

How Curiosity and Consent Can Make Old Lovers New Again



In a sexual rut with your partner? Then it might be time to talk to each other like strangers.

BY JEREMY ADAM SMITH | NOVEMBER 1, 2022

Autumn Vandiver went to her first cuddle party in 2018. At the start of the party—a social event where people learn to give and receive non-sexual touch—participants did some exercises around consent. She was paired with a stranger who asked for a hug; she was supposed to say “no.”



This was Autumn’s first exposure to consent practices. When she said “no” to her companion, he replied, “Thank you for taking care of yourself.”

“I had a visceral reaction in my body, when I heard that,” says Autumn, who now facilitates cuddle experiences. “First of all, I’d never had a guy ask me for permission to hug me before”—and she’d never felt empowered to refuse one, because “I just went along with whatever was happening, because that’s the way I was conditioned as a woman.”

The effect on her was intoxicating. “I just felt so emboldened and empowered,” she says. “For the rest of the party, I just went around saying ‘no’ because I could.”

The core of consent is to simply ask permission to do whatever it is you want to do. *May I stroke your arm? Would you like it if I kissed you? Do you prefer a firmer or gentler touch?* And then respond graciously to the answer: *Thank you for taking care of yourself.*

We know that there's a strong correlation between explicit sexual consent and sexual satisfaction. Indeed, explicit consent is essential when two people have just met and are learning each other's needs and boundaries, while building a sense of trust and safety.

Inside of established sexual relationships, however, consent is often assumed, usually based on accumulated precedent. As one 2019 study of 84 people found, "participants were less likely to report consent communication cues as sexual precedent increased."



A Greater Good series about sexual communication

In other words, at a certain point, couples start to take consent for granted and they feel able to assume what's OK and what's not OK with their partner. At its best, this is based on a deep understanding and trust of each other. *He knows what I like. They understand when I'm ready.*

For that reason, some might think sexual communication and satisfaction can only go up in a long-term relationship—but there are quite a few studies that find both of those things are prone to declining over time, even if overall *relationship* satisfaction goes up. Why?

There can be many reasons—aging, stress, illness—but here I'd like to highlight the role of implied, precedent-based consent. The problem is two-fold. First, assuming that the past should shape the future is exactly how couples get into ruts; in this case, from trust comes boredom. Second, assuming consent in long-term relationships can inhibit communication around sex as our bodies and minds evolve over time.

That's why it can become important to intentionally decide to not take anything for granted with your partner of many years. Consent might have a different meaning for long-term couples than it does for people just getting to know each other, but it can be an incredibly helpful tool for re-learning each other—even, perhaps especially, when we think we know everything there is to know about someone.

Approaching your beloved like a stranger

Remember the '90s sitcom *Mad About You*? In one episode, married couple Paul and Jaimie have gotten a little too used to each other and their lives. Jaimie decides to get a new hair color to shake things up. It works: When she walks through the door, Paul is instantaneously turned on. They tumble into the bedroom.

Consciously agreeing to switch on consent and sexual communication can have that effect on committed couples, suggest multiple studies. You're intentionally asking, about someone you think you know well: *Who is this person and what turns them on?* As the mid-century wit Dorothy Parker once wrote, "The cure for boredom is curiosity." (She added: "There is no cure for curiosity.")

What might that look like? Many long-time couples tend to fall into distinct patterns of maintenance sex: There are certain times of the day or night when sex feels possible, and they tend to take the shortest paths they've found to each other's orgasms. It takes effort to suggest something different, like: *I want to make love to you this afternoon, while the kids are at school.*

You might hear "no" to that request—and that can be difficult. In consciously reviving consent in your relationship, you might even role-play a bit and practice saying "stop," looking each other full in the eyes as you say the words—as Autumn did at her first

cuddle party. Just for fun, you can ask something like, “May I touch your ass?” And then hear your partner say “no.” Then practice responding graciously to the refusal.



