

## WHAT IS HEALTHY SEXUALITY AND CONSENT?

### What is healthy sexuality?

Healthy sexuality means having the knowledge and power to express sexuality in ways that enrich one's life. It includes approaching sexual interactions and relationships from a perspective that is consensual, respectful, and informed. Healthy sexuality is free from coercion and violence.

Although many cultural messages contribute to our understanding and experience of sexuality, many of us are at a loss for how to identify or define healthy sexuality. It is important to understand that sexuality is about much more than sex. Healthy sexuality is emotional, social, cultural, and physical. It is our values, attitudes, feelings, interactions, and behaviors.

### What is consent?

Consent means granting permission for something to happen or agreeing to do something. When sex is consensual, it means everyone involved has agreed to what they are doing and has given their permission. Nonconsensual sex, or sex without someone's agreement or permission, is sexual assault. Some important things to know:

- **"Yes" means "yes."** The absence of a "no" doesn't mean "yes." Consent is the presence of a clear, affirmative, expression of interest, desire, and wants. The exchange of consent involves all parties. Each person sets their boundaries or shares their desires. Consent is respectful, mutual decision-making.
- **Drugs and alcohol impact decision-making and blur consent.** When drugs, such as alcohol, are

### CONSENT 101: BEYOND 'YES' AND 'NO'

Consent is more than a yes or a no. It is an ongoing dialogue about desires, needs, and level of comfort with different sexual interactions. Consent is not a blanket statement. It is specific each time and always required. Healthy sexuality is rooted in consent and respect.

involved, clear consent is not possible. A person who is intoxicated or impaired cannot give consent.

- **Consent needs to be clear.** Consent is more than not hearing the word "no." A partner saying nothing is not the same as a partner saying "yes." Don't rely on body language, past sexual interactions, or any other nonverbal cues. Never assume you have consent. Always be sure you have consent by asking.
- **Consent can be fun.** Consent does not have to be something that "ruins the mood." In fact, clear and enthusiastic consent can enhance sexual interactions. Not only does it allow one to know that their partner is comfortable with the interaction, it also lets both partners clearly express what they want.
- **Consent is specific.** Just because someone consents to one set of actions and activities does not mean consent has been given for other sexual acts. Similarly, if a partner has given consent to sexual activity in the past, this does not apply to current or future interactions. Consent can initially be given and later be withdrawn.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS: HEALTHY SEXUALITY

The following behaviors are adapted from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States' *Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult* (SIECUS, 2004, p. 16):

- Comfortable with their body.
- Know that human development includes sexual development, which may or may not include reproduction or sexual experience.
- Have access to information and resources to protect and enhance their own sexual health.
- Engage in sexual relationships that are consensual, non-exploitative, honest, pleasurable, and safe.
- Express their sexuality while respecting the rights of others.
- Interact with all genders and gender identities in respectful and appropriate ways.
- Know the difference between life-enhancing sexual behaviors and those that are harmful to self and/or others.
- Communicate well with family, peers, and romantic partners.
- Express their sexuality in ways that are in line with their values.
- Enjoy sexual feelings without necessarily acting on them.
- Understand the impact of family, cultural, media, and societal messages on thoughts, feelings, values, and behaviors.
- Accept one's own sexual orientation and respect the sexual orientations of others.
- Accept one's own gender identity and respect the gender identities of others.

## Establishing consent

Remember that sex without consent is sexual assault. When establishing consent, be aware of the following:

- **Ask for consent.** Don't assume a partner is OK with what you want to do. Always ask them. Be direct. If you are unsure that you have their consent, ask again.
- **Communicate.** Don't be afraid to talk about sex and communicate your boundaries, wants, and needs. Encourage your partner to do the same.
- **Make it fun.** Consent does not have to be something that interrupts sex; it can be a part of sex. Checking in with your partner throughout sexual experiences can be a great way to build intimacy and understand your partner's needs. It can help partners create a healthy and satisfying sex life.
- **Drugs and/or alcohol increase risk.** Intoxication impairs decision-making and can make it impossible to gain someone's legal consent. Mixing drugs and/or alcohol with sex also can lead to risky behavior, such as unprotected sex.

## Resources

- **The Line Campaign:** [www.whereisyourline.org](http://www.whereisyourline.org)
- **National Sexual Violence Resource Center:** [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)
- **Scarleteen:** [www.scarleteen.com](http://www.scarleteen.com)
- **Yes Means Yes:** [yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com](http://yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com)

## References

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. (2004). *Life behaviors of a sexually healthy adult*. Retrieved from <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/PS2010/html/LifeBehaviorsofaSexuallyHealthyAdult.pdf>.