

Consent Skills

This toolkit is **not** a check list or an exhaustive list of skills. Consent is **not** a once off agreement or a box to tick. Consent involves ongoing communication, these skills are to be used together and will need to be revisited many times, even within an individual encounter.

These skills work together and are present at different times in in different consensual experiences, in different relationships. Everyone has their own boundaries and personal agency. Each individual owns their own consent. No one can tell someone else what is consensual or not consensual for them. This resource is a helpful suggestion, not a one size fits all.

What is consent?

Freely given, voluntary consent is an absolute principle that allows each individual to decide what they want and do not want, and to have that respected every time, all the time.

Consent is present when people want the same thing and are comfortable doing it.

Consent lets us have fun together whilst keeping ourselves and each other safe and happy.

Consent is not about pushing to get what you want.

Refusing to accept a “No” or trying to convince someone to do what you want is coercion and is dangerous.

Consent to one thing is not consent to anything else.

You can change your mind at any time.

Consent is not about giving one-off permission.

Consent needs to be present every time, all the time; in one-night stands, long-term relationships and everything in between.

Consent for kissing is not consent for touching and consent to going home with someone is not consent for sex.

Each act requires fresh informed consent.

Consent requires free will and a clear capacity to decide.

This means that you and whoever you are engaging with needs to be over the age of consent, not under the influence of drugs or alcohol and not asleep or unconscious.

Consent Skills

Consent is often considered to be an intimidating and confusing topic. At worst, it's associated with sexual violence and the law; at best, it's thought of as a bit awkward. It is absolutely true that the absence of consent is a dangerous and harmful crime and this should not be taken lightly.

But when consent is present, it empowers us to have fun together and to figure out what we like, without worry or fear. Consent communication is like any other skill – it takes practice. It's like a muscle, we have to use it in order to build it up and make it strong. The more we practice it and make room for potential awkwardness and for checking in with people in our lives, the more we can get confident with ensuring that everyone is happy and comfortable in their sexual activity.

This toolkit will talk you through some of the main skills involved with consent. For each, we'll talk about what the skill is, what being skilful looks like and then give you some practical tools for how to put it into action.

Some of the skills involved in talking about and doing consent:

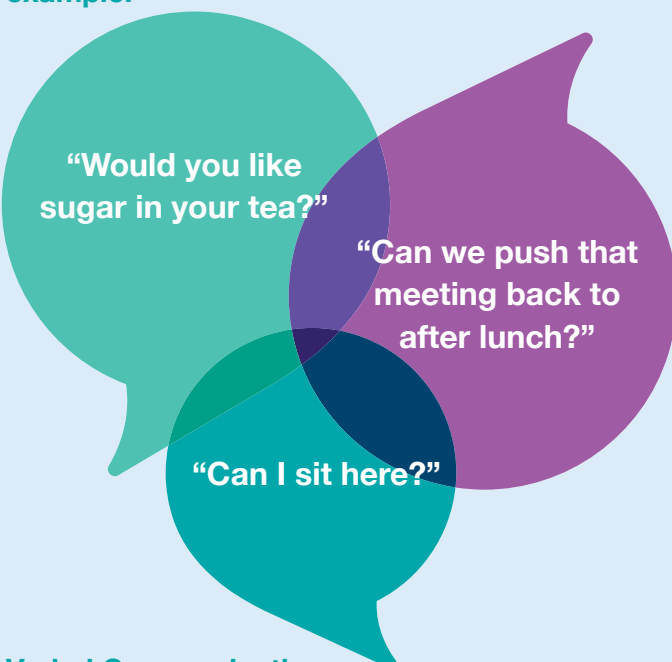
- Recognising and understanding a yes, a no and everything in-between;
- Asking for what you want and saying when you don't;
- Hearing & respecting a boundary;
- Slowing everything down and grounding yourself.

Many of the speech bubbles below are anonymised quotes from our We-Consent Conversation Workshops series – thank you to all who have participated so far. If you'd like to participate you can sign up [here](#).

Recognising and understanding a yes, a no and everything in-between

We use verbal and non verbal consent constantly in our lives, often without thinking. We check in with our friends, co-workers and strangers to see how they are and to check that we're on the same page about things.

Consent is present everywhere in our lives for example:



Verbal Communication

All communication is about passing information from one person to another. This means that both the sending and the receiving of the message are equally important. Listening and listening well is an incredibly important and often unpractised skill. You can learn more about active listening [here](#).

