



It's time ... to talk about it! Your voice. Our future. Prevent sexual violence.

## Safe sex(uality): Talking about what you need and want

**R**elationships, dating, liking someone, or even being friends can pull people in many directions. We want to make other people feel happy, but sometimes that is at odds with what makes us happy. We get a lot of information about sex, sexuality, and relationships. We hear all sorts of messages, and it can be overwhelming to think about what we need and what someone else might need. It's not often that we get to think about how to act in ways that support safety and valuing ourselves and others.

Knowing what we want and learning about what other people want is an important part of making and keeping healthy relationships. A "relationship" can be any connection: a close friend, someone you like romantically or sexually, or people who share similar interests. This resource is meant to help you think about your needs and what others in your life might need. The intent is to explore these topics in a way that looks at our whole person: body, mind, experiences, and feelings.

### What do you want?

To begin to focus on your needs and wants, it's important to figure out what those needs are. This takes time and honesty. Pleasure – feeling good or comfortable – is really about safety, being fulfilled emotionally and intellectually, and feeling in charge of our bodies. We want this because pleasure, boundaries, and our feelings make us who we are: wonderful and valuable people who deserve to be appreciated and respected.

### What does it feel like?

Knowing what something feels like can be helpful as we search for ways to support or

prevent those feelings, as well as talk about them with others (Haines, 1999). Remembering how our bodies react to pleasure, safety, and respect is an important part of finding our way back to those feelings. The following exercises can help you think about the ways you have felt emotions in your body.

- Think about a time when you felt safe and comfortable. What did it feel like in your body? For example: *My muscles were relaxed, and I felt clear about my thoughts.*
- Now think of a time when you felt some form of pleasure – emotionally or physically, alone or with someone else. What did that feel like in your body? For example: *My muscles felt like they were buzzing and I couldn't help but smile.*
- Can you think of a time when you felt pleasure, but did not feel safe or comfortable? What did that feel like? For example: *I felt confused and afraid; I had trouble breathing.*
- We all may experience uncomfortable or difficult situations. We can find the strength to learn from them and move forward – it just takes patience and time. There are people out

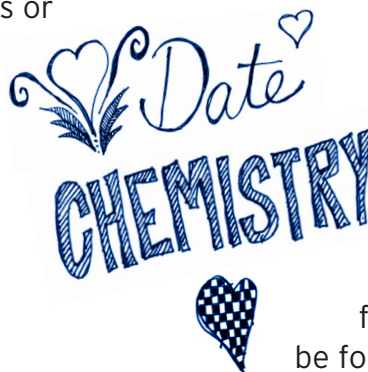


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there who want to support us and make us feel comfortable, pleasurable, and safe.

- In addition to thinking about our own feelings and reactions, it can be pleasurable to make others feel comfortable and safe. Connecting with someone else can bring pleasure in and of itself – as long as we are feeling respected.

- Think of a time when your words or actions made someone feel safe. It could be a time you helped a friend, or when you were with someone you really like. What did it feel like? For example: *I felt butterflies in my stomach, and I could feel my heart beating.*



## Sexuality is more than sex

There are a lot of ways to look at sexuality. Sexuality is about more than the activities in which we engage; it can be about our sense of self and sense of others. Sexuality can be how we feel about our bodies and body image. Sexuality could simply be when we like someone – being around them or talking with them. The most important part of sexuality, though, is that it can make us feel valued and happy. This is particularly important when we think about preventing sexual violence or sexual assault. When everyone feels valued, interactions are safe and reinforce our sense of self.

Sexuality and sex are different, but related, things. For example, someone might not be ready or interested in sexual activity, but could share their fears, thoughts, and opinions with someone they care about. This is intimacy and is a part of

sexuality (Hunter-Geboy, 1995). Intimacy is what helps us feel emotionally close to other people and can be a big part of relationships.

## Consent and consensual activities

Asking for and hearing a “yes” can support feelings of safety and respect, even if sex isn't happening or going to happen. Consent means that the people involved agree without pressure to what they are doing together. Consensual interactions are the opposite of sexual violence.

Consent is best when it is verbal, and when there is a clear “yes.” For example, when two people are making out, they can ask each other if they are feeling comfortable. This doesn't have to be formal or stuffy, a simple “Are you OK with this?” works just fine. It doesn't have to be a big deal, just a simple request between two people who respect and like each other.

What do you feel comfortable talking with someone about? Take a look at the list on Page 3. Mark how comfortable you are talking with someone about each topic. As you're doing this, consider:

- Who you are thinking about? Someone you are dating? A friend? Someone you are in a relationship with?
- When do you think you can talk with them? As you're getting to know them? Before you start getting physical?
- Is there an adult you can turn to for information? What would you say to learn more about something you don't know about? What other reliable sources could you go to if you feel uncomfortable?



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**ARE YOU COMFORTABLE TALKING ABOUT ...**

**WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD OR FEEL PLEASURE?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**WHAT DOESN'T MAKE YOU FEEL GOOD/MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**PROTECTING YOURSELF AND OTHERS FROM SEXUALLY-TRANSMITTED DISEASES?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**PROTECTING YOURSELVES FROM UNPLANNED PREGNANCIES (IF APPLICABLE)?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**WHAT IT MEANS TO BE RESPECTED?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**WHAT HONESTY MEANS?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR BODY?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THEIR BODY?**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it

**BOUNDARIES IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PEOPLE  
(EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, OR SEXUAL)**

- Comfortable     
  OK     
  Uncomfortable     
  Have to think about it



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## Conclusion

It can be difficult or awkward to have these conversations, but they are important. They also don't need to happen at one time. Opportunities will come up to talk about things. Just keep in mind that talking about these things can help improve your relationship, because you will understand and respect each other more.

## Notes

This resource was informed by the work of Staci Haines and *The survivor's guide to sex: How to have an empowered sex life after child sexual abuse*.

## References

Haines, S. (1999). *The survivor's guide to sex: How to have an empowered sex life after child sexual abuse*. San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.

Hunter-Geboy, C. (1995). *Life planning education: A youth development program*. Retrieved from Advocates for Youth: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/lpe.pdf>

