

ANY QUESTIONS PODCAST

EPISODE 2: CONSENT AND COMMUNICATION

Carson: Today we're going to talk about consent and communication. Consent is really just a subset of communication and we're going to specifically focus on sexual consent today. Of course, we get and receive consent every day. For example, you wouldn't take money out of someone's wallet or borrow their car without consent or permission. Because without their consent, you'd be committing a crime. The same is true when it comes to having sex with someone, which makes consent especially critical when it comes to sex.

Communication skills enhance our ability to give or receive consent, which makes us better partners. This makes hookups more pleasurable, but I don't want to get ahead of myself. We'll talk more about that towards the end of this episode.

In any relationship, sexual or non-sexual, you should feel comfortable assertively expressing your feelings. Being able to express your dreams, fears, desires, and making sure the other person in the relationship also feels comfortable expressing those things is central to healthy relationships. Even non-sexual ones. Consent is just being able to share these same feelings about sex before, during and after sex.

Let's do introductions. My name is Carson and I use he/him pronouns. I was a power-based violence peer educator.

Caroline: Hi. My name is Caroline. I use she/her pronouns and I was a mental health and stress management peer educator.

Carson: I know some listeners might be wondering who's this random guy talking about consent? But I've spent the last two years working as a peer educator for UMD's Health Center and before that, while on active duty in the U.S. Army, I served as a sexual harassment and assault victim advocate. So, I've been having conversations about consent for several years, in many contexts, and across our campus.

Because we're focusing on sex and consent this episode, I want to acknowledge that the episode may bring up thoughts or feelings for listeners who have been directly or even indirectly impacted by scenarios where someone was forced to do something they didn't want to do. We encourage these listeners to reach out for help through the Care to Stop Violence office. And if you do have any follow-up questions or concerns, we encourage you to reach out.

(INTRO MUSIC)

Carson: So, Caroline, what do you think? What is consent?

Caroline: So, for me, I was not a sexual assault, power-based violence peer educator, so I think I don't have as clear of an idea of what consent is, or at least I went into this podcast not having as clear of an idea, or how to even talk about it, which is kind of interesting, seeing as this is consent and communication and I don't even really know how to talk about consent.

Carson: That's fair.

Caroline: So, for a lot of people, consent is kind of seen as a grey area, which I don't think is really a real thing, because, yeah, it's either a yes or it's a no. And, I think that grey area idea stemmed from this whole – a while ago, we've kind of changed the language but a while ago, it was like, yes – or, it was – no means no, which kind of doesn't account for the whole freezing aspect, which is, you know, if something is happening to you and you don't like it, you know, fight or flight. And sometimes flight is just, like, I can't respond to this. So, that whole "no means no" didn't account for that response. So, now –

Carson: It implied that the absence of a no was a yes.

Caroline: Was a yes, right. So, now we've kind of worked on changing the language to be "yes means yes" to try to eliminate that grey area of, like, if someone doesn't say yes, then it's not yes, I'm consenting to this.

Also, for a lot of people, they think consent is limited to sexual encounters and it's really not. It's any type of encounter you have with someone so . . . "Can I hug you?" even if it's just a friend, you know, still asking, "Do you want to be hugged?" Is that OK? Sometimes I do not want people touching me and there's nothing wrong with that.

Carson: Yes.

Caroline: Also, it's not just a one-time thing, which I think a lot of people will forget.

Carson: Yeah, that's big.

Caroline: Just because you're in a relationship with someone or you've done something with someone doesn't mean you're, like, down to do it again, you know? You have to make sure that the person still wants to be doing that with you.

Carson: Yeah, because people change.

(LAUGHTER)

Caroline: And people's decisions change and feelings change. Everything can change.

Carson: You brought up some really good points and I appreciate your openness of not necessarily having a simple, one sentence, formal definition. I think that's fine.

You talked about how recently the conversation about consent has shifted from, "no means no" to "yes means yes." Across the country, states, universities – including the University of Maryland – and other organizations are passing affirmative consent policies and laws. "No means no" policies aren't great at defining consent. After all, an unconscious person can say no but, of course, we know that an unconscious person can't actually consent to sex or anything else.

A lack of no does not constitute consent to anything. Just because I don't tell you you can't borrow my car, doesn't mean you are allowed to borrow my car. On a related note, you also talked about freezing and fight or flight. You're talking about an acute stress reaction triggering our sympathetic nervous

system, which is an involuntary reaction that does things like subduing some normal body functions and boosting others, like your perspiration or your heart rate to get you ready to deal with some sort of threat. That has traditionally been referred to, as you pointed out, the "fight or flight" response. Now, however, we're starting to realize there's actually a fairly common third reaction: freezing.

Basically, if your brain has decided that you cannot fight or flee from the threat, it basically dissociates from your body and whatever terrible thing is happening to it. Freezing is not at all uncommon among survivors or victims of sexual assault. This is why a lack of no is not a yes and why affirmative consent is important. I like how you pointed out hugging. Sometimes people just don't want to be touched. And there isn't any additional justification needed for you not to touch them.

Finally you also talked about how consent can be withdrawn at any time. Checking in with your partner is so important. There's no such thing as blanket consent. It's your obligation to pay attention to your partner and make sure they're getting what they want and they're having a good time. It's as simple as that.

Consent can be as simple as checking in. Do you want to do X? Do you like Y? What about trying Z? Are all examples of checking in and are things you should be saying, not necessarily those things word for word, but those are all things that you should be saying during sex or communicating during sex, at least.

