



## CHAPTER 9

# Sexual Communication

So far, you've learned why sex is important, and you've got a good understanding of how people experience desire and arousal. Hopefully, you've been able to determine why sex might be important to your clients, and you've developed an understanding of the biopsychosocial factors that promote and inhibit positive sexual experiences for each of them specifically.

As you have read time and time again, discrepancies between partners' sexualities are the rule, not the exception. Sexuality is multifaceted and specific to the individual. When someone participates in a partnered sexual interaction, they have to deal with the individual needs and preferences of each person involved. No wonder it doesn't always match up! Moreover, anytime you are working with individual preferences and needs, you are likely to encounter two difficult hurdles: conflict and shame. Conflict is likely to arise whenever you are dealing with two people in two different bodies, simply because each person may want different things that cannot be satisfied at the same time. Shame is a deep vulnerability that we all deal with, especially when it comes to sex. Because most of us are steeped in sex negativity throughout our lives, we become very concerned about whether or not our wants and needs are acceptable. The bad news is that conflict and shame often derail communication between partners pretty quickly. But there is good news, as well. If your clients experience conflict in their sexual relationship, this is an indicator that they're trying to be honest with each other. It's actually a marker of a positive relationship, not an indication that something is wrong. You've already learned how to help your clients overcome conflict; now you're going to learn how to help them overcome shame. Begin by having them complete the following two-part activity on improving their sexual communication.

## Sexual Communication, Part A

There are two parts to this activity. First, you are going to look at your general feelings about sexual communication in your relationships. Then, you will explore a specific instance of sexual communication.

**Part A:** The Dyadic Sexual Communication Scale\* helps elucidate areas of strength and weakness in partners' sexual communication. Please note that this measure was developed using two-person relationships. To ensure valid results, if you are involved in multiple relationships simultaneously, choose one in which sexual communication could be improved.

As you read each statement, indicate how much you agree or disagree with it, with 1 being "disagree strongly and 6 being "agree strongly."

|   | 1<br>Disagree<br>Strongly | 2                        | 3                        | 4                        | 5                        | 6<br>Agree<br>Strongly   |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. My partner rarely responds when I want to talk about our sex life.                           | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Some sexual matters are too upsetting to discuss with my sexual partner.                     | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. There are sexual issues or problems in our sexual relationship that we have never discussed. | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. My partner and I never seem to resolve our disagreements about sexual matters.               | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

\* This scale is reproduced with permission from "Dyadic Sexual Communication Scale," in R. R. Milhausen, J. K. Sakaluk, T. D. Fisher, C. M. Davis, and W. L. Yarber (Eds.), *Handbook of Sexuality-Related Measures*, 4th ed. (pp. 212–214), by J. A. Catania, 2020, Routledge.

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|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5. Whenever my partner and I talk about sex, I feel like they are lecturing me.               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. My partner often complains that I am not very clear about what I want sexually.            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. My partner and I have never had a heart-to-heart talk about our sex life together.         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. My partner has no difficulty in talking to me about their sexual feelings and desires.     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Even when angry with me, my partner is able to appreciate my views on sexuality.           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Talking about sex is a satisfying experience for both of us.                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. My partner and I can usually talk calmly about our sex life.                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. I have little difficulty telling my partner what I do or don't do sexually.               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. I seldom feel embarrassed when talking about the details of our sex life with my partner. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Take a look at your responses. Are you more likely to endorse items that indicate that it is difficult for you to discuss sex with partners, or do your answers indicate you are comfortable discussing sex? How do your results compare to that of your partner? If one of you feels more comfortable talking about sex than the other, lean on them for support in your future conversations. Their comfort can help instill confidence in you.

## ***Sexual Communication, Part A Debrief***

First, compare your clients' results to one another. Are they on the same page? Or does one partner think that their communication is much better or worse than the other? Is there embarrassment at speaking their preferences aloud? Conflict from not knowing how to address differences between them and their partner? Difficulty being truly honest and forthcoming? A lack of responsiveness toward one another? Emotionality during the conversations? Looking at the areas in which your clients' *do not* match up is a good start to identifying the barriers to communication that they face.

