

# **Consent**

**MJ Barker**

# Introduction

Welcome to my free book on consent. These free books are collections of the pieces and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

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# What is consent?

The definition of consent is 'agreement to do something'. Being able to agree to something requires everyone involved feeling free-enough and safe-enough to tune into ourselves, and to communicate openly with others, about who we are, what our capacities are, and what we want and don't want.

Unfortunately wider culture is extremely non-consensual. Treating ourselves and others non-consensually is normalised at every level of experience: in our upbringings; in our communities; in workplaces and educational systems where we're required to push beyond our capacities; and in the media we engage with; and in how political and economic systems treat some lives, bodies, and labour as more valuable than others.

Given this it's inevitable that we'll all be treated non-consensually at times, and that we'll all treat ourselves – and others – non-consensually at times too. I'm interested in exploring how we can do our best to cultivate consensual behaviour with ourselves, each other, our communities, and the wider world. This requires recognising how hard this is and how much we're up against, as well as developing ways to address non-consent honestly and kindly when it happens, ideally at a systemic level, rather than policing and punishing individual behaviour.

Consent goes way beyond sexual consent. It's about how we treat ourselves and each other in all kinds of relationships, and it's only possible within communities and cultures of consent.

# Consent and trauma

Another of my free books is on the topic of trauma (see [rewriting-the-rules.com](http://rewriting-the-rules.com)). Consent and trauma are interlinked because non-consensual behaviour – at an interpersonal, community or societal level – is one of the main forms of trauma. Non-consensual behaviours become more difficult to identify and protect yourself against when you have experienced trauma, and it's hard to treat yourself consensually as a trauma survivor.

It's also harder to behave consensually with others when there is trauma present. Developmental trauma can result in deep fears of abandonment or annihilation by others, which can mean that we try to grasp hold of others – perhaps crossing their boundaries in the process – and/or we try to push them away, potentially in non-consensual ways. We can also be drawn to relationships which are non-consensual in similar ways to those we had growing up. The 4F survival strategies can make it very hard to be consensual in relationships. For example, fawn makes it hard to be honest with others about ourselves, our needs, and our boundaries, because them liking us and approving of us feels so vital. Fight makes it hard to avoid attempting to control others' behaviour because we often feel we have to do this in order for people to stay or to avoid them hurting us.

High levels of fear and shame when we are triggered make it very difficult to be present to another person; to engage in open communication and conflict intimacy; to be honest about our feelings, needs, and boundaries; and to hear any criticism. Often when relationships are struggling we trigger each other into trauma responses. It takes a long time for our nervous systems to return from one of these mutual triggerings, and when they happen regularly we tend to go to old survival strategies to try to avoid it happening again. We may well also become hypervigilant for signs that it might be about to happen, which keeps our nervous system on high alert and more prone to being triggered.

It's also easy to look to partners, and to people we're in close relationship with, to be The One who can prevent us from having to feel the fear/shame and other tough feelings of trauma, and/or who can reach us and pull us out of them when they hit. Both of these can easily tip into treating them non-consensually.

Working on our own trauma responses, and cultivating consensual behaviour, go hand in hand, and they require both inner work and cultivating networks of support to help us.

# The Consent Checklist

This zine is about the conditions that are required for consent: a kind of checklist that we can apply to any situation in life. I'm hoping it'll be a useful starting point for conversations about how to do various things consensually. There's a list of situations we might consider at the end.

Here's my 8 point checklist of conditions which make it more likely that people will be in consent: that they'll feel free, safe, and able enough to tune into themselves and to communicate openly with others about their needs and limits, their wants and boundaries.

1. **Consent as the aim:** Have we made consent the explicit aim of our interaction rather than something happening?
2. **Informed consent:** Is everyone fully informed about what's being asked for, offered, etc., why, and where everyone is coming from?
3. **Ongoing consent:** Is consent ongoing before, during, and after an encounter, or throughout a relationship?
4. **Relational consent:** Is this a relational interaction where everyone can bring their needs and limits, wants and boundaries to the table?
5. **Consent and wanting:** Are people able to clearly express and be heard about what they want and don't want, and what they consent to and don't consent to?
6. **Multiple options beyond a default script:** Are we aware of the default script for 'success' in this situation, and have we shifted this to multiple options and an agreement to default to the lesser one on the table?
7. **Power awareness:** Are we aware of the cultural and personal power imbalances between us and their potential impact on capacity to feel free-enough and safe-enough to consent?
8. **Accountability:** Can we notice when we've been non-consensual, name that with the person concerned (if they're up for it), hear the impact, and offer to make reparations?

Before unpacking these, let's touch on what the word consent means, and what we're up against when we try to relate consensually.

# Consent

The dictionary definition of consent is '*permission for something to happen or agreement to do something*'. What I'm asking here is what conditions make it most likely that those involved can give their agreement for something to happen. In order to be able to do this they must be able to:

1. Tune into how they feel: what they need and want, where their limits and boundaries are.
2. Communicate about this with the others involved, knowing that they are free-enough, safe-enough, and able to be honest, and that their position will be heard and respected.

The conditions for consent in interactions are therefore pretty much the same as the conditions for good relationships with others (and with ourselves) more broadly. If we don't feel free, safe and able to tune into ourselves and to communicate what we feel with others, then we can't be in consent in any specific interaction. And if we don't feel free, safe and able to tune into ourselves, and communicate who and how we are to others, then we can't be fully ourselves in relationship: we'll be covering over the vulnerable bits, only sharing certain parts of ourselves.

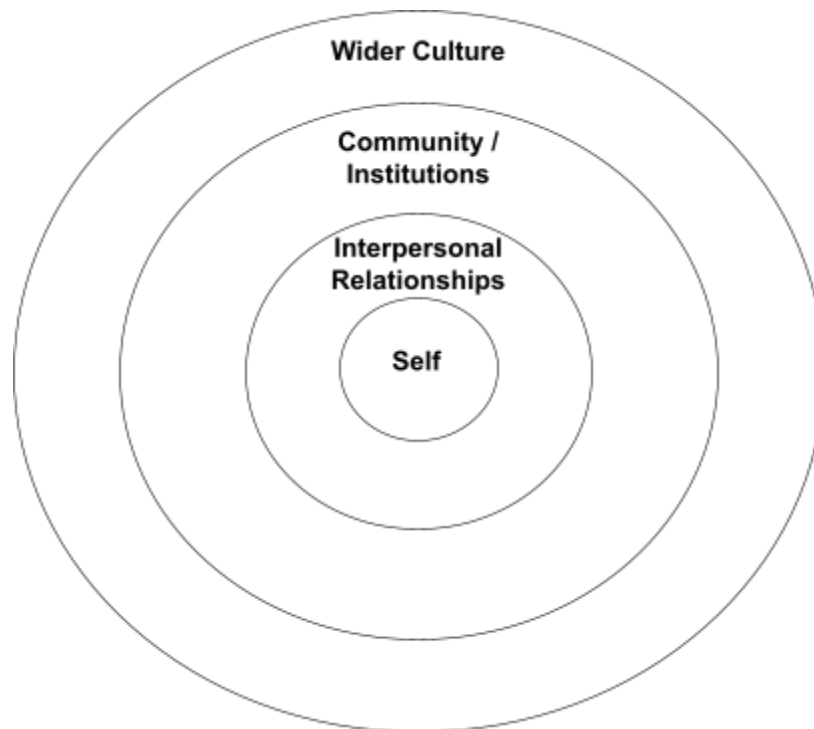
In order to consent to something, we have to fully and profoundly know that we don't *have* to do that thing, now or ever. This applies whether the thing in question is having sex with a partner, doing the task we'd set ourselves on a particular day, hanging out with a friend, or being in a certain relationship or group. We have to know that nothing is contingent on it, that we're not bound by entitlement or obligation, that there'll be no punishment if we don't do it, and that there's no assumed default 'normal' script or path that we're expected to follow here: like what other people do, or what we've done before.

How can we construct our relationships with others and ourselves to enable consent? What systems and structures of support do we need in order to do so? That's what this zine explores.



## Consent at Every Level

Non-consent is normalised at every level: wider culture, our institutions and communities, our interpersonal relationships and everyday interactions, and within ourselves (self-consent). You could go through this diagram considering the messages you received about consent - and how consensually you were treated - at each level growing up, and the same for now.



Given this, it's worth thinking about how - at each level - we might shift the micro-culture around us in order for interactions and relationships to become more consensual, as well as what systems and structures we might bring in to support that. It's important to be gentle with ourselves and others: to recognise that we're up against years of training in habits of being non-consensual, within wider systems and structures that support non-consensual behaviour.

It's also vital to remember this isn't just about sex, it's about everything. The extent of non-consensual sex may be the thing that's shown us how important consent is, but:

1. We will struggle hugely to practise consensual sex if the relationship that the sex is happening within is non-consensual in other ways, or if people have deeply non-consensual relationships with themselves because of the wider culture around them and how they've been taught to treat themselves.

2. We can damage ourselves - and each other - just as much with other forms of non-consent as with sexual non-consent, and these forms of coercion, pressure, persuasion, bullying or manipulation can often be more insidious and harder to recognise given how culturally normalised they are.

## 1 - Consent as the aim

Perhaps the main shift we need to do is to make consent the aim of every interaction, encounter, relationship, or situation, instead of the more common aim of getting what we want and/or giving someone else what they want.

Think about the definition again: Consent is *'permission for something to happen or agreement to do something'*. Most of the time our aim in any situation is for the 'something' to happen. Success means that something-we-want happens, whether or not consent is present. We need to shift this so that success means that consent is present, whether or not the something-we-want happens. If we don't make this shift, people are going to keep applying pressure to get a 'successful' outcome: to avoid the sense of awkwardness or failure that happens if we don't get what we want, or if we don't give other people what they want.

- We've had a successful hook-up if consent happens, whether or not sex happens.
- We've had a successful work exchange if consent happens, whether or not the task we wanted gets done.
- We've had a successful exchange with friends or family if consent happens, whether or not we end up socialising with them in the way we wanted to.
- We've had a successful day if we've been consensual with ourselves, whether or not we completed our to-do list.
- We're running a successful event if the people present are in consent, whether or not it's unfolding exactly as we imagined.
- We're having a successful relationship if it's consensual, whether or not it contains the amount of sex, romance, commitment, or shared time that we think we want, or imagine should happen in that kind of relationship.

It's worth making this explicit in any interaction or encounter. Let others know that this is your understanding of consent, and invite them into conversation about how you'll mutually ensure that consent is prioritised over whether or not the thing happens.



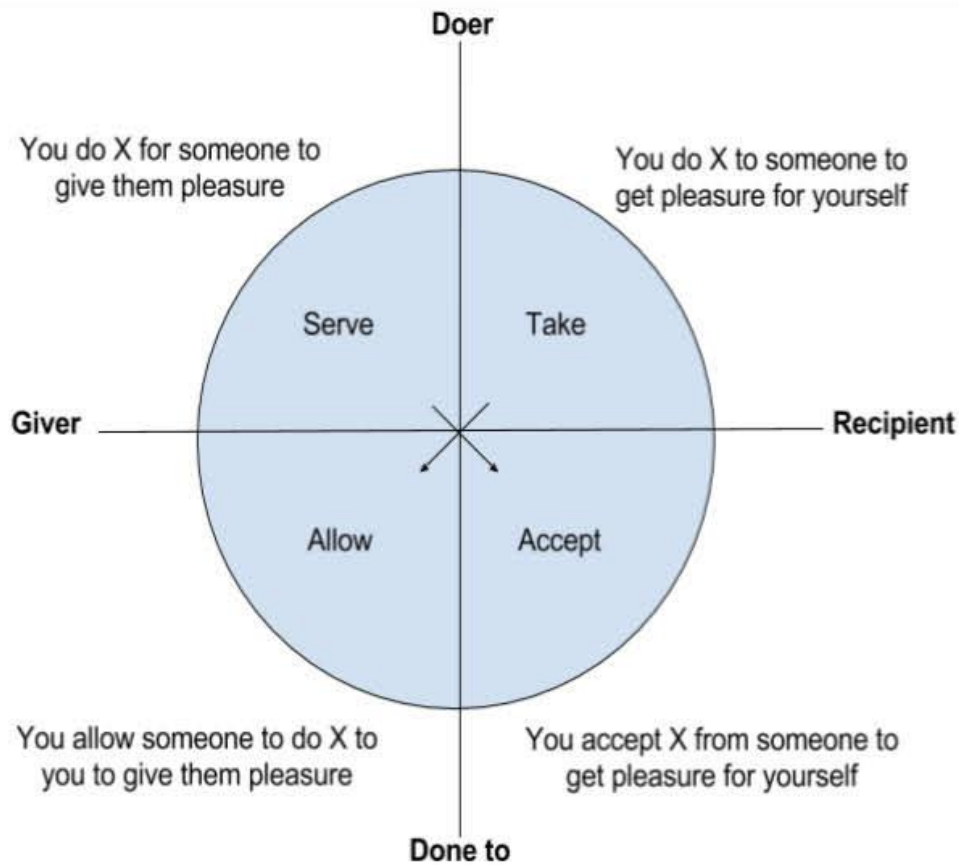
## 2 - Informed consent

To be consensual people have to be informed. That means knowing what's being suggested, asked for, and/or offered, and why. We can't tune into what our wants, needs, limits and boundaries are if we don't know the full picture.

If you're the one suggesting something then try to provide as much information as possible, rather than leaving it up to the other person to have to come back with questions. Consider what information *you* would need in order to give a consensual response in this situation. For example, if you're asking for help, be clear what kind of help you'd need and for how long. If you're suggesting becoming friends, explain what friendship means to you.

Informed consent also involves being clear about the unknowns and uncertainties: the bits you don't know yet. How could you keep someone involved - and enable them to continue to be in consent - as things became clearer? For example, how could you keep it open for somebody to change their mind as you each got more information about what a certain event would involve, about what you could offer in exchange for a task, or about how you felt about someone.

For informed consent it's also important to be clear and open about where you're coming from. This is where I find the wheel of consent helpful. It's common in our non-consensual culture for people to disguise making a request of someone as offering *them* something. For example, we might be asking for someone's time, energy, and personal risk on a project but present it as a great opportunity for them (journalists and documentary-makers I'm looking at you!) We might start massaging someone's neck because we want to touch them, but act as if we want to help them relax. We might give someone a gift because we want them to like us or feel obligated to spend time with us, but act as if it's wholly for them, assuming they'll be comfortable and happy to receive it. We might suggest spending time with someone as if they want it, when actually it's us who want it.



The wheel can help you to identify where you're at in relation to being the doer or the done-to, and also where you're at in being the one giving something or getting something in this scenario. Particularly it's worth watching out for whether you're convincing yourself - and others - that you're in 'serve' when actually you're in 'take' ('I'm doing this for you'). Non-consensual culture also means we often try to convince ourselves we were in 'accept' when actually we were in 'allow' ('I must have wanted it really').

Informed consent means being as clear as possible with ourselves - and others - what we're asking for, suggesting, offering, etc. and where we're coming from.

### 3 - Ongoing consent

Consent isn't a one-off interaction, it needs to be ongoing throughout any encounter or relationship. Just because somebody has agreed to something, enjoyed something, or offered something once - or several times - doesn't mean they'll do so again. Just because we had energy and enthusiasm at the start of an interaction or relationship doesn't mean we still will some way into it. Things change.

It's good to have an overarching agreement that it's always okay to pause or stop, and that there won't be any kind of implicit or explicit punishment for doing so (e.g. not being asked again, the other person expressing frustration, the relationship changing drastically).

In the lead up to a social, sexual, or work engagement we might make a habit of checking in with each other whether we're still all in a good place for that to happen (physically and/or psychologically), reminding each other that it's always fine to cancel or postpone, perhaps building in contingency plans so that we know that we can do so without adversely impacting others. If it goes ahead we could start the encounter by checking in with each other how we're doing, and what we have capacity for. And during the encounter we can build in some pauses or check-in points to see where we're at now. If it's an ongoing relationship we could keep reflecting on this process and how we might develop it to maximise everyone's capacity to consent.

#### **Access intimacy**

Here - and in many other places - consent relates to the concept of access intimacy, from disability activism. This recognises that we all have different needs and it's important to be mindful of these, to help others be able to express them, and - ideally - to develop such intimacy in the relationship that we're aware of those needs and have built them into our exchanges. Examples include knowing that our friend needs to sit centrally in order to hear everyone, will require a comfortable seat, or won't be able to focus for more than an hour. We'd know to ensure that the situation meets those needs, so they don't always have to be the one doing the extra labour of pointing it out (again!) or suffering if they don't have it in them to do so this time.

The point here is not to treat disabled people differently by making a thing of their body and mind perhaps having different needs and limits to everyone else's. In sex it's useful to approach every body in front of you as unique, making no assumptions, and finding out how it works - regardless of whether you're aware that someone is disabled or not. In every encounter it's useful to assume that everyone present will have different needs and limits, and to create micro-cultures of ongoing consent so that everyone is able to express these,

and how they change over time, meaning the situation works as well as possible for everyone involved.

## 4 - Relational consent

Consent is often presented as a one-way interaction: one person asks or initiates and the other person agrees or refuses (yes or no). As well as viewing consent as ongoing rather than one-off, it can be useful to see it as relational rather than one-directional. How can we shift into a situation where everyone can bring their wants, needs, limits, and boundaries to the table, where we can share these openly, and then decide what we're going to do accordingly? **Needs** and **limits** are the things we absolutely must have - and not have - in order for it to work for us. **Wants** are the things we'd like to happen, and **boundaries** express what we'd prefer to have present - or not - for it to be a comfortable, positive experience for us.

For example, you and a new potential friend have agreed that you'd like to hang out. How might the conversation go? You could list the following:

- Needs: Somewhere accessible by public transport
- Limits: To be in bed by 10pm otherwise I'll be too tired the next day
- Wants: To be able to have deep conversation, so nowhere we'd be overheard
- Boundaries: No pressure to drink alcohol because I don't enjoy that

They could list:

- Needs: Some place quiet because I struggle with crowds
- Limits: Somewhere I can spend less than £5 over the evening because I'm on a low income
- Wants: Somewhere familiar so that I can relax
- Boundaries: Not somewhere we might run into lots of folks we know so we can focus on each other

This can lead into a conversation about where the overlaps are between us, and what situations could best meet these needs, limits, wants, and boundaries.



## 5 - Separating out consent and wanting

As we saw in 'consent is the aim', we often muddle consent and wanting. It's good to tease these apart. It's perfectly possible to consent to things we don't particularly want to do. We're probably all sometimes going to have to do that in order to help somebody else out, or to get something done, get paid, etc. However the important piece here is that everybody knows what's going on, that they don't assume that just because we're consenting to something that means we're wanting it, or just because we're wanting it means we're consenting to it.

Acknowledging this distinction means that, for example, we can build in care for the person who is having to put extra energy into doing something that's not really their thing, rather than acting as if it's something they want just because we want it and they've agreed to it. Also we can dig a little deeper into how to ensure consent even in situations where the other person seems enthusiastic. We can really want something without it being a good idea for us to do it.



On [megjohnandjustin.com](http://megjohnandjustin.com) we came up with the idea of a spectrum for this, maybe from -10 (really don't want to do this thing) to +10 (really want to do it), with 0 as a neutral place. So if the two people in the previous section come up with the possibilities of meeting at a cheap cafe, in the park, or at one of their places, they could then check in where they're at from -10 to +10 on each of those options to help them make that decision together.

## 6 - Multiple options beyond the default script

It's often harder to consent under conditions where only two options are made available, one of which is culturally - or otherwise - seen as the 'successful' option, and the other not. I find the whole concept of dates horrific for this reason! If we both understand that 'success' would be us having erotic and romantic attraction for each other and wanting to see each other again, and anything else would be failure, how can we really be present to the encounter, tune into how we feel, and be honest with each other?

However, I love meeting for coffee with people I connect with (which might seem a lot like many people's concept of a date I realise!) Under those conditions we've already reached 'success': we agreed we have some kind of connection and wanted to have coffee together. It's perfectly fine for it to be a one-off, and there are multiple other options available to us, e.g. deciding to meet up again in a few months or next time we're in the same place, recognising some kind of developing friendship, suggesting a shared future work thing, or realising a frisson of attraction.

So for consent it's great if we can offer several options to choose from, together, rather than just one option which you can do or not do, with not doing it being a loaded kind of choice. In an erotic encounter, for example, instead of assuming that the default script of penetration and orgasm is the aim, we could start by exploring a range of things that we might do together and deciding between us which we want to start with, again with ongoing check-ins. If we're running an event we might offer the group a few options for activities and decide between us how to proceed, instead of stating that the group is going to do a specific activity and that people are allowed to opt out if they don't want to do it. This is often a very hard thing to do under group dynamics, social scripts of participation, and the human desire to fit in and belong.

### **Defaulting to the Lesser Option**

Once there are multiple choices on the table, it's also important to default to the lesser option that the two - or more - people want. If one person wants to kiss and the other wants oral sex you default to kissing. If one person wants to hang out every other month and the other every week you default to every other month. Of course realising the discrepancy between you might mean that the person who wants more needs to explore other ways of getting those desires met than in this relationship. It has to be okay for people to express lesser desires, and for desires to change over time or as more information becomes available.

