Having a chat

We-Consent
all people, all situations, all relationships

A note on language: We know that language is important, and people feel differently about the terms used to describe people who have experienced sexual violence. Throughout our toolkits, where space is limited, we will be using 'survivor', but we acknowledge that not everyone will identify with this term.

In order for all of us to play a role in supporting positive consent, we need to start having conversations about it with the people in our lives. This toolkit is a practical guide on some things that could make it easier and safer to spark these important conversations in your life.

Overview:

Chat Tip 1: Reflecting on our influences

Chat Tip 2: Spotting myths

Chat Tip 3: Seeing conversation opportunities

Chat Tip 4: Feeling prepared and safe

Chat Tip 1: Reflecting on our influences

Every day we are bombarded with information about sex and consent from TV shows, social media, films and much more. We are also surrounded by the stereotypes, bias, social scripts, and old wives' tales that form the world around us. From the moment we are born, these things are influencing how we think and feel about so many things, including how we think and feel about ourselves. Many of the things we learn are helpful, but some are unhelpful. It is useful to take a step back to consider if everything we think about consent is accurate and helpful or not.

Some things we learn and believe can be actively harmful. In terms of consent, those unhelpful learnings provide the environment that allows sexual violence to happen and for it to be excused, minimised or joked about. It provides an environment where survivors are blamed for the sexual violence they experience.

Individuals still cause sexual violence to happen – and those who commit acts of sexual assault must be held responsible for the decisions that they make. But when thinking about cultural change we need to think broader and consider all the other factors at play. Much of our information about consent and sexual violence is confused in layers of misinformation and fear.

Self-reflection

Reflecting on what influences us will look different for different people but it could look like:

Thinking about where we get our information.

Thinking about how our consumption of media can make us feel about ourselves.

Thinking about whether that information is based on verifiable facts or expert opinion.

Thinking about whether our beliefs or behaviours make generalisations about a particular group.

Thinking about whether our beliefs might cause harm for others.

If you want to give it a go, then you can try this reflection about the media and how it influences you: Self Reflection Activity

Chat Tip 2:

Spotting Myths

Myths regarding sexual violence and consent are widely believed and often go unchallenged. These misconceptions are all around us and have the potential to shape our thoughts, feelings and actions. They can cause significant harm when they are left unchecked.

Myths can leave survivors feeling blamed or ashamed and make it hard for them to seek help. If a survivor is surrounded by harmful myths, especially victim blaming myths, then they are less likely to speak to anyone about what they have experienced or access the support they deserve.

So, to arm you with the skills you need to challenge harmful behaviours, here is a guide to spotting harmful myths in the wild and what to do when you find them.

Red flags

Here are some of the most common 'red flags' - signals of danger - to look out for if someone you meet shares an opinion about consent or sexual violence or behaves in a way that indicates they may hold harmful beliefs or attitudes. In this section, we also explore what might be going on behind the behaviour or attitude, what you can do or say, and some useful further reading or examples in the media.

Red Flag 1: Blaming survivors

What to watch out for:
Look out for statements that try to blame or shame survivors. Nobody is ever to blame for any sexual violence they experience. The responsibility for causing harm through sexual violence always lies with the perpetrator or perpetrators.

You can consider:

- Is the blame for sexual violence being shifted onto a survivor in any way?
- Is this statement blaming someone for the violence they experienced?
- Is the survivor's behaviour before, during or after the assault being used as a reason for why they were assaulted?
- Are there statements like "Well if they didn't want X, then they shouldn't have done Y".

Statements that focus on things a survivor said, did or wore in the context of sexual violence are victim-blaming.

What you could say:

What's going on here?
It can be hard to accept just how often sexual violence happens – it can make people feel like they or people they love are always at risk. So, when we shift blame onto survivors, it's like a form of self-defence for the brain – a belief that it is possible to 'avoid' sexual violence by not doing certain things, by avoiding certain clothes or places. We might also look for 'reasons' that the survivor was assaulted – like a previous relationship, or flirting.