## **Barriers to Communication**

Despite our good intentions and best efforts, even the best relationships can suffer from barriers to productive communication. Common barriers include disconnection from the body, lack of knowledge, embarrassment, and guilt.

### ***Disconnection from the Body***

Disconnection from the body is a fancy way of saying that sometimes we don't attend to or know what our bodies are feeling. If clients don't know how their bodies feel, it is almost impossible to describe what they want. First, make sure that they have the language they need to describe their anatomy. Second, suggest that your client, either with their partner or alone, experiment with different kinds of touch and describe out loud how they feel. Ask them to note what feels pleasurable: Are there specific types of touch or specific places that feel better than others? Encourage your client to share this information with their partner.

For some people, connecting to the body can feel impossible or even dangerous. If your client dissociates or is not ready to experience touch while staying present in their body, that is okay. Simply back up and help them feel grounded in their body without touch. Grounding exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness meditation can be helpful tools to make it safe to be connected to the body. Once safety is established, then you can move on to touch.

### ***Lack of Knowledge***

Lack of knowledge is another barrier to communication. Like being disconnected from the body, not knowing what possibilities might be out there makes it very difficult to explore what your clients might want. Talk with them to assess their level of knowledge about their bodies, their partners' bodies, and

common types of sexual stimulation. Explore their experiences and help them identify pathways toward increased pleasure. You may also educate them on common anatomy using clinical language, noting both genital and non-genital erogenous zones.

## ***Embarrassment***

Embarrassment is a common experience when talking about sex. It is incredibly vulnerable to be open and honest about our desires and fantasies. It can be helpful to first label the embarrassment and normalize it. In addition, you may offer examples of fantasies, ranging from the common to the less common; this can help your clients become more comfortable with the wide-ranging world of sexual desire. Helping your clients understand how vast the sexual landscape can be may help them understand that their desires and fantasies are not as uncommon as they might think.

In addition, many clients aren't used to using explicit clinical language to discuss their bodies and sexual desires. Model this type of language when offering examples of things that people may find sexually interesting.

## ***Guilt***

Guilt often arises when people try to talk about sex. Many clients will assume that talking about what they want will imply that their partner is lacking (whether real or imagined) in some way. First, assess whether or not this is true. If the partner feels that they are letting their partner down, remind them that they should not just magically know what their partner wants. They are not in their partner's body, so they cannot know unless their partner tells them. Furthermore, each partner is responsible for telling the other what they want. It is no one's job to intuit or mind read the other partner's desires.

## Sexual Communication, Part B

Think about a specific instance when you and your partner had a conversation about sex that didn't go as planned. Write down your answers to the following questions, then talk with your partner and identify one or two aspects of your communication that you want to improve.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| How did you feel at the beginning of the conversation?                               |  |
| What was happening when the conversation took a turn?                                |  |
| How did you leave the conversation (e.g., did you feel connected, withdrawn, angry)? |  |
| What did you feel afterward?   |  |

Were you able to get what you wanted out of the conversation?

What did your partner do or say that was helpful?

What did your partner do or say that was hurtful?

What do you wish you had done differently?

## ***Sexual Communication, Part B Debrief***

Have one client share their experience of a conversation. Their partner's job is simply to listen without responding, defending themselves, or deflecting. Help your clients understand where the conversation went off the rails and what may have triggered them. Develop a strategy with them to help keep the conversation on track the next time. Then let the other client share the conversation they have chosen to document, repeating the same steps.

## **Why Is This So Hard?**

Communicating about sex is often a difficult—and at times seemingly impossible—task. It can bring up feelings of shame, inadequacy, fear, and even anger. Many partners enter discussions about their sex lives only to leave the conversation feeling defeated and disconnected. As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the conflict and shame we feel about our sexual desires and history can make communicating about sex difficult.

