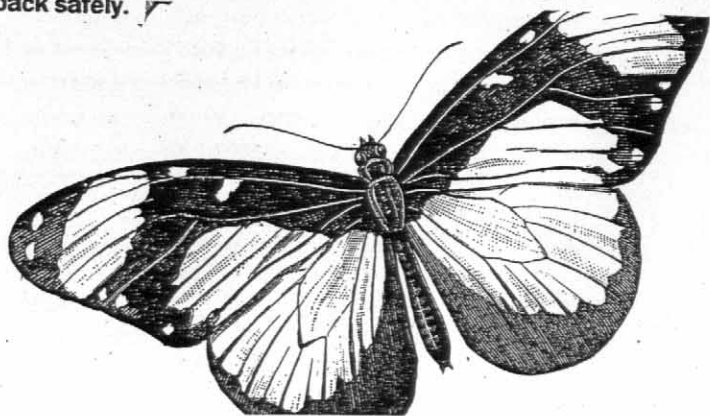


This was my introduction to an experiential understanding of the practice of consent, of what it really feels like and why it's so important: I remember sitting on the edge of the bed, making out, but making out really sweetly, with soft kisses, and I remember thinking to myself "this is the best part"...and 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 disassociated 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. ✓



numbers

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 whether 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.

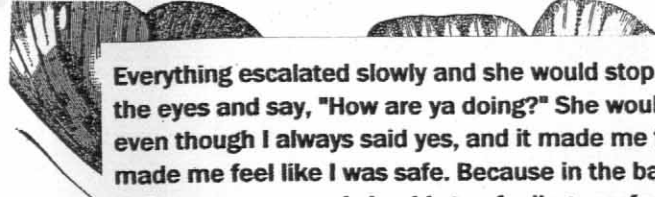
So, talking beforehand, and also trying to figure out ways to talk about what's happened during sex, but later, like when we are not in bed, and trying to figure out ways for them to not get freaked out if I admit to faking it or having a flashback or just not wanting to do something. It's important 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 doin' 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.



Everything escalated slowly and she would stop kissing me and look me in the eyes and say, "How are ya doing?" She would stop to check in with me even though I always said yes, and it made me feel like I was respected. It made me feel like I was safe. Because in the back of my mind, I knew that if, for some reason, I should stop feeling comfortable and if, for some reason, I didn't feel like I could speak up, she would ask again and there would be the space to back out or slow things down. I didn't feel trapped, the way I had always felt before, like "I've gone this far, now there's no way to get out of it." She gave me a choice at each new level, and just because we had already done something before didn't mean she didn't ask for permission before doing it again.

Consent can be so fucking scary because you're opening yourself to up rejection. You're creating a safe space, a space where your partner can say no. But what's so hot, so empowering, so fucking amazing about consent is that the yes's really become yes's. The first time you hear no, it validates all the yes's. The first time you hear no, it's not really a rejection, a failure of any kind. It's a reassurance that when you hear yes, it's a yes, and they'll tell you otherwise when it's not. The yes's become erotic and the no's are signs of the safety and the trust that have been built, that consent actually works, that what you are doing is worth all the work, is right.

I assume everyone I come in contact with is a survivor. If they tell me otherwise at some point, then great, but I'd rather be conscious of my behavior than to hurt someone and find out after the fact that it could have been avoided with some simple consent practices. I've learned to ask people if I can give them hugs. I ask children if I can pick them up. I ask a crying friend if they want to be held, if they feel comfortable if I hold their hand. I have a friend who is a massage therapist. "The first rule of massage is to always obtain consent first," he said. "But I realized," he continued, "that it's not just about massage...that I have to apply the principles of consent to every interaction I have in my life..." I think about what he said when I sit next to strangers on the bus, when I help people at work, when I talk with friends. Consent isn't inherently sexual. It's about communication, about working towards creating safe spaces. I want intimate, private experiences to be safe, but I want to feel safe in public, too. Thinking about consent in all of my interactions makes me feel like I'm making a start on some level, doing my part to make that happen.. When we practice consent we create our own safe spaces, and then see where those spaces overlap with others'.

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