

What is sexual consent?

Doctor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, and psychotherapist Silva Neves discuss sexual consent and why an open dialogue about assumptions and consent is important for healthy, empowered relationships



WHAT IS CONSENT?

Do we always know when consent has been given? With a lack of education around consent and little in the media showing how healthy sexual relationships should be, do we really understand how to give consent, or when we have it from someone else? In the accompanying podcast with psychotherapist Silva Neves, I seek to uncover why consent is more complicated than we think, and why open discussion is necessary.

Sarah

CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy

UKCP psychotherapist Silva Neves explores sexual consent – what it is and why education is critical

Sex may seem simple and natural, but many people are confused about how to have sexual relationships. The lack of understanding stems from poor sex education. If we taught primary schoolchildren age-appropriate lessons around boundaries, respecting differences and expressing yourself clearly, then maybe the overall foundation of how we exist in our sexual relationships would be significantly different.

The way consent is presented in the media only reinforces the idea that people don't need to have conversations around it. In *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, a story known by

millions of children, Aurora is saved by a non-consensual kiss. These stories tell us that women need to be chosen and, if they are chosen, it is an automatic yes on their behalf. She, therefore, does not get to express what she wants or needs.

Harmful beliefs

This can be true for men too. It is assumed that men are always up for sex. And, when we consider gay relationships, the oversexualisation of gay men reinforces the idea that both partners are usually keen for sex when, actually, there should be a conversation about it.

This is important because getting it wrong can leave someone with sexual trauma. So, what constitutes consent?

Consent is a clear and assertive declaration of permission, which can be withdrawn at any time. It is only in the here and now. It must be clearly given every time. Saying yes once doesn't

NO MEANS NO



mean that you agree to the same activity another time. An absence of consent does not constitute consent. If someone is intoxicated, they are too impaired to give consent.

Learning how to communicate your wants and needs, and comprehend those of your partner, not only removes the awkwardness around talking about sex, but allows you to better engage in consent-driven conversations, so you feel empowered in your relationships. Having these conversations may seem daunting and sometimes the best way forward is through psychotherapy.



The podcast

We live in a sexualised culture, but most of us find it difficult to have conversations with partners about our erotic lives. Why is it so important that we speak frankly? In this podcast, Sarah Niblock and Silva Neves talk about the need for open dialogue about consent for healthy sexual relationships. Listen at psychologies.co.uk/sex-and-consent-podcast-ukcp

ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK

How therapy can help

Clients can talk about sexual trauma in the safety of the psychotherapeutic space, and move towards healing, strength and confidence

1 For someone who has experienced sexual trauma, therapy may be the first time that they break their silence. When I work with these clients, firstly and most importantly, I always believe them and listen to their story in full.

2 Coming to therapy shows strength, and I want to ensure my clients know that they are in a secure and supportive environment. I do my utmost to create a place where they can pace themselves and their story to avoid further traumatisation.

3 Consent is empowering. I make it a priority to model consent in my consulting room. Fostering that understanding in the psychotherapeutic relationship allows a client to feel in control of how the relationship unfolds. I never book a second session with a client during the initial consultation. Instead, I give the individual all the information they need and encourage them to go home and sleep on it. That way, they can take their time and feel in control of their choice about whether to re-enter the psychotherapeutic space.

HOW I BECAME A THERAPIST



The power of connection and a sense of belonging drew Silva Neves to psychotherapy

AS A GAY MAN WHO GREW UP in a rural area, I often felt alone and disconnected. I didn't know there were other people like me. In the city, I met my LGBTQIA+ community and was amazed at the healing power of human connection. During my original psychotherapy training, I knew I was going to be a humanistic and relational therapist. I then became a College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists-accredited psychosexual and relationship psychotherapist and a trauma therapist.

I'm passionate about offering a relational and therapeutic space for my clients, including those from the LGBTQIA+ community. Along the way, I also found joy in helping therapists grow and flourish in my role as a clinical supervisor and connecting with my psychotherapy community. I feel grateful to be a psychotherapist every day.

silvaneves.co.uk

About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

• **The UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)** is the leading research, innovation, educational and

regulatory body working to advance psychotherapy for the benefit of all. We have a register of more than 8,000 individual members, who offer a range of therapy approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups. We also have more than 70 training

and accrediting organisations for those who wish to become psychotherapists.

• **To find the right therapist for you** or learn how to become a therapist, visit psychology.org.uk