As with the situation of people pretending to be offering something when they're actually requesting it (in 'informed consent'), people often pretend to offer more than they really feel

able to because of social scripts and other pressures. This can leave the other person confused and unhappy because they're receiving an unclear mixed message. If we can, it's definitely kinder to be honest. Again that requires everyone cultivating the conditions under which such honesty is possible and safe-enough for everyone.

## 7 - Power awareness

All of this requires awareness of power dynamics. People often don't feel free, safe, and able enough to tune into themselves and to be open about their needs, limits, wants and boundaries. This is generally because they fear implicit or explicit punishment.

We all need to keep asking ourselves what we can do to make it genuinely possible for others to make - and articulate - consensual choices in their relationships and encounters with us. Unless somebody really feels able to say 'no' to us, without fear of the potential impact of that, then they're not in consent. It needs to be just as easy for them to say 'no', 'I'm not sure', 'maybe under these conditions', or 'I'm not ready yet' as it is to say 'yes' or any version of 'yes'.

It's worth reflecting on what forms of power we have in any dynamic, culturally or personally:

**Culturally**, we might consider where we - and another person - are at in relation to each other on gender, race, disability, sexuality, class, age, and any other relevant intersecting axes of privilege and oppression.

**Personally**, we might consider aspects like how much money we each earn, how much security we have in various ways, where our health is currently at, what our histories are with trauma and/or mental health, what other relationships we have and how those are, how much experience we have relevant to our interaction, how attractive and/or successful we're seen as by the wider world, etc.

We might have ongoing open conversations about these things and how they impact us and our dynamic. For more one-off encounters, we might check in with ourselves and each other more briefly about what might be present in the dynamic that makes it easier/more difficult to consent, and how we'll do our best to mitigate that.

We might decide that a power imbalance is too great for a certain kind of relationship to be possible, or that we need to go very slowly in order to keep checking in given the disparities that are in place. We may need to take time over such conversations in order to build enough trust to be able to share these things with each other, but as always that should be preferable to the non-consent of pressing ahead before everyone has the information and awareness they need.



## 8 - Accountability

Given that we live in such a non-consensual culture, and have generally learned non-consensual ways of treating ourselves and others, it's inevitable that we'll behave non-consensually at times. Hopefully applying this checklist regularly will help us to see when that's happened. If we practise accountability in micro-moments of non-consent, it hopefully becomes easier when bigger violations occur.

In situations of non-consent wider culture encourages us to: deny that what happened was non-consent, blame the victim, minimise the impact, and insist that it wasn't part of a wider pattern of behaviour (these are at the heart of common rape myths). We probably do this to reassure ourselves that we have some control over whether we ourselves are victimised or not, and that we couldn't be a 'bad person' ourselves if we have violated another's consent. Admitting to non-consent - under a wider cultural system of non-consent - is not about saying we're a bad person or a monster. It's simply acknowledging that we'll all fall short of consensual behaviour at times, and that this hurts others, and that we understand that and want to do better.

What people generally want after they've been treated non-consensually is to hear the person who treated them that way:

- Acknowledge that they are telling the truth
- Take responsibility for it
- Understand the impact of it
- Reassure them that it won't happen again

Often doing these things leads to a sense of relief for the person who has behaved non-consensually too, whereas defending against any sense that they might have been non-consensual leads to toxic feelings of blame and shame. It's important not to require anything from the person who you have treated non-consensually, and to take things on their timeframe, just letting it be known that you're available for whatever they need. It may take a while till they feel ready for contact, or they may never be able to do so. They may not be able to forgive, or it may be that this comes easily once you've acknowledged what happened.

In situations where the consent violation is more major, where the situation is complex, or where there is a lot of trauma, it may be necessary to follow an accountability process rather than having direct contact. There's information about how to do that in the further resources. It can be useful to have a group of supportive people already set up in your life

who you will go to if somebody has treated you non-consensually, if you realise you've treated somebody else non-consensually, or if somebody tells you that you've treated them non-consensually. Their role is to support you through any process, helping you deal with the impact on you of recognising that you are a survivor and/or person who has behaved non-consensually, and liaising with the supportive people of the other party if there is an accountability process.

## Applying The Consent Checklist

So to summarise, here's the checklist of aspects of consent to consider and address in any encounter, interaction, relationship, or situation.

1. **Consent as the aim:** Have we made consent the explicit aim of our interaction rather than something happening?
2. **Informed consent:** Is everyone fully informed about what's being asked for, offered, etc., why, and where everyone is coming from?
3. **Ongoing consent:** Is consent ongoing before, during, and after an encounter, or throughout a relationship?
4. **Relational consent:** Is this a relational interaction where everyone can bring their needs, and limits, wants and boundaries to the table?
5. **Consent and wanting:** Are people able to clearly express and be heard about what they want and don't want, and what they consent to and don't consent to?
6. **Multiple options beyond a default script:** Are we aware of the default script for 'success' in this situation, and have we shifted this to multiple options and an agreement to default to the lesser one on the table?
7. **Power awareness:** Are we aware of the cultural and personal power imbalances between us and their potential impact on capacity to feel free-enough and safe-enough to consent?
8. **Accountability:** Can we notice when we've been non-consensual, name that with the person concerned (if they're up for it), hear the impact, and offer to make reparations?

We can make this list something we consider regularly in an ongoing relationship.

- How did we do in our last encounter?
- What might we tweak to make mutual consent even more possible in future encounters?

We might want to cultivate a group of people in our lives to keep talking with about how we're doing on consent. They can be the ones who support us through times when we realise we've behaved non-consensually and/or being treated non-consensually by others, and we might be that for them also. If this becomes a regular ongoing conversation this can make it easier to respond well when such issues come up.

In a non-consensual culture we're not going to manage it perfectly every time, but by acknowledging this we can keep moving towards more consensual relationships with ourselves and our people, hopefully cultivating communities and micro-cultures of consent which can ripple out and enable more consensual relating in the wider world.

In order to keep internalising and applying this list, I've come up with a bunch of situations which we can work through to consider how we could best check all these points.

- How we treat ourselves in relation to our own everyday life/work
- Asking someone for help
- Arranging the holidays with family
- Spending a day with a friend
- Going on a date
- Spending the evening with a partner
- Requesting somebody do a work task for you
- Letting someone know you're interested in a relationship with them
- Having a hook-up
- Developing a friendship
- Checking in on an ongoing colleague, friendship, or partner relationship
- Having someone round to eat together
- Making a big life decision
- Someone in your life getting sick
- Showing your appreciation to someone
- Figuring out how to spend a period of time alone
- Apologising to someone
- Giving a gift
- Organising and running an event
- Borrowing money
- Changing plans
- Supporting someone who is struggling
- Arranging a social event
- Deciding whether to get involved in a project

It can be useful to use sex as an analogy when thinking through how consensual something is. For example, if your response to someone saying they don't want to do something with you is to try to persuade them, think how unacceptable that would be if what they'd refused was sex with you. If someone assumes you'll spend a certain kind of time with them, consider how it would be if it was a certain kind of touch.





# Sexual Consent

(an encyclopedia entry, included in the [SAGE encyclopedia of LGBT studies](#))

Despite its obvious importance, sexual consent remains a remarkably under-researched and under-theorized topic. Sexual consent has important implications in the areas of: sexual violence and the law; sex education and sex advice; and LGBTQ studies, particularly in relation to drugs and sex, BDSM/kink/leather, and debates around age of consent for various sexual practices and identities.

Reviews of the literature find a notable absence of studies and articles relating specifically to the topic of sexual consent: specifically, only 1-2% of the number of those relating to rape or sexual assault. Similarly, analyses of mainstream sex advice books, articles, and websites find that the topic of consent is rarely, if ever, mentioned, despite its pivotal role in ensuring that sex is not abusive. Frequently the only time consent is covered is in relation to BDSM or kinky sex, as a form of delineating such practices from 'normal' sex which is generally assumed not to require any strategies to ensure consent. This seems problematic given the consistently high level of incidents of sexual violence, and increasing awareness of the prevalence of sexual assaults and abuse across various contexts.

This entry provides a brief overview of five of the main ways of understanding sexual consent which exist within the psychological and legal literature, and within feminist writings and writings from within BDSM communities. It starts with assumptions that consent is implicitly understood, moving onto definitions wherein it is assumed that consent has been given as long as nobody has explicitly refused or said 'no'. It then moves on to the concept of 'enthusiastic consent', and consent as an ongoing communication between people, ending with a consideration of 'consent cultures': the idea that consent negotiations occur within a wider social context and are impacted by the power relations between those involved.

## Implicit Consent

Even the academic and legal literature on sex and sexual violence often assumes a shared understanding of consent, rather than defining it explicitly. Sexual consent is often used to imply a dividing line between different kinds of sex, for example between abnormal sex (requiring of consent) and normal sex (not requiring of consent); between criminal acts (non-consensual) and unproblematic sex (consensual); or between enjoyable sex (assumed to be consensual) and not-enjoyable sex (assumed to be non-consensual). Such literature often assumes a shared understanding of what consent means, such that it does not need to be defined.

These kinds of assumptions are problematic because they result in slippage between concepts. For example, the list of 'paraphilic disorders' in psychiatric nosologies such as the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 5) include some

practices which are non-consensual alongside some which can be conducted consensually but are still assumed to be pathological due to their unusualness or deviation from normative cultural sexual scripts. To be counted as disorders such interests can either be non-consensual, or distressing to the individual who has them. The psychiatrist Chess Denman has called for a much clearer distinction between practices which are coercive and those which are transgressive, suggesting also that the former should be the remit of criminal law not psychiatry, and that psychiatry and psychology should not be engaged in pathologizing that which is merely culturally transgressive, as highlighted by the history of the inclusion of homosexuality within the DSM.

The use of consent to delineate enjoyable from not-enjoyable sex is also highly questionable as it suggests that any sexual behavior is acceptable so long as the person receiving it ends up finding it enjoyable. This supports problematic practices such as those of the seduction communities, or Pick Up Artists (PUAs) who use techniques to seduce women into having sex with them with no attempt at establishing consent. It also creates problems for victims of sexual assault, some of whom do experience physiological arousal.

## **Saying No**

A common definition of consent which is implicit – or sometimes explicit – in mainstream media coverage of sexual assaults, and in sex advice literature, is the idea that sex is consensual if a person does not refuse another's sexual advances or say 'no'. This idea is also present in some feminist activism which focuses on improving women's ability to say 'no' to sex, or employs slogans such as 'no means no'.

However, such approaches have been subject to criticism by feminist and critical psychologists. Their studies have demonstrated that people rarely use the word 'no' in everyday negotiations (for example, when refusing an invitation to a social event) or in sexual negotiations. Instead they make other responses in order to sound less rejecting, in adherence to cultural conversational conventions (for example, 'I'm afraid I'm busy tonight', or 'I'm having second thoughts'). Psychological research in this area has shown that people generally clearly understand that responses other than a direct 'no' constitute a person refusing the invitation. For example, conversational analytic studies on focus group discussions with young women, and young men, respectively, have found that both groups demonstrate implicit understandings of the normative interactional structure of refusal, without requiring the word 'no' to be used.

One approach which tries to resolve these issues is the attempt to come up with lists of behaviors which would count as non-consent. However, such approaches have been criticized for over-simplifying sexual relations given that sex communication is complex and nuanced. For example, asking somebody to use a condom can be listed as a consensual sexual behavior, but there have been rape cases where victims have asked their attackers to do this in order to prevent HIV transmission. Similarly screaming and fighting back could be listed as non-consensual sexual behaviors but may be part of some consensual BDSM scenes.

## **Enthusiastic Consent**

The 'saying no' approach to consent has been criticized by many feminists and sex-critical academics. They point out that it relies on a problematic assumption that consent is present until somebody takes it away. Also the emphasis is very much upon the behavior of the person who is receiving the sexual advances, rather than the behavior of the one who is making them. This is problematic as it reinforces the cultural tendency to focus on the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of sexual assault. The emphasis is on whether the recipient refused clearly enough, rather than whether the initiator did enough to ensure that sex was consensual. Finally, the 'saying no' approach potentially risks resulting in rather mediocre sex on the basis of it being anything that people do not actively refuse, rather than things that they actively want to do.

'Yes means yes' or 'enthusiastic consent' presents an alternative whereby partners are responsible for ensuring that the other is actively enjoying the sexual activity between them. As such it goes further than 'consent as agreement' which defines consent as 'any yes'. The important distinction here is that 'consent as agreement' can include sex which is forced or coerced, whereas enthusiastic consent has to be freely entered into. The issue of 'informed consent' also comes in here as it is generally regarded as impossible to consent without a fairly clear idea of what is going to take place.

However, some people have raised issues with 'enthusiastic consent' for suggesting that all consensual sex must also be pleasurable to everybody concerned. There are certainly situations in which people consent to sex without particularly wanting, or enjoying, sex themselves. For example, some asexual people are sexual with partners despite their lack of sexual attraction.

## **Communicative Consent**

Another issue to be raised with the enthusiastic consent model is whether sexual consent is established in one conversation prior to sex. In 'communicative sexuality' models of consent, sexual consent is regarded as an active and ongoing process of communicating willingness rather than a one-off event.

Adding this ongoing communicative element to an enthusiastic consent model means that the responsibility is shifted onto the person initiating sex, if there is one, to ensure that they have obtained consent, and that they continue to do so throughout the interaction. Some have criticized this for having an unrealistic understanding of how sex generally progresses, ridiculing the idea of asking for permission for each touch. Research has found that consent is communicated non-verbally far more than it is verbally. However, communicative sexuality writers have emphasized that negotiations can be non-verbal as well as verbal. Melanie Beres gives the example of somebody undoing another person's shirt button. If that person proceeds to unbutton the rest of their shirt that is clear consent, whereas if they do the button back up, or clutch the gap that was created, it is not.

However, given research findings on the lack of communication about sex, amongst dating couples and people in long-term relationships alike, it is likely that a move towards communicative models of consent would require a paradigm shift in the ways in which most people currently engage in sex.

## **Consent Cultures**

The consent culture movement is a sex-critical approach which regards consent as operating within wider cultures rather than in isolation between freely choosing individuals. This movement emerged out of conversations on the BDSM blogosphere about the fact that abusive situations can – and do – occur within kink communities, despite the emphasis on consent in BDSM mantras such as Safe, Sane, Consensual, and Risk Aware Consensual Kink. Consent culture writers raise questions such as whether consent is possible in sex if people are engaging in non-consensual practices within the rest of their relationships, and how wider cultures can be cultivated which make consent more possible (the kind of paradigm shift mentioned previously).

Many consent culture authors point out the normalizing that occurs around forms of force, control, pressure, persuasion and manipulation in other aspects of relationships, for example in everyday attempts to persuade somebody to attend a social event, or in street harassment when men attempt to engage women in unwanted conversations.

These authors –such as Kitty Stryker, Cliff Pervocracy, and Thomas Macaulay Millar - put forward a Foucauldian understanding of freedom in which people have options to act within a field of power, but the extent of their possibilities is constrained. Consent is possible, but neoliberal understandings of consent are called into question wherein individuals are assumed to be autonomous agents with complete freedom to consent or not.

This links to feminist psychological work which has called attention to the normative (hetero)sexual script in which men are assumed to initiate sexual activity and women to respond either by refusing or accepting the initiation. Psychologists such as Nicola Gavey have pointed out how difficult consent can be under such power relations whereby men are assumed to have a natural sex drive and to need sex, whilst women are not constructed as actively desiring beings. This also points to an absence in discussions around sexual consent of same-sex interactions, of sex with multiple partners, and of sex initiated by women.

Nicola Gavey distinguishes between interpersonal coercion (between people) and social coercion (from the surrounding culture). For example, many sex advice books advocate women having sex when they do not feel like it in order to maintain their relationship: this could be regarded as a form of social coercion. Authors in the consent culture movement agree that there needs to be awareness of both the circulating cultural pressures around sex, and the power relations between any two (or more) individuals. Such awareness needs to be intersectional, considering the impact, for example, of age, gender, sexuality, race,

nationality, social position, social class, and other differences, on how possible it is for each person to say either 'no' or 'yes' to sex.

### **Further Readings**

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# What Can We Learn About Consent From The Psychology of Sex?

I wrote my book for Routledge's Psychology of Everything series before the #metoo movement hit the headlines. However, consent was a central theme of the book, both explicitly in the chapter on how psychology has delineated 'normal' from 'abnormal' sex over the years, and implicitly as a thread running through all of the other chapters. In this piece I want to explore some of the main things we can learn from studying the psychology of sex to inform the current - vital - conversations that we're having about sexual consent.

A key point to make before we start is that while non-consensual sexual behaviour is a huge problem affecting huge numbers of people, the question of how we should go about having consensual sex - and wider relationships - has been notable in its absence in both psychology and popular discourse. Mainstream psychology and sexology textbooks rarely include this topic in any depth, although it has been a key area of study in the more marginalised areas of critical and feminist psychology. Similarly coverage of consent is shockingly lacking in sex advice literature. When I studied the most popular sex manuals, websites, and newspaper columns I found that consent was rarely ever even mentioned, and when it was this was generally only in the context of kinky sexual practices, as if other forms of sex were somehow immune from the risks of non-consensual behaviours.

From my reading of the research, and the psychology of sex more widely, I would say that we need to turn this on its head. The conditions that make sex most likely to be non-consensual are all frequently present in what we might call normative sexual encounters, such as sex within ongoing heterosexual relationships or hook-ups. While kink communities are certainly not immune from non-consensual behaviour, the understandings and practices around consent within those communities often make it more likely that people will have consensual encounters.

What are the conditions that make sex less likely to be consensual? Here are some key ones:

## 'Proper' sex

- The assumption that people must have sex in order to be healthy individuals and to maintain relationships
- The sense that there is a set sexual script that must be followed, and that only that counts as 'proper' sex
- The feeling that if this script is not followed then the encounter - and the individuals involved - are failures

## 'Normal' sex

- A high level of fear and shame about 'getting it wrong' or being 'abnormal' which makes any kind of open communication feel dangerous
- Rigid ideas about the gendered roles in sex, and the ways in which bodies should perform

## How Consent Works

- A 'no means no' understanding of consent where it's assumed that people have consented if they haven't actually said 'no' to what is happening
- The idea that consent is given in a one-off conversation - or implicit interaction - that happens at the start of the encounter
- Imbalances of power between those involved which make it very hard for one or more to communicate what they want and what they don't want before, during and after
- A wider culture of non-consent in relationships of all kinds

Sound familiar? These are actually the conditions under which the vast majority of sex happens in our culture, and the psychology of sex itself has - over the years - contributed to many of these conditions rather than endeavouring to challenge or shift them.

These are the conditions under which it becomes easy for those who want to engage in predatory sexual behaviour to do so and to get away with it. They are also the conditions under which the rest of us who would never want to act non-consensually towards another person - or towards ourselves - might easily find ourselves doing so.

Let's explore what we can learn from the psychology of sex to inform our thinking in each of these areas. You can find out more about them all in [the book](#) too of course!

### **'Proper' sex**

In the early chapters of *[The Psychology of Sex](#)* I explore how psychology and sexology have shaped our understanding of sex in such a way that we now have a pretty limited sense of what counts as 'proper' sex: 'foreplay' followed by penis-in-vagina intercourse leading to orgasm. This is the sexual script developed by researchers like [Masters and Johnson](#) which continues to underpin the 'sexual disorders' in manuals like the [American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \(DSM\)](#).

If this is what 'proper sex' means then we need disorders for penises that can't penetrate, vaginas that can't be penetrated, and people who struggle to orgasm from that kind of sex. We don't need disorders for hands that become tired quickly, anuses that struggle to be penetrated, or people who struggle to have erotic fantasies, for example.

This limited script, and the assumption that it must always be followed to completion, probably explains why around half of the population consider themselves to [have some kind of sexual difficulty](#). Ironically the pressures on penetration and orgasm are often the very things that make those [experiences more difficult](#) because trying to force bodies to do these things often results in the exact opposite - rather like trying to make yourself fall asleep when you have insomnia.

Another problem is the assumption - in psychology and popular culture - that people must want sex and should have sex a certain amount in relationships in order to be 'healthy'. Research with people [on the asexual spectrum](#), and in [long-term relationships](#), now demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to be a healthy individual, and to have a good relationship, without sex. In order for sex to be consensual people must know that it is always just as fine to not have sex as it is to have it, that all kinds of consensual sexual activities are equally 'proper' or legitimate, and that nothing else - like approval, the



continuing of a relationship, or being treated well at work - is contingent on giving somebody sex (unless that has been explicitly and consensually negotiated).

### **'Normal' sex**

Linked to these ideas of what counts as 'proper' sex are assumptions about 'normal' sex and sexuality which I also explore in *The Psychology of Sex*. Back in the 1980s Gayle Rubin wrote that we culturally operate on a 'sex hierarchy': as if one type of sexual relationship (heterosexual, monogamous, coupled, non-kinky, etc.) is best, and all of the others are somehow inferior to that, often to the point of being regarded as mad (pathologised) or bad (criminalised).

