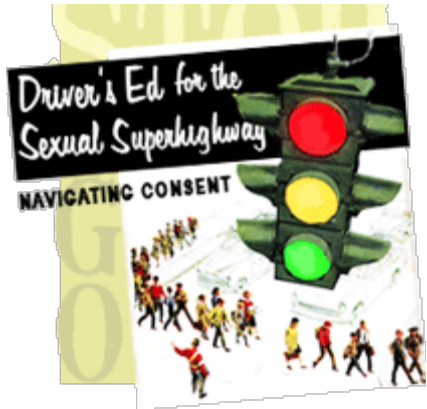


# Driver's Ed for the Sexual Superhighway: Navigating Consent



by Heather Corinna

Whether we walk, bike, skate, wheel or drive, when we're on the road there are traffic lights, signs and signals we know we and everyone else needs to pay attention to. We also know we need to clearly give our own signals: when we turn, we use a turn signal for good reason, rather than muttering under our breath that we're going to be turning or just veering left in an intersection without signaling. All of that helps keep us and others from crashing or getting run over: we all agree to follow and give those signs as part of an ongoing, mutual agreement to help keep each other safe. As well, if we want to get somewhere, we usually have to pay attention to signs: if we keep ignoring the signs that say "Dead End," or don't read street signs at all, we're not likely to be able to get to where we meant to go.

Most of us understand being in transit means there's a possibility of getting hurt, hurting others, having a good time turn into a bad one or just not getting to where we intended, and to try and prevent those outcomes, we need to follow basic rules of the road like being attentive to and actively giving clear signs and signals. Just like it's important on the road, it's important between the sheets.

**What is *sexual consent*?** An active process of willingly and freely choosing to participate in *sex* of any kind with someone else, and a shared responsibility for everyone engaging in, or who wants to engage in, any kind of sexual interaction with someone. When there is a question or invitation about sex of any kind, when consent is mutually given or affirmed, the answer on everyone's part is an enthusiastic yes.

Willingly and freely choosing means we and our partners feel able to make and voice any choice without being forced, manipulated, intentionally misled or pressured. It means we're in an interpersonal environment where what we want is mutually meaningful, and where we aren't in a situation where the other person is not in a position where they have or have had, in our history with them, radically more power than we have and/or has not used that power to influence or guide our sexual choices. It means we and our partners are and feel safe. It means we feel able to

say and accept yes, no, or maybe without fear, and that our limits and boundaries are completely respected. Feeling free and able to say yes and to say no isn't only important to keep from getting hurt or hurting others: it's important because a big part of a satisfying, healthy sex life and sexuality, one people enjoy, is grounded in free choice.

Participating means everyone is an active, whole part of what is going on. It means we or a partner are treated like a whole, separate person, not like a thing someone is doing things to. If consensual sex was a sport, participating would mean that we're out on the field running around with the team, not sitting on the bench while people throw balls at our heads.

What about enthusiasm? Sex that people really want and fully participate in does not tend to be a whatever or something we need to be dragged into. When we have strong sexual feelings and want and feel ready to put those feelings into action in some way, we experience that as a strong *desire*, much like we can feel when we're hungry and smell our favorite meal cooking. When someone shares our sexual feelings and also wants to put them into action at the same time, it's mutually exciting. Sometimes younger people express they have a hard time figuring out when they are and are not feeling sexual desire. While sexual desire doesn't always look the same way, so that's not simple to explain, when any of us really, truly wants to engage in something sexual, we'll feel enthusiastic, stoked and excited, not apathetic, bored, fearful or doubtful.

If you want one word to define consent with it's **yes**. Consent is a yes a million times over, for the love of all things sparkly, awesome and delicious, and not a minute longer if you want to do it too, *please, yes*. Everyone's yes doesn't always look or sound the same, of course, but there are often common threads. There also isn't always a question, exactly, to say yes to. Sometimes yes is inviting someone else to do something with us. Sometimes it's saying what we want, even if the other person says no or not now. Sometimes yes is using hands to pull someone closer, or an excited squeal or moan. A yes with words is a lot easier to understand and know as consent than some other kinds of yes.