### ***Conflict***

As you have already learned, the presence of conflict is not necessarily bad. In fact, conflict is inevitable when two or more people share experiences together, simply because we are all different people with different wants and needs. You may want to revisit the previous chapters on conflict and conflict resolution to refresh that information if needed.

There are a few additional points to keep in mind when you see your clients experiencing conflict around sexual issues. First, most people feel discomfort talking about sex, so be kind. Second, your clients' sexual desires do not have to match perfectly in order for them to have a sexually satisfying relationship. Third, your clients are not responsible for meeting their partner's every sexual want or need. Lastly, adhere to the golden rule of talking about sex: *do not yuck someone else's yum*. (Note: this rule does not apply to sexually abusive behaviors.) If a client is not into something, that's okay! Just because something holds erotic value for one person doesn't mean it holds erotic value for another. However, everyone is vulnerable and prone to shame when talking about sex. Think of how you would feel if someone yucked your yum. You don't want that to happen to you; don't do it to your clients or allow them to do it to one another. There is no right for everyone; there is only right for each individual person.



## ***Shame***

Despite the fact that sexual behavior is incredibly common among humans, we are often afraid to talk about it for fear of judgment or rejection. Even when we intellectually know that we don't deserve judgment or rejection, the fear of it creates the internal feeling that we do, in fact, somehow deserve it. What makes such a common part of life so scary? The biggest factors contributing to the shame that most people feel around sex are sex negativity and a lack of adequate sexual education.

As we discussed back in chapter 1, the environment around us, such as our family beliefs and behaviors, cultural attitudes, and media portrayal, affect our opinions and beliefs around sex, often without us realizing it. And most often, we are exposed to negative and conflicting messages around sex. These messages begin from a very young age and shape our beliefs and attitudes toward sex. Nagoski (2015) uses a garden metaphor to describe the impact of these insidious forces. Think of your understanding of sex and sexuality as a garden plot. Before you can even speak, let alone form your own opinions, the people, culture, and media around you are planting the seeds of assumptions and preconceived notions in that garden. While it's possible that these seeds could yield beautiful sunflowers, the prevailing attitude toward sex in our culture makes it far more likely that they will produce weeds.

Later in life, you stumble upon this garden, perhaps when sexuality becomes a more present force in your life. Like most people, you see a plot full of weeds and accept them as the only possible plants in that garden because no one ever told you that there could be sunflowers. Not sure that you love those weeds? Too bad—there are no other options; furthermore, you've been sworn to secrecy about the contents of your garden because you have been taught not to discuss issues of sex and sexuality with anyone else.

While some families, communities, and cultures regard these weeds as necessary measures to protect young people from dangers they associate with sex, there are many others who unintentionally plant weeds by relying on the “sex education” offered in school or through other community institutions. The assumption is that this instruction will be largely neutral given that it focuses primarily on reproductive health: anatomy, the changes in bodies during puberty, and the basics of fertilization and gestation. The discussion of actual sex mostly involves warning against the dangers of STIs, unwanted pregnancy, and moral failing. In other words, weeds, weeds, and more weeds. Of course, reproductive health is important, but it is not *sexual* health. Unless someone's “sexual education” included accurate information about the risks of different types of sexual behavior (without scare tactics), the importance of pleasure, and how to give and receive consent, it was not real sex education. Real sex education results in a garden full of sunflowers.

## ***Sex Negativity Sabotages Sexual Communication***

Being able to talk about sex is a huge step toward helping your clients weed out their garden and plant sunflowers. Like many important things, it is also difficult. One of the most destructive and invasive weeds that we encounter is *sexual shame*. It comes in many forms. Perhaps your clients have experienced

shame over the presence, content, or frequency of their desire or the way their body does or does not react in sexual situations. Perhaps they feel pressure to look a certain way, feel a certain way, or participate in a certain kind of behavior because they believe it's expected. Perhaps they've pretended to be more comfortable or knowledgeable about something than they actually were at the time. The list of possibilities for sexuality-related shame is endless.