So as well as the fear of straying outside of 'proper' sex by failing to follow the limited sexual script in some way, many of us also fear communicating openly about our erotic desires - even with ourselves - for fear that we may be exposed as being into some form of 'abnormal' sex. This is particularly cruel given that research into erotic fantasies suggests that the vast majority of us are into something that would be classified under the 'paraphilias' in the psychiatric manuals: whether that be mixing some kind of power, role-play, bondage, or intense sensations into sex, enjoying watching sex or being watched and found desirable, or playing with conventional gender roles.

The DSM now only classifies 'paraphilias' as 'disorders' if they cause distress or impairment to individuals, but given the degree to which these fantasies and activities are still stigmatised and marginalised in our culture, it seems likely that many - if not most - people will struggle with them in some way.

All of this results in a situation where people feel deeply uncomfortable talking openly about what they like, and don't like, sexually. Researchers like Sandra Byers have found that even couples who had been together many years only understand about 60% of what their partner likes sexually, and about 20% of what they don't like: hardly good conditions for consensual sex to be likely to happen.

Perhaps one of the main norms about heterosexual sex is that men and women should have very different roles: men initiating the encounter and performing sex on the woman; women either accepting or rejecting the initiation and being the 'receptive' partner. Men are assumed to have a natural sex drive and to need sex, while women are often seen as focused on love rather than sex and as not having active desires of their own. There are also strong gendered scripts about women being responsible for much of the emotional labour around heterosexual sex, particularly protecting men from any sense of rejection, for example by faking orgasms or regarding themselves as personally responsible if they find sex unsatisfying. Again, all of this creates huge pressures on women and on men, particularly those who don't fit these norms. It also contributes to a set of conditions in which it's all too easy for sex to become non-consensual.

### **How Consent Works**

Finally the cultural understanding of how consent operates has actively worked against people having consensual sex for many years. We have strong cultural messages that it is sexy or romantic for people - particularly men - to seduce others into sex and to continually pursue them until they agree to a relationship. Even sex advice often reiterates the idea that

it's not hot to communicate about sex, and that people should surprise their partners with sexual scenarios, or have sex at a certain frequency even when they don't want it.

In addition to these pressures to pursue people for sex and to perform sex on them rather than sex being a mutual thing, there's often a 'no means no' understanding of what consent means. In other words anything goes so long as the other person doesn't actively refuse it. However, when psychologists have studied this area they've found that we rarely refuse sexual - or even social - invitations with a direct 'no'. Researchers asked young women and men how they would tend to turn down a friend's invitation to go to the pub if they didn't want to go. Generally they reported that they would say something like 'I'm sorry I'm busy tonight', or 'I've got to finish this project'. Similarly, when they were asked what they'd do if they went home with somebody but then decided that they didn't want sex, people of all genders said that they would say something like 'I'm so sorry I'm actually really tired' or 'I've realised I'm not ready for this'. Crucially all the participants were clear that they would recognise such statements – from another person – as meaning the exact same thing as 'no'.

Such findings have led to 'enthusiastic consent' models which suggest that sex should only happen if there is mutual enthusiasm on everyone's part for what's been suggested. Again this is difficult to achieve unless people feel able to communicate their desires openly, rather than fearing being exposed as 'abnormal' or 'disordered'. Also, it's tough in cultures where everyone - or certain groups - are strongly socialised to express enthusiasm for things they are not really enthusiastic about like presents, social occasions, hugs, or work projects.

Some people have responded to #metoo by endeavouring to create contracts or apps whereby people can record their consent prior to having a sexual encounter. This maintains a problematic view that consent is a one-off interaction rather than something that needs to happen in an ongoing way throughout the encounter. People may change their mind about what they're up for, or try something and realise that it's not for them. Ongoing consent may involve verbal checking, or suggestion of multiple options including stopping, and/or more non-verbal forms of tuning into the other person's responses.

#Metoo has also highlighted the vital importance of considering the relationship between power and consent. Do differences in age, gender, cultural background, race, body type, disability, class, role, experience of trauma, or anything else between us mean that we have different levels of power in this situation? How do these impact on the likely capacity of ourselves, and the other person, to be freely able to consent (or not) to what is being suggested? Are there pressures in play that make the other person feel that they should act enthusiastically, or say 'yes', even when they're not keen? And how might we decrease those pressures, or at least bring them out into the open?

Something that is rarely acknowledged is how difficult - if not impossible - it is to ensure consensual behaviour in this one area of life - sex - when our wider relationships, communities, and cultures are not consensual. Going back to those studies about 'saying no', another thing they demonstrate is that we rarely operate in consensual ways around social encounters like going for coffee, doing something together at the weekend, making plans for the holidays, collaborating on a work project, etc. Our interpersonal relationships are shot full of non-consent on this level. Even though we know full well that somebody's reluctance, or claim to be busy, or going quiet, or changing the subject, means that they

don't want to do what we've asked, it's easy to pretend that a partner, friend or colleague might still be open to it because they haven't actually said the word 'no', and to start with all the 'go-on's, 'you know you want to,' 'do it for me,' and other forms of persuasion.

And of course our wider cultures and communities are often predicated on non-consent. There have been some useful writings recently, for example, about how common and taken-for-granted non-consensual practices are within organisations, and within education. For example, people in positions of power over others often force them to do things; implicit rules state that people should be constantly available to their colleagues; and there are pressures to demonstrate 'success' in certain ways in competition with others. If we really want to take consent seriously we need to look at the way non-consent is normalised throughout our institutions, communities, families, and popular culture.

So how might we shift these common cultural understandings about sex to create the conditions for more consensual sex? These would be my suggestions:

### **Sexual diversity**

- Recognise that people can be anywhere on a spectrum from asexual to highly sexual, that this can change over time or stay the same, that it's always absolutely fine for somebody not to want sex (now or ever), and that nothing else should ever be contingent on them having sex (unless explicitly consensually negotiated)
- Acknowledge that there are vast range of activities that people can find erotic or hot - alone and with others - and that all of these 'count' as sex and are totally fine so long as they're done consensually
- Shift from goal-focused sex to process-focused sex: it's about being present to the unfolding experience rather than reaching any particular goal
- Emphasise sexual diversity rather than attempting to divide sex into 'normal' and 'abnormal' kinds, to remove the stigma around expressing our sexualities and erotic desires
- Challenge any assumptions about particular gender roles for sex, or how certain bodies 'should' perform sexually

### **Consent culture**

- Move towards a model where sex only happens if all those involved really want it to happen
- Embrace the notion that consent should be ongoing throughout the encounter
- Recognise our power and privilege and the ways these play out in sex. Where we have more power and privilege than others use that in ways that give them the maximum amount of agency possible to the other person or people in the situation. If in any doubt whatsoever, don't have sex
- Address consent in our whole relationships - not just the sexual parts - and in all of our different relationships and communities - not just the sexual ones

# Consensual relationships

## Non-consent in relationships

The current moment in 2020 highlights the importance of turning our attention to consensual relationships in several ways.

First, domestic abuse has gone up globally by 20% during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK calls for domestic abuse helplines jumped by a half in the first month or so and a further spike is predicted post lockdown. Boots pharmacies began offering safe spaces for people to go if they were in abusive situations, and legislation was put in place to help survivors to escape abusive homes during lockdown. All of this led to domestic abuse being called the 'shadow pandemic'. So we see clearly the scale of non-consensual relationships, and just how important this is to address. Being stuck in together during lockdown has highlighted to many people the areas in their relationships which are not as consensual as they would like them to be.

Then the #BlackLivesMatter uprising highlighted massive flaws in the policing and criminal justice systems. Some people responded to calls to dismantle and abolish these systems by asking 'what about' survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault? However, others pointed out that the criminal justice system has never served survivors. Survivors often experience legal processes as retraumatising and gaslighting, given the minimising, denial, victim blame, and perpetrator defense which often happens in court cases – mirroring how survivors are treated in wider culture. Number of cases passed for charges is low, as rates continue to rise.

Many have suggested that policing is ill-equipped to deal with sexual and relationship abuse, and that involving the police is actively dangerous when those involved are people of colour. For these reasons, people have turned to alternative models like funding other forms of support for survivors, building accountable communities, and transformative justice.

Alex Iantaffi and I had a conversation with Deana Ayers on the Gender Stories podcast about how police feel necessary in communities where people keep themselves and their families separate and private – a particularly white western middle class heteronormative model. Alternative models include building relationships and support systems in community, and learning how to open the windows on our relationships and support each other when our dynamics have fallen into non-consensual or traumatic patterns.

## Sexual non-consent and relationship non-consent

The #MeToo movement highlighted the commonality of sexual forms of abuse and assault. At least 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men have had someone try to have sex with them against their will. In most cases when sex happens against someone's will, it is with a known person, mostly a current or former intimate partner.

This highlights the fact that we need far more focus on how to avoid and address sexual – and other forms of – abuse in the home and within known relationships. Instead, media focus tends to be on stranger sexual assault of women. This potentially puts women at more risk because fear of stranger danger constrains them to private home spaces. It also makes it harder to speak out about assault with known people when it occurs, and about assault in other gendered dynamics.

Non-consensual sex often happens in contexts where other forms of non-consent are normalised, so we need to explore how to cultivate cultures of consent around all aspects of our relationships, not just sex. This is also important because emotional forms of non-consent can be just as damaging as more sexual and physical forms, but often harder to recognise and to open up about.

With all forms of non-consent it's rarely obviously present from the outset of a relationship but rather it gradually creeps into a relationship (like the foot in the door technique, or the boiling a frog fable). This makes it hard to recognise because it seems normal due to past experience, and because beginning to question it would mean recognising all the previous moments of non-consent when we didn't say something about it.

It's also important to consider these questions in all kinds of relationships, not just partner relationships, because non-consent in friendships, family relationships, colleague relationships, and so on are also very common, and often go unrecognised because of the focus on romantic/family relationships, and because terms like 'bullying' are used which downplay and normalise peer-to-peer or colleague-to-colleague non-consensual and abusive behaviour.

### **Cultural normalising of non-consent**

The wider culture of relationships normalises non-consent, with common tropes like it being legitimate to pressurise or manipulate somebody into a particular kind of relationship with you, and to do particular things (e.g. go for a drink with you, eat the kind of food you enjoy, take the kind of holiday you prefer).

It's also presented as valid to attempt to shape a person into who you want them to be, to focus on that relationship to the exclusion of others, and to try to convince them to stay with you even if they don't want to.

Close relationships are often presented as private so we shouldn't share what's going on in them with anybody else, we should present them as perfect on social media and never talk about the difficult parts.

These tropes are particularly prevalent for romantic relationships, but also often apply to best friendships, family relationships, and close collegiate relationships, for example.

Relationship researchers find that it is very common for people to engage in behaviours like shaming forms of criticism, mocking contempt, defensive blame, and stonewalling or shutting down in relationships which are struggling, all of which are examples of non-consensual behaviours, but are rarely framed in this way because it is so normalised in our culture to treat people in these ways within relationships.

### **Why a binary model of consent/non-consent is unhelpful**

The common idea with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse is that the majority of relationships are 'normal' and non-abusive, and a minority are abusive which is a very specific issue and requires a completely different approach to 'normal' relationships. This division is unhelpful because it encourages us – as survivors and as a wider culture – to keep asking the binary question of whether a situation is 'bad enough' to count as abuse, and only counting it, and feeling able to address it, if it meets those criteria: often the legal criteria.

Also, this binary perpetuates the idea that there are bad 'abusers' and then there is everyone else who is perfectly good and safe. This makes talking about consent in relationships really hard because we feel like we have to present ourselves as perfectly good and safe – and deny or defend any non-consensual behaviours – lest we be seen as an abuser and rejected, called out, or reported.

We need to acknowledge that we're all likely to behave non-consensually at times in such a non-consensual culture, when most of us were brought up with these relationship norms, rather than denying our capacity for non-consent, and focusing on policing and punishing others for it.

### **Spectrums of consent**

The criteria for 'abuse' is a low bar for a relationship: the sense that if it doesn't meet the legal criteria for abuse/assault then it is fine. Instead we should focus on how all relationships can be as consensual and beneficial for all involved as possible, recognising that the level of consent present is probably on a spectrum which goes up and down over time.

We can define consent as the degree to which people feel safe-enough and free-enough in a relationship to be open about their needs and boundaries. This is inevitably going to change over time, impacted by outer circumstances, trauma, how well-supported we are, and more.

So we might ask ‘how can we maximise how consensual this relationship is for all involved?’ – as the people in that relationship, and as the supportive people around that relationship. Then, if we feel like the level of consent is not good enough – if someone starts feeling unsafe or their freedom constrained for example – we can know that that is enough reason to ask for that to be dealt with, or to step away if others aren’t up for that.

Thinking about all the following features of non/consent on spectrums rather than as legalistic abuse/non-abuse binaries can be helpful:

- How consensual is *physical touch* in this relationship – how free and safe do we each feel to say what we want and don’t want in this area with no sense of pressure – (rather than does it count as physical abuse or not)?
- How consensual is *sex* in this relationship – how free and safe do we each feel to say what we want and don’t want in this area with no sense of pressure – (rather than does it count as sexual abuse or not)?
- How consensual is *money* in this relationship – how free and safe do we each feel to say what we want and don’t want in this area with no sense of pressure – (rather than whether someone is entirely controlling of the other’s personal finances)?
- How *kind* are people in this relationship, and are they able to *regulate* their emotions and behaviours when not feeling kind (rather than do people actively put each other down or diminish each other)?
- How *safe* do people in this relationship feel (rather than are active threats made)?
- How free do people in this relationship feel to have *other close relationships* (not just whether they are explicitly isolated from friends or family)?
- Is everyone in this relationship able to meet their *basic needs* and *get support* when they need it?
- Does everyone in this relationship get the *privacy* and *solitude* they need, online and offline, without *monitoring* from the other person/people?
- Is everyone *free* to decide where they go, who they see, what they wear, when they sleep, etc.?

### **Recognising non-consent in relationships**

In addition to working our way through the previous questions, tuning into our body and feelings is an important way of identifying how consensual a relationship dynamic is. It can be difficult though, particularly for those with a history of trauma, and/or when gaslighting is present, to tune into – and trust – our feelings. Also it can be confusing when non-consensual dynamics coexist, for example, with strong love feelings, exciting sex, a close connection between you during the good times, and/or deep mutual understanding.

Remember that non-consent is not always conscious on the part of the people involved. They may well not know they’re behaving in non-consensual ways, and/or these dynamics may be so familiar from their past that they don’t recognise that they are a problem. If everyone involved doesn’t feel free enough or safe enough to be themselves and to express their needs and boundaries, then it’s not a consensual dynamic.

Signs that a dynamic has become non-consensual to a concerning level include the following:

- Feeling frightened of another person or their reactions
- Feeling small or powerless
- Your mind being foggy and confused
- Inability to express yourself openly around the other person
- Sense that you're losing things like your other close people, your passions, or your spark
- Sense that you and/or the other person are treating each other very differently to the ways you treat other people in your lives (e.g. much more criticism, comparison, aggression, or taking for granted)
- Uneasiness or queasiness about things you've done or said in the relationship and whether they're okay
- Noticing that the other person seems frightened, placating, or unable to be honest around you
- Feeling out of control around the other person
- Struggling to allow the other person space, privacy, or time away from you
- Feeling threatened by the other person's relationships and interests outside of your relationship
- Spending a lot of your time thinking about this relationship, particularly trying to tell if something might be wrong, or to figure out how to keep the other person happy
- Editing what you tell your close people about the other person or things that happen in the relationship

### **Addressing non-consent in relationships**

Unless there are clear sexual or physical violations going on, it can be hard in relationships to know whether you are overriding your own consent (perhaps because this was the way of relating you learnt in the past), or whether the other person is overriding your consent, or whether it's more of a mutual non-consensual dynamic between you.

It can be helpful to remember that it doesn't matter whether this dynamic is 95% down to them and 5% you, or vice versa, or 50/50. The thing to do when it feels non-consensual remains the same:

- Pull back from the relationship as much as you need to to find a sense of clarity and 'having yourself' again
- Press pause or slow down in order to do so
- Get all the support you need from others around the relationship and your role in it. This might be friend, community support, trauma-informed therapy, and/or support groups, for example

Once you are feeling clearer, calmer, and stronger you can get a sense of whether a more consensual dynamic is possible in this relationship, and what kind of relationship container



would be necessary for that. For example, it may require rethinking whether you cohabit, or whether you see each other as often, whether you share finances, or how you name the relationship.

It's also useful to think about what systems and structures of support you'd need in order to keep an eye on the dynamic and to keep moving towards greater consent. Some form of individual work for each person around their patterns is helpful, as well as ensuring that everyone has a network of support around them so you aren't each other's main support while you're going through this together. Forms of mediation, transformative justice, or therapy together can also help address the dynamics between you.

The other person should be up for you doing what you need if you articulate it this way and if they are committed to having a consensual relationship with you. If they're not hearing you, or meeting you there, then it may be necessary to pull back further or to step away.

If you struggle to do this, it's worth remembering that remaining in a situation where someone is getting hurt – whether that is somebody else or whether it is you – doesn't help anybody, including those who are behaving non-consensually. It often keeps them stuck behaving in habitual ways which are often very painful and shameful for them, whether or not they're able to acknowledge that. Remaining in such situations also tends to take so much of our energy that we're not much good for ourselves, for the things we find meaningful, or for anybody else in our lives. Taking yourself out of the dynamic enables everyone – if they're up for it – to look at their part in it, and hopefully to address that.

There's more from [Justin](#) about signs of non-consensual relationships and how to address them [here](#), including how to access support if it is difficult or dangerous to leave.

## **A culture of consensual relationships**

Ideally we would change the whole culture to depict relationships far more consensually – so that we have models for this – and to support everyone to relate more consensually. In the meantime hopefully we can try to shift the consent cultures in our communities and networks. If it takes a village to raise a child, perhaps it also takes a village to support a consensual relationship.

Moving towards a culture of more consensual relationships could involve things like:

- At a micro level learning how to notice what [non-consent feels like in our body](#): both when we are at risk of doing it to another person, and when it is done to us. This requires getting enough solitude and privacy to be with our feelings and to check in with ourselves regularly about our needs and boundaries.
- Addressing our [stuck patterns](#) which make us more likely to behave reactively or non-consensually, and being up for getting support with this when needed. Again some

time alone is necessary for doing this work, as is the capacity to **take ourselves away** to a safe-enough place when we become reactive.

- Practising addressing micro moments of non-consent in relationship so it becomes everyday and normalised to do so.
- Cultivating systems of support, and consensual relating within those systems, so that it becomes normalised and so that we have people to support us in this.
- Committing to keeping the **windows on our relationship open** with our close people and community so we can be alerted if people have concerns, and supported to maximise consent. Check out **Mia Mingus's** work on **pod mapping** to think more about the support structures around your relationships.

### Key relationship consent criteria

Taking the **key ideas about sexual consent** and applying them to relationships, we might consider the following:

- Make consent the aim. With sex making consent the aim, rather than getting sex, enables consensual sex to happen. With relationships we could make mutual consent the aim of the whole relationship, and each encounter: not getting what you want from the other person, or being what they want. This might look like wanting the maximum freedom and safety for you and the other person, regardless of what the relationship needs to look like in order for this to be possible.
- Everyone knows that they don't have to do it (now or ever). Sex can't be consensual unless we know that we absolutely don't have to do it, and that no kind of punishment will occur if we don't do it. With relationships the same is true for the whole relationship. We need to know that we are free to *not* be in this relationship, or in this particular way, without fearing that we will be punished or suffer significant loss. Here it can be useful to keep affirming with each other that our whole relationship (and our home, community, security, etc.) isn't contingent on, for example: having sex regularly, continuing to cohabit, feeling romantic towards this person, our body staying the same, doing certain things together, earning a certain amount, etc.
- Consent is informed. In sex this means knowing what's on the cards before the encounter rather than being surprised with activities we weren't expecting. In relationships this means having enough information to be able to make a decision about whether this kind of relationship with this person is a good idea for you. It's important not to hide vital information that you know might make a person think twice or want to go slower. With each step in a relationship people need enough information in advance in order to make a consensual choice. For example it's good to be clear about your feelings about having kids and childrearing long before you've committed to a relationship that would preclude people doing that elsewhere, or not doing it if it's not what you want. It's good to be clear about your financial situation and relationship with money long before sharing/borrowing/lending finances in any way. Considering **speed of relationships** can be helpful for having long enough to ensure informed consent before each step. It's also important to explore **shame** and how we cover over shame in presenting ourselves to others.
- Consent is ongoing. In sex this means checking in verbally and/or non-verbally during the encounter that everyone is enjoying it, and pausing or stopping if not. In relationships this means also continuing to check in whether it is working well for

everyone, and taking whatever kinds of pauses, breaks, or step-backs are necessary on aspects of the relationship – or the whole relationship – if it isn't working (if it's not working for everyone, it's not working for anyone). The cultural idea of specific vows, promises, duties or commitments – particularly in romantic and family relationships – can make ongoing consent difficult because they suggest that it's possible to agree to share your money, body or home in a certain way for the rest of your life, whatever happens in relation to money, health or feelings.