Consent isn't something we just do or give once: it's something we're doing (or not) in every moment of every sexual activity. If someone consents to one thing, that doesn't mean they're consenting to anything, just to that one thing. Consent is also always something we or others can revoke: in other words, everyone gets to change their mind, at any time, including after they've already said yes.

Jaclyn Friedman, co-editor of *Yes Means Yes*, explains that well [here](#): "Sexual consent isn't like a lightswitch, which can be either "on," or "off." It's not like there's this one thing called "sex" you can consent to anyhow. "Sex" is an evolving series of actions and interactions. You have to have the enthusiastic consent of your partner for all of them. And even if you have your partner's consent for a particular activity, you have to be prepared for it to change. Consent isn't a question. It's a state. If, instead of lovers, the two of you were synchronized swimmers, consent would be the water. It's not enough to jump in, get wet and climb out -- if you want to swim, you have to be in the water continually. And if you want to have sex, you have to be continually in a state of enthusiastic consent with your partner."

## **The Essential Rules of Consensual Road**

- **Consent is about *everyone* involved in a sexual or possibly sexual interaction.** Not just women, not just young people, not just whoever didn't initiate sex to begin with, not just the person whose body part someone else's body part may be going into. *Everyone*. For sex to be fully consensual, everyone needs to seek consent, everyone needs to be affirming it, and everyone needs to accept and respect each other's answers, nixing sex or stepping back, pronto, if and when someone expresses a stop.
- **Consent can ALWAYS be withdrawn.** Consent to any kind of sex is not a binding contract nor does consent obligate anyone to follow through. It is also one-time-only: because someone consented to sex Tuesday does not mean they were giving consent for sex on Thursday.
- **Nothing makes consent automatic or unnecessary.** Being someone's spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend doesn't give anyone consent by default. Someone loving you or saying they love you doesn't mean they have your sexual consent or you have theirs. No one kind of sex means consent to another, or that anyone is "owed" any sex. For instance, someone who engages in *oral sex* is not asking for or consenting to *intercourse*; someone who says yes to *kissing* is not saying yes to any other kind of touching. Because someone has had any kind of sex in the past does not mean they will have sex or consent to sex again with that same person or anyone else nor that they are obligated in any way to do so.
- **In some situations, full, informed and free consent cannot truly be given or shared.** Those include: being drunk or wasted, being asleep, being unable to really understand what one is saying yes to, including possible risks and outcomes; being under severe duress, like when seriously upset, ill, grieving or scared or being unable to understand another person's words or other means of *communication*. Consider things like these to be a red light to even asking about sex: sex should usually be off the table entirely in these situations. Legally, when someone is under the age of legal consent, with someone of an age where sex is not lawful, and in most of the above situations, sex is a crime.
- **Nonconsent means STOP:** If someone is NOT consenting to something or says no with their words and/or actions, the other person MUST stop trying to do that thing AND must not try to convince that person to do that thing in any way. If they do not stop, or exert emotional or other pressure and that person gives up and gives in, they are sexually assaulting that person. Sex is not sex if everyone is not consenting. If anyone is not consenting or not asking for consent, then what is happening is or may be *rape*, sexual *abuse* or assault.
- **A lack of no does not mean yes.**

### **Consent 101: Use Your Words**

Consent works best centered in communication in words; words in whatever language everyone involved can use and understand. There are other ways to express and affirm consent, but they're way trickier, and when those ways work well, it's usually because the people involved already use and have used words with consent and have established good, solid patterns of communication with words.

### **This kind of consent is a must for:**

- First-time sexual partners
- When a *relationship* is new or when you or a partner are new to sex in general
- When you or a sexual partner want to take the LEAST amount of risk in crossing a line or having your lines crossed
- When you or a partner are just learning what you each like sexually
- If you've had a sexual relationship with someone before, but it's been a while since you were sexual together
- When you know or suspect you have a hard time reading nonverbal cues or that your own nonverbal cues may be tricky for someone else to interpret
- People who have been sexually assaulted or abused, especially recently or before a lot of healing (not only can a lack of clear consent-seeking be *triggering*, when nonconsent has been refused in the past, we often need extra effort put into assuring consent)

