



*the revolution starts at home*

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CONFRONTING INTIMATE VIOLENCE WITHIN ACTIVIST COMMUNITIES

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# WITHOUT MY CONSENT

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Bran Fenner

**My first adult experience** with intimate partner abuse started right before college. While having sex, I suffered a flashback to a sexual assault from my childhood. I had to stop, and started to cry. My partner at the time held me for about 20 minutes, and I started to feel better—but then they asked me to continue with the sexual act I had stopped doing. I felt sick to my stomach and confused, so I just said I wasn't in the mood. Rather than respect my decision, my partner whined, begged, and pleaded until I cooperated. Until I gave in.

I didn't want to go through a long process of saying NO. From prior experience, I knew the other person wouldn't listen, and eventually I would have to give in or find a substitute; cooperate. In this moment, I experienced major feelings of guilt: guilt that I had a history of sexual abuse and, later on,

depression that would sometimes hinder my sexual desire, especially around specific acts my partner desired. This was a running theme throughout the relationship: I was made to feel bad and mean for not wanting to have sex. Though this behavior was less aggressive than the time this person held me down while I tried to get free and pleaded NO repeatedly, it was still violent and scarring.

"I just wanted to make you feel good." This was the excuse my former partner provided for physically restraining me, for showing up unannounced at my mother's house in the middle of the night, for each time they coerced me into sex. Later I realized that it was never about me—it was always about their satisfaction. I just got good at faking it so it would be over as soon as possible.

Fortunately, this relationship ended, and as traumatized as I still am from some of its different aspects, I've learned a lot from it. The most important thing I learned is that cooperation is *not* consent, and my first NO should be the final NO. The excuse "But I want to make you feel good" is not an excuse, it's a self-serving rationalization for abusive behavior. NO is often easier for me to say to strangers. Since then, almost all of my partners have been sexually responsible. Learning how to say NO and being okay with other people's hurt feelings increased my sense of self-worth, allowing me to reclaim my desires. This experience also helped me relate more respectfully to other people. I'm more aware of respectful touching and not assuming what's comfortable for people, as well as understanding that many people in my community have been sexually assaulted. I want to do everything in my power not to replicate those patterns. We are, however, only human and sometimes fuck up. The point is not to go to a place where you focus only on how what you did was harmful, but instead to figure out how to grow and change and have your actions show that.

My ex may never know why I refused to be in the same spaces as them or how many female-bodied people have felt sexually disrespected by them. They did not listen throughout the relationship, and there seemed to be a point when they stopped engaging with anyone who would challenge their behavior. That point seemed to come after they were isolated and talked about

in the community. Although this person might still blame me for their "ex-communication," most of the stories that were circulating in the community came from other people's direct experiences, many of which were similar to mine.

Since this person was surrounded by enablers, it is easy to imagine how they would not move to a place of truly looking within and understanding male-bodied privilege, consent, and healthy relationships. Worse, this person's abusive behavior, pushing women and trans men into unwanted sex or sexual acts, seemed to be ongoing; and some of these people, I knew. Admittedly, I see the appeal of shaming and community call-outs. But ultimately, I think this helps stunt the perpetrator's growth process, creating a false sense of relief for the person (and community) wronged. Accountability could mean so many different things. It could mean one person is asked to stay out of certain social events and seek counseling. The other person may require support as well to begin to let go of the damage suffered. As in organizing, I believe in the escalation model as part of an accountability process. Using the escalation model involves finding people who can commit to working with both parties to heal while creating and maintaining realistic boundaries. Escalation becomes necessary when perpetrators refuse to engage in the process, maintain agreements or change their behavior.

There are a lot of things we are not in control of, particularly if we are poor, brown, female-bodied, queer-bodied, and/or disabled. Our ability to decide what happens to our bodies can be compromised not only in our interpersonal relationships, but also within the larger systems that shape our thinking and behavior. So many of our communities are under constant attack by pervasive police surveillance, harassment, and brutality, as well as other forms of state violence framed as "protection." Yet, in some ways, I am even more dismayed that some social justice activists are also perpetrators of sexual harassment, assault, sexual manipulation, and rape. Too often we remain silent as a community when confronted by cycles of abuse, allowing violence to fester like a wound on someone's forehead. We all see it but try not to look. Why?! What are we afraid of? Is it the significant amount of work it takes to create a long

term vision for alternatives to policing, the complications of organizational impacts? I am tired of our seeing a community member abuse their partner without response—or with an inadequate one, where we have one meeting, take great notes, and subsequently drop the ball. I'm sick to my stomach when I remember that the person who violated my body and boundaries was constantly surrounded by community people who never held this person accountable. Meanwhile, several female-bodied folks (most being young folks I worked with) confided in me about unwanted advances from the same person. We were all silent, but I was blamed for this person's isolation by their friends. This was beyond invalidating; it was humiliating and contributed to a severe depression that lasted years.