- There is no default script, but multiple options. In sex there is the default script of **first to fourth base** (or similar). In relationships there is a similar cultural **'escalator'** model where it is seen as good to get closer, more entwined, and happier in a relationship over time, checking the points on the relationship checklist (e.g. for romantic relationships dating, having sex, becoming exclusive, moving in together, getting married, having a family, etc.) For consent it's vital to know that all erotic, sensual or sexual activities – and none – are equally valid, so you can choose what works best for everyone. In a relationship all ways of doing relationships – and all aspects of relationships – need to be affirmed as equally valid. Then you can find what works – and doesn't work – for this particular relationship. It's important that the person or people whose ways of doing things are the closest to the normative script maximise the agency of those whose ways of doing things are further away to articulate their preferences and have them respected.
- We're all mindful of power imbalances and how they constrain consent. Sexual consent is way harder when one person has a lot of power over the other. For example it is hard to say 'no' if you feel at risk in some way if you don't respond to another person's sexual advances (career, money, care, safety, etc.) Similarly those with more power in a relationship in various ways need to recognise those with less may feel far less able to say what they need and where their boundaries are. It's good to be open about the power imbalances, and to do what you can to enable those with less power in each area to identify and articulate their needs and boundaries and have them respected.
- We try to be accountable. It's important to recognise that we won't always be perfectly consensual and to recognise – as soon as possible – when this hasn't happened, and to be accountable for that. Micro moments of non-consent can be fairly easy to repair, and the more we make a habit of doing that the more easy it can become. Bigger moments can be much harder, and this is where it's really good to have a network of support around you to help each person to process what has happened, to enable them to take as much space as they need in order to be ready to address it, and to support them coming together to hear and be heard, and repair if possible.

# Gaslighting and consent

## What is gaslighting?

**Gaslighting** is when somebody manipulates another person so that they doubt their own reality or sanity. The word comes from the play and movies called '**Gaslight**' where one character tries to make another crazy by constantly questioning her experience. One thing he does is to dim the gaslights in her home. He then tells her that they haven't got dimmer and that she's imagining things.

In her **book**, *Dancing the Edge to Reclaim Your Reality*, Lori Beth Bisbey says that gaslighting does two damaging things simultaneously. It convinces you both that:

- Your perception is distorted, and that
- Another person – or group's – perception is reality

Lori Beth points out that, as well as being a **sign of a non-consensual relationship**, gaslighting makes us more at risk of non-consensual situations. For example, gaslighting about our experiences when we're younger makes us more likely to mistrust our own feelings, and to overly trust other people's sense of how things are. In later life this may mean that we override our sense of danger that something isn't right about a situation or relationship. It may mean that we believe a partner or friends' sense of what is normal or acceptable in a relationship even when it doesn't feel good to us. It may mean that we doubt our sense that something non-consensual or abusive has happened to us when it has.

## What's involved in gaslighting?

Common features of gaslighting include:

- Minimisation (e.g. it wasn't that bad, it didn't have such a bad impact, no-one intended any harm, you're making too much of this)
- Denial (e.g. it didn't really happen, your memory is inaccurate, what you're describing isn't real, you're acting crazy, everybody else agrees with me so you must be wrong)
- Victim blame (e.g. it was your fault, you brought it on yourself, surely you could just have done X and it wouldn't have happened, bad things only happen to bad people)
- Defensiveness (e.g. it's nothing to do with me, I'm blameless, *you've hurt me* by raising this), and
- Offering a superficial fix that doesn't get at the extent of the problem (e.g. couldn't you just try...? Let it go. You're overthinking this/making a big deal. Look on the bright side).

## Who gaslights?

Rather than being something that only a small minority of abusive/narcissistic people 'over there' do in deliberately manipulative ways, gaslighting is something we're all socialised into

within our non-consensual culture. It's also on a spectrum, with most of us automatically going to a gaslighting response sometimes.

For example, we might gaslight unintentionally, and/or for understandable reasons when:

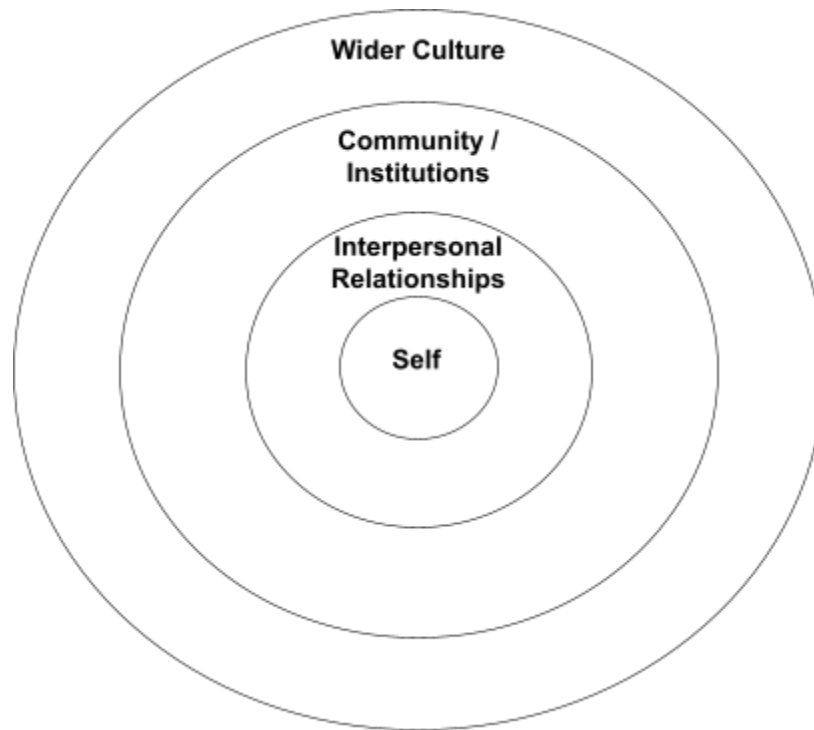
- We don't want to acknowledge that a close person is struggling so much and that we might be powerless to help them,
- Their experience shows us just how unjust and painful the world can be,
- Their vulnerability frightens us because we'd hate to be that vulnerable ourselves,
- Their experience highlights a privilege/oppression dynamic that we benefit from ourselves, or
- We're scared that our own behaviour might have been harmful in some way either to them directly or to other people in similar ways in the past.

Lori Beth writes that gaslighting can be deliberate, but it can also be unconscious on the gaslighter's part, for example when it involves protecting them from a negative view of themselves, or when it involves them asserting their need to be 'right' in order to shore up their sense of themselves.

### **Levels of gaslighting**

Gaslighting happens at all levels. One of the reasons that we struggle to spot it, easily fall into it in our own relationships, and internalise it and gaslight ourselves is because it is so common in wider culture, and in the communities and organisations that we're part of.

You might find it useful to identify forms of gaslighting that were familiar to you at the following levels growing up, or which you see in the world and relationships around you in the present.



### **Cultural gaslighting**

Gaslighting has been evident in political responses to the **Covid-19 pandemic**, such as denial of the extent of the problem, its impact, or the fact it is impacting some – marginalised groups – far worse than others. **#BlackLivesMatter** has also highlighted how those common features of gaslighting are generally present in everyday responses to police brutality against black people, and in **racism more broadly**.

The common features also map onto the **rape myths** which survivors generally hear when they speak about their sexual assaults. These are present in **jury decision making**, and are often internalised by survivors themselves, making it hard for them to acknowledge what happened to them, or to speak out about it.

It's important to be aware of how marginalised and oppressed people in particular tend to be gaslit in wider culture, for example in the **portrayal of trans people** as not really existing and as perpetrators of violence when they are statistically vastly over-represented as victims of violence.

We can be mindful of when our go-to response when hearing about a situation is minimising, denial, victim blame, defensiveness, and coming up with quick fixes, that we're at risk of perpetuating cultural gaslighting in that area.

### **Systemic gaslighting**

Gaslighting also happens in systems such as organisations, communities, and families. A common form of gaslighting involves individualising something which is really a systemic/structural issue. Examples of this include:

- 'Explaining away' why all the people high up in an organisation are white men, rather than acknowledging and addressing the role of structural sexism and racism,
- Scapegoating one individual in a community as abusive rather than recognising an underlying issue with normalising of non-consensual behaviour in that community,
- Blaming an individual for being over-sensitive rather than dealing with structural racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. in an organisation,
- Giving a brief training or workshop on some form of injustice rather than tackling it throughout the system.

Lori Beth Bisey highlights gaslighting as a common feature of many of our early family lives. Many children are taught to distrust their needs, feelings, and boundaries because they don't have these heard, reflected back, and respected by caregivers. Gaslighting children risks them learning to mistrust their own experiences, becoming unable to tune into vital needs and boundaries, and being overly trusting of potentially unsafe others rather than checking them out of building trust over time.

*Common examples of gaslighting in childhood include adults:*

- Telling kids they shouldn't – or don't – feel the way they feel about something,
- Pretending that tough things aren't going on in their family or community when they are,
- Making light of their struggles,
- Assuming they must have done something to cause any bullying or hurtful behaviour they experience,
- Suggesting their experiences or identities are 'just a phase' or not real,
- Blaming them for finding something hard when this may well be due to a form of disability, neurodiversity, or mental health struggle,
- Telling them they have to accept adult behaviours after they have expressed discomfort with them (e.g. forms of touch or invasions of privacy).

## **Relational gaslighting**

One reason why gaslighting in families or educational settings is so damaging is that it can set us up for emotionally and otherwise abusive later relationship dynamics. If we've been taught that our feelings are not valid, that we don't have a right to privacy, and that our body is other people's to touch even when we don't want it, we can easily fail to recognise when people later on in life are undermining us, trying to control us, or even assaulting us.

Signs that you might be gaslit in relationship include: feeling foggy, lost, or murky rather than clear about what's going on, and finding yourself protecting that person – and their view of themselves – in conversations with other people.

It's useful to ask yourself whether your experiences and views are affirmed or undermined in the relationship, whether another person's views are put across as always 'right', and/or

whether any difficulties are blamed on you rather than being seen as relational issues and/or there probably being responsibility on all sides.

It can be the case, of course, that both or all people in a relationship engage in gaslighting behaviour. In conflictual and non-consensual dynamics people can often end up attempting to undermine each other's versions of events in gaslighting ways. Important things to hang on to hear is that there are generally multiple stories through any situation, and that it's important to affirm the truth of each person's lived experience of it, without undermining anybody else's. More on this in the break-up chapter of my book [Rewriting the Rules](#).

## Self-gaslighting

Sadly, because of cultural, systemic, and relational gaslighting, it is easy to gaslight ourselves, which often contributes to our suffering.

For example, if we have mental health problems, common stigma around mental health can often lead to us questioning whether what happened to us was really 'bad enough' (minimising), wondering whether our mental health problem is even real (denial), blaming ourselves for it (victim blame), mentally defending the people/situations that traumatised us (defensiveness), and telling ourselves that we should be able to easily fix this as individuals, rather than recognising the extent of the trauma and/or the wider systems which are involved in our suffering (superficial fix).

Working with a trauma-informed therapist can help us learn how to reality-test, how to regulate our feelings and come to a more trusting relationship with them, and how to find and articulate our needs and [boundaries](#).

## Responding to gaslighting

At all these levels it can be helpful to respond to the common features of gaslighting in the following ways – when drawn to gaslighting behaviour ourselves, or when experiencing gaslighting from others.

- Minimising: Instead acknowledge the ongoing impact of what happened, and that it may always be there.
- Denial: Instead recognise that what happened was real and painful, and allow any feelings to be present, assuming that they are [sensible](#).
- Victim blame: Locate the responsibility for what happened in the person/group who behaved in the harmful way and/or in wider systems and structures, not individualising it in the one who is suffering or was victimised.
- Defensiveness: Be [accountable](#) for your role in what happened if relevant, acknowledge the systems and structures involved.
- Superficial fixes: Ask the person concerned what helps, and practice these things. Do your homework to learn what is generally supportive in such situations. Seek consent



before giving any advice. Try to empower the person in finding their way through rather than assuming you know what's best for them.

Importantly please be kind and gentle with yourself around this. Because gaslighting is such a common go-to response at all levels, and because most of us grew up with it, it is really hard not to engage in this behaviour with ourselves and with others. We all need to do the work of learning how to treat ourselves kindly and honestly, knowing our trauma responses and stuck patterns, staying with our feelings, and articulating our needs and boundaries where it's safe-enough to do so.

# Boundaries FAQ

## How would you define boundaries?

I'd define them as the limits that we set around how it's acceptable for another person to behave with us. We set them in order that we can feel free-enough and safe-enough to have a relationship, interaction or encounter with that person. Boundaries vary from person to person because they're often rooted in our particular lived experiences and values. For example a vegetarian might have a boundary about people not eating meat in front of them. Somebody who has a particular trigger, phobia, allergy, or disability might have boundaries around people being mindful of those, and acting accordingly.

There are some boundaries which might be more generally applicable to everyone, for example those around what is, and is not, consensual behaviour. The [Consent Checklist](#) lists some of these.

We can usefully think about our boundaries with ourselves as well as with other people. People often overstep their own boundaries, for example by spending time with somebody who doesn't feel good to be around because they feel an obligation to do so, or by making themselves work when they're tired or sick.

## What informs the way we approach boundaries?

Probably the biggest one is the non-consensual culture we live in. Very few of us have families, friendship groups, communities, or workplaces which encourage us to tune into – and assert – our boundaries. In fact many do the opposite.

Most everyday relationships involve at least a certain amount of trying to get people to be what we want them to be for us, or to do things that they may not want to do. Examples include getting our friends to do a social activity we want to do, making family get together for the holiday, or pressuring a person to eat the food we've prepared.

Most institutions encourage people to work in ways that aren't good for them, to push themselves further than feels safe or comfortable. Most constrain people to certain forms of labour rather than finding out what would be the best fit for them, in order to feel most free and fulfilled.

Most of us were brought up in families where we were made to eat food we didn't like, to receive hugs and kisses we didn't want, to pretend to enjoy presents or entertainments that didn't feel good to us. Most of us went to schools where the expectation was that we would learn what we were taught was important rather than what we enjoyed, where we were bullied by other kids and told that this was normal, and where we had little choice over the kinds of food we ate or physical activity we engaged in. We were also probably taught to mistrust and/or hide certain [important emotional responses](#) like anger, sadness and fear: that we shouldn't feel those things or that we should pretend we didn't.

All of this means that most of us find it difficult to tune into where our boundaries actually are, and feel guilt, shame, or fear about communicating them to others.

## Can people learn how to assert boundaries as an adult? How do they?

Love Uncommon's suggestions for **self-consent** are a good starting place. We need to recognise that we've probably been taught to treat ourselves – and others – pretty non-consensually. We might need emotional support in facing the painful implications of that: The places where we are a survivor and the places where we've behaved non-consensually ourselves.

Then it's about learning about boundaries and consent: which is a long – probably lifelong – journey. Books, websites, and workshops can help with this, several of which I mention in the **consent zine**. It's important to have at least some people in your life who're on the same page with this stuff who you can practice asserting your boundaries with, and having them respected. At first you might find that you swing from having no – or poor – boundaries to being all about the boundaries that keep you safe. Love Uncommon calls this going from the **broken house to the fortress of solitude!** Over time you can get to a more balanced place, but a certain amount of swinging is to be expected.

It can be great to practise respecting your own boundaries, by tuning into what is a **'yes', 'no', and 'maybe'** for you in more straightforward areas of life: for example around what you eat (if you have a fairly good relationship to food) or what physical activities you do and don't want to do,

### **How do boundaries with yourself differ from boundaries with other people?**

It's a pretty similar idea but in this case it is us who set – and overstep – our own boundaries. Again we're generally brought up both to allow others to overstep our boundaries, and to do so ourselves. For example, most of us have been taught to crave the love, respect and approval of others, and have had painful experiences where we have lost those things. So we may well overstep our boundaries in the hope of getting love, respect or approval. That might include having sex we don't want to have, working beyond our comfort levels to do well at work, or giving more of ourselves than we can really offer in order to help a friend or partner.

Other ways of overstepping our own boundaries might be about the boundaries we have which keep us safe and healthy. We might know that it's not good for us to drink a lot or watch TV all night, but we might overstep those boundaries when we're feeling low or anxious or overwhelmed.

Our own boundaries are linked to our boundaries with other people because we're relational beings. In order to keep boundaries with others we need to know what our boundaries are and recognise when they have been overstepped, as well as articulating them to others, letting them know when they have overstepped them, and withdrawing from that person if they keep doing so – or if they aren't accountable for their behaviour.

### **Why is important to have clear boundaries around sex?**

Sex is one area where we can be badly hurt by having our boundaries overstepped, as we know from the literature about the physical and psychological toll of sexual assault and abuse. So it's really important to know where our boundaries are and to respect other peoples' around sex. Of course this isn't easy because most of us have also received a **bunch of cultural messages** that we should want sex, that we should have it in a very specific way, that a relationship or date is a failure if sex doesn't happen, and that we owe

sex to people in certain situations – like if we've gone on a date with them, gone home with them, or if they are our partner.

We need to do a great deal – as a culture – to shift these messages so that people know that it's absolutely okay to never want sex and/or to only want certain kinds of sex under certain circumstances. Also we need to learn that the aim of any relationship or encounter should be for consent to happen – whether or not sex happens, rather than the aim being for sex to happen – whether or not consent happens.

### **How can sexual assault survivors navigate emotional and physical flashbacks during sex?**

First of all it's about knowing that this is extremely common and many survivors experience it. Definitely it's worth getting ongoing support from a trauma specialist therapist or counsellor who can help you with the flashbacks. It's vital to only be sexual if you're sure you want to be, and with partners who will know how to tell if you're having flashbacks and will stop the moment that happens. It's useful to learn – yourself – about how trauma works and what you need when these triggers hit. Books like *Trauma Is Really Strange* and *Healing Sex* may well be helpful.

Justin and I did a whole podcast episode about how to handle getting triggered during a hook-up which may be helpful here.

### **How can survivors of child sexual abuse navigate discussing trauma and boundaries with new partners during sex?**

I don't think this is really specific to survivors of child sexual abuse because, as I've mentioned, very few of us have upbringings which encourage us to tune into, or articulate, our boundaries. Also sadly many of us – particularly people who are marginalised in terms of their gender, sexuality, class, race, or disability – reach adulthood with significant trauma. However those with experiences of CSA may find boundaries around sex with others particularly difficult given that those were violated at such a vulnerable age. Having adult experiences which are very careful and consensual can do a lot to shift our bodies and brains in ways which mean we are better able to have and hold our boundaries.

I'd suggest that everybody enters into any sexual encounter or relationship aware that the other person probably has some non-consensual experiences in their past. The boundaries conversation is a really essential one to be having with anybody you're having sex with (or any other kind of relationship come to that).

Justin Hancock and I put together this zine – *Make Your Own Sex Manual* – to help people to tune into their own sexual needs, wants, limits and boundaries, and to communicate them to others. Again things like the yes, no, maybe list are helpful, as is communicating about what happens to you if you do go into a trauma response so that the other person can recognise this. It's absolutely normal for people to dissociate, for example, or to go into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses.

### **How does navigating boundaries change in polyamorous dynamics compared to monogamous dynamics?**

I don't draw a clear distinction here because actually there's a lot of overlap between monogamy and non-monogamy. Many people who say they are monogamous are actually secretly non-monogamous, and research has found that some monogamous relationships are actually more open than some polyamorous ones, and that people often mean very different things by monogamy, and end up realising that they had very different rules. There's lots more about all this in my book [Rewriting the Rules](#).

For anyone in any kind of relationship it can be useful to have upfront conversations about where their boundaries are. What do they need in a relationship in order to feel free-enough and safe-enough for that relationship to be a positive one for them? Again Justin and I have made a zine to help people figure this stuff out: [Make Your Own Relationship User Guide](#).

Things you might think about include: What does being 'in a relationship' mean to me? What am I offering to the other person and what do I want from them? Where am I on a spectrum from being sexually monogamous to sexually open? What about from emotionally closest to one person to equally close with a number of people? What agreements would I want about privacy? How enmeshed or entwined do I like relationships to be? Do I have a sense of [relationship escalator](#), and what does that involve for me?

### **How do you feel like asserting boundaries enriches our lives?**

It enriches our lives more than it's possible to put into words! As long as we're unable to know and/or communicate our boundaries we're treating ourselves – and often others – non-consensually. This is taking a deep physical and emotional toll on our lives. The author Gabor Mate suggests that a great deal of physical illness is a result of us not listening [When The Body Says No](#), and there's much evidence for the role of the trauma of non-consent in all forms of mental suffering.

When we assert our boundaries we can begin to be more open, authentic and vulnerable with others because we can trust ourselves to know and articulate where our boundaries are, and we can trust others in our lives to help us to hold them. This can lead to much deeper intimacy with others and a much kinder relationship with ourselves.