When clients try to talk to their partner about sex, all this shame can rise to the surface. They have been taught that they should be ashamed of these things, so it is an enormous risk to reveal them to you and their partner. What is worse than growing a shame weed? Having it confirmed through the judgment and rejection of a person they trust. Perhaps your clients avoid these conversations for fear that they will be shamed, or perhaps they have been so vague as to not say what they actually wanted to say. This is why the golden rule is golden. If your clients are open to having productive conversation with a partner around sex, they have to trust that you and their partner will not yuck their yum.

## Guidelines for Sexual Communication

Before you read the guidelines, it is important to understand the principles on which they are based. As you have seen in previous chapters, the tenets of conflict resolution inform these guidelines. The other important concept is sex positivity. Explanations and definitions of sex positivity vary, but there are core attributes that are shared by most models. In short, a stance of sex positivity involves holding and cultivating positive attitudes toward sex, being interested in exploring sexuality, being open and nonjudgmental toward the interests of others even when they are not your particular interest, and affirming a practice of consent. In other words, a person practicing sex positivity is interested in understanding and defining sexual pleasure and satisfaction for themselves and is concerned with others—especially their partner—understanding this for themselves.

Now, on to what you are really here for: the nuts and bolts of improving your ability to teach your clients how to discuss sex and sexuality with their partner. These are general guidelines for communicating around sex (we'll get to more specific scenarios in the next chapter). Remember, sex is about pleasure, intimacy, connection, and exploration. In other words, good things. Shame and anxiety will tell your clients that conversations around sex are treacherous and fraught. In reality, conversations surrounding sex are simply to improve and build upon a positive aspect of their relationship. To the extent possible, approach such discussions as opportunities to strengthen their bond. Also, keep in mind that many conversations about sex and sexuality are ongoing or made of several parts. Remind your clients not to pressure themselves to wrap it all up in a neat little bow the first time they discuss something.

The following handout includes the guidelines for sexual communication. Familiarize yourself with them so that you can teach your clients how to communicate effectively and respectfully.

## Client Handout

# Guidelines for Sexual Communication

1. **Ask for permission. Obtain consent.** As you have learned over the work you have done so far, talking about sex can be challenging and emotionally laborious. Just because you are ready to dive into a conversation does not mean that someone else is. Before jumping into the content of what you want to say, check to see if your partner has the bandwidth to listen and respond.
2. **Be honest. Be explicit.** If you're going to do the work of talking about sex, make sure you get to say what you need to say. Vague language will sabotage any sexual conversation. Make sure the person that you're talking to knows what you're saying by asking for their understanding and clarifying any miscommunications.
3. **Use I-statements.** This is a good rule to follow for any emotional conversation—or any conversation, really! I-statements allow you to take responsibility for how you feel and help you avoid the pitfall of blaming your feelings on someone else's behavior. This helps everyone involved stay open and empathic during the conversation. For example, "I'm worried that I may not be desirable to you anymore" is a much more inviting statement than "You're not attracted to me anymore." The first statement expresses your own experience and allows room for reassurance. The second statement accuses your partner of doing something wrong, and it is likely to result in defensiveness or combativeness.
4. **Expect differences.** You and whoever you're talking to are different people. Your interests, desires, and boundaries are going to be different (hopefully with some overlap). Differences are not necessarily problems. In fact, nothing is an inherent problem unless you or your partner are negatively impacted by that particular thing.
5. **Follow the golden rule.** If you only take one thing from these guidelines, let this be it. You do not have to like or be interested in everything that your partner may be interested in. You do, however, have to respect and affirm their desire. *Do not yuck their yum.* If you are turned off by someone else's desire, don't worry. It's just not for you, but it can still be great for them.
6. **Make a plan for reconnection.** Despite our best efforts to facilitate open, constructive dialogue, discussing sexual matters can be emotionally difficult. While these guidelines are important, they are not a fail-safe against others becoming upset. Have

a plan for how you and your partner will reconnect if the conversation does go awry. Perhaps you share a genuine hug or do a nonsexual activity that you both enjoy. Be creative and develop a way to reconnect that works for your relationship.