Thus when someone experiences sexual violence, we blame them for not avoiding it – as if the incident was somehow inevitable. This kind of thinking might make us feel like it is possible to avoid horrible things happening to us so long as we 'follow the rules'. However, people are assaulted in all sorts of situations and activities, from routine daily tasks to social occasions, in work, at school, at home. The person responsible for sexual violence is the perpetrator, not the survivor.

The following are some more specific red flags:

- Talking about what a survivor was wearing or doing
- Questioning their relationship to the person who assaulted them
- Questioning the person's behaviour before, during or after an assault

What to do:
Challenge the blaming itself rather than the substance of the statement. Facts and evidence may be helpful in some cases but remember that the experiences of a survivor are not a debating topic. Challenging the blame rather than the details will allow you to stick up for the survivor directly, rather than giving time to any attempts to shame them.

Examples in the media:
This exhibition displayed 103 outfits worn by survivors of sexual violence at the time of their experience.

This TedTalk discusses calling out rape culture on TV.

Red Flag 2: Not Believing Survivors

What to watch out for:
One of the most common, harmful and prevalent myths about sexual violence is that people lie about their experiences.

You can consider:

- Is this person questioning whether the survivor is telling the truth?
- Are there comments like "Well, if young girls sleep with someone and then regret it and blame the guy, it's not his fault" or "X seems like a lovely guy, he would never do that – it has to be made up"?

If so, then you're hearing someone perpetuate the myth that people lie about experiencing sexual violence. This can also be done by discrediting a survivor by questioning how they acted or what they did after an assault. This might be asking why the survivor didn't report it earlier, or report it at all, or didn't leave a relationship. It might be suggesting that someone "doesn't look/act like they were assaulted".

In all its forms, sexual violence is harmful and wrong and can be traumatising. Every person's reaction to trauma is unique to them. A person can behave in a way they don't normally behave. The idea of a "typical" victim and a typical way to react to sexual violence is very harmful. As with all of us, there is not a one-size-fits-all set of behaviours for survivors – they are diverse and multi-faceted people.

Sexual assault survivors can struggle with a wide range of emotions that make it difficult or painful to report or disclose their experiences. Trauma can also affect how the brain forms memory, so it isn't unusual for those who have experienced trauma to not be able to recall the event in detail or to recall it in a partial way. Sometimes trauma can cause the brain to "forget" the event entirely. You can read more about the impact of trauma here.

What's going on here?
It is no surprise that people are nervous about this issue – being wrongly accused of a crime is very frightening. However, there is a wealth of factual evidence that this is a very rare occurrence. The vast majority of allegations of sexual violence are made in good faith. It can be hard and even painful to accept that people we like and trust might have committed sexual violence. It may be easier to think that it didn't happen and that someone else is lying. In the case of celebrities or people in the public eye, it can be hard to believe that someone we look up to has done something so awful – it is easier to blame the survivor.

International research shows false rape accusations are very rare. Research across 11 European countries shows that in over 91% of cases, police found allegations of rape to be meeting crime investigation thresholds.

You can read more information in our False Accusation Fact Sheet.

What to do:
Think carefully about the way you talk about survivors in every context. One in three people in Ireland has experienced sexual violence; statistically, there is at least one survivor in most families, friend groups and workplaces. Hearing harmful, victim-blaming narratives from family members, friends or colleagues can be especially painful and may even prevent a survivor from accessing the help they need and deserve.

The most powerful thing you can do for the survivors in your life, whether you know they are survivors or not, **is to believe them**. Some survivors report that when people they trusted responded negatively to hearing them tell their story, it was as harmful as the experience of sexual violence in itself.

Remember that sexual violence can be traumatic, and that trauma can cause a change in behaviour. There's no such thing as a "typical" victim or survivor and no such thing as the 'right way to act' after experiencing sexual violence.

Example in the media:
"They are all innocent until proven guilty. But not me. I am a liar until I am proven honest."