As we learn to feel our boundaries we may well move away from situations and relationships which are harmful for us and into ones which nourish us better. It's not an easy path because it can call upon us to make changes, and often to move away from the path that wider culture has set out for people like us. But we may well find ourselves feeling more engaged and fulfilled in what we do – and with the people around us – long term.

We may also engage more politically as we see that non-consensual ways of relating are intrinsically interwoven with how we've historically treated marginalised and oppressed groups, animals, and the planet.

### **Do you think boundaries can assist survivors in taking agency over their lives?**

Absolutely. I think that freedom and safety come together here. If we can help people to have and hold their boundaries in order to keep themselves safe enough, then they will also begin to feel more free in their lives – more of a sense of agency – so they can begin to live in more authentic and fulfilling ways.

As I've said though, for survivors of [developmental trauma](#) and non-consensual behaviour as adults – that is most of us – this can be a long journey and it requires support. [Survivor networks](#) can be very helpful in addition to trauma-informed therapy and cultivating your own support networks.

### **What are good ways people can practice asserting boundaries?**

It's great to start with everyday things, which can be easier to practise than something as emotionally intense and culturally loaded as sex. Ideally it's great to practise with people who are on the same page about this stuff and who are also passionate about creating more consensual cultures in their families, friendship groups, or communities. Justin and I suggest that everyday greetings are a good place to start. We created [this video](#) to help people try different ways of approaching a handshake, including finding and articulating their boundaries.

Of course other people in our lives won't always be up for joining us in this approach. [Harriet Lerner](#) has written a number of brilliant books about how we can assert our boundaries with others who don't necessarily respect them. Please remember though that you don't have to be in a relationship with somebody who doesn't respect your boundaries.

### **How can one assert their boundaries actively during sex?**

Personally I'd suggest only having sex with people who are in the same place regarding the importance of boundaries and consent. It's an equally important up-front chat to have as the one about STIs and contraception.

Importantly it's not really about the emphasis being on one person to assert their boundaries and the other to respect them. Rather ideally it should be a relational conversation. How can both/all of those involved in the sex maximise the potential of others to be able to have and hold their boundaries. This might involve reflecting on the power dynamics in play. It might be useful to articulate boundaries up front in the form of exchanging fantasies, or yes, no, maybe lists, or having online forms of sex first. There's more on all of this in [The Consent Checklist](#).

### **How should sexual partners react when their partner is having a flashback brought on during sex?**

Stop as soon as you realise it's happening and focus on helping them to look after themselves in whatever way works for them. Ideally it'd be great to talk before sex about how each of you responds if you do go into a trauma response (e.g. going still and quiet, going along with things in a dissociated way, pushing away) and also about what helps if it happens (e.g. grounding in the body and/or the environment by naming things in the room or going through what you pick up with the different senses).

Sometimes the person who is going into trauma won't realise it for a while so it's great if everyone involved can be mindful of this. If in any doubt, pause and check-in. Reassure everyone that success means that consent has happened – whether or not sex happens. There are so many other things you can do together than sex, and supporting somebody through a tough time into feeling safer can be way more intimate and wonderful than sex.

### **How can approaching boundaries in relationships be more difficult for survivors?**

The more our boundaries have been violated, the more difficult it can be to know where they are, or to feel safe-enough to articulate them. We may just expect people to overstep our boundaries, or we may find it really hard to know when that has happened. The important thing is not to give yourself a hard time about this. It's just normal for brains and bodies to respond in these ways when they have been traumatised, and it is totally possible to slowly shift our bodies and brains so that they can know where the boundaries are and articulate these.

Again getting support from professionals and/or other survivors is a great place to start, as is realising that you never have to do anything you don't want to again. [Your Resonant Self](#) is a great book for helping you to become more compassionate with yourself around this kind of thing.

### **Thoughts on survivorhood?**

One final thing that I would emphasise is that survivorhood is not just about sexual assault. Physical and emotional forms of non-consent can take just as heavy a toll, and emotional non-consent is often less easy to spot, take seriously, and get help for.

It's good that people are becoming more aware of [coercive control](#) in relationships. If you've been in controlling or bullying relationships, or dynamics where you've given up too much of your power or been treated non-consensually in areas other than sex, it's equally important to get support. Many of the issues discussed here about finding boundaries difficult may well apply if you've had those experiences.

To end on a positive note I would say that – like many marginalised groups – survivors actually have the most to teach everyone about consent, and about sex and relationships more broadly. Post #MeToo everyone should be listening to the vast and rich literature which is coming from survivors about how we could all be doing all kinds of sex and relationships more consensually and pleasurably, as well as how this links to many other forms of activism. Books like [Ask](#), [Pleasure Activism](#), and [The Revolution Starts at Home](#), are great places to start.

# Mind the gap: The (micro and macro) gap as a radical act

## Micro and macro gaps

You could see gaps on a spectrum between the micro and the macro. On the micro level it could be as small as taking a breath between sentences \*breath\*. For example, that might apply when writing or speaking. Next level there is the value of taking a gap between one daily activity and the next: to be in the present moment rather than racing on to the next thing. Then we might consider gaps in the week or month (like what we do with weekends or holidays or their equivalent). Finally, on the macro level, what about gaps following big life changes or upheavals?

I've noticed a tendency to overlap both big relationships and big projects – like books I'm writing. Just as it feels unfamiliar and edgy to allow gaps between daily activities, it can feel similarly difficult to allow gaps between people and projects, but so essential in order to mark endings, process big changes, and settle. With a big enough gap I can know that new relationships and projects are intentional and consensual, rather than an attempt to avoid difficult feelings or (re)create myself to avoid being with who and how I am. Perhaps as the level increases in size, the gap needs to be longer in order to slow down and process what's just gone, and to tune into what to do next.

## Consent and the gap

Slowness weaves together with consent because it's a way of ensuring that our consent with ourselves – and others – is ongoing rather than a one-off. For example, if we start the day with a to-do list and only feel okay if we complete it, that is one-off consent (like starting sex with a script and only feeling okay if we manage to follow it). If we check in, ongoing, during the day, as with sex it is more likely to be **consensual**.

Babette Rothschild's concept of **mindful gauges**, and Love Uncommon's practices for **self-consent** can help us to use the gap to learn what our body feels like when it is in – and out of – consent.

## Why do we avoid the gap?

We avoid slowing down – or giving ourselves gaps – because they often confront us with the very feelings we were trying to avoid by going at such speed, particularly tough ones like fear, shame, and loneliness. Paradoxically the more we're able to slow down and be in those moments, the less uncomfortable they are likely to be, because we become more used to being with ourselves whatever the feelings, and often the feelings don't have to be



so intense: shouting loudly to be heard over all the noise of busyness and distraction. Kindness is key. We need to cultivate enough kindness with ourselves to be able to stay with ourselves in those moments. Staying in those moments cultivates kindness, and cultivating kindness helps us to be able to stay.

### **How do we avoid the gap?**

Many of us use combinations of the **four F trauma** strategies to avoid slowness and gaps. Fight is when our mind is constantly busy blaming others or ourselves for everything and trying to control our experience. Flight is when we throw ourselves into work and productivity. Freeze is when we constantly distract (e.g. with TV, social media, food, etc.) Fawn is when we rush to please others and respond to every bid for our attention. Some of these things can – on the surface – look slow (like when we're obsessing mentally or crashing out in front of the TV), but if we're checked out then we're not really being present to ourselves or the moment. It's not so much about what you do, but about how you engage with it.

### **The gap as prevention of – and response to – reactivity**

When we make gaps regularly we're more able to notice when we've become reactive: when our nervous system has shifted into that fight or flight mode, or dissociated. Regular check-in gaps during a day can enable us to notice such a shift when it is still just a flicker, and allow our nervous system to come back to neutral. We can also commit to pausing and looking after ourselves additionally whenever we notice that flicker come up during daily activities, and we're more likely to notice that when we're used to slowing down. Staying with the **flicker can stop it becoming a flame or fire**, and also help us to learn what to do when the reactivity is more accelerated.

### **The gap as a radical act**

Some may critique such slowness and spaciousness as only possible with privilege, and this connection is worth being aware of. However, slowing down and creating gaps – as much as we can realistically manage – does also mean we're far less likely to hurt others, and ourselves, and damage relationships. It's when we're sped up, over-stretched, distracted, or dissociated that we risk treating ourselves and others non-consensually, lashing out, offering too much and having to pull it away, and making mistakes.

The gap can also be seen as a radical act under **neoliberal capitalism** where we're so often encouraged to produce more and more by going faster and faster. What would it mean to know that we're enough in this moment and don't need to be more? Could slowing down help us to be with the fear and shame we're trained into feeling unless we're happy, successful, and in a certain kind of love relationship? if we could be with those feelings kindly, might we be able to stop constantly striving for such impossible permanent goals.

### **Doing it your way**

There is no one true way of slowness. In recent years it has become somewhat fetishised in the form of **mindfulness and/or meditation**. While such approaches can help us to learn ways of being slow and still with ourselves, they often just result in another thing we're meant to do with our days, and another thing to feel **bad about ourselves for not doing 'properly'**. There is no 'properly'. It's not about 'not thinking' or 'feeling calm' or anything like that. It's just about pausing – briefly or for longer – and being aware of everything going on right now: sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, feelings, whatever is there. We're not emphasizing any of it, not trying to avoid any of it, just being with it.

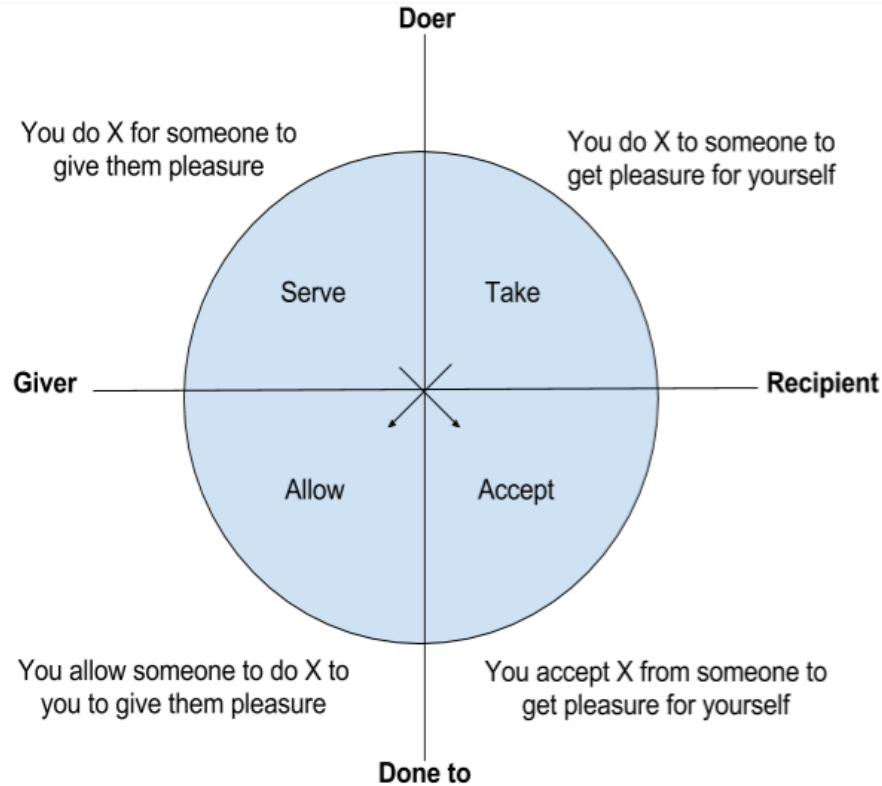
# The wheel of consent and why I'm a fan

The [Wheel of Consent](#) is an idea from the awesome sexologist and intimacy coach [Betty Martin](#). I heard about it through my mates in the [sexological bodywork](#) and [urban tantra](#) scenes and found it extremely useful. However, I've also introduced it to other people in my life who haven't connected with it at all. So I thought I'd write a bit here to try and explain it because it can be complicated to get your head around. I'll also say why I find it so helpful. You can read more about how it integrates with my own ideas about consent in [The Consent Checklist](#) zine.

This is definitely my take on the wheel, so please do check out Betty's [own website](#) to get her – far more thorough – explanations. She's super generous with her free resources and you can download both [the wheel and the three minute game](#) based on it for free, as well as watching plenty of [vids](#) that go into detail about how it all works.

The idea of the wheel of consent is that when we're sexual – or probably in many other contexts in our lives – we move between different zones. Often we're not aware of which zone we're in. The wheel divides the zones up so that we can notice where we are more readily, and reflect on how to do consent in each of the zones, because it works in different ways in each one.

Here's the basic wheel as I understand it ...



So taking the example of a kiss, here's what it might be like in each of the quadrants:

### **Taking**

'May I kiss you?' you ask, and when they nod enthusiastically, you take their shoulders firmly in your hands, and press your lips up against theirs, invading their mouth with your tongue, feeling the heat and excitement rising up inside you.

### **Allowing**

'May I kiss you?' they ask, and when you whisper 'yes' they step towards you, tilting your head back and bringing their lips against yours. You open your mouth and let them take it over, knowing how much it's arousing them to do so.

### **Serving**

'Will you kiss me?' they ask, blushing a little at their boldness. 'Yes,' you agree, moving slowly towards them in order to judge their response. You bring your lips against theirs, softly at first, tuning into their movements and breathing to judge how your kiss is being received. This is all about giving them pleasure. After kissing them for a while you pull back to check in. 'How's that?' you ask. They flush further 'Amazing... Please will you do it even harder...'

## Accepting

'Will you kiss me?' you ask. 'Hell yes,' is their immediate response: so keen to serve. They put their arms around you and begin to explore your mouth with their lips, tentatively at first. You make appreciative noises, and pull them into you, to show them exactly how you like it done.

~

Hopefully these examples illustrate both what it's like to be in each of the zones and how consent works in them. I'll now say a bit about four reasons why I find the wheel – and the three minute game that's based on it – so useful. For me it's about hotness, matching sexual preferences, self-consent, and other-consent.

## Hotness

Perhaps one of the big reasons why I, and others, like the wheel so much is that it can be very hot to focus on being in one quadrant at a time. Often in sex – and in other aspects of life – we try to be in many places at the same time. So, for example, we're kissing each other and we're trying to excite the other person because we want them to find us a good kisser, but we're also trying to get excited ourselves because we want to be ready if things progress beyond kissing. Perhaps we're doing 'taking' style kissing because we think that's what they want, but that throws us more into 'serving' mode, except we haven't actually checked out what they like. In such situations are you doing or done to? Are you giving or receiving? It can be pretty confusing.

Many people like the simplicity of the quadrants because you know where you are and you can focus on one pleasure at a time: the pleasure of taking what you want, the pleasure of somebody using you to turn themselves on, the pleasure of serving somebody, or the pleasure of someone focusing all their attention on getting you excited, for example.

Of course this may well be the reason why the wheel doesn't work so well for some people. Perhaps they prefer sex that has all these things mixed up together, maybe because it feels more reciprocal and mutual that way. Perhaps sex for them flows naturally between doing and being done to, and between giving and receiving.

## Fitting sexual preferences

Another helpful idea – [Mosher's sexual path preferences](#) – might help us out with this. Mosher suggests that people's sexual preferences can be about three things:

1. Acting out roles,
2. Engaging with partners, and/or
3. Sexual trance.

Many of us enjoy two, or all three, of these things, but often one of them is dominant. So role-enactment people are particularly into bringing certain sides of themselves to sex (e.g. confident, shy, dominant, pleasing, cheeky). Partner-engagement folk are most focused on the connection with the other person or people during sex. And sexual-trance people like to spin off in their own minds and bodies from the sensations and rhythms of sex.

My rough working theory is perhaps the wheel works particularly well for role-enactment people, because sex for us is exciting if we get into a certain headspace or character. We like being the taker, the allower, the server, or the accepter. Some of us probably have a preference for certain of these quadrants, some like to mix it up. And I'm guessing that for many of us it's easier to know which quadrant we're in and to stay there. Being encouraged into a different quadrant by a partner could feel quite jolting once we're in the zone.

Maybe people who're more into partner engagement or sexual trance feel less need to remain in one quadrant, or even struggle if they're restricted to one quadrant at a time – perhaps because it prevents them from the sense of flow or mutuality they're looking for from sex.

Alternatively perhaps the wheel offers us a further dimension of sexuality to add to all of the others (what our sexual path preference is, what gender/s we're attracted to, where we're at on the asexual spectrum, etc.) This would be whether we're somebody who likes to stick with a quadrant, or somebody who likes to mix it up.

## **Self-consent**

I also appreciate the wheel of consent because it helps us to practice consent: both consent with ourselves and consent with others. In Betty's [own depiction of the wheel](#) she includes how consent works in the dynamics between taking and allowing (the taker asks 'may I...?') and accepting and serving (the accepter asks 'will you...?') – as I illustrated with the kiss example.

Betty's [three minute game](#) suggests trying out the wheel in pairs. Basically during the game you each spend three minutes in each quadrant (with your partner taking the opposite quadrant to the one you're in). This gives you an opportunity to experience what it's like to be taker, allower, server, and accepter. If you like the game you can keep going round and round of course, and it can be good to each reflect what it was like for you after each round.

One of the things many people find challenging about the three minute game is that when they are in the taker and accepter quadrants, they have to figure out what – if anything – they want to do to the other person, and what – if anything – they want done to them. For those (many) of us who've learnt in their lives to focus on pleasing others this can be pretty challenging, but it's a great practice for tuning into yourself and figuring out what you want.

Additionally, in the allower and server quadrants you must only allow, and do, things that you consent to. So there's a great opportunity in the game to **tune into your body** and to whether it's responding 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe' to the suggestion the other person makes when they say 'may I...?' or 'will you...'. It's a good opportunity to practice refusing suggestions that you don't consent to with a strong permission to do so: something which we know **can be difficult during sex**.

## Other consent

In Betty's **version of the wheel** she also includes the non-consensual 'shadow sides' that each quadrant can turn into if not done consensually – in other words if you're doing a thing, or letting it be done, without **checking that everyone is fully up for it, and establishing the conditions under which people can honestly say where they're at**. These shadow sides can be helpful to check out whether we're really engaging with other people consensually. So...

- If somebody takes non-consensually they're being a perpetrator or groper
- If somebody allows non-consensually they're being a doormat or pushover
- If somebody accepts non-consensually they're being entitled and freeloading
- If somebody serves non-consensually they're being a martyr or rescuer

Again, it seems like the three minute game could be a useful one for figuring out which quadrants you feel comfortable in, and which leave you quite uncomfortable. Is it because that 'shadow side' is one you're familiar with, either in yourself or others? Do you maybe need to practice self and/or other consent more than you have been doing in that area?

This gets us to another reason why the wheel might be challenging for people. Given that we live in a **highly non-consensual culture** we all tend towards some – or all – of these shadow sides at times. Perhaps the three minute game is a painful reminder of this. It certainly has the potential to take us into some deep and troubling territory, so it's worth doing a whole load of **self-care** around it if we are going to try it out. However, not exploring our potentials for non-consent is probably even more concerning.

# Consensual Relationships Revisited: Only with Consent

*This is an older piece than most of the others in this book, written back in 2014 as I was developing my ideas around consent.*

*Content warning: abusive relationships and abusive sex are touched on briefly in this piece.*

Initially, when I studied kink, or BDSM, communities, like many of the researchers who have tried to learn from – rather than explain – kink, my focus was on the ways in which people ensured that their play was Safe, Sane and Consensual (SSC) or Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK). Those terms are the mantras of the kink communities. Whilst RACK recognises the problems with the idea that the things people do could ever be entirely safe, or completely sane (whatever that means), it retains the idea that consent is the vital cornerstone of BDSM sex.

However, my latest piece of research with kink communities was all about how common ideas about consent are currently being questioned, and reconsidered, by people in those communities. Online conversations over the last three or four years have radically challenged understandings of consent in ways that I think are useful for everyone, far beyond just kink communities.

The Consent Culture movement has argued that the idea of consent needs to be expanded out in a number of ways.

## **Consent is about:**

- All sex, not just kinky sex
- Enthusiastic mutual agreement, not just the ability to say ‘no’
- The whole relationship, not just the sex parts
- All relationships, not just sexual relationships (including the relationships that we have with ourselves)
- The whole culture, not just the individuals within it

The idea is that unless we aim for consensual relationships beyond the bedroom, with all the people in our lives, and in our wider culture, it will be very hard – if not impossible – to ensure consent within sexual encounters, whether those are kinky or non-kinky. It isn't possible to isolate just one aspect of human behaviour (sex) and ensure that it is conducted under a completely different set of rules than the ones that we use when managing the domestic chores, for example, or inviting someone out to a social occasion, or putting structures in place for how our work projects will be conducted.



I'll take each one of these expansions in turn now, and explore how we might encourage all of our relationships, networks and communities to become more consensual.

