This was my introduction to an experiential understanding of the practice of consent, of what it really feels like and why it's so important: I remember sitting on the edge of the bed, making out, but making out really sweety, with soft kisses, and I remember thinking to myself "this is the best part..."...and then I remember jumping off the bed, pacing, my heart pounding, scared to death, with a pit in my stomach that felt like it was swallowing me alive. I felt like a little kid. I started muttering shit to myself and it just got worse and worse. I tried to force it, to go back and just keep going. I couldn't stay in my body, couldn't keep myself from being pulled into the vortex that left me curled up in a ball under the covers crying. I couldn't open my mouth and I couldn't look at her. I wanted to tell her that it wasn't her, that she didn't do anything, that it wasn't her fault, that I loved her - but I couldn't say anything. She sat there for a minute and then I heard her say, "Do you want me to stay here with you or do you need space?" I couldn't answer so she made it a yes or no question and she asked again, "Do you want me to stay here with you?" I nodded my head yes underneath the protective layers of bedding. "Can I touch you?" she asked and I nodded yes again and felt her hand on my shoulder. "You're okay," she started saying softly, "everything's okay, you're safe...you're safe...you're safe..." She asked if she could hold me and I nodded yes, so she curled around me and held me softly and I started shaking and crying. She stopped asking me questions and just let me cry and held me. When I was done crying I moved the blankets down off my face and I turned around and faced her. I wouldn't look into her eyes but she held my head softly until I did and she asked me where I was. "Are you here?" "It's safe now, everything's okay," she said. I had never dissociated and come back before. I had always had to sleep it off, wake up the next day groggy and confused. But we had talked before about triggers, about how sometimes I dissociated and what that meant for me, about what I needed when that happened. We had sat there together and read the Support zine, we went through the questionnaire about consent in the beginning of it...we had prepared for experiences like this. She practiced what we had talked about, and it was the first time anyone had ever been able to bring me back, and bring me back safely.

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I have never been able to figure out a way to talk comfortably about consent.

I think I am pretty good about asking other people, but figuring out a way to explain whether or not I want to be doing something is pretty impossible. I mean, if I want to be doing something, it's usually fine, but if I don't, or especially if I'm unsure, it's impossible. If someone asks, "is this ok," I always say "yes." Everything is "ok" I mean, I can survive anything, right? So even the best of intentions don't usually work for me, and just the words like "do you like this?" or "do you want me to be doing this?" they are triggering, or even if they're not specifically triggering, they make me doubt myself - like "Oh, I thought I wanted this, but do I? What if I don't? shit. How do I know for sure?" So generally when people ask me for consent it not only ruins the mood I'm working so hard to maintain, but it triggers me, then I have to try and navigate wheter or not I'm going to be able to get out of the trigger, stop thinking so much and get back to just feeling good. And if they notice me flinching or withdrawing for a second and they stop and want to talk about it, then it is just over, and may be I don't want it to be over, I just want to be able to work through it myself and forget.

So I've never really known what to do. There are some things that have worked - like talking beforehand about what I need - like being held after sex. And asking them not to ask me things like "how was it for you". There are just too many words and sentences that are triggering for me. But I love sex and want to be able to do it. I want
to be able to be asked for consent and to give consent. If people don't even try, then that's frustrating too.

So, talking beforehand, and also trying to figure out ways to talk about what's happened during sex, but later, like when we are not in bed, and trying to figure out ways for them to not get freaked out if I admit to faking it or having a flashback or just not wanting to do something. It's important for me to be able to talk about it later, because I can't usually talk about it at the time, but that usually makes people feel like shit and feel guilty and then question every move they make, and they feel like they can't get anything right and I have to take all initiative and give so much reassurance, and that makes me never feel like doing it, and that sucks too.

One of the things that happens a lot is that I am really sexual in the beginnings of relationships but when they get more serious or when they have been going on for awhile more things start to come up. My last partner came up with an idea. I have to say that the fact that he came up with an idea instead of me having to do it, helped so much! He came up with a number system he would ask me 1-6 We worked together to come up with what the numbers stood for.

1. I feel like being held. No sex. Nothing. Not even sexual energy.
2. I want kissing but nothing past that. No moving against me in a sexual way.
3. I want to kiss and might be open to other stuff too.
4. I want to do stuff, but check back in a lot as we go.
5. I want to do stuff, and don't want much checking in, just check in before doing anything with the downthere parts and check in if you feel like I might be feeling weird.
6. Let's do it!

Something about the number system took the weight off things. It made it more easy and a little bit funny. I was totally able to say 2, where as I would never say "I want to kiss right now but nothing else". Saying those words would make me feel totally guilty where as saying "two" just felt like fact. It didn't always work perfectly, but it was way easier for both of us.