## Implementing Guidelines

Revisit the interaction that you wrote about in the *Sexual Communication, Part B* activity. In the following list of sexual communication guidelines, place a check mark by the ones you employed in this interaction.

### Sexual Communication Guidelines

- ☐ Ask for permission. Obtain consent.
- ☐ Be honest. Be explicit.
- ☐ Use I-statements.
- ☐ Expect differences.
- ☐ Follow the golden rule. (Do not yuck someone else's yum.)
- ☐ Make a plan for reconnection.

Now note which of the guidelines you didn't employ in this interaction. If you'd been following these guidelines, how might the conversations have been different? How would your answers to the questions change?

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### ***Implementing Guidelines Debrief***

Help your clients restart the conversations from the *Sexual Communication, Part B* activity, and gently remind them of the guidelines when they go astray. It is not necessary that they finish the conversation, just that they have the experience of having a contained, calm exchange of ideas and information.

## Creating Sexual Goals

The following questions will get you thinking about aspects of your sexual relationship that you might want to change or improve. Use your answers to create one or more goals toward improving your sexual relationship. When you are finished, share your goal(s) with your partner.

Do you feel anxious when you think about your sexual relationship?

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How do you feel about the kind of sex that you are having or not having?

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Is there something about your sex life that feels uncomfortable, upsetting, or stressful?

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Which things do you wish you could tell your partner about what you like or don't like?

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What might you like to try with your partner?

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## Safety and Consent

Step one of any sexual exploration is always safety. Most people think about safety as physical. Of course, it is important to make sure that any sexual activity that could cause physical injury is as safe as possible. However, we must also consider *psychological safety*. Psychological safety is the belief that we will not be punished, humiliated, or shamed for discussing our ideas, feelings, concerns, and questions. It is the expectation that our ideas, feelings, concerns, and questions will be met with acceptance, affirmation, and respect. Establishing and maintaining psychological safety begins with true consent.

### What Is Consent?

Consent is an agreement between two or more people to engage in a sexual activity. In order for consent to be trusted, it must meet certain criteria. Consent must be given freely (i.e., not coerced) and must be able to be withdrawn at any time without consequence. It is an ongoing process, meaning that an affirmative response to one activity is not an affirmative response for other activities or activities in the future. Furthermore, all participants must be able to communicate clearly and coherently. It may be important for your clients to have conversations about sex before they are in a sexual situation, particularly if they have a tendency to feel pressure or anxiety. Help your clients discuss how to communicate consent or lack thereof during a sexual encounter. For instance, they may consent to sexual activity that restricts a participant's abilities to speak or see; it is vital in this instance that you help them strategize and agree to alternate forms of communication. It is also important to help your clients develop a plan for what to do when consent is not given or withdrawn. This can be a disconnecting and jarring experience, and you want to help your clients maintain their connection as much as possible.

Sometimes, it can be easier to conceptualize what consent *isn't*. Consent is not an affirmative response resulting from coercion or persuasion. Consent is not the absence of a no or a protest. Consent cannot be given by vulnerable or incapacitated people (e.g., children, intoxicated persons, sleeping persons, unconscious persons).

### Why Is Consent Important?

To maintain an open and trusting sexual relationship, participants must be able to communicate freely without fear of judgment, rejection, or punishment. Importantly, consent is a loving and respectful process. When participating in sexual experiences with others, we demonstrate care by



paying attention to what our partners want and what they do not want. Also, sex is much more enjoyable if people aren't worrying about whether or not things are okay!

Not only is it important to actively ask for consent, but it is also important to be able to deny consent. Often, people are afraid to say no to sexual activity for fear of disappointing their partner; however, this undermines trust. We cannot trust a yes if we never hear a no. It is just as important to respond truthfully as it is to ask for consent.