### **All sex, not just kinky sex**

This last few months my main research project has involved analysing sex advice media. One thing that is really noticeable in mainstream sex advice is that there is hardly *any* consideration of consent at all. On the few occasions when consent is mentioned, it only happens when the authors start writing about kinky sex. In all of the books listing multiple positions for sex, and all of the agony aunt musings on sexual problems, there is hardly any mention of the need for sex to be consensual, or of the role of lack of consent in sexual difficulties. But when the topic of kink comes up – as it increasingly does since the *50 Shades* phenomenon – suddenly everyone is being advised to proceed very carefully and to ensure that they have a **safeword**.

Of course it is good to see consent being mentioned at all, but given the **extent** to which non-consensual sex happens in *non-kinky* forms of sex it is shocking that there is so little about how to engage in that kind of sex consensually. It often seems like consent is just being used, in these few kinky mentions, to remind readers that BDSM is something 'different' and riskier: so it is seen as requiring consent in a way that 'normal' sex doesn't.

In the sex advice book that **Justin Hancock** and I **are writing**, we aim to weave consent throughout the book rather than considering it only in relation to certain kinds of activities.

### **Enthusiastic mutual agreement, not just the ability to say 'no'**

One of the first things that many of the BDSM blogs say is that we need to move away from the 'no means no' version of consent, which is the one that we generally hear about. 'No means no' is the idea that sex is consensual so long as the other person doesn't refuse our sexual invitation, or actively say 'no' (or use a safeword) during sex.

The idea of 'enthusiastic' or 'yes means yes' consent is that 'no means no' is a pretty poor basis on which to proceed.

For one thing, studies have found that people very rarely use the word 'no' when refusing things. It can be very difficult to start using it in a sexual context given how unfamiliar it is. Researchers asked young **women** and **men** how they would tend to turn down a friend's invitation to go to the pub if they didn't want to go. Generally they reported that they would say something like 'I'm sorry I'm busy tonight', or 'I've got to finish this project'. Similarly, when they were asked what they'd do if they went home with somebody but then decided that they didn't want sex, people of all genders said that they would say something like 'I'm so sorry I'm actually really tired' or 'I've realised I'm not ready for this'. Crucially all the participants were clear that they would recognise such statements – from another person – as meaning the exact same thing as 'no'.

This kind of finding lies behind the enthusiastic consent idea that we should read anything other than an enthusiastic ‘yes’ as a ‘no’. As one [website](#) puts it:

- “NO” means NO.
- “Not now” means NO.
- “Maybe later” means NO.
- “I have a boy/girlfriend” means NO.
- “No thanks” means NO.
- “You’re not my type” means NO.
- “\*#^+ 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.
- “\_\_\_\_\_” means NO.

[Research](#) suggests that the kind of ‘miscommunication’ that is often cited by perpetrators when non-consensual sex happens is generally not valid. People are mostly very capable of understanding a refusal that doesn’t include a ‘no’ in both social and sexual situations, and a direct ‘no’ is actually relatively uncommon.

However, there are certainly differences between people, particularly in terms of culture, class and [neurodiversity](#), which meant that one person might struggle to read another’s reluctance. For this reason, enthusiastic consent can be a more helpful model than ‘no means no’ because it suggests that people only go ahead if everyone involved is enthusiastically saying – or demonstrating – that they want to do so. If you’re not receiving a clear, wholehearted, enthusiastic message to go ahead from a partner you don’t go ahead, and you check in with them (and vice versa). Also this is an ongoing process throughout the whole encounter, rather than a one-off thing that you do only at the beginning.

However, as with the capacity to decline sex, the capacity to enthusiastically consent is constrained by a number of other factors, so it is important not to leave it there. The Consent Culture bloggers suggest many things that individuals and communities can do in order to put in place the best possible conditions for people to engage with each other consensually.

### **The whole relationship, not just the sex parts**

Here we can return to *50 Shades of Grey*, as a helpful example. In the novels (and presumably the upcoming movie), it could be argued that the sex/kink was relatively consensual, at least according to the 'no means no' version of consent. Christian presents Ana with a list of all the things he likes and doesn't like sexually, and she is able to remove anything that she doesn't fancy doing. He also introduces her to the concept of a safeword so that she can stop a scene at any point.

Of course the enthusiastic consent model would prefer it if they mutually came up with a list of things that they both actually *wanted* to try, which they revised over time. Also it would be good if they considered how they might both check in with each other (verbally and/or non-verbally) throughout what they were doing to ensure they were still on the same page, and perhaps if they talked more together about how they both tended to express things so they would know that going in.

But the biggest problem with the consent between Ana and Christian is that it doesn't exist in the rest of the relationship, only in relation to sex. Christian never hears Ana's clear 'no' about him buying her gifts, following her on holiday, and getting involved in her work. Also both characters continually attempt to pressure, persuade or cajole the other into being what they want them to be: a submissive in Ana's case, and a loving husband in Christian's case. This is despite both stating very clearly that this is not what they want, several times over.

Could Ana really trust that Christian would respect her 'no' or safeword during sex when he had so often ignored it at other times? Could Christian really trust Ana's consent to engage in activities when he knew that she was so desperate to convince him into the kind of relationship that she wanted with him.

So we can usefully ask ourselves how possible consent is in one aspect of a relationship (such as sex) if it is absent in other areas. If we find ourselves trying to force, control, pressure, persuade, or manipulate our partner in some areas, how easy will it be for us to adopt a different approach, or for them to be able to clearly express enthusiasm, or refusal, in others?

This is not easy stuff. We live in a wider culture of relationships where it is often deemed acceptable to try to gently – or not so gently – change a partner to be more like we want them to be: to nag them or niggle at them or pressure them to alter things because it would be better for us, or because we think it would be better for them. It can be easy, when we know someone well, to subtly manipulate them into doing what we want at the weekend, or to pressure them into going on the kind of holiday that will make us happy, or to try to convince them to dress differently or go on a diet, for example.

A particularly pervasive myth in relationships is that it isn't acceptable to change. 'You've changed' is often deployed as an insult. This has implications for sex where people can feel huge pressure to continue the frequency and type of sex they had at the start. This can make it virtually impossible for them to feel able to refuse sex of particular kinds, or to express (or even know) what they might be enthusiastic about.

## All relationships, not just sexual relationships

Several of the Consent Culture bloggers point out another difficulty in cultivating the kind of consensual relationships that are necessary in order for sex to be consensual. This is the fact that so few *other* relationships in our lives are consensual. As [The Pervocracy](#) puts it:

I think part of the reason we have trouble drawing the line “it’s not okay to force someone into sexual activity” is that in many ways, forcing people to do things is part of our culture in general. Cut that shit out of your life. If someone doesn’t want to go to a party, try a new food, get up and dance, make small talk at the lunchtable – that’s their right. Stop the “aww c’mon” and “just this once” and the games where you playfully force someone to play along. Accept that no means no – all the time.

Our interpersonal relationships are shot full of non-consent on this micro level. And, again, the model is often one of ‘no means no’ rather than of enthusiastic consent. Even though we know full well that somebody’s reluctance, or claim to be busy, or going quiet, or changing the subject, means that they don’t want to do what we’ve asked, it is easy to pretend that they might still be open to it because they haven’t actually said the word ‘no’.

Attempting to shift to an enthusiastic consent model in all our relationships can be very liberating. For example, after lots of conversations about this kind of thing in my friendship groups, I’ve noticed a subtle shift from a default assumption that if you’ve said you’re going to an event you ought to go. Instead now the default assumption is generally that we all have times when we get to the time of the event and –for whatever reason – we’re not in the right place for it. It is totally fine to say that we’re not up for it under those circumstances, without the need to provide any kind of explanation, and with an implicit ban on any attempts to persuade somebody further.

I’ve realised how much more enjoyable it is to have a coffee with somebody, or an evening out, when I know that the only people present are people who actively want to be there. It’s also a relief to know that it is totally fine to reschedule or to opt out when I’m not in the mood.

Enthusiastic consent in all relationships might involve things like: checking whether somebody wants physical contact rather than assuming (e.g. would you like a hug?); remembering to check in with people when there is an ongoing arrangement between you that whatever you’re doing is still something that they enjoy; assuming that the lack of an enthusiastic ‘yes’ to an invitation means the person probably doesn’t want to do what you’re suggesting, and leaving the ball in their court instead of continuing the invitations.

It’s also important to remember that different things work for different people. So in any relationship it could be valuable to initiate a conversation about how you can best communicate in order that the other person will feel able to decline, respecting that their way of communication might be different to yours. For example, they may find it easier to

communicate about these things over certain media, or they could let you know that a certain response from them generally means that they are reluctant or uncomfortable.

Of course none of this is at all easy, especially when it runs so counter to the way we've often culturally learnt to do these things, and when we've often learnt to experience refusal as a personal rejection. But it is good to keep touching in with yourself about whether you are approaching people in a way that opens up, or closes down, their freedom to consent or not (e.g. to social arrangements, to work projects, or to the relationship in general).

### **(including the relationship that we have with ourselves)**

This takes us to another major aspect of relationship consent which strangely only occurred to me very recently. I was talking about a recent interaction that I'd experienced as pushy and pressurising, suggesting that it felt non-consensual. A friend pointed out to me that I hadn't been treating *myself* consensually in the situation.

I was shocked that I hadn't noticed this given that I'm usually such a big advocate of the need for **self-care** and **kindness** as foundations for treating others **compassionately**. Looking back on the situation I realised that part of me felt obligated to respond in the way that I assumed the other person wanted me to. Then I felt trapped into a corner of either agreeing and feeling resentful, or refusing and feeling guilty and/or angry with them for putting me in that position. I realised that if I could treat myself consensually -really *knowing* that it was okay to agree *or* decline, and respecting my own limits in terms of what I could and couldn't offer – then it all felt much less emotionally loaded and trapping.

Another situation which occurred to me was when I was at a social event. I didn't want to talk with anyone because I was worried about getting pulled into a long conversation with somebody I didn't really connect with. I realised that I was treating myself non-consensually in believing that once I'd started a conversation it wasn't okay to move away. That meant I wasn't engaging with anyone at all unless I could come up with a 'good excuse'. An alternative would be to allow myself that it is fine to honestly say when I've got to the point that I just want to be alone, or with somebody I know well rather than in a group, or that I want to chat with a few different people over the course of the event.

Recently I had a realisation that, most evenings, I really enjoy doing something social early on (generally with one other person or with a small group), and then having some time at home before going to bed. I notice how I still don't always feel okay just expressing that to friends who are more into late nights and who invite me along. Consensual self-relationships are definitely something that require cultivating!

Treating ourselves non-consensually can lead to us closing down because we fear the situations we might get into. For example, we might be worried that we will offer too much to somebody and have less time or energy for ourselves; that we will get into a relationship of whatever kind that doesn't feel good for us because we think that it is what the other person wants; or that we won't feel able to change what we have to offer as we (inevitably) change

over time. This can lead to an all-or-nothing approach. On the other hand, when we are consensual with ourselves we can refuse; or offer only what we have to offer knowing that it is okay to change; or ask for time to consider things rather than responding straight away.

None of this is to say that such conversations or negotiations will be pain-free. But with a foundation of self-consent, the pain of acknowledging a discrepancy in what any two (or more) people want may become less enmeshed in a larger tangle of guilt, shame, anger, or self-recrimination. Hopefully you can stay with the loneliness that the other person doesn't share what you want; or the sadness that you can't reciprocate in the way that is desired; or the acknowledgement of your limitations; without criticising yourself – or the other person – for it.

### **The whole culture, not just individuals within it**

Perhaps the main thing that the Consent Cultures movement emphasises is that individual relationships cannot easily become consensual in isolation. When we are in wider cultures where the norms are of non-consensual behaviour, it is very difficult for us to operate differently to that. There have been some really useful writings recently, for example, about how common and taken-for-granted non-consensual practices are within **organisations**, or within **education**. For example, people in positions of power over others often force them to do things; implicit rules state that people should be constantly available to their colleagues; and there are pressures to demonstrate 'success' in certain ways in competition with others.

Currently consent is taught very little in schools even in **sex education**, and this is a real problem. But people have pointed out that even if we did teach consent much more, at all levels and across different classes, it would be hard for children and young people to adopt consensual practices when they are often not treated consensually themselves in families and in schools. The idea of Consent Cultures leads us into some vital – but very challenging – conversations about how organisations, institutions, and societies operate.

As Pepper Mint **points out**:

*we are in fact swimming in a soup of nonconsensual power dynamics, where our personal strategies are typically shaped by sets of options that can range from mildly undesirable to downright horrific.*

So we need to think about all our relationships and how cultural power dynamics play out in them. For example, do differences in age, gender, cultural background, race, body type, disability, class, role, or anything else between us mean that we have different levels of power in this situation? How do these impact on the likely capacity of ourselves, and the other person, to be freely able to consent (or not) to what is being suggested? Are there pressures in play that make the other person feel that they should act enthusiastically, or say 'yes', even when they are not keen? And how might we decrease those pressures, or at least bring them out into the open? This is another useful set of questions to ask about the relationship between Ana and Christian in the *Fifty Shades* books.

Returning to the sex advice that I've been analysing, I feel very aware of how this kind of media often promotes a culture in which consent is difficult if not impossible. For example, there is often an implicit idea that any kind of discrepancy in what people in a relationship want sexually, or how much they want it, is bad. So there is encouragement for **people to do things they don't want to do** in order to give the impression that there is no discrepancy.

Instead we could operate under the assumption that discrepancies of all kinds will be present in all our relationships: in terms of what people want to do together and how much they want to do it, as well as in relation to values, goals, and all kinds of other things.

This assumption of discrepancy means that we are less likely to fall into patterns of trying to determine who is right or wrong, or insisting that one person changes entirely to meet the other's needs. Rather we can look at the discrepancy openly together, considering what we each have to offer, and where are limits are, and figuring out a way forward, for now.

# Open Relationships Revisited

*This is an older piece than most of the others in this book, written back in 2014 as I was developing my ideas around consent. It may seem less obviously relevant to the topic of consent than some of the others, but I think it was the starting point for many of my current thoughts about the importance of emphasising the ‘consensual’ part of ‘consensual non-monogamy’ (CNM) rather than the ‘non-monogamy’ part (as much writing on the topic tends to). Whether a relationship is monogamous or non-monogamous, open or closed, or somewhere in between, perhaps what’s really important is the consent of those involved, which includes how open they feel able to be, how open the windows are on the relationship, and how open the relationship is to possibilities and change.*

*Open relationships: Applying the concept of openness to all relationships in various ways.*

Content warning: relationship conflict and abusive relationships are touched on briefly in this piece.

A decade ago I started studying three topics that have pretty much defined my career: open non-monogamy, BDSM, and bisexuality. I just checked my CV and found that my first academic publication in these areas came out in 2004: an interview with the ever-fabulous Jen Yockney of Bi Community News for the *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review* (now appropriately renamed the *Psychology of Sexualities Review*). That was quickly followed by an interview, in the same publication, with the equally wonderful Dossie Easton, about her writing on kink and polyamory.

It’d taken me six years since finishing my PhD to start researching these topics. My first paper based on my PhD (on a different topic) had been rejected with cruel comments from one reviewer. So I decided that academic research wasn’t for me and to focus on teaching, which I really enjoyed. I still have major issues with that side of academia. But then I started to read about gender and sexuality for my teaching, and to attend more interdisciplinary conferences. I realised that it was possible – perhaps even beneficial – to research topics that were personally relevant.

Although I can’t say that this guiding principle has made for a completely easy ride (to say the least!), I have learnt a huge amount from researching polyamorous, BDSM, and bi communities. My work has always been led by the question of what we (i.e. everybody) can learn from such communities, rather than the more traditional psychological question of how they can be explained. The answers I’ve explored have focused on the benefits of more open approaches to relationships rules around monogamy, the consensual arrangements that kinky folk use in their sexual activities, and non-binary understandings of sexual attraction (i.e. not just attraction to either ‘the same’ or ‘the opposite’ gender).

Recently I’ve been reflecting on the directions that my thinking about relationships has taken in the last few years. I realised that these themes of openness, consent, and non-binary are still very present, but in different forms. Previously I’d just thought of



openness in the context of non-monogamy, consent in the context of (kinky) sex, and non-binary in the context of sexuality.

I thought I'd write a couple of pieces to explain the ways in which my thinking has expanded out lately, considering the benefits of applying openness and consent to our relationships in a much broader way. Regarding non-binary I have a much longer piece of writing bubbling away about what happens when we apply this concept beyond sexuality and gender to our ways of relating, feeling, and thinking.

I'll spend the rest of this piece on openness.

### **Open non-monogamous relationships**

Probably the first revelation in my explorations of open non-monogamy was the fact that it was possible at all. Wider culture presents long term monogamy as the only way of doing relationships, with non-monogamy only being possible in the form of cheating, which will inevitably mean the end of the relationship.

I found that various forms of swinging and open relationships offer the possibility of couples having additional sexual relationships in an honest and open way. Primary/secondary polyamorous couples show that it is also possible to have love relationships outside a primary couple.

I also found that polyamory opens up the possibility of relationships beyond this conventional couple-based model. There are Vs, triads and quads, poly families and networks, and all kinds of other ways of managing multiple love relationships. This offers an alternative to the conventional model of putting The One partner or spouse way at the top of a hierarchy of important relationships, with all of the high expectations this places on that relationship.

However, as I explored these things myself and talked with colleagues about it, one thing that became apparent was that many of these models still generally place romantic, or sexual, partnerships as more important than other kinds of relationships. In fact there can be a risk that the division between partners and friends becomes even larger when we have more partners, and perhaps even less time or energy for friends, or for other kinds of relationships including our relationship with ourselves.

Another thing which I recognised in myself and others was that it becomes possible in open non-monogamy to replace a search for The One perfect partner with a search for the perfect relationship style which will solve all the problems inherent in close relationships and/or mean that you are constantly bathed in the reassurance and validation of multiple adoring gazes.

Neither of these issues is a reason to reject open non-monogamy in favour of a return to monogamy. It's not an all-or-nothing situation where we can find one universally 'right' way

of doing relationships and dismiss all the others. Rather I concluded that we need to embrace the diversity of possible relationship structures: versions of singledom, coupledness and polyamory; monogamies and non-monogamies and all the possibilities in between; friends-based, family-based, and partner-based models; and anything else that people are doing. Along with this it's important to recognise that different things work for different people and at different times in their lives.

### **It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it**

So that is probably about where I got to in the monogamy chapter of *Rewriting the Rules* and the other writing I was doing about open non-monogamy around that time.

Since then I've increasingly recognised how – in many areas – it seems like we get so focused on *what* people do that we pay much less attention to *how* they are doing it. I've started to wonder if the latter question might actually be the more useful one.

For example, this year I've been analysing sex advice books (more on that topic will doubtless be arriving soon!) It took me a while to realise one of the major problems with them: they were all about *what* people do sexually rather than *how* they do it. So all the advice was about trying different positions or 'spicing things up' with toys or techniques. There was much less on what I would see as the more important matters of *how* you figure out what you like, *how* you communicate that to others, *how* you ensure consent, *how* you learn about different bodies, and lots of other kinds of *how*. In the book that [Justin Hancock](#) and I are writing on this topic one thing that we've already decided is that the focus will be much more on the *how*.

Going back to relationships I think a lot can be gained from a more *how*-based approach. As I said I'm increasingly convinced that issues of *what* people do, in terms of structuring their relationships, is rather less important than *how* they relate within them. Both academic research and media on these topics often gets obsessed with the *what*: Look at those crazy polyamorists, or swingers, or whatever! Instead perhaps it'd be more valuable to look across all different kinds of relationships to explore how people do their relationships in ways that work well, or not so well, for them.

This brings me back to openness because I think that is a key part of this *how*. I'm going to touch on three ways in which we might consider the openness of our relationships which go beyond whether they are monogamous or not, and could apply just as much to monogamous as non-monogamous relationships. These are:

- Being open to vulnerability,
- Opening the windows on our relationships, and
- Opening up our possibilities.

### **Open to vulnerability**

The **research on conflict** suggests that we tend to respond in two ways when there is conflict in our relationships. We tend to withdraw, or we tend to attack. Withdrawing includes all of the different ways of putting up defences to protect ourselves. Attacking includes all of the different ways of projecting the conflict outwards, onto the other person, instead of accepting any responsibility ourselves.

Strong versions of withdrawal would include things like storming out, or completely shutting down. Weaker versions would include shifting the conversation to avoid the topic, subtly putting up our defences so the other person can't get in, or distancing from a relationship without letting the other person know there's a problem.

Strong version of attacking would include hurling abuse and insults, or physical attack. Weaker versions would include sharply dismissing another point of view, niggling and nagging at the other person to let them know about aspects of them that we don't think are okay, jokey putdowns, or complaining about them to other people.

Both of these strategies of withdrawal and attack are ways of protecting ourselves where we're vulnerable. Think about conflicts you've had. They only tend to happen when someone has triggered something you feel vulnerable about –whether you're consciously aware of that at the time or not. If that triggering doesn't happen then it isn't really a conflict. It's just one person having a go and another person finding it easy to empathise with them and/or to step away kindly.

A – very challenging – alternative to withdrawal or attack in situations where we've been triggered is openness. This involves staying open to the vulnerability that we are feeling rather than putting up our defences, or attacking or projecting blame.

