

An Explanation of Consent

Get to know why consent is so important

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“Wildcats
get
Consent”

Consent is at the center of many [presentations](#) SHARPP gives on campus. It is also at the center of every sexual experience and interaction that is not assault.

There are four main components:

1. A mutual agreement, based on a shared desire for specific sexual activities
2. An ongoing verbal interaction, taken one step at a time, to an expressed and honest yes
3. Mutual awareness of possible consequences of activities
4. Each partner remains open to and respects the other partner's expression of agreement or disagreement to engage in the activity

This can be a lot to take in when people first encounter this [explanation of consent](#). It goes far beyond the slogans of “No Means No” and “Yes Means Yes.” This consent can be revoked at any time, involves large active communication and leaves all doors open for someone to back out. This definition, complicated as it may seem at first sight, is the right approach to sexual experiences. As a SHARPP [community educator](#) and someone involved in issues of sexual violence for years, it makes sense. Yet it leaves a question for many people: What happens when someone does not explicitly say “yes” or “no”? What about the gray area?

Where people get confused are the seemingly halfway answers: “I’m too tired; I don’t know; I guess”. These aren’t clear. They are also not consent. A person has to be clearly willing to engage in the specific activity proposed for the consent to be legitimate. If you are unsure that the person is consenting, stop. It is better to be entirely sure that someone is giving their consent than to ignore the signs they are trying to send that they are uncomfortable.



To be clear, it is best to be as explicit as possible when giving or withholding consent.

Communication is key to any positive sexual interaction. Yet for a variety of reasons, people are hesitant to directly say no. As a society, it can be seen as rude to say no, even though a person is completely within their rights to do so. This is especially true when someone is refusing to do something they might have agreed to earlier. They feel an obligation to follow through, even though they have no desire to. In another situation, people may feel unsafe when giving an answer. If someone has more authority or power, or implies violence should the answer be no, a person may give an answer to consent that seems unclear. They are protecting themselves from the perceived fallout. The answer they give is not consent because they are not in a situation where they can give their consent. If someone has been giving unclear answers for some time and then

has been wearied down to a yes, that is not consent. Consent cannot be forced. Someone has to willingly give it.

Things get more complicated when alcohol and drugs are involved.

Alcohol is the number-one date rape drug. Many perpetrators use alcohol as a tool for assault. In this case as well, the responsibility exists to get consent. This doesn't mean alcohol is never involved in consensual activity. It means that you have to be aware of your and your partner's actions when drunk. If you don't know if someone is sober enough to consent, don't initiate anything. It is better to wake up the next day and talk with them about why you didn't initiate anything than to have that person experience sexual violence.



If someone cannot stand or walk due to drunkenness, they cannot consent. If you can't understand what they are saying due to slurred speech, they cannot consent. If they are confused or can't focus, they cannot consent. If they have vomited or soiled themselves, they cannot consent. If they are passed out or sleeping, they cannot consent.

Some of this might seem obvious, but there are cases where individuals fit one or more of these descriptions and were assaulted. It's important to hold yourself and others responsible.

The responsibility to get consent is on the person initiating the sexual act. It is not the responsibility of the other person to accommodate the initiator. This person initiating the contact should continually ask questions: "Is this ok? Do you want to stop? How does this feel?" When consent is unclear, questions can both clarify that consent and give the other person the space to express either their enthusiasm or disagreement.

Making clear that saying no is acceptable means there will be much less confusion. It is also important for people to know when to stop. If you are unsure about consent, and you can't get a clear yes or no, it would be better to leave the immediate situation. Later on, perhaps away from the pressuring situation or the expectation of immediate sexual activity, you and the other person can have a discussion about communication and what consent would look like going forward. It is better to have that discussion later on than to assault someone.

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