This is a quote from Louise O'Neill's novel "Asking for it", which is a fictional but realistic portrayal of victim blaming and questioning the validity of the survivor. The powerful story follows the main character, Emma, in navigating the devastating effects of sexual violence, public shaming and not being believed.

This article from Zero Tolerance looks at how the media perpetuates the myth that people lie about experiencing sexual violence.

This Elle article discusses the Netflix show "Unbelievable". Unbelievable is based on a devastating real story of a woman who was accused of lying about being assaulted.

What you could say:

"It takes a huge amount of courage to report sexual assault in the first place, it can be a daunting process. I don't think someone would go through that for no reason."

"It's understandable that you would be concerned about false allegations, but there is a lot of international evidence to show this is incredibly rare."

"Studies across the world and police statistics have found that false allegation rates are very low."

"There's no right way to respond to trauma"

"I believe survivors and here's why:…"

Red Flag 3: Sweeping accusations and stereotypes

What to watch out for:
You should always carefully scrutinise information that is asking you to think negatively about a particular group of people, especially if that is a marginalised community. This is often done through use of generalisations and stereotyping.

Commonly, harmful ideas come from sources that have a vested interest in amplifying their agenda and spreading their own version of events, including hateful misinformation. Such ideas can spread quickly through social media platforms.

You can consider:

- Is a statement implying that certain groups or classes of people do not experience sexual violence?
- Is a statement implying that certain groups or a certain social class of people are more likely to perpetuate sexual violence?
- Is the statement suggesting that the existence of a certain group of people is inherently harmful or dangerous?
- Does the statement start with "I'm not racist/ homophobic/etc, but..."

What's going on here?
Generalisations are based on various forms of animosity towards marginalised groups and can include but are not limited to the following.

- Misogyny (dislike of or prejudice towards women)
- Homophobia (dislike of or prejudice against people in the LGBTI+ community)
- Racism (dislike of or prejudice based on race)
- Xenophobia (dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries)
- Ableism (dislike of or prejudice against people with disabilities)
- Transphobia (dislike of or prejudice against transgender people)
- Classism (prejudice against people belonging to a particular social class.)

What to do:
When you can, stand up for marginalised groups by highlighting discrimination. Take the time to educate yourself on different issues. The best people to listen to are people within the communities themselves.

Challenge your own discriminatory thoughts about certain groups of people. If someone is casually discriminatory in your presence, when you can, challenge them. If the discrimination is aimed towards you, you can seek support.

Examples in the media
This Time article debunks the transphobic myth that making public bathrooms trans inclusive will put people at risk.

This article debunks the myth that men do not experience sexual violence.

What you could say:

Chat Tip 3:

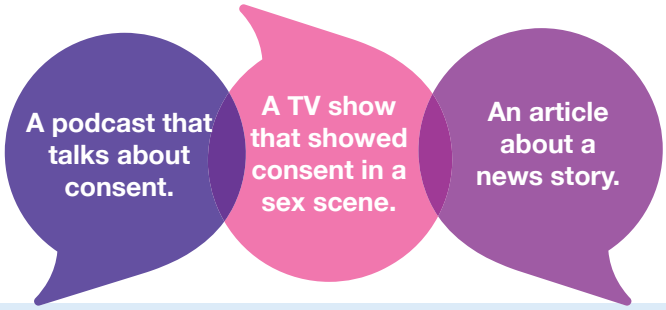
Seeing conversation opportunities

Have the chat
There are opportunities all around us to talk about consent. If you're confident talking about all things consent and feel prepared, you might want to have the chat with the people in your life.