Another part of this is being open to the vulnerability in others: recognising that their withdrawal and/or attack likely stems from their own vulnerability. This is perhaps an even greater challenge as it involves being open and compassionate to others at the very moment that they are being the most difficult, threatening, and hard to empathise with.

Whether with ourselves or with others, such openness involves staying with the situation rather than attempting to shut it down; taking the the time to notice what is going on (which will likely involve taking some time out before returning to it); recognising that there is a sensible reason for the seemingly inexplicable behaviour of the other person or ourselves; and going slowly and gently enough to find it (or trusting that it is there if it doesn't easily reveal itself). It also involves the openness to let the other person know about our vulnerability, or to listen to theirs in the vulnerable situation of realising that we are the one who triggered it.

This form of openness is clearly applicable to all relationships, not just partner ones. Although it may be the relationships that we spend most time in, and that we are most highly invested in, that challenge us the most because it is much less easy to simply withdraw from them.

## Opening the windows on our relationships

One question that you might well have had reading the previous section is about abusive dynamics. The idea of being open to our vulnerability, and to the vulnerability of others, is certainly a challenging one to apply to situations when one person is consistently physically or emotionally attacking the other.

Another important aspect of openness occurs to me when thinking about abusive relationships. Something that we know from the research on domestic abuse is that abusers tend to isolate their partners from friends and family, pressurising them into keeping aspects of the relationship secret. A particularly worrying thing about the popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* series is that Christian doesn't allow Ana to talk about the kinky side of their relationship with anybody in her life.

So another important aspect of openness in relationships could be how open they are to other people beyond the relationship itself. Perhaps it could be a warning bell in any relationship if we're feeling that we have to keep elements of it private or secret, or that we are unable to talk about the difficult parts of the relationship with other people.

Recently I was in a pub conversation with somebody who was complaining about how badly her housemates were at doing the chores. She was in the process of moving out and her partner, who she was moving in with, nervously said that he hoped that she would be able to talk about the issue directly with him if it became a problem, rather than discussing it with friends in the pub!

I take the partner's point of course. Part of openness to vulnerability would, I hope, be that we could try to talk with each other directly when there is a problem. But I also found myself thinking that I would like it if my partner (or any other person in a relationship with me) felt able to chat to other close people about our issues. Of course it would feel vulnerable for me to know that this was happening, but actually I would prefer the safety of feeling that vulnerability whilst knowing that our relationship was getting fresh air through it in this way, to the more questionable safety of keeping our 'dirty laundry' to ourselves.

Abusive dynamics are not specific to physical violence. Nor are they specific to situations where just one person abuses another: it can be a lot more even between the people concerned. And nor are they specific to partner relationships, as anybody who has ever been in an abusive friendship or a bullying situation at work will confirm.

Openness in the form of transparency, or letting others in, is therefore another aspect of open relationships that is well worth exploring for ourselves, and with the people we're in relationships with, no matter what kind of relationship it is.

As I explored in the conflict chapter of *Rewriting the Rules*, the current cultural pressure is to present our relationships as perfect, and to never admit to any struggles. Bringing this kind of air and spaciousness to our relationships could be beneficial not only to us, but also

to the people we open up to because they won't be able to use our supposedly 'perfect' relationship as an unrealistic point of comparison any more. Such openness more widely could also help us, as a culture, to recognise that relationships of all kinds can be tough, rather than suggesting that any one kind of relationship structure will really lead to 'happy-ever-after'.

### **Opening up our possibilities?**

So we've considered openness in the form of being open to vulnerability (our own, and other people's), and in the form of transparency in relationships. A final form that I thought of is whether any particular relationships opens up, or closes down, the possibilities of the people in it.

When I wrote the break-up chapter of *Rewriting the Rules* I realised that most of the chapter failed to address the most urgent question that people tend to have around break-up, which is how to know when they should break-up with someone. I struggled with providing advice about this because, of course, it is so specific to that person and their situation. One suggestion I did come up with was to think about whether it felt like the relationship was more opening up the possibilities of the people in it or more closing them down.

I still don't want to do much more than put that idea out there as one to think about, perhaps not just at the end of the relationship but all the way through it, and in all kinds of relationships: parent/child, friends, siblings, colleagues, and neighbours, as well as partners.

Of course it is likely that there are all kinds of openings up and closings down going on constantly, but the different ways in which this is happening, and how that feels for us, seem like useful things to reflect upon, ourselves and with the other person or people. This is another thing that is interwoven with treating people consensually.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Now that I come to the end of this long piece (thank-you if you've made it all the way through) I realise that this whole series could be titled 'rewriting rewriting the rules'!

I guess it's also part of this way of seeing these things to acknowledge the inevitable imperfection of any one thing that I write, and to try to be open and transparent about that. While I'm alive everything is a process: a work in progress. An ongoing blog is a good way of capturing that.

# Consensual events

## Consent

The definition of **consent** is 'agreement to do something'. Being able to agree to something requires everyone involved feeling free-enough and safe-enough to tune into ourselves, and to communicate openly with others, about who we are, what our capacities are, and what we want and don't want. So how can we run professional or social events – online and offline – in ways that maximise everyone's capacity to consent?

## Consent is the aim

First of all when planning an event, can we ensure that the aim is that everybody involved is consenting, instead of the aim being that it happens in a particular way, or that particular people attend, or even that it happens at all?

If people feel under pressure to attend a social or professional event then it's hard – if not impossible – for them to be in consent. So can we attend to ways in which this might be the case and do what we can to mitigate those?

In the case of a social event, is there space for every potential attendee to be open about whether or not they fancy it, with recognition that it's probably not everyone's thing? For example, if you were planning a birthday party, wedding, or similar, you might think of providing friends and family with other ways they might celebrate you if that wasn't their thing, or if they couldn't afford to take part, or if they didn't get on with other people who were going. That could be getting together with you personally at another time around the event to celebrate, or contributing a video message, for example.

In the case of a professional event, might people feel they have to attend even if it's not a space they feel comfortable in, due to being asked by a manager, or there being financial penalties if they don't? How might we reduce any sense of duty or obligation as much as possible?

## Informed consent

When planning the event, it's also important to consider informed consent, ensuring that people know what they're getting into: what they will be doing and why, and what exactly will be involved. It's important that they know these things before they decide whether to sign up.

This is particularly vital because, if you don't tell people what to expect in advance, they may well find themselves in a **'foot in the door'** scenario. Because they've shown up, paid, participated in the first part of the event, etc. they may well feel that they have to keep going, and can't opt out if they begin to feel uncomfortable.

Important things to let people know about before they sign up include:

- Any content or activities that could be potentially triggering for anybody
- Who else will be involved if there are potential clashes
- Whether they will be expected to talk with strangers – particularly whether that might involve difficult decisions about whether to out themselves or remain closeted about aspects of their experience
- Whether activities will happen which are designed to elicit big memories or feelings
- Presence of drugs/alcohol

It's rarely possible to meet all potential access needs and some may be in tension. For example, physically accessible spaces can often be more financially expensive. Going slowly enough for some people may mean an event which is too long for others. Creating an event which is safe-enough for people new to a topic to ask basic questions and potentially mess-up may not be safe-enough for those who that topic is personally relevant to. This is why it's good to be mindful of access needs, and to be clear what is and isn't catered for at this event, and who it's aimed at.

### **Your role**

It's also worth thinking about your role in the event. Is this a co-created event where everyone is responsible for what happens, or is it one where you're explicitly the organiser or facilitator?

If it's the latter then it's important to recognise that that is a big role, and it takes a lot of energy and attention, so it might be wise to have somebody else available to assist. For example, that might be someone to sort out the technology at an online event so you're not worrying about that, or someone who will check up on anybody who needs to leave, or more of a co-organiser or team to spread the load.

Probably the most important thing you can do in preparing for the event is whatever self-care helps you to be as present as possible to yourself and others, counting this preparation time as part of the work, and seeing this as more important than learning the content of what you're planning perfectly.

It's worth being mindful, for example, of the risks of scheduling too many events back-to-back, of organising both a whole event and a workshop within that event, or of having people attend a professional event who you have other relationships with (e.g. clients, partners, family) without a clear plans with them about how that will work, and them understanding that you are 'on' and can't be for them in the way that you usually are one-to-one.

It's also important that you, as facilitator, are treated consensually as much as it is participants. You might work through a yes, no, maybe list to think about what kinds of

events you are – and aren't – up for being part of, and what your own consent agreements need to be, as well as considering what you're offering to participants as a facilitator.

For example, with the shift to online events I've found that I generally want somebody else to monitor and filter questions coming in on chat, as it's very hard to remain present to the conversation if I'm also watching chat comments come in. I've also had to be open with participants in online workshops about what kinds of situations I do and don't have the capacity to hold.

## **Consent agreements**

Early on it's useful to form a group agreement, ideally through a process of asking the group what they need in order to feel free-enough and safe-enough to participate fully in the event (i.e. to be in consent). With shorter events it can be harder to do this, but you could ask people to write things down (e.g. in chat on an online platform) and then write a list of key ones.

Important points for the group agreement would be: the kind of conversations we are aiming for here, treating anything people share confidentially, not putting people on the spot, listening, use of respectful language, looking on people with kind eyes if they make mistakes, checking in with yourself before sharing, and being free to opt-out of anything or leave at any time. Some more suggestions are [here](#).

At the end of the group agreement it's great to model adding any access needs. For example I might explain that I'm hard of hearing and request that people don't talk over each other. This, followed by asking if anyone else has anything to add, can enable people with other access needs to mention them.

Before or after the group agreement it's useful to have some form of activity to help people to 'land' in the room and get a sense of who is there. For example this could involve inviting everyone who wants to take three breaths to orientate themselves in their body and the space; or inviting everyone who wants to write their name and location in the chat online.

Including pronouns in introductions is appropriate with groups who are already familiar with that practice, and where it's likely that more than one person has pronouns that aren't 'he' or 'she', otherwise one person can feel very exposed so it's worth being cautious. If there's an option like pronouns on badges or online handles that can be easier, especially if you model having yours there. You definitely need to flag up not assuming people's pronouns if they're not stated, perhaps by encouraging use of names and second person pronouns (e.g. 'when you said...' – looking at the person concerned – rather than 'when he/she/they said...').

## **Ongoing consent**



Ongoing consent is important during the event. Just because people agree to something at the beginning, they may not as the event unfolds, so it's important to give people opportunities to check in how they are feeling, particularly before a shift in activity.

To be consensual it must be possible for people to leave at any time, and it's good to make this clear up front and provide easy ways to do so. For example, online, you might give multiple options 'It's fine to go mute, to blank your screen, or to turn down your volume and step away for a while if you need a pause. If you want to leave entirely, you can either let us know in the chat or just end the call – no need for an explanation.'

If people are breaking out into smaller groups, consider whether they get any choice in who to work with, and how to enable them to make choices if that is possible. For example in one online therapy course it was possible that some people might be clients of others, so people were encouraged to let moderators know if there was anybody they couldn't be in a group with before break-out groups happened. Remember to be mindful of cultural power imbalances with dyad / group work, and how they may restrict who feels able to take openly.

### **Active consent**

Group pressure and social scripts makes it very hard for people to opt out of activities which everyone else is participating in, and easy to passively go along with something that doesn't feel right.

It's great if there can be two or three options to actively choose from, for example; or a group process to decide on what fits everyone's needs; or an option to be an observer – where that is an important role; or a norm of a craft table or chill-out space people are encouraged to go to whenever they don't fancy something; or – online – an option of writing responses in the chat rather than taking part in discussion on camera/audio, or an option for self reflection rather than group work. It also helps people if you always let them know why you're inviting them to do a particular thing rather than just doing it.

Try to be mindful of the different access needs that are likely to be present. It's important to have breaks and endings at the time stated as people may have very different energy capacities, concentration spans, requirements for nourishment, caring responsibilities, etc. Ideally people with such needs shouldn't have to say something, but rather the space would be designed to be inclusive and/or opportunities given to state any specific needs in advance anonymously. Again modelling is great, e.g. 'I'm going to stand up/lie down for this activity because my back needs it. Anybody else feel free to do whatever makes you comfortable too.'

Building in [self-consent](#) check-ins as part of the event is great, so people have a specific chance to tune into how they are feeling, whether they want to engage with something, and how.

### **Endings and aftercare**

It's important to allow a decent amount of time to close the event to help people through the transition back into their everyday life. For example you might have a closing round of 'one thing that people are taking away', or an opportunity to write something in chat online. As facilitator you might offer to be around for a certain amount of time to deal with any individual debriefs that need to happen. It's good to be super clear with yourself in advance what you can and can't offer with this, in relation to your own needs and what you're being paid for.

Make sure that you build in self-care time to recover from the event. Holding space takes a lot of energy, so this needs to be budgeted for as much as the time planning and facilitating the event itself.

It's also worth thinking in your own self-consent reflections before, and in the group agreement, about how any feedback after can be given consensually and constructively, and how you'll be kind with yourself around receiving it and considering what to take on board.

## **Consent checklist**

You might find it useful, when planning events, to go through this consent checklist and to consider how the event meets the various [criteria for consensual engagement](#):

1. Consent as the aim: Have we made everyone being in consent the most important thing here rather than specific things going the way we planned?
2. Consent of all: Is the event planned so that the most vulnerable people in the room are likely to feel able to consent (e.g. survivors of trauma, people with various access needs, members of marginalised groups), rather than defaulting to the assumed needs and capacities of the most privileged people?
3. Informed consent: Is everyone fully informed beforehand about what will happen during the event, what they'll be expected to do, who else will be involved, how long it will last, etc. so that they can make an informed choice about whether or not to engage with the event?
4. Active consent: Are we aiming at active consent of all involved, rather than their passive agreement to ground rules, activities, etc. (i.e. are we going beyond assuming consent if people don't actually say 'no')?
5. Ongoing consent: Is consent ongoing before, during, and after the event with enough pauses for people to check in with themselves? Is ensuring consent seen as a process rather than a one off event at the start?
6. Awareness of scripts and power dynamics: Are we aware of the default script for 'successful' engagement in an event, and have we shifted this to giving multiple options so nobody feels pressured to participate in anything, or to stay beyond their capacity? Are we aware of the power dynamics which may make it hard for people to be in consent, particularly around our position as leader/facilitator?

# Trigger warning: trigger warnings (towards a different approach)

*Written in 2014. The main point of trigger warnings is to open up the possibility for people to determine what they engage with, when and how.*

There has been a great deal of discussion lately on the topic of trigger warnings. First a [spate](#) of articles appeared in the press describing situations in which students had asked teachers to provide warnings about the content of materials on their courses. These warnings aimed to provide people with information about any topics that they might find personally difficult, due to connections with events that had occurred in their own lives. Many of the newspaper articles ridiculed the idea of putting warnings on great literature, for example, and portrayed such requests as entitled, over-sensitive censorship.

Following this, a number of online authors wrote [defences](#) of [trigger warnings](#), portraying them instead as a means for people to have some control over what they are exposed to, often in the context of wider discriminations.

Most of the articles that I have seen on this topic have taken a stance for or against trigger warnings, often presenting an impassioned argument in favour of providing trigger warnings or virulent opposition to the practice. To me this binary either/or approach seems unhelpful. Instead I think it is more useful to adopt an approach where we first clarify what we are talking about when we speak of trigger warnings; we then ask what they have the potential to open up and to close down; and we finally consider *how* we might engage with them in order to maximise this potential (instead of *whether* we should engage with them).

## What are triggers?

First let's think about what we mean by triggers. Some of the concern about trigger warnings stems from the different ways in which this term is being used. The word 'trigger' can be employed in a narrow sense to mean something which sparks a flashback in a person who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or it can be used in a much wider sense to mean anything that anyone finds uncomfortable in any way. Some writers have criticised those requesting trigger warnings for claiming trauma for minor stressors in way that insults those with genuine experiences of trauma.

As with many debates around mental health diagnoses this gets us into tricky territory. What counts as 'real' trauma and what doesn't? Where do we draw the line on the continuum from everyday stress to traumatic experience? And who gets to decide what counts as trauma or trigger? This line-drawing gets even more complex when we remember how dependent such things are on personal meaning: what traumatises one person is not what traumatises another.

One friend is triggered by a classroom activity involving blindfolds, decades after their experience of imprisonment as a refugee. Another is triggered when jokingly called a word that was used repeatedly against them in school to let them know that they weren't accepted or acceptable. A third is triggered by watching a scene of conflict only a week after a painful breakup. A final friend feels triggered when told (in a debate about trigger warnings) that they don't understand trauma, despite having undergone a life-threatening situation some months ago which is not something they feel comfortable speaking about publicly.

One of these people responds angrily, using all their power to cut the offending person down to size. Another immediately leaves the situation to go home, curl up in a ball and rock themselves until the bad memories stop racing through their head. Another becomes very quiet and focuses intently on other things. The last bursts into tears and then berates themselves for getting so upset over something so trivial compared to other peoples' struggles.

As with other such debates, those on the 'pro' side often focus on what seem to be incontrovertibly traumatic triggers such as sexual assault, child abuse, and violent discrimination, whilst those on the 'anti' side often mention seemingly trifling things like name-calling, unusual phobias, or personal slights. Perhaps it would be useful if all authors on the topic applied their argument to the entire spectrum of potential traumas to consider whether what they're saying works across the range or is limited to a certain section. As with the wider use of terms like 'depression' and 'anxiety', those who are pro trigger warnings might consider what it is like for somebody who struggles daily with flashbacks and panic attacks to hear others claiming trauma, whilst those who are anti trigger warnings might reflect on what they are doing when they make claims about what counts as trauma and what doesn't.

Some have suggested the phrase 'content warnings' as being less loaded than 'trigger warnings'. This might well be a helpful move. However, the idea of being triggered is something that we can all relate to and is, I think, a useful broad concept. One of my favourite authors, Pema Chödrön, uses the term to refer to those times when something happens, or somebody says something, and – due to resonances with things that have happened in our past – we find ourselves quickly responding in old habitual ways: perhaps trying to escape, or lashing out at whoever triggered us.

In this sense, the joke that some authors have made about the trigger warning debate potentially triggering people is not far off the mark. For many on the 'pro' side, the 'anti' articles remind them of all the other times when their pain has been dismissed. Often those articles feel like yet another occasion when the particular oppressions that their group experiences are being erased or ignored by those in more privileged positions. For many on the 'anti' side, the 'pro' articles read like yet more whining from people who seem to think they deserve special treatment. Perhaps it feels like a dismissal of their own pain, which nobody has ever taken that seriously.

Or, through their lens on the situation, they see a bunch of relatively privileged people asking for others to take responsibility for their emotions in an individualistic way which leaves the structural features of oppression unchallenged.

### **What do trigger warnings open up and close down?**

Perhaps the main point of trigger warnings is to open up the possibility for people to determine what they engage with, when and how. The idea is that, if we provide people with a brief overview of the kinds of topics and issues they are going to be confronted with (in a novel, a movie, a lecture, or a workshop, for example), then they can make an informed decision about whether they wish to engage with it or not.

Advocates of trigger warnings regard this as a form of consensual practice, and a good way of modelling, and enabling, a more consensual culture than we currently have. It is also a potential way of recognising the structural constraints around agency. Not all people are as free as others, and one key limit on our freedom are the scars left by experiences of discrimination and oppression.

Trigger warnings are one way of giving people greater agency within the structural limits on this. Perhaps they also have the potential to somewhat flatten the hierarchy between those in a position of power (giving the message) and those in a less powerful position (receiving it). For example, a teacher providing trigger warnings to their class is potentially recognising the less privileged positions of many students (who may have experienced the kinds of things the lecture covers in ways that the teacher has not), and also flattening the hierarchy between teacher and student so that students can make choices about whether and how they engage with the materials.

However, there is also the potential – of course – for this approach to close down possibilities as well as opening them up. One risk is that, if taken too rigidly, we start to divide the world in binary ways between the powerful people who get to give trigger warnings, and the powerless victims who require them. This ‘us and them’ scenario serves nobody. The ‘powerless’ can become further disempowered by the assumption that they require looking after and can’t take responsibility for their own experience. The ‘powerful’ can find that their own vulnerabilities are dismissed or ignored by others – and by themselves if they invest in this position. This potential alerts us again to the risks in line-drawing between traumatised and non-traumatised, oppressed and non-oppressed. Perhaps instead it points us towards recognising the inevitability of traumatic experience during a person’s life, and the complex net of intersecting oppressions in which each person is located.

Critics of trigger warnings have pointed out another way in which trigger warnings can close things down for individuals. There is a risk that trigger warnings reinforce the common cultural perception that we should avoid the situations that trigger us. There is a pretty compelling consensus, amongst researchers and practitioners, that fear and anxiety are

generally exacerbated by avoidance, and ameliorated by engaging with them in some way (the 'feel the fear and do it anyway' approach). There is certainly a real danger if we teach people that anything they find painful is to be avoided: this is a path to greater suffering, not less, as people's worlds can end up constricting to smaller and smaller zones of perceived safety.