Active Listening

Connect with a partner through empathy and understanding.

That might feel ridiculous, but if you're not used to saying “no” to each other, the practice can be liberating, the way it was for Autumn all those years ago. Over time, boundaries can break down inside a relationship; in bringing more consent back into your bedroom, you're re-establishing boundaries. You're separating, a little, to see each other from a distance. That can feel painful, but it's the kind of pain that can strengthen intimacy, if you learn to tolerate it.

“The first time a guy said ‘no’ to me, I was like, you’re not supposed to say ‘no’ to me—I’m supposed to say ‘no’ to you! I was like, “That hurt and I didn’t like it,”” says Autumn. At the time, to help herself feel better about the refusal, she tried to recognize it “as a sign that I was taking a risk.”

Practice makes perfect: In time, after hearing many more “nos,” she came to feel “a sense of safety and relief because I know that that person’s ‘NO’ means that I can trust them. Because if they can say ‘no’ to me, then that means that when they say ‘yes,’ it’s a true ‘yes,’ a real ‘yes.’”

Autumn’s experience touches on gender roles as a factor. We often hold in our minds a stereotype that men are the active pursuers and women are the ones who say “yes” and “no.” Embedded in that stereotype is the idea that men should always be ready for sex and women need to be revved up. When you try to break patterns, you can end up breaking gendered roles, as well.

Opening the door to variety

When we pick up the tool of consent in a long-term relationship, we're opening ourselves up to many possibilities. You might have an idea in your head for what you want to happen—oral sex, for example, or something in front of a mirror—but your partner might not be up for that. Your job is to find out what they *are* up for, if anything, and to see if you can meet them there.

It could be that, for example, intercourse isn't their first choice. For many heterosexual couples, it can become a problem when penis-in-vagina intercourse is treated like the inevitable culmination of any physical intimacy—which can lead one or both of them to avoid that intimacy, especially if they've gone through some emotional or physical experience (such as a high-stress situation or menopause) that makes intercourse trickier.

“When you're making out with a guy, things will get hot and heavy and lead to sex, unless you put a stop to it, and that may trigger some moping, as if you're taking something away from them,” says Claudia (not her real name), a married, polyamorous 50-something in San Francisco. After exploring boundaries and consent with other lovers, she found that re-introducing more explicit consent with her husband “let me feel safe. We could just cuddle or be sexy in small ways.”

Claudia adds that, “There are guys who want to be nice guys, so they won't give you a proper kiss or fondle you, because they don't want you to feel pressured to have sex.” But to her, that's not at all desirable. Claudia says she wants to be kissed and fondled—but she also wants the ability to say “stop” without fear of sulking or other kinds of recrimination.

The goal of this process is to train yourself out of expecting a preordained outcome to initiating sex, by opening yourself up to disappointing someone or being disappointed, and responding respectfully—and so, perhaps, finding new pathways to pleasure. When you do that, other things become possible. Or, to quote sex-advice guru Dan Savage: “The broader your definition of sex, the more sex you'll be able to have.”



Sexual Self-Awareness

Trying to figure out what you want? Try communicating with yourself.

Your partner may suggest watching porn together, or side-by-side masturbation; they might want *only* oral sex, or they may ask for a massage instead. They may just want a make-out session with a little frottage (that's a fancy grown-up word for dry humping). Perhaps someone wants to bring in toys. They might want to take orgasm off the table, because that feels like too much pressure. They may ask you to entirely run the show; they might want to run it, and put you in the submissive position, for once.

Does this mean you won't get to do your favorite sexy things anymore? Or that you're going to feel obligated to do a bunch of stuff you don't want to do? If you and your partner are doing consent right, the answer to both questions is absolutely not. This is a dance and a two-way dialogue (or three-way, if you're in a throuple...). All parties can say "no" or "maybe" or even "I don't know, yet," and there's nothing wrong with falling back on tried-and-true.