Consent with words is about mutually voicing what we want and don't want, what our desires are and are not, and what we do and don't feel ready for. Sometimes it's about one person asking for something and the other replying, sometimes it's more organic. But when any of us says or expresses an "I want," we're voicing desire. Desire can be a strong feeling, so we might not always voice it delicately. The way we voice sexual desire matters when it comes to consent, though: we need to be mindful of how our words express what we want while still leaving room for others to express what *they* want, especially since we won't always want the same things or want them at the same times. There are ways to voice desires and seek consent that support consent and good sexual communication, and there are ways to voice desires or seek consent that can stifle mutual consent and communication, and make it hard for someone to make and voice their own choices freely in response.

### **What are some clues someone doesn't care about consent?**

They act like they're in a big hurry. They act like you or others owe them sex or they owe you sex. They're not asking how you're feeling or what you want: they seem only or mostly focused on themselves or they are ONLY focused on you and seem to have none of their own desires or limits. They don't really seem to be all there. They're ignoring or trying to change some of your stop signs, like pushing them away, not wanting to get naked, saying you're not sure or saying no. You feel unsafe or worried; unable to speak up or say no or are worried they're unsafe or can't speak up. They react with anger, resentment or self-injury when you don't immediately say yes to sex. They don't seem to have personal boundaries.

**If any of those things are going on, do yourself a favor and just get away from that person or situation pronto.** If you were wrong, it's okay: no one is done big harm by not getting laid.

**Some good ways to ask for and assure consent are questions like:**

- May I [do whatever sexual thing]?
- I'd like to [do whatever sexual thing]: would you like to? If not, what would you like to do?
- How do you feel about doing [whatever sexual thing]?
- Are there things you know you don't want to do: what are they? Mine are [whatever they are].
- Is there anything you need to feel comfortable or safe when we do [whatever sexual thing]?
- I'm really interested in doing [whatever sexual thing] with you, and it feels like the right time for me: do you want to do that and does the timing feel right to you?
- I'd like to have sex tonight, would you? What do you want to do or try?

See how all of those were questions, or statements that ended with questions? That opens the door to communication and makes clear you understand that while you want something, that doesn't mean someone else does, or wants them with you, right then or without certain things they may need. Any time we ask a question like that where we haven't answered it first ourselves, we can take our turn answering it after the other person answers.

**Some not-so-hot ways to voice desires and invite others into sex when it comes to consent**

**are:** *Let's do [whatever sexual thing.] I want [whatever sexual thing]. Last week you really liked it when I [whatever it was you did], so we'll do that again tonight. I heard guys/girls really like it when someone [does whatever], so let's do that, you'll probably like it. Let's just do it: I'll take care of you. You're okay, right? I know you trust me, right?*

Most of those are statements, not questions: they're conversation stoppers, not starters. They address one person's wants without acknowledging the other, or kind of make someone else into a non-person. Even the ones that are questions aren't really questions. *"I know you trust me, right?"* doesn't really leave room for the other person to answer: it basically answers the question for them and tells them there's only one right answer. It also makes having the wrong answer seriously loaded. Most of those statements are one person making decisions for everyone: that's not consent. Consent is about everyone involved actively making choices together.

Who's the person who should voice their desires and asks for a partner's own input and wants?

**Everyone.** Not just one person, or one *gender* or one person with a given kind of body or of a given age. Obviously, someone has to make the first move sometimes and put it out there. Who does is usually who gets the gumption to first. In a healthy sexual relationship where both people share mutual feelings of sexual desire, mutual desire to *enact* them (even if not always at the same time or on the same days) and both feel ready to fully participate in a sex with a partner, there tends to be a lot of back and forth, rather than sexual initiation, and initiation of consent, being one person's doing.

What can consent-in-words and nonconsent tend to sound like, whether we're putting our desires out there, saying we don't want or aren't sure about, or providing an answer to someone else's voiced wants?