Here's some examples of verbal consent communication:



Non verbal communication

Consent doesn't need to be verbal; we communicate nonverbally in our day to day lives. It's always important to check in with your partner verbally but sometimes we give signals about how we are, or are not, comfortable with something through our body language. It's important to remember that not everyone can communicate verbally, so we need to check in with them as to how they are doing and whether they are comfortable.

Some examples of nonverbal consent communication:

Enthusiastic consent can be shown through nonverbal cues, such as positive body language. These signals alone do not necessarily mean that consent is present.

Physical responses to sexual interactions like erection, physical arousal or orgasm are involuntary, this means that your body might react one way even if you are not consenting to what is happening. These reactions happening does not mean that you consented to what happened. Body language does not automatically mean that the person is consenting, some responses that the body has to protect itself can appear to be positive, it is always worth checking in and confirming with the person that they are okay.

Here is a list of ways someone might give signals with their body that they are not comfortable or enjoying themselves. Body language can look different for different people. If there is any doubt then check in, it's always okay to slow down and take a break. If you are feeling unsure about what you want, then it's okay to stop or take a break.

Asking for what you want and saying when you don't

This section focuses on communication within consensual encounters only. Practising saying no is a fantastic way to get better at asserting boundaries in all areas of your life. The first step is knowing how to listen to your body and to know what you're comfortable with.

Remember, it's not always possible to say no but that doesn't mean consent – an absence of a no is NOT consent. It is always the responsibility of the other person to watch for and recognise your body language as well as your no.

It is never your fault if you're not listened to or if your boundaries are not respected. You never have to explain a no, "No" is a complete sentence. Sex is supposed to be fun, it's supposed to be about connection and pleasure.

Keep in mind that when your partner asks for something, if you don't want to do it then you don't have to! Similarly, if you want to do something and your partner doesn't want to, then they don't have to do it. Asking multiple times puts pressure on them which could lead them to doing something they don't want to do. That is coercion and it is very harmful and dangerous. Even if you are in a relationship or have done something before, you do not have to do it again. Nothing about sex is ever mandatory.

If you're ever unsure about how your partner is feeling, check in and have a conversation about it.

Examples of enjoyment

- Smiling
- Nodding enthusiastically
- Pulling you closer
- Maintaining eye contact
- Actively engaging

Examples of discomfort

- Shaking their head
- Silence
- Pulling away
- Hesitancy or freezing
- Looking sad or scared
- Pushing you away or pushing your hand away
- Crying

What does being skilful at this look like?

- Open, honest communication
- Caring and kind check ins
- Active listening
- Respectful responses
- Being clear in your asks and in your boundaries
- Being aware of body language and checking in if there's any doubt
- Respecting the answer you are given, whatever that is

"I don't like that"

"I like the sound of this, what do you think?"

"I would prefer to do something else"

"I would like to try this new thing; how would you feel about that?"

"I'm still not sure about this. Do you mind if we meet again next week?"

"That's not something I enjoy"

What does being skilful at this look like?

- Being able to openly communicate
- Being comfortable practicing asking for what you want
- Prioritising checking in with your partner
- Being comfortable saying "No"
- Talking about consent all the time, not just in the moment
- Listening and hearing
- Having respect for yourself and others

Hearing and respecting a boundary

Sex is about feeling good. We feel good when we feel safe. We feel safe when we can communicate well. To communicate well we need to be able to express what we want and don't want and hear when people tell us what they want and what they don't want. We need to respect this communication, listen to it and respond kindly.

It can feel personal if you've put yourself out there and made yourself vulnerable by checking if someone wants to kiss or more. Hearing or sensing a no can feel hard, struggling with feeling rejection is normal but remember that good communication is the foundation of healthy relationships. If someone can trust that you will respect their boundaries, they will feel safe with you and in turn be happier to explore. Practice telling your partner exactly what you do and don't like and practice listening to their likes and dislikes.

Hearing a no from a consenting partner can be a positive, someone is trusting you with their boundaries and that is something to be heard and valued. Asserting a boundary can be difficult, so if someone has redirected you, given you feedback or even a firm no, then make sure your response is respectful, neutral and kind. You might even thank them for being open and honest with you, a poor response to open communication or a boundary being established might make the other person feel unable to tell you how they feel in the future.

Alcohol and consent

Alcohol can make lots of our skills and decisions more difficult. Alcohol and drugs can affect people's capacity to make decisions and this includes deciding to have sex.