Sexual behavior without consent is both abusive and criminal. If someone performs sexual acts on or in the presence of a person who did not consent to that act, they are, in fact, assaulting that person. It is abusive to behave without consent, and it is also abusive to impose consequences on someone when they deny consent. For example, becoming angry with a partner and withdrawing warmth and affection after they set a boundary is a form of punishment and therefore abuse. If someone creates an environment that is physically or psychologically threatening for their partner to say no, they have created a toxic and abusive environment.

Many people have fantasies and interests that are directly related to a lack of consent. When engaging in sexual activity that hinges on the absence of consent, an element of role-play is necessary. Your clients should discuss boundaries and desires with their partner ahead of time, consenting to behaviors then. This keeps the fantasy alive during the experience. Make sure that they also discuss ahead of time how to communicate ongoing consent, distress, or the withdrawal of consent during the interaction.

Make sure that your clients fully understand what consent is and is not before moving on.

## Common Conversations

In previous chapters, you learned about how to converse with your clients about sex and sexuality, including how to avoid the pitfalls that most people fall into when discussing sex. In this section, you will learn how to tackle specific issues that may be relevant to your clients' sexual relationships in the past, present, and future.

In the following pages, you will explore several common challenges that people face in their sexual relationships. Of course, the scenarios here are not exhaustive, and this section cannot cover every potential challenge. Some issues that people encounter are so complex, long-standing, or deeply ingrained that they simply cannot be explored in this format. Remember that you can always refer out when you encounter an issue with which you are unfamiliar.

When your clients begin to explore their sexual wants and desires, you are likely to encounter one or more of the following scenarios: expressing dissatisfaction, making or receiving a request, and setting or receiving a boundary.

When reviewing the following conversation examples, please keep in mind that any of these topics can be spread out over multiple discussions. In fact, should your clients become overwhelmed or flooded while discussing sex, it is best to take a break and revisit the conversation at another time.

Before continuing, remember the guidelines for sexual communication:

1. Ask for permission. Obtain consent.
2. Be honest. Be explicit.
3. Use “I-statements.”
4. Expect differences.
5. Follow the golden rule. (Do not yuck someone else’s yum.)
6. Make a plan for reconnection.

With these principles in mind, let’s explore some common scenarios. For the following examples, you will be following a couple, Jessie and Alex, as they navigate their way through important conversations regarding their sex life together. Jessie and Alex have been together for three years, have been living together for a year, and are discussing marriage. Note that each scenario is independent of the previous scenarios.

### ***Expressing Dissatisfaction***

Anytime at least two people are involved in a sexual relationship, there will be conflict, and there will be some degree of dissatisfaction. If your clients want to improve their sexual well-being, they need to be able to talk about the areas of their sex lives that could use a bit of work. While it is unrealistic and unfair to expect their partners to meet all of their sexual desires, there is often much room for improvement if the couple begins a discussion of these issues together. Let’s take a look at how Jessie and Alex navigate expressing dissatisfaction.

Since moving in together, the frequency and quality of Jessie and Alex’s sex life have decreased. Jessie feels that they are not having sex often enough, and when they do, it feels routine. Alex seems unbothered by the change in their sex life. Since they started talking about marriage, Jessie begins to wonder if this is how their sex life will be forever and decides to address these issues with Alex.

Jessie is afraid to hurt Alex, afraid that things won’t ever change, afraid that Alex is no longer interested, and afraid that this means they are sexually incompatible. What difficulties do you imagine might arise in their conversation? Based on the sexual communication guidelines, how might Jessie address these concerns with Alex?

#### **Scenario A:**

Jessie approaches Alex after they are both home from work. Alex had a challenging day and is grateful to just be home.

**JESSIE:** (*Having mustered up the courage*) I need to talk to you.

**ALEX:** (*Surprised*) What?

**JESSIE:** We don't have enough sex. And things aren't like they used to be.

**ALEX:** What? Yes we do. What do you mean?

**JESSIE:** It's like you don't even care anymore. Or don't want me. If this is how it's going to be, I'm not sure we should get married.

**ALEX:** Of course I care! We have a normal amount of sex. What are you even saying? If I don't put out more, you're going to leave me?