## verbal signals of consent and nonconsent

What can consent sound like?	What can nonconsent sound like?
Yes	No
I'm sure	I'm not sure
I know	I don't know
I'm excited	I'm scared
Don't stop	Stop
Whoohoo! Yippee! Hot damn! Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah!	[silence]
More!	No more
I want to...	I want to, but...
I'm not worried	I feel worried about...
I want you/it/that	I don't want you/it/that
Can you please do [whatever]	Can you please not do [whatever]
I still want to...	I thought I wanted to, but...
That feels good	That hurts
Mmmmmmm	[silence]
Yes	Maybe
I love you/this	I love you/this, but...
I want to do this right now	I want to do this, but not right now
I feel good about this	I don't know how I feel about this
I'm ready	I'm not ready or not sure if I'm ready
I want to keep doing this	I don't want to do this anymore
[insert praise to your deity of choice here]	[insert plea for help to your deity of choice here]
This feels right	This feels wrong

## What can consent sound like?

Yes

## What can nonconsent sound like?

[silence]

Really being able to give, withhold or share consent has a lot to do with feeling like an interpersonal environment or relationship supports consent. So many people have been raised with the idea that sex is a power struggle, a performance of gender or that they automatically don't have equal voice, so they may need to have partners affirm very clearly that their wants and not-wants are important. Some people may have been reared with ideas about sex that have given them the impression they don't have to seek out or ask for consent, or may have had partners in the past who did not assert themselves, so they got the impression they could just assume consent.

There are things we can say to each other to help support consent and make everyone involved feel more able to voice what they want, rather than just echo a partner or a cultural expectation. To help create that kind of environment, when we and someone else are talking about becoming sexual, we can make clear right from the start that we care about real consent, shared desire and mutual pleasure. To express that, we might say something like: *"If something doesn't feel good or turns out to be something other than you want, please let me know. I only want to do what feels good for both of us."* Or, *"I think it's hot when someone tells me what they want during sex, rather than just me saying what I want."* Or, *"I'd rather put sex off for another time when someone isn't really into it. I don't want to have sex when the other person doesn't totally want it: each of us really wanting it is the best part!"* Or, *"This is about us doing something together that's from and for both of us, not about someone tending to just my needs or just my tending to theirs. It's really important to me that we're both always honest about what we want and don't so that it's really about both of us, and about pleasure and desire, not guilt or obligation."*

Because consent is ongoing, it's also important to check-in with each other as we continue sexual activities. Check-ins don't have to be formal, or even stop anything we're enjoying. Of course, we can use moments to check-in that may already have presented a pause, like someone having to pee, the phone ringing, falling off the bed, switching up a position or a big laugh we're trying to catch our breath from.

**What if talking ruins the moment?** When people are worried about talking "ruining the moment" they're usually either worried their partner will have an opportunity to say no, or that they themselves will pay attention to their own feelings and not do something a partner wants or they wanted, but didn't feel really right about. Either way, those two things are one of the reasons talking is ESSENTIAL. If someone really doesn't want to do something, no one should be doing that thing to or with them. If we really don't want to be doing something or have doubts? We should nix it, press pause and take whatever time we need to figure out or get what we need to make sex right for us.



Consent check-ins can sound like, *How does this feel? Are you still liking this? Are you comfortable? Is there anything you need or want right now? You seem quiet: are you okay? Anything I should stop doing or do that I'm not doing? I feel good: are you feeling good?*

Before we move into a more complex kind of consent, let's review. Columbia University Health Service's Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Program provides these consent traffic lights:

Red

Yellow

Green

### **Signs You Should Stop**

You or a partner are too intoxicated to gauge or give consent.  
Your partner is asleep or passed out.  
You hope your partner will say nothing and go with the flow.  
You intend to have sex by any means necessary.

### **Signs You Should Pause and Talk**

You are not sure what the other person wants.  
You feel like you are getting mixed signals.  
You have not talked about what you want to do.  
You assume that you will do the same thing as before.  
Your partner stops or is not responsive.

### **Keep Communicating**

Partners come to a mutual decision about how far they want to go.  
Partners clearly express their comfort with the situation.

You feel comfortable and safe stopping at any time.  
Partners are excited!