Whatever paths you end up following, you both want to lean into the sexual experience you're co-creating with questions and openness. In a new relationship, too many "nos" might be the end of things. But in one with history and trust and love, when you're building a future together, one loving, compassionate, fearless "no" can open the door to many more "yeses."

"If someone feels safe saying 'no' to you," says Claudia, "they're going to feel safe saying 'yes' a lot more often."

Some tips for before, during, and after

You might fear that continually asking permission through physical intimacy can kill the mood. Hollywood movies have led us to romanticize the idea that sexual connection should be intuitive to be valid—but that kind of ideal can really undermine long-term connection, with all its inevitable evolutions.

So, how do you make consent arousing? You're in luck: Consent is a learnable skill that is incredibly sexy *if you decide that it's sexy*. In other words, the words and the way you say them are completely under your control, which means that creativity and emotion can imbue them with meanings that help you feel even more connected.

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Really, there are three stages of consent-based sex: before, during, and after. It's important to remember that throughout, you're trying to practice active listening, so that there's no room for coyness or ambiguity. Try repeating back in a paraphrase what you heard them say, e.g., "So, you're saying that you want to be more dominant with me?" Ask questions for clarity: "Does that mean you want to tie me up?"

You're well within your rights to reply, "I'd rather not be tied up this time, but I'd love it if you held me down with your hands." Avoid judgment or judgmental words (e.g., "So what you're saying is that you want to be lazy, right?"). Maintain contact throughout, with your eyes or light touch.

Give yourselves permission to be awkward. One of my sexual partners likes to agree beforehand to co-creating "zones of experimentation," where anything goes and failure is a sign of progress. In the before stage, you're asking these kinds of questions:

- May I kiss you now?
- May I touch your _____?
- How far are you comfortable going right now?
- Would it please you if _____?
- Would you enjoy it if _____?
- Are we aiming for orgasm or does that feel more optional to you?

"During" is, of course, usually the the part we like best—and it's also the trickiest. In the heat of the moment, it can be hard to remember to use your words. You're asking questions like these (many of which I've pulled from the website of Marcia Baczynski and Erica Scott, authors of *Creating Consent Culture*):

- Are you enjoying this?
- Do you prefer a firmer or gentler touch?
- Do you like it when I move slower or faster?
- Would you like the handcuffs tighter or looser?
- Do you want more of this?
- Do you want something different?
- Do you want me to stop?

On her podcast *Making Polyamory Work*, relationship coach Libby Sinback suggests making invitations in the midst of intimacy—as opposed to making demands, or statements that can feel like demands:

So, instead of saying, *Hey, would you be willing to go down on me right now?* You could say, *Hey, I'd really love for you to go down on me right now; I think that would feel amazing.* That's just stating a desire. That's not a request and that leaves the ball very gently in their court, but they don't have to do anything with that.

I see the “after” stage as a tender debriefing—and it's especially important if you've just tried something new. So, the questions (also borrowing from Baczynski and Scott) might include:

- Did you enjoy it when I _____?
- Was it pleasurable to you when I _____?
- Did it work for your when I _____?
- Do you want to do that again?
- What do you need right now?

Throughout this process, try to bear in mind that the purpose of these kinds of consent practices is to increase the likelihood that a sexual experience will be enjoyable for all parties. Getting consent is a way of focusing attention. You're making your partner feel *seen* and *heard*, something for which all of us long.

That spotlight of attention is fundamental to romantic love and for long-term, committed partners, but it's so easy to forget in the day-to-day grind of work and chores and family. You're reminding your partner that they matter to you—and nothing is more romantic than that.

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Jeremy Adam Smith edits the GGSC's online magazine, *Greater Good*. He is also the author or coeditor of five books, including *The Daddy Shift*, *Are We Born Racist?*, and (most recently) *The Gratitude Project: How the Science of Thankfulness Can Rewire Our Brains for Resilience, Optimism, and the Greater Good*. Before joining the GGSC, Jeremy was a John S. Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford University. You can follow him on Mastodon.