Though neither of us was willing to engage in conversation, at the same time, isolation was not the answer. To ensure that the process of accountability for the person who “fucked up” continues, the community needs to support all parties involved. For example, we need clear boundaries for all parties and community events. Both people may get triggered when they see each other; reactions can be damaging and lower community morale. And what about people who are less willing to be held accountable for sexually inappropriate behavior? How do responsible community members at least watch out for the people who may be at risk for their abusive behavior? Do we post guidelines for fund-raisers and house parties around consensual behavior, notifying all attendees that those who do not adhere to them will be asked to leave? Why not? I personally believe that many of the rules clearly posted at the door of many sex clubs or play parties should be universal. Why not expect people to ask if they can touch you; why not suggest code words to use if you need someone nearby to intervene? We have to be dedicated not only to institutional change, but also to transforming our interpersonal dynamics. We cannot allow the fear of not being liked to prevent us from setting boundaries as a community. To me, there is a big difference between kindness and niceness. More often than not, “being nice” (which is not necessarily about being genuine) tends to lead to passive-aggressive behavior and unhealthy repression, and ultimately can undermine what is required to

build a community that loves and protects all of its members. If we are serious about ending violence within activist communities, it is crucial that we set community standards for acceptable behavior and that we are committed to fiercely maintaining them.

With all of the lessons I have learned, I now feel a sense of empowerment each time I let someone know they're dancing too close, or that I want them to dance closer. I know that I have the ability to forgive someone who has fucked up and is actively working to change. That said, the biggest task I have ahead of me (and before the recommended forgiveness of the community member who repeatedly violated my body and tried to take away so much of me) is to forgive myself and heal the other part of my past—the child who was repeatedly violated and unprotected, the child whose early wounds were left uncared for. For a long time I held on to the fact that I chose to stay in a sexual relationship with this person. The fact that I chose to stay was a primary reason I felt unjustified in walking away earlier, why I let guilt run things. For some time, I started to believe this person's words when they berated me for saying NO. Now if someone begs and pleads that I do something sexual for them, I know I can walk away. It is always okay to say NO and that can give you a new and beautiful understanding of what YES really and truly means for you. My prior relationship was not always clearly abusive to me until after the fact. There were ways in which the abuse was more obvious but I felt a need to focus on the coercion and manipulation that ran the majority of the relationship. I appreciate my story being shared; reading this all those years ago might have validated my feelings enough to have helped me end the cycle earlier.

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**BELOW ARE TIPS GATHERED FROM MAINLY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS, AND PAMPHLETS ON PARTNER ABUSE:**

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*Are you listening?* “I don't know” and “maybe” do not mean YES. YES does. Everything else means NO! If someone says NO, stop pushing. It's not cute, it's not smooth—it's sexual harassment.

*Are you being responsible?* If your date is drunk or passed out, that is not an invitation for sex. You are responsible for everything you do; these are choices you make. Sometimes what was a yes may become a NO when someone sobers up and that needs to be respected too.

*Are you respecting someone's decision?* Don't make people feel bad for saying NO to one, a few, or all sexual acts. Being in a relationship or on a date does not mean you have any rights to someone's body. You are not entitled to anything except mutual respect.

*What is consent?* Consent is freely and voluntarily agreeing to do something. Consent is not giving in to someone who is harassing you to do anything. Consent is not when you or the other person are heavily intoxicated, not when someone is sleeping, not when someone has said NO. (And remember: only YES means YES!)

*Remember:* Touching someone while they are sleeping or falling asleep because you find yourself turned on is selfish. How many important decisions are you asked to make after being woken up in the middle of the night? If you think there is a possibility you might want to have sex with your partner in the middle of the night, talk to them beforehand and make agreements. For some people, it could be hot to be woken up in that way, but unless your partner has given you permission that is fully consensual, you are raping them.

No one is obligated to get you off sexually. If you are horny and the other person is not, you do not need to show your disappointment. Remember, you can always jerk off. If it becomes a consistent problem, you may need to adjust your relationship; if you're monogamous, it could mean figuring out how to open up your relationship for a bit so your sexual needs are met. If it continues for a long time, it could be a sign of a bigger problem or dynamic you can evaluate together. Sex involves reading body language and listening to the desires of all people involved; how responsible or considerate are you being if you succeed in wearing someone down to the point where they give in to your

needs rather than respecting their own wants and boundaries?

If the other person says no to a sexual request, that should be taken seriously. Someone saying NO is not an invitation to beg, plead, or cry for sex.

Sometimes you can't help but cry. This may mean after being told NO you might need to take some time to yourself to calm down. Being sexually rejected by a partner, date, or friend can trigger many difficult emotions, such as lowered self-esteem, anger, and sadness, as well as a lack of confidence, and body issues. These are all very real feelings that you will have to figure out how to deal with. Making the other person feel guilty or bad for setting a sexual boundary is neither okay nor helpful. Try listening first, then maybe talking to a friend whom you trust, especially a friend who is a good communicator and is good at seeing issues from multiple sides. Some friends may automatically side with you, especially if they don't like your partner. Try getting support from someone who can better separate the people from the actions.

Many aspects of my life have been affected by this experience—negatively, positively, and everything in-between. I continue to struggle with maintaining my boundaries and staying present in my body, though it has gotten easier. Disassociating was a skill I developed to protect myself many years ago and it served me well. Now I work hard to develop new skills but my process is long from over.

Good luck in every part of your journey.