## Consent 102: Others Kinds of Communication

Over time, people who have sex together will tend to get more comfortable with each other, and will get to know each other better, and so they may use less consent-in-words and start using more nonverbal cues. That's generally okay so long as it feels okay to everyone involved, but it's a lot trickier than words, because body language is often a lot less clear. Sometimes people try to have sex right from the start using only body language as communication. While it can work sometimes, more often it results in either someone getting hurt, having boundaries or lines crossed, or in people just not connecting well.

**This kind of consent, paired with consent-in-words, is best saved for:**

- Longtime sexual partners
- When everyone involved has already had a good deal of sexual experience
- When you and/or a partner understand that you are taking far greater risks of overstepping boundaries and limits, are each okay with that, and when you're each willing to take good care of each other if signals get crossed
- When you and a partner already communicate nonverbally well in other situations
- When you and/or a partner each feel VERY confident you can read each other's more subtle cues
- When you have used verbal consent to establish that you're going to start using more nonverbal consent

A lot of folks ask how they can tell by looking when someone is aroused, in part to try and establish nonverbal consent. The trouble is, physical signs of *arousal* are often lousy nonverbal signals of consent. Why? Because we can be sexually excited but still not want to have any kind of sex at a given time: just because we feel sexually excited around someone else, after all, doesn't mean it's right for us to act on those feelings. To boot, some ways people can look or feel when sexually excited are also ways they can look or feel because of other things. A wet *vulva* can mean someone is simply at a fertile time in their cycle, hard nipples can be about being cold, and an *erection* can be a physical response to friction. Some of the ways our bodies react with sexual arousal are also the ways our bodies can react when we're afraid, like flushing, having an elevated pulse, or breathing faster. When it comes to nonverbal cues, it's usually better to look to whole bodies or faces for those than to look to *genitals*.

A study recently done by [The Havens Sexual Assault Referral Centres](#) (*Where is Your Line? Survey Summary Report*) of over 1,000 people ages 18-25 found that less than half of young *adults* interpret someone pushing them away as a no, and over 60% would not assume crying means nonconsent. That same study found that more than one in five people expect intercourse after other kinds of touching, and that 25% of women have been silent when a partner did something sexual to them that they did not want.

What does that mean? That we need to be VERY cautious about ditching consent in words and make sure that before we do, we've established good communication and verbal consent first, and have it as a pattern and precedent we know we can fall back on any time we or a partner are not 100% sure we are interpreting or can interpret nonverbal consent correctly. We also want to be sure to still do check-ins with partners during less-talky sex time. And before moving on to this kind of consent, you should be very sure it's really the right situation and relationship to ditch a lot of talking, for you and for a partner.

The following are some very general nonverbal cues that can often -- but don't always -- signal consent or nonconsent.

## nonverbal consent

Possible nonverbal signs of consent	Possible nonverbal signs of NONconsent
Direct eye contact	Avoiding eye contact
Initiating <i>sexual</i> activity	Not initiating any <i>sexual</i> activity
Pulling someone closer	Pushing someone away
Actively touching someone	Avoiding touch
Nodding yes	Shaking head no
Comfort with nudity	Discomfort with nudity
Laughter and/or smiling (upturned mouth)	Crying and/or looking sad or fearful (clenched or downturned mouth)
"Open" body language, like relaxed, loose and open arms and legs, relaxed facial expressions, turning towards someone	"Closed" body language, like tense, stiff or closed arms and legs, tight or tense facial expressions, turning away from someone
Sounds of enjoyment, like a satisfied hum or enthusiastic moan	Silence or sounds of fear or sadness, like whimpering or a trembling voice
An active body	"Just lying there"

If you and a partner are moving more towards nonverbal sexual communication, talk about it. Looking at a list like the one above, do you and/or your partner feel like these things are true for each of you? Do either of you know nonverbal cues or responses you tend to have when you want something sexual or don't that you can share with each other to make this kind of communication easier? Maybe you even want to come up with a safeword, or stop-word, to use

when you want to be expressly nonverbal: one word or gesture you can use to say stop clearly that both agree means stop.

## **Accepting & Respecting Nonconsent**

Everyone knows it can suck when we want something with or from someone else that they don't want to share or give, most certainly including with sex. Sometimes it's just a momentary bummer, and other times it can feel like a real heartbreaker.