Advocates of trigger warnings, however, point out that the aim is not to avoid people confronting frightening or painful material, but rather to provide them with greater control over how and when they do this. No therapist I know would advocate randomly plunging a client into a situation they find highly traumatic without warning, rather most take a gradual approach, helping clients to learn to sit with their fear for brief periods at first (rather than trying to escape or avoid it) in a context where they can prepare themselves before it happens.

Whilst obviously real life is sometimes going to confront us with unexpected triggers, it seems cruel to use that as justification to ignore the strong possibility of triggering somebody in the particularly exposing context of a lecture hall or other public venue if our material contains likely triggers.

Turning from the individual to wider communities, an important set of criticisms of trigger warnings in social justice movements is that they feed into a culture which is prevalent at the moment. In this there is a focus on 'calling out' bad behaviour within communities, often with many people jumping on the bandwagon when this happens and criticising the perceived 'bad' person in order to shore up their own position as a great activist or ally. Things disintegrate into a kind of 'oppression olympics' or 'tragedy top-trumps' to determine who is most marginalised and therefore has most right to call out anybody else. This often results in newer members of communities feeling unable to speak up and in people withdrawing from movements from fear of this happening to them.

Critics have pointed out the risk of movements imploding or fragmenting in ways that render them impotent and which allow the systems and structures that they were attempting to change to continue. There is a danger that a focus on blaming individuals for causing personal trauma takes our attention away from social and cultural dynamics of oppression, and that our movements may be ridiculed by outsiders who observe this 'infighting' occurring.

There is certainly a risk that trigger warnings play into this culture if the onus is on everyone to avoid triggering anybody else, and if great shame and guilt are attached to having triggered somebody. The phrase 'hurt people hurt people' is a useful one for capturing the ways in which we so often bump up against each other when we ourselves are struggling, in ways that bruise others and leave them more defensive and prone to bumping into others too. Perhaps an answer here is to weave together a culture of trigger warnings with a culture of recognising the inevitability of making mistakes. We are surrounded by wider cultures in which it is not deemed acceptable to own up to having been wrong. That is a

message that our communities could helpfully resist by helping people to admit to mistakes, and to acknowledge when they have hurt others, without being berated or excluded for it.

Finally it is important to think carefully about this risk of ‘fragmentation’ in communities. At the same time that there are important dialogues to be had about how to avoid communities collapsing into in-fighting, the fear of ‘fragmentation’ has historically been used to erase difference within movements in ways which privilege those who already have the most power. For example, Black feminists were shouted down for ‘fragmenting’ communities when they pointed out the emphasis on issues that only impacted white women. Bisexual and trans activists are often shouted down for ‘fragmenting’ LGBT movements when pointing out their relative invisibility, or questioning whether issues like same-sex marriage should be the priority.

### **Moving from *what we do* to *how we do it***

I have only covered some of the many, many issues that are relevant when we start to think about trigger warnings. This is likely why it has become such a hot topic of late, as it enables people to start talking about a whole load of issues that have been bubbling under the surface in many communities for a long time now, and which people have felt scared to speak out about for fear of being called-out and piled-upon for doing so.

Perhaps some of the rage in the anti trigger warning articles comes from a sense of having been silent for too long about something that has caused great distress. Trigger warnings are something that people can somehow legitimately target, in a similar way to the way in which it is easier to call-out an individual than it is to address the wider problematic cultures in which they are embedded. However there is a risk here that collapsing several different things together under ‘trigger warnings’ results in muddled messages, which only add fuel to the fire as people polarise into ‘us and them’ positions.

An alternative approach involves not trying to determine which side you are on, or whether trigger warnings are a good or bad thing. Rather we could consider how we engage with the possibility of trigger/content warnings in ways which most enable their potential to open things up, whilst also being mindful of their potential to close things down. We can also recognise that whatever we do will not be perfect. Some closing down is probably inevitable – it is an ongoing process, not a once-and-for-all choice.

### **Suggestions that I would make here include the following:**

- Making clear that content/trigger warnings are about giving people the opportunity to consider when and how they engage with material, rather than encouraging them to avoid anything potentially painful or difficult.

- Recognising that it is impossible to predict all possible triggers and perhaps engaging groups in also thinking about what individuals and communities can do when people are triggered.
- Acknowledging both that everybody has triggers and traumas *and* that there are differences in experiences, particularly depending on how we are located within intersecting oppressions (not all trauma is equal).
- Making trigger/content warnings part of a wider move towards cultures of consent, and acknowledgement of imperfection and vulnerability, rather than seeing them as any kind of singular quick fix solution.

As with many such debates there is a good deal to be gained from listening with empathy to the other ‘side’ rather than looking for more reasons to dismiss them. As I’ve said [elsewhere](#), in our communities we have generally all had times when we’ve been abused or oppressed by others, as well as times when we – ourselves – have been accused of abuse or oppression. It can be incredibly useful, before we engage, to remember the times we were on the other side of those dynamics, how that felt, and how we responded.

### Further Reading

- Julia Serano’s latest book, [Excluded](#), is a very interesting reflection on these kinds of issues in social justice movements, particularly feminist and LGBT communities.

A couple of thought-provoking and useful pieces about trigger warnings, which I drew upon here, are:

- [Jack Halberstam: You are triggering me! The neo-Liberal rhetoric of harm, danger and trauma](#)
- [Scott Alexander: The wonderful thing about triggers](#)



# Treating writers - and other professionals - consensually

I've been writing a lot about [consent](#) again recently. One of the areas that's come up for me is consent in my relationships with people who connect with my work. On the one hand, several people who've treated me in lovely ways have expressed anxiety about whether it was okay. On the other hand, there've been a few situations where I've been left uncomfortable – even frightened – and like I haven't been treated consensually. In this piece I want to explore consent in the reader/writer relationship, although many of the points probably apply to all kinds of creative workers, and perhaps to those in more caring and service professions as well.

## Awkwardness and Obligation

I notice that this feels an awkward piece to write. It's a terrific privilege to be able to be a [full-time writer](#). I'm very aware that the thing that makes it possible at all is people buying my books, supporting my [Patreon](#), and recommending my work to others in their lives. I'm hugely fortunate to have perhaps a few hundred people who really connect with my stuff and actively support me in these kinds of ways.

I'm also aware of how much the feedback from these folks means to me. Knowing that I've connected with somebody through my work – perhaps helped them in some way – is gold. It affirms that I'm a decent writer who creates quality stuff, which is huge in itself. Beyond that it's also massively personally validating. Most of what I write comes out of my own struggles. Turning those into something that connects with other people, is useful for them, perhaps even helps them to navigate similar struggles more easily, feels like a form of self-compassion too: [healing even](#).

The reason for my awkwardness in writing this piece is that I realise that a part of me feels that, because of my gratitude to my readers, it isn't really okay to set any limits or boundaries around how they treat me. That can mean that when I'm asked for something that I can't – or don't want to – give, it's hard to say 'no' or be honest about my response.

It's been helpful for me to think about this in relation to [consent](#) because of course that's a big red flag right there! It's a problem if a person feels they have to take sexual harassment from their boss because that boss is helping them in their career. It's a problem if a person feels they have to have sex with a partner because they're obligated to by the nature of their relationship. It's a problem if a person feels they have to remain in a relationship that isn't good for them because of what their partner has done for them or feels entitled to. Consent is extremely hard to achieve under any of those conditions.

## Power and the Reader/Writer Relationship

Of course being able to freely consent is made more difficult – even sometimes impossible – under imbalances of power. Power between a reader and writer is a complex one. Often I'm in a position of far greater cultural power than a reader. I'm the person speaking up on a stage, whose work is known about publicly, and who is recognised for their art in a way that many sadly are not (and privilege and marginalisation come into that big time of course).

Also the writer/reader relationship is a dynamic where one person is far more significant in the other person's life than vice versa. I know this well from my own relationship with Pema Chödrön. This is somebody who accompanies me through my life everyday, who I regard as my main teacher, and who has shaped my life in hugely significant ways. They're also somebody who in all likelihood has no clue that I even exist! If I ever did get to spend time with her it would be a few minutes where I got to ask her a question at an event in front of everyone else, if I was quick getting to the front of the queue. Readers can feel let down if a writer who they have met before doesn't recognise them the next time they meet, but again there is such an imbalance that that writer met tens or hundreds of readers at the same event, whereas that reader probably only met the one writer. Personally, being somebody who struggles cognitively to recognise faces really doesn't help with this!

These power imbalances are one of the reasons that I think very carefully about the kinds of connections or relationships that might be possible with people who've come to know me through my work in the first instance.

However, there's also power in engaging with somebody's work as a reader. I see myself as in service to my communities through what I do, and it's very important to me to serve them well. Reader responses certainly have the power to impact me significantly.

When I do an event or engage on social media I'm there for my readers, and part of the deal is to be in service to them: to answer their questions honestly, to be available to them, to give them my time and presence. There's an imbalance that the reader will know far more about me than I know about them, and that can be pretty vulnerable.

Also people have a lot of power these days if they want to hurt somebody, as I've experienced myself when bullied online, and witnessed in other writers who have been on the receiving end of trolling or stalking behaviour. Painful experience has shown me that many journalists will pick up on individual tweets or comments to craft a news story without doing any fact-checking, meaning that a completely false depiction of your work can get out there widely. It's scary indeed to put yourself out there knowing that might be the response.

### **How Can I Do My Best Work?**

The reader/writer relationship is one of the most important relationships in my life. I want to be in service to my readers, recognising the privileges they afford me, opening up through my work in ways that enrich it, and delighting in the sense of connection I have with those who engage with what I write. How can I balance this with keeping myself safe-enough, being clear about my boundaries, and not accepting non-consensual behaviour?

One thing that has helped me to navigate these questions is to ask myself under what conditions I do my best work: creating the kind of writing which I know readers enjoy and find helpful, and being available and real through my writing and when I do events. The answer to this is when I'm treating myself consensually and being treated consensually by others. For example, I need to do a fair amount of self-care around my writing because I'm often writing on vulnerable and painful topics. I need people to respect the boundaries I put in place to make that spaciousness and self-care possible (e.g. only doing a couple of gigs a month, and not being able to respond to people immediately). Similarly my collaborative work requires going into a bubble. I need people to respect that bubble time. Finally, I can be more available to everyone who wants to engage with me on social media, or in real life, if one or two people aren't taking all my time or depleting my energy with inappropriate demands.

We should be able to require consensual behaviour from others simply because we all deserve to be treated consensually, but for those of us who struggle with recognising this for ourselves it can be useful to remind ourselves that we'll be better for everyone if we're treated with consent.

### **No Pedestal Please**

I'm going to be brave and set out here the ways I am – and am not – up for being treated by folks who enjoy my work. I hope this might be useful for other people in all kinds of professions to consider, in exploring their own needs, wants, limits and boundaries. For example, people in any kind of caring or service profession need to consider what is – and isn't – an acceptable way for clients or customers to treat them. Charlotte Shane has written about this very thoughtfully in relation to [sex work](#), with many of her points applying well to other professions where the work involves caring for others or giving others a pleasant experience.

Hopefully this piece will also be useful for all of us to reflect on in relation to how we treat people we admire, or who we come across in a professional context. I certainly haven't always thought about this well in the past. I remember occasions where my desperation around my own struggles meant that I probably made a speaker quite uncomfortable with my personal questions at the end of their talk. Certainly I've been guilty of putting writers on a pedestal because I've connected with their work, and then being angry with them when they've behaved imperfectly. I feel very aware now that pedestalling people is not a kind thing to do, however much it may feel like it. It's a form of objectification which gets in the way of any kind of mutual human relationship, and you're setting the pedestalled person up for a painful fall when they inevitably turn out to be a vulnerable messy human like everyone else.

### **Yes, No and Maybe**

One activity that's often recommended to ensure sexual consent is ['yes, no, maybe'](#). You make a list of all of the possible erotic activities you might engage with and then figure out which ones are a 'yes' for you, which a 'no', and which a 'maybe'. You can add more

detailed notes to each one as well, to explain what version of that activity you're up for, what it means for you, or under what conditions you'd be up for it happening, etc. Then you can compare notes with people you're thinking of having sex with and find out where your overlaps are, as well as your limits.

So here's my personal 'yes, no, maybe' list for engaging with people who like my work, read my books, listen to my podcast, come to my events, etc. To figure it out I followed Sophia Graham's excellent advice for tuning into your body and feelings to tell when you're in [self-consent](#).

### **Hell Yes (and please be aware...)**

These are the things I've felt great about pretty much every time they've happened. Obviously it's still important to check out whether they're okay in a specific situation, but generally they're likely to be a positive thing for me.

- *Telling me that my work has been meaningful or helpful to you.* As I've said, this means a huge amount to me. Coming up to me at an event, tagging me online, or sending me a brief email or tweet feels great, and I will likely respond positively. Where it would feel uncomfortable is if there was a sense that I should now engage with you further, for example talking with you for a lot longer than other people at an event, or getting into a back-and-forth conversation on social media or email.
- *Sharing my stuff on social media or leaving reviews.* This is gold for a writer and I love seeing people sharing pics of themselves with my books, or recommending them to their followers. Where it would feel uncomfortable would be if you were singling me out as the only author you do this about, suggesting that my work would be great for everyone (it'll inevitably connect with some people but not others), or tagging me in things all the time in ways that put me under pressure to engage.
- *Asking me to sign something or take a selfie.* People who ask me to sign their books, take a selfie with me, etc. are often apologetic about it. Personally I love doing this, it feels like being a 'proper writer'! I guess the only times it would feel uncomfortable would be if it was interrupting me when I was obviously having a tough time, or supporting somebody else who was, or clearly super busy with something. It's also always worth checking with someone before you share a pic of them publicly. I'm likely to agree but it's nice to be asked.

### **No Way**

These are my limits: things which overstep my boundaries and feel intrusive, frightening, or highly uncomfortable if people do them.

- *Demanding/expecting my help when you're in crisis:* Several times people I don't know have messaged me demanding an immediate conversation with me because they're in crisis. Often they send multiple messages, and/or come through on inappropriate channels like phone rather than email. I will block people who do this because it's simply

not something that I can offer, and it's not consensual behaviour. There are a number of great [free services that offer crisis support](#), please go there.

- *Announcing/assuming that we are friends:* Sometimes people have assumed that they're in a friendship with me because they've connected with my work or had a conversation or two with me. Please be clear, for me the development of close relationships of all kinds – including friendship – is a long, slow, careful, process. It needs to be in order to ensure that the relationships I develop are consensual and mutually nourishing. Being a survivor with a history which includes sexual assault, school/workplace bullying, and controlling relationships this is particularly vital. It's never okay to announce privately or publicly that you're in any kind of relationship with somebody without checking that they also see it that way, and feel comfortable with such declarations.
- *Public shaming or bullying:* Never okay, I will simply block you and report you. If you feel like the time at the end of my talk is a good one to publicly or privately share your opinion that people like me are damaging or don't really exist, please believe me it isn't. In fact no time is the time for expressing that opinion. Think how you would feel about somebody expressing that opinion about people like you. Go do your work please.

### **Maybe, Maybe Not**

These are the things that I need people to be careful about. Please follow [the consent checklist](#) (below). Ensure you're making it possible for me to say 'yes, no, or maybe'. Understand the conditions under which these things do and do not feel okay for me.

- *Asking/telling me about a personal situation:* I have had great conversations with people after events, at workshops, and so on when they've shared what's going on for them, so I definitely wouldn't say 'never' to this, but please be mindful that it's not always something I can offer. It's certainly worth checking whether I do have capacity for it first, making it as easy as possible for me to say if I don't, and giving me a head's up about the kind of thing it might be about in case it might be personally triggering. If our contact is online generally long messages about people's personal situations are not something I can engage with. They feel intrusive, particularly when the person doesn't check out first whether it might be something I'm willing to receive. They're also a form of unpaid labour. Please remember that I only have limited time and energy to engage with such things, so engaging with you in this way may well mean I have less available for engaging with others who'd been hoping to do so.
- *Suggesting a longer exchange:* A part of my life that I enjoy is meeting with other creatives, therapists, activists, and academics who I connect with to talk about our work, network, offer mutual support, informal mentoring, etc. However it feels tough when somebody just assumes that I'll be up for doing this with them. Generally it's only something I feel comfortable doing with folks where our areas overlap significantly, where I feel a good connection, and where I have some sense of them being a safe-enough person from mutual friends and colleagues. If the other person is actually looking for something from me rather than a mutual conversation then it's good if they can be clear about that.
- *Suggesting I do some work for you or your organisation:* In addition to writing I support other folks in my community around their creative projects, and I engage in media interviews, panel discussions, workshops, and the like. Generally I'm happy to receive

requests from people to do these kinds of things. However it's important that these are clear about what's wanted, and what's being offered in return. This is my job so I can very rarely offer such things for free, and politically please remember that it's important to compensate people – particularly marginalised folks – for their labour. Mostly my diary is now pretty full up several months in advance, and for self-care I need to build space around bigger events – so it's important to have decent advance notice. I also already have close collaborators who I create with and I only build such key relationships **very slowly**. Please also inform yourself about my work before asking. I've had frustrating unpaid exchanges with people who are really looking for someone to edit their work for example, or who want trainings on topics which are not really my wheelhouse.

- *Offering constructive criticism:* I definitely want to hear when I've got things wrong, and to keep thinking about how I can improve my work, particularly in relation to accessibility and inclusivity. However, offering criticism is definitely something that needs to be done consensually. It's important to check first whether feedback is welcomed and – if so – in what form, recognising the potential impact on the other person of receiving it. If there's an error in a book, it would be better to contact the publishers rather than me directly and they can liaise with me about any changes. Writers often have to filter criticism which is just bullying/trolling, that which is another perspective but doesn't mean their perspective is wrong, and that which is definitely valid and requires them to make changes or apologise for something they've put out there. I'm working on developing a small pool of trusted people to help me navigate this kind of process, and would recommend other writers do similarly. Generally if the criticism is not done consensually I won't engage with it.

### **The Consent Checklist**

Whatever kind of contact we're having, hopefully the **consent checklist** I wrote provides a clear steer on how I'd love for you to go about it.

- Consent as the aim: Is it more important to you that I'm in consent than that you get the thing you want from me? Will you recognise that it's a big compliment to your way of interacting and communicating if I can say 'no' or express my boundaries?
- Informed consent: Have you fully informed me about what you're asking for and/or offering, why, and where you are coming from with this?
- Ongoing consent: Are you checking in before, during, and after the encounter – with yourself and with me – that you've made it possible for me to be in consent?
- Relational consent: Have you expressed your needs, limits, wants, and boundaries, and encouraged me to do so as well?
- Consent and wanting: Have you enabled me to express what I want and don't want, and what I consent to and don't consent to? Have you been clear about where you're at with these things with yourself?
- Multiple options beyond a default script: Are you aware of the default script for 'success' in this situation, and have you shifted this to multiple options and an agreement to default to the lesser one on the table? For example, instead of asking me to speak at your event, perhaps you could let me know about that event and say you'd love me to

be involved in some way, listing a few different options for involvement and checking out how I might feel about those.

- Power awareness: Are you aware of the cultural and personal power imbalances between us and their potential impact on capacity for each of us to feel free-enough and safe-enough to be in consent?
- Accountability: Can you notice if you haven't been consensual and name that?

## Further Resources

My other free books on trauma and plurality include more relevant material on this theme: [rewriting-the-rules.com](http://rewriting-the-rules.com).

Here are some useful resources if you want to explore consent further:

- The Consent Collective: [consentcollective.com](http://consentcollective.com)
- Consent Culture: [consentculture.co.uk](http://consentculture.co.uk), [consentculture.com](http://consentculture.com)
- The wheel of consent: [wheelofconsentbook.com](http://wheelofconsentbook.com)
- Hancock, J. (2021). *Can we talk about consent?* Frances Lincoln Publishers Ltd. [bishuk.com](http://bishuk.com)
- Corinna, H. (2016). *S. E. X.* Da Capo Lifelong Books. [Scarleteen.com](http://Scarleteen.com)
- Moen, E. & Nolan, M. (2021). *Let's Talk About It: The Teen's Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human.* London: Random House Graphic. [Ohjoysextoy.com](http://Ohjoysextoy.com)

- Love Uncommon - [Self consent](#)
- Mia Mingus - [Access intimacy](#)
- [Transform harm](#)
- [Building accountable communities](#)

I cover consent more in my books:

- Barker, M-J. & Iantaffi, A. (2022). *How to Understand Your Sexuality*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Iantaffi, A. & Barker, M-J. (2021). *Hell Yeah Self Care!* London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Barker, M-J. & Scheele, J. (2021). *Sexuality: A Graphic Guide*. London: Icon Books.
- Barker, M-J. (2018). *Rewriting the Rules: An Anti-Self-Help Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships*. London: Routledge.
- Barker, M-J. & Hancock, J. (2017). *Enjoy sex (How, when and if you want to): A Practical and Inclusive Guide*. London: Icon Books.



# Thank-you for reading

You can find my other free books on my website:

- [rewriting-the-rules.com](http://rewriting-the-rules.com)

If you enjoyed the book or shared it on, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

- [patreon.com/MegJohnBarker](https://patreon.com/MegJohnBarker)
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