Some examples of topics might be:

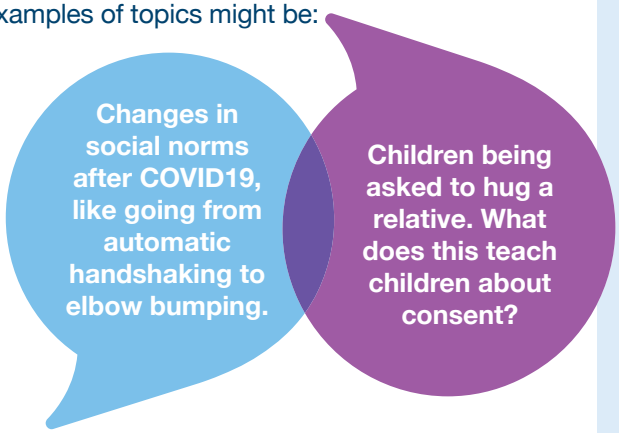
Connecting conversations
It might be intimidating to bring up consent on its own, so it could be helpful to raise it in relation to something that you've recently seen or heard or read.

Some examples of topics might be:



Exploring other areas
Consent doesn't exist in a vacuum, there are many topics and issues that intersect with it. The more we open the door to conversations about consent, the more we see that it is everywhere all the time. If talking about consent within a sexual context doesn't feel safe, we can talk about other areas of our lives where consent does or doesn't exist. This can help to explore the topic without it feeling too personal.

Some examples of topics might be:



Some examples in the media:
This Everyday Feminism article contains some great examples of when pop culture got consent right .

This Harpers Bazaar article asks "When will film and TV stop playing off non-consensual acts as romance or comedy?"

This Glamour article discusses Normal People and how it represents consent.

Chat Tip 4:

Feeling prepared and safe

Starting conversations about consent or sex can open the door to topics that are difficult or painful. It's important to keep yourself and those around you safe by being aware of this.

Unfortunately, consent is often associated with the harmful things that happen when consent isn't present. Talking about consent could bring this up for people. If you want to feel more prepared in the event that someone tells you about their experience, you can check out our "Supporting Others" toolkit where we go through how to respond to a disclosure in a kind way.

Some people do not want to talk about consent – that's okay. For some people it might be painful or difficult. If someone lets you know that they don't want to engage in a conversation about this topic, then don't push them on it. Some people are also actively not interested in, or open to changing their minds about harmful opinions they have. Trying to debate with people who communicate like this will not be helpful for them and could be harmful for you. If someone is being purposely inflammatory, aggressive or speaking in a way that is harmful, offensive or dangerous, don't engage with them.

Have conversations with people who are on the same page as you. This can lead to great, expansive conversations and provide you with an ally if you want to bring the conversation into the wider public. If you want to have a broader conversation about all the above in a safe and fun way, then consider coming to one of our **We-Consent Conversation Workshops.** You can find the link here.

Summary

Chat Tip 1:

Reflecting on our influences

- We are all surrounded by social and cultural influences.
- Some things we learn from them might not be helpful or might be harmful to us or other people.
- We can reflect on these influences to see what we want to keep and what we don't.

Chat Tip 2:

Spotting Myths

- There are many myths about sexual violence and consent.
- Many myths blame or do not believe survivors.
- Blaming and not believing survivors is harmful.
- Discrimination is harmful.
- You can spot myths by looking out for stereotypes, victim-blaming or discrimination.
- You can challenge myths and stereotypes with expert opinion, facts and standing up for survivors or marginalised communities.

Chat Tip 3:

Seeing conversation opportunities

- There are plenty of ways to talk about consent.
- You can jump right in and talk about it.
- You can talk about consent in connection to TV, films or other media where it is represented.
- You can talk about consent outside of a sexual context.

Chat Tip 4:

Feeling prepared and safe

- Consent conversations might trigger some people.
- You can check out our "Supporting Others" toolkit.
- Don't force a consent conversation, you never know why someone doesn't want to talk about it.
- Avoid conversations with people who do not show an interest in having safe conversations.
- Find allies to have the most interesting conversations about consent!
- Come to a We-Consent Conversation Workshop to talk about all the above!

Call the National 24 Hour Freephone Helpline at

1800 778888

for support and information on options.

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Department of Justice

DRCC
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

Community Foundation Ireland