But when someone is not clearly giving, sharing or continuing consent or is nonconsenting, there's only one sound way we should all respond: to absolutely accept and respect their response or their lack of agreement and participation, and to immediately stop the action (if something physical was going on) or not move forward. It's really important that while we are allowed to have whatever feelings we have that we manage our own feelings well, avoiding things like voicing anger, sulking or emotionally withdrawing, which puts sexual pressure on someone else.

We may need or want to work through our feelings and theirs (they might be bummed out, too!). That might be sensitively -- not manipulatively -- asking for some time to ourselves to clear our heads and cool down our heart rate, then calling each other later to check in and assure each other it's all okay. Maybe we'll need to have the other person affirm that they still like us. You can ask if they want to do something to share some comfort, or to get close in other ways, like having a cuddle, holding hands, or doing something else entirely, like taking a walk together, catching a movie or hitting some Karaoke to have a laugh. If we want to extend the on-the-road schtick, it's worth noting that sometimes running out of gas or getting a flat tire can actually turn into a whole new adventure on its own right, one more fun and interesting than our original plan (I know that's certainly true of a couple of my own thwarted road trips). It's always possible that what starts out seeming like a bummer can turn into something really great. Not having the sex we want blows, but if it means we wind up having an ad-hoc roof party, a moonlight swim together or a really deep talk that brings us closer than having sex would have, it can be a blessing in disguise.

If their no wasn't about sex full-stop, it is okay to ask if there's something else they'd like to do sexually. It's also okay to ask why someone doesn't want to do something sexual at all or anymore, but you want to make clear that question isn't about you trying to convince them to change their mind, or suggesting they need to justify their no. You want to be sure you're asking that at the right time, too: if they seem upset or stressed -- or you are -- it's probably not a good time and is probably best to talk about it a few days down the road when everyone is feeling less vulnerable. You can open a conversation like this with something like "I was totally okay with you not wanting to do [whatever it was] anymore yesterday, but if you're up for talking about it, I'd like to hear about why so I can better understand you and also do my best to help us create a sex life together that's best for us both."

## **Some Bits of BS About Consent**

- Most people with sex lives they and their partners enjoy do NOT have sex in silence or with only moans, groans and oh-baby's. While media doesn't often show a lot of sexual communication (or a lot of good communication, *period!*), and plenty of people were

reared with sexual shame that may have made it, or may make it, challenging for them to communicate or even understand that they can, people who have mutually satisfying sex lives often talk during sex, and enjoy communication, even when it's challenging.

- Women are not “naturally” submissive, silent or passive in sex. Women are also not less *feminine* if they voice their own desires or set limits and boundaries and insist partners respect them. Some people internalize social or interpersonal messages that that's true, and may believe it to be true, but it is not true. Some people know that message isn't true, but use it as an excuse, knowing enough other people think it's true, they can get away with it. Usually being passive means that someone is not fully consenting or does not feel able to give nonconsent.
- Men are NOT “supposed to” be in charge of or dominate everything with sex: partnered sex is supposed to be mutually active and engaged. Men also do not want to say yes to sex any or every time it is made available to them nor should they be assumed to be obligated to or less *masculine* if they decline. Some people internalize social or interpersonal messages that those things are true, and may believe it to be true, but it is not true. Some people know those messages aren't true, but use them as excuses, knowing enough other people think they're true, they can get away with it.
- Consent is NOT less important for people with same-sex partners just because *pregnancy* is not a risk. Consent is no less important for people wanting or trying to become pregnant, or who already share an STI or who have been *monogamous* and tested to know they do not likely have any STIs. Consent is important for everyone, and for everyone any kind of sex carries a multitude of possible outcomes, wanted and unwanted, positive and negative, not just pregnancy and/or *sexually transmitted infections*.
  - Pain is NOT a given with any kind of sex (save kinds of sex where people are purposefully trying to cause or experience pain) and often means someone is not getting something they need or feel nervous or fearful. Pain is a signal to stop, not something for anyone to ignore, stay silent about or suck up.
    - No does NOT mean yes. Maybe does not mean yes. Yes means yes. And saying yes should always feel just as awesome as hearing it.