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Sexual Boundaries: How to Set Them

Imagine you're in a sexual situation, and you know exactly what you want to do physically. Maybe you're cuddling with a friend, and you really want to kiss them, but you don't want to go further than making out. Or you're naked with a date and want to give each other orgasms, but you're a "no" when it comes to blowjobs. Do you say something?

Yes! Having a good time means being turned on — without being on guard or worrying that your boundaries will be crossed. Sure, talking about boundaries pauses the action for a moment. But communicating what you like and don't like sexually helps everyone involved have more fun all around. And talking about things you don't want to do sometimes also involves talking about things you DO want, which can be really sexy.

But before communicating your sexual boundaries, you need to know what they are. Read about getting in tune with your body and emotions, to learn how to recognize them. And once you know how you're feeling, you can clue in whoever you're getting sexual with. Here's how to do that.

What's a Boundary?

Personal boundaries are the line between what you're OK with and what you're not OK with. If you're not comfortable with something happening to you or around you, that means you have a boundary between yourself and that thing.

Sexual boundaries are all about:

- How people touch your body — including over or under clothes and your body parts.
- How people see your body — such as being naked, partially naked, or dressed in a sexy way.
- How people treat you in sexual situations — including how they speak to you and what your relationship is.
- What you're comfortable doing to others — such as what you touch on their body.
- Communicating How Sexual You Want to Get

Choose from these categories to explain what you want to do and what you don't want to do.

Clothing Boundaries

- What clothes you want to keep on.
- What touching you don't want — including unwanted types of touch over the clothes and under the clothes.
- Example: "It would be hot if you touched my boobs under my shirt, but I want you to stay over my bra."

Body-Part Boundaries

- Which of your body parts are off limits.
- What body parts of theirs you don't want to see or touch.
- Example: "I'm into touching each other under our underwear, but I'm not ready to see you naked."

Activity Boundaries

- What physical touch and kinds of sex you're comfortable with, such as heavy petting, fingering, hand jobs, and oral sex.
- What types of other sexual activities you're comfortable with — such as taking photos, saying kinky nicknames, practicing BDSM, or involving other people.
- Example: "I really want to get naked and touch each other all over, but I'm not ready to go down on each other or have sex tonight. Also, you can call me [X], but I don't like when you talk to me like [Y]."

Setting — and Resetting — Boundaries

Part of what you communicate has to do with what the other person does. For instance, if you're having sex and your partner says they want to have anal sex, that's a time to speak up about whether you want that.

Be on the lookout for any signs of sexual coercion. If your boundaries are being pushed, slow down and step back. You might be with a person who doesn't respect your boundaries or who just isn't able to hear them.

Finally, sexual situations are dynamic. You might have a miscommunication and need to restate your boundaries. Or you might suddenly feel uncomfortable and change your mind about your boundaries as you go. That's totally OK! You can set a new boundary at any time. It's YOUR body, and YOU get to decide what you do with it!

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Sexual Boundaries: How to Listen to Your Body

It can be tough to know your boundaries in a sexual situation, especially when you're hanging out with someone you really like. Picture this: Someone's flirting with you and you're into them. They want to get sexual, but you're not sure you want to go there. Or you're hooking up and you like it so far, but then they want to do something you're not super comfortable with (like oral sex). What do you do?

Knowing your own boundaries, especially when you're in the moment, can be harder than it seems. In sexual situations, your body and emotions are just as much in play as the analytical part of your brain that learned about consent online, or from sex educators. Paying attention to your whole self — head, heart, and body — can help you understand what your sexual boundaries are. And that awareness can help you make decisions about sex that you feel good about, both in the moment and afterward.

Don't know where to start? Here's how to stay connected to all the emotions you're feeling and everything you're physically experiencing in sexual situations.

Understanding the Factors That Can Affect Boundaries

When there's an opportunity — or an expectation — to get sexual, people can have conflicting feelings. And different factors affect how you think about, communicate, set, and enforce your boundaries:

You can have mixed feelings. Desire isn't always a clear-cut "enthusiastic yes" or "absolutely no." You might be totally attracted to someone and feel turned on, but still not feel 100% right about getting physical. You might want sex, pleasure, or intimacy in your life, but also feel pressured, disrespected, or unsafe in the moment.

Other people's desires can overpower your decisions, especially if you've been taught to put other people's needs first. You might consider going along with it because you want them to like you, or because you don't want to hurt their feelings, cause conflict, or end the relationship.

Alcohol, drugs, partying, and staying up late can make it harder to recognize or speak up about your boundaries. Being intoxicated can also make it harder to recognize other people's boundaries.

The way you were raised and traumatic experiences can affect how you respond in situations when you have mixed feelings, are being pressured, or face conflict for setting a boundary. If your boundaries were crossed repeatedly in childhood or if you're a sexual assault survivor, then sexual activity itself — like when you're getting naked, touching, or being touched — may trigger you. In particular, unwanted touch may be a trigger that causes you to freeze and have a harder time speaking up.

Listening to Yourself: The Key to Authentic Sexual Consent

Recognizing the signals your mind and body are sending you are key to understanding your needs, wants, and boundaries around sex and intimacy. Follow these tips for finding authentic consent.

Track trauma responses and take a break if you need to. If you can, try to remove yourself from the situation for a few minutes (such as going to the bathroom or getting a breath of fresh air). Signs you're having a survival response to trauma include:

- Having tunnel vision
- Watching yourself or hearing yourself talk like you're outside your own body
- Feeling like you're on autopilot or in a trance
- Feeling numb
- Being unable to speak or move

Note your habits and go slow. It's normal to deal with situations in a certain way out of habit. Sometimes you may lean on default responses, like going along with what someone else wants and putting your own boundaries to the side. If that sounds familiar, it's OK to pause and take some time to make decisions. Expressing your feelings and speaking up when you're feeling discomfort are ways to recenter your boundaries.

Check in with your body. Take a moment to think about whether you're turned on AND physically comfortable. Tightness in your body, like clenching your jaw or holding your breath, may be signs that you aren't feeling relaxed or safe. It's your body's way of telling you to slow down or step away.

Acknowledge all of your emotions. If you're enjoying someone's company and feel excited, great! Just make sure you're also focusing on what your gut is telling you. Don't push away negative emotions like anxiety or annoyance. Allow yourself to feel all of your feelings, even the uncomfortable ones.

It's OK if this all feels a little overwhelming. Most people don't naturally know how to do all of these things — it takes practice, which includes making mistakes. Talking to a friend or counselor may also help you process your feelings.

Staying in tune with all the things you're feeling and experiencing can help you have consensual, sexy experiences that are pleasurable and safe. But remember: If someone touches you without your consent, or forces or pressures you to do something sexual, that's sexual assault or abuse — and it's not your fault. Don't blame yourself for anything you did or didn't do.