Sex should be positive and enjoyable for everyone involved and consent is just the process of communication that ensures everyone is on the same positive and enjoyable page. Checking in should be normal and should be good not because it's required, not because, like, this policy says you have to check in, but because they actually make hook-ups better.

Let's take a moment to just talk about coercion. I think most of us can agree that coercion is wrong but we don't always get that message from media. It's important to talk about it openly like we're doing about it here and to just be aware of it, I think.

Recently on campus, when I've been facilitating workshops, a question that I've been getting asked a lot is, "Well, what's the difference between convincing someone and coercing them?"

My reaction to that question has always been to take a step back and ask, "Well, why are you trying to convince someone to hook up with you?"

That's not part of the hook up – that's not a hook up that I want to be a part of.

Caroline: And I really see this a lot when I go out with my friends. If a guy approaches one of us at a bar and asks if we want to dance or if we want him to buy us a drink. The answer and response tends to be, "No, I have a boyfriend" or "No" and some other excuse. And I think that acknowledging that no is a sentence and you don't need to give someone a reason as to why you don't want to hook up with them, so no, period. And then, you know, for people listening, if I have given you a no, respecting that. So, not pressuring me any further than that.

The idea that coercion is or should work is rewarded in the media that we're presented with. Bear with me, I'm going to throw it back a little bit. The show "Saved by the Bell", it's not the main storyline but one of them is there are two characters, Screech and Lisa, and Screech is always in love with Lisa.

Part of the show is – and the humor of the show is – him constantly vying for her affection and her attention. And the issue with that is, you know, she says no multiple times but then the show makes it seem like you're going to get rewarded for not giving up and being "persistent" – I'm using that in air quotes because it's not persistent, it's creepy. But, you know, she goes to prom with him and she goes on a date with him. The idea that him constantly pressuring her to go on a date with him, it works.

Carson: And I think that's problematic because the right reaction from Screech when Lisa says no is to leave her alone, not to bother her. But in the show, and in a lot of other media, Screech is rewarded for her coercive behavior.

I also get asked about alcohol and consent a lot. People have a lot of questions about that. I think context matters. There's a difference between having a couple of drinks with your partner and using alcohol as a weapon. But I think it's really important not to focus on loopholes here. I think that's kind of missing the point.

Like, I have these 50 minute conversations and we'll often spend 20 to 30 minutes just trying to find exactly where the line is, talking about how drunk is too drunk. I wish we spent half that time talking about how we can practice enthusiastic consent and have better hook-ups rather than trying to figure out where the line is between assault and consent. Like, what is legal and illegal.

I often speak to students who believe that you cannot consent to having sex if you're under the influence of any alcohol, as in even one drop of alcohol renders you incapable of consenting. That's not really the case. Alcohol affects each of this differently and so while one person's judgment might be substantially impacted by having just one drink, another person's may reasonably not be affected until they've had three, or four or more drinks. It's important to exercise caution when mixing sex and alcohol. How I might communicate consent – or anything – but how I might communicate with someone I pick up at Bentley's tonight, that would probably look different compared to how I communicate consent with whom I've been in a relationship for several years. There's no blanket consent.

I often say that consent is basically just a legal standard that requires you to know how your sexual partner or partners communicate yes and no. And, that they clearly communicated yes. It's a really low bar when you think about it. If you don't even understand how your partner says yes and no, I think the best case scenario is that you'll have bad sex.

Caroline: And, of course, the worst case scenario is that you are committing an assault.

Carson: Ideally you know how your partner communicates a lot more than those two simple concepts of yes and no.

At the beginning of the episode, I talked about how consent is just a subset of communication and hinted at how improved communication skills can enhance the pleasure we get from hooking up.

Caroline: So to turn this into a non-sexual example, we're going to talk a little bit about pizza. Let's say I take myself down to Blaze or LOTSA – I'm not endorsing either.

(LAUGHTER)

Caroline: And I don't just go up to the person at the front and say, "Make me a pizza." I tell them exactly what type of crust I want, what type of sauce I want, cheese, all that good stuff. I'm getting a little hungry. But, they don't just sit there and assume because I came in and said I wanted pizza, I just wanted this specific thing. You know, they ask every step of the way, "What do you want?"

Carson: And having that back and forth means that at the end of the day, you end up with a better pizza.

So, in conclusion, and let's just raise the bar a little bit and instead of thinking about like – focusing on where the line is between what is legal and illegal when it comes to hook-ups or sex, let's think about how we can make every hook-up or every sexual experience the best we can. And remember that everything in this episode, we could unpack a lot more. This is just the basics.

So, I encourage you, if you have any follow-up questions or comments, please hit us up. Our contact info is at – I mentioned earlier in the episode and it's also written in the notes for the episode. And I hope to hear from you.

Take it easy, everyone.

(EXIT MUSIC)

Narrator: The week of April 13 is Sex Week at UMD so tune in next time when Emily and Liv discuss the fascinating world of kinky sex.

Emily: Sexual violence and harassment have also been given a national spotlight like never before, which leaves a lot of us wondering where kink stands in the spectrum of healthy sexuality.

Liv: So, negotiation and informed consent are the first part of ensuring safety and responsibility. So important, again, like Emily said, to know what someone's typical reactions are to certain things so that you are aware of when this is putting someone into extreme pleasure or when this might not be OK anymore.

Narrator: Join us on April 16 for a special release of the next episode of "Any Questions."

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