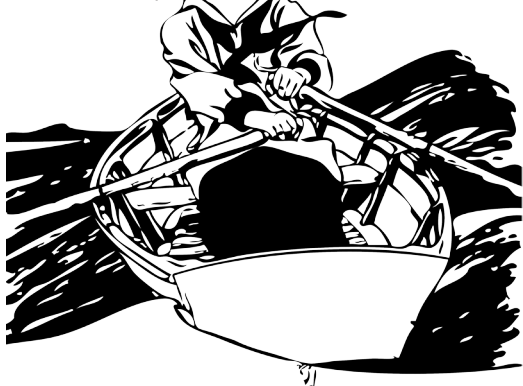
nothing you should have, or could have, said or done differently to prevent this. You did not “lead them on.” The actions of the perpetrator are the perpetrator’s responsibility alone. Though you might feel trapped, you do have many options. You can seek the advice of friends. You can have friends talk to the perpetrator about the assault. You can openly call the perpetrator out on the assault. You can seek professional help. Remember that you have the right to be listened to, and you have the right to make requests of the perpetrator. Whether or not you have friends to support you, there are resources you can turn to for help (see “Resources” box).

If someone else approaches you because her boundaries have been crossed, listen to her story and take her word for it. You are not the person to decide if the assault needs to become public, that’s up to the survivor. Whether the survivor needs time, protection or action, be there to give him unconditional support.

“The Spirit of Consent” is not a boat in the harbor

When you practice consent, you learn quickly who you make sparks with. Consent makes sex better, whether it is casual or devoted. There are a million reasons to practice consent. But you need to believe in the importance of consent, and act in the spirit of consent, to make it work. You must pay more than lip service to consent: internalize it, live by it, ask, listen and check in. Try your damndest not to cross any boundaries. If you forget to practice consent, or if you avoid it at first out of shyness, or if you just screw up, it’s not too late to try again. The important thing is to incorporate consent into daily life, not to flush it all down the toilet just because it doesn’t work out perfectly the first time you try to use it. Have fun at college, get ready to meet some special people, and remember that the only true lovin’ is consensual lovin’.

Sassy Sophia enjoys erotic check-ins and playing the melodica. She believes that when the whole world practices consent, Moshiach will come.



Resources

This list is incomplete. For example, it includes no books. It takes only moments of digging to find heaps of information on consent and related topics.

Local Groups

•Consensual Liberation through Intimate Tactics (CLIT) Collective: Based out of Santa Cruz, the CLIT Collective is a group that has come together to open dialog about sexual/intimate violence. Memembers are radical activists working to engage in grassroots and community-based action and response to sexual and intimate violence. Visit www.MySpace.com/ClitCollective.

•Women's Crisis Support – Defensa de Mujeres: Latina-based sexual assault and domestic violence center. Phone: 831-425-4030, 24-Hour Crisis Line: 831-685-3737.

•UCSC Rape Prevention Education: The center closed this year. The old website is here: www2.UCSC.edu/rape-prevention.

Myriad Accountability, Consent and Survivor Support Zines

- www.DorisDorisDoris.com/zines.html
- www.PhillysPissed.net
- ZineLibrary.info/English/interpersonal

Stimulating Writings

- www.Anarcha.org/sallydarity/consent.html
- www.FruitionDesign.com/dealwithit/02wispy.php
- www.BeyondIntractability.org/action/articles.jsp
- www.Incite-National.org
- www.XYOnline.net

If you have feedback or would like a digital copy of this zine, contact Sassy Sophia, sophia@siriusprose.com.