The law

Legally, a person who is intoxicated, either through alcohol or any other drug, cannot consent to any sexual activity. It is illegal to engage in sexual activity with anyone who isn't aware of what's going on. This includes being unconscious or asleep. There is no such thing as consent with an incapacitated person.

This is the case even if you've had sex before or you're in a relationship or you've both been drinking. Consent can never be assumed.

Sex and alcohol

Sex and alcohol often go hand in hand, sex can make us feel vulnerable or nervous and drinking can help to boost confidence or reduce inhibitions. It would be unrealistic to expect that people who are drinking would never have sex, but it is really important to remember that alcohol and drugs do affect our behaviour.

If there is any doubt, any mixed messages, confusion or apprehension from either yourself or the other person,

Consent is not about pushing to get what you want. Refusing to accept a "No" or trying to convince someone to do what you want is coercion and is dangerous.

What does being skilful at this look like?

- Creating an environment where your partner feels comfortable communicating with you.
- Actively seeking feedback and redirection.
- Asserting your own boundaries.
- Not taking a no personally.
- Listening to a "no".
- Respecting a "no".

Some examples of kind responses to a boundary

"Thanks for letting me know, I can do that differently."

"We don't ever have to do anything you don't want to do."

"I only want to do what you feel comfortable with."

"You can always tell me what you want and don't want."

don't do it. If you're unsure about how drunk the person is, then don't do it.

There is no magic number of drinks that means someone can or cannot consent. It is worth keeping in mind that while the law is clear on alcohol and consent, even if something is technically legal, it still might not be the right thing for you or the kindest thing to do.

It could be helpful to ask yourself a few things. This is not a checklist, but rather some things to consider:

- Is this person having difficulties communicating?
- Are they unaware of their surroundings?
- Are they blacking out or confused?
- Are they behaving differently than they were when they were completely sober?
- Has this person previously said no to something sober and are now saying yes to it while drunk?

If the answer to any of these is yes, you should assume the other person is too drunk to consent. You can never assume consent and it is never worth the potential impact of the harm of sexual violence to ignore any warning signs. Practicing our consent skills every time while sober will help us train ourselves to practice them while drinking. Consent should always be our reflex response.

Slowing everything down and grounding yourself

It is normal and human to rush into things and get caught up in the moment. However, when we're rushing, we can miss important signals from ourselves and other people. If we're not paying attention to how we feel and how the other person is feeling, we could misinterpret or ignore signs that something isn't right.

It can be difficult to interrupt the flow to slow down and check in with yourself, and your partner, but the more you try it, the easier it will be.

There are loads of reasons why you might be finding it hard to stay present during sex – such as outside distractions, gender dysphoria or body image issues.

Survivors of sexual violence might find it particularly hard to stay present. Dissociation is a defence mechanism used by the brain to cope with trauma. Many people who experience sexual trauma can find that dissociation reoccurs even during consensual sex. For more information about this or supporting someone who is dealing with this, you can visit our [resource hub here](#).

Here are some of the ways you can try to stay present:

Practice mindfulness Take the time to tune in and focus on your body and the sensations you experience. Practice this in your day-to-day life so that it's easier in the moment, mindfulness is associated with many positive benefits to mental and physical health and there are loads of resources on mindfulness.

Consent Skills summary

Consent requires:

Two (or more) people knowing what they individually want and don't want

Communicating that openly

Hearing and respecting what their partner does and doesn't want

Slowing down and checking in to make sure they stay on the same page

This informed, ongoing agreement to do what all parties want to do is **consent**

Call the National 24 Hour
Freephone Helpline at

1800 778888

for support and information on options.

Breathe If you're noticing your mind beginning to wander or sensing things might not be going well, take a break for a few seconds to breathe. Take a few deep breaths to notice how you're feeling in your body and then go from there.

Get to know yourself Get to know yourself when you're on your own. What you like and don't like can grow and change regularly so trying new things can be a great way to keep in touch with your body.

Slow it down Be honest with your partner and let them know you need to slow down.

What does being skilful at this look like?

- Being non-apologetic in how you assert your boundaries
- Being honest/curious
- Naming and owning how you feel
- Remaining calm but firm
- Listening to your body
- Asking questions
- Double checking

“Can we figure this out?”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I'm not sure how I feel about this, I need a few minutes to figure it out”

“I'm enjoying this but I need a break”

“Can we take a few mins?”

“I need to stop”



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