

CONSENT

SEX AND SEXUALITY FOR TRANS PEOPLE

Consent means agreeing to something without feeling like you have to agree to it. At a glance, consenting to sex can be simple – someone asks you if you want to have sex and you say yes or no. But there are many factors which can make a person feel pressured to say yes. When a person says yes because they are pressured into it directly, this is sometimes called ‘coercion’. Coercion can be very direct and easy to see, or it could be more subtle. It may include forcing them, sulking, passive aggressive pressure, or saying ‘if you loved me you would...’.

Consent should never be coerced on purpose, and we also have a responsibility to try to make sure we don't coerce consent by accident as well. We call this 'good consent practises'.

Making sure you have good consent practices can be a lot of work, but it can also be a lot of fun.

There is a metaphor called the ‘Consent Castle’, where we liken starting a new relationship to building a castle. It goes like this:

When you meet someone you like, you might decide to build a castle together. In the beginning, you will need to talk a lot about what you both want from a castle, and make sure you're on the same page. You might write some things down, draw some diagrams, share your ideas.

Next, when you start to build your castle, you will probably need to be extra careful – you might wear hard hats, steel toed boots, and check in with each other frequently. As time goes on and the castle takes shape, you will be able to relax and enjoy it more without having to talk about every step, and one day when the castle is finished, it will become a comfortable and familiar place where you can have fun together.

Castles are always a work in progress – you might need to do some maintenance now and then, and if you want to change something or add another room you'll probably need to put on your hard hats and overalls and plan it out carefully, but by planning and talking and working it out together in the beginning, you will have build a strong foundation for a mutually satisfying castle.

Before they first have sex with a new partner, some people like to have conversations about sex in a relaxed situation when sex isn't about to happen immediately. If the conversation is not focused on ‘if/when we have sex’ but instead is about ‘when people have sex’, this can make it easier to bring up broader social pressures and other issues, likes and dislikes, emotions, expectations, and any other issues. This can give everyone involved an opportunity to talk about how they feel, and what they want from sex or a relationship, and from each other.

During sexual encounters, it's important to check in – or ask how the other person is feeling or if they want to do a certain activity, or whether what you are doing feels good. The answer may be that they want you to do something a little differently, or that they want to try something else, or that they feel amazing. Communicating during sex can be fun and sexy, and it means that you will always know if your partner likes something or not.

Likewise, talking about it afterward can be really useful. Sometimes we did like something at the time, but later we realise it also gave us a cramp! Or made us feel insecure about part of our body. Or we think of something else that might be good to try next time. Talking about sex can be empowering, and it gives us lots of opportunities to make choices.

Tip: asking for consent while physically initiating a sexual action can make the other person feel pressured into accepting. Get consent before you act.

What about hookups and one night stands?

Practicing good consent is also possible for casual hookups. While you may not want to have long conversations with someone you've just met, getting into the habit of discussing sex before you start having it can mean that you both have better experiences.

For example, Andy tells Shay he sometimes feels like the gay dating scene expects everyone to do oral sex without condoms, and that's hard for him as a trans man, because he wants to fit in but he also wants to protect his sexual health. Later when they're hooking up, Shay has the opportunity to let Andy know it's fine to use condoms, which makes Andy feel much more relaxed and valued as a person, and then he can make more of a free choice about whether to use a condom or not. Understanding each other more and being more relaxed also makes the whole experience more fun for both people.



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CONSENT PART 2: TRIGGERS

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Past Trauma Memories, or 'Triggers'.

If a person has experienced trauma in the past, such as being the victim/survivor of sexual violence, they may have very strong emotions such as anger or fear which are associated with an element present when the initial trauma happened. This element – or trigger – can be anything from a smell to a certain word or phrase, it could be a particular sexual activity or position, or any number of other elements. After the initial trauma – it could be days, weeks, or years later – when the person experiences the trigger, they may emotionally or psychologically re-live the trauma of the initial incident. We call this 'being triggered'.

It is not always possible to avoid being triggered, for example if the smell of beer was present when the initial traumatic incident occurred, then in the future the smell of beer might make the person have a 'fight, flight, or freeze' response. Whether the current situation is safe or not, the person who has been 'triggered' might experience an elevated heart rate and physical symptoms of fear, anger, humiliation, sadness, or a number of other things. This may also mean that their reaction to another person drinking a beer is to feel distrustful, or angry, and they may not know why.

Discussing Triggers.

Some people find it very helpful to work out, over time, the things that trigger past trauma for them. It can be a long process of recognising when they feel disproportionately upset, and working out why that might be. Not everything that upsets someone is a trigger – we can be upset for many reasons, including being upset because the thing which is happening right now is harming us. Or because we just don't like something. It can be helpful to separate things out and reflect on what feelings we were having when we were upset, and whether there is a current problem happening and we are being harmed, or if we were triggered.

Although the trauma we have experienced might not be our fault (and in the case of sexual violence is never the victim's fault), it is still our responsibility to manage our triggers and behaviours.

Some people find it useful to discuss triggers with partners or potential partners. It can also be useful to talk about how a person might guess that you are being triggered when it happens, what they might say to you in that situation, or how you might communicate with them.

Example: Sarah has trauma that involves sexual violence. She doesn't like to have sex in certain positions, or when she's very tired, or after an argument. Sometimes she doesn't realise how tired she is, or something else can trigger her. When she's triggered, she feels humiliated and worthless, and her response is to 'freeze', which for her means she thinks about other things, and tries to 'just get through' the sex that is happening right now. She struggles to let partners know she wants to stop having sex. Usually during sex she makes a lot of eye contact and talks or makes sounds. When she is triggered, she avoids eye contact and usually goes quiet and sometimes cries. She tells this to her partners, so that if she behaves in those ways, they know to stop and check in. She tells them that when they think she's triggered, she doesn't want to be asked 'are you ok?' because it's hard to say 'no' when she feels like that. She wants her partners to ask 'do you want to stop?', because saying yes is easier. If she does want to stop, a good next question is 'shall I make you some tea?', because it gives her the chance to have space alone for a few minutes. After that, she sometimes feels fine. Other times, she wants to do something that isn't sexual, like watch a film and cuddle. She also lets them know that her being triggered doesn't mean they are doing something wrong.

You can read more of our series 'Sex and Sexuality for Trans People', and find more information on this topic and other things we do at genderminorities.com

If you need support with sexual violence services, counseling, or other referrals, you can search our healthcare database or get in touch.



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