### Analysis of Scenario A:

In scenario A, both Jessie and Alex made moves that contributed to the escalation of the conversation. First, Jessie opens with a statement containing an implicit demand, which startles Alex and increases the likelihood that Alex will be defensive. Furthermore, Jessie's opening does not allow any opportunity to determine whether or not Alex is ready to have an important conversation. Jessie then blurts out a version of the perceived conflict in a way that suggests something is wrong with both of them and the relationship, rather than taking accountability for their own feelings. Alex then gets defensive and attempts to argue Jessie's assertion that they don't have enough sex. In response, Jessie begins to make assumptions about Alex's feelings, then threatens the commitment to the relationship. In turn, Alex begins to get upset, catastrophizes, and implicitly accuses Jessie of being cruel. With each line, we see both Jessie and Alex using provocative language to which the other reacts strongly. They both begin to spiral and flood, moving further and further away from the issue at hand.

### Scenario B:

**JESSIE:** (*Having mustered up the courage*) I'd like to talk to you about our sex life. Is now an okay time?

**ALEX:** (*Surprised*) Oh. Sure. What's going on?

**JESSIE:** I'm feeling worried about the change in how often and how we're having sex.

**ALEX:** Okay. What are you worried about?

**JESSIE:** I miss the sex that we used to have. I miss you, and I'm worried that the change means that I'm not desirable, or maybe that we're not sexually compatible?

**ALEX:** Of course not! I absolutely desire you. Listen, it has been a really long day. I agree that this is something that we need to talk more about. How about this weekend? I can think more about what you're saying, and we'll figure something out.

### **Analysis of Scenario B:**

In scenario B, both Alex and Jessie make positive communication moves that allow them to have a constructive, rather than destructive, conversation. Jessie opens by asking whether or not Alex is available to discuss their sex life. This gives Alex the opportunity to consent to a conversation or request an alternate time to talk. Alex responds with curiosity rather than suspicion. Jessie, using an I-statement, clearly states how they are feeling without suggesting that Alex is to blame or requiring Alex to feel the same way. Instead of reacting to Jessie's concerns, Alex listens and again approaches Jessie with curiosity. Jessie explains more about how they are feeling, and they bring up the vulnerable worries that they have been attaching to the observations about their sex life. Rather than accusing Alex of not desiring or caring about them, Jessie simply states that the change in their sex life makes them worry about deeper issues. With this information, Alex can now address some of those deeper fears and comfort Jessie. Realizing that this conversation may require more emotional energy than Alex has at the end of a stressful day, Alex can lovingly suggest that they discuss this issue further during the weekend. This reassures Jessie that Alex understands the importance of their concerns and is committed to working through them, which allows Jessie to let the conversation go for now and wait until they can address their sexual challenges together.

## ***Making or Receiving a Request***

Making or receiving requests may follow conversations in which someone expresses dissatisfaction, or, for those more comfortable with sexual conflict, it may be a stand-alone conversation. Either way, both making and receiving requests can make us vulnerable to worries about compatibility, adequacy, attachment, and vulnerability. Again, we turn to Alex and Jessie as examples.

Since adolescence, Alex has been interested in exploring anal play with a partner. Embarrassed and worried about judgment and rejection, Alex has never told anyone. Wanting to be open and honest, Alex decides to tell Jessie.

When making a request, Alex should consider several questions. First, how important is exploring anal play to Alex's sexual satisfaction and well-being? It's good to have a sense of how deeply this conversation with Jessie may impact Alex.

Next, Alex should identify the important features of anal play. What about Alex's fantasy is the most meaningful? The most erotic? Asking and answering these questions will help Alex differentiate between wants and needs. Sexual needs are those things that are essential to our sexual well-being; wants are the ways that we try to meet those needs. For example, Alex may identify that at the core of their desire for anal play is actually a desire to share something novel and intimate with Jessie. In other words, the *need* is for the intimacy that comes with sharing vulnerability and exploring something new together, and the way Alex *wants* to do that is through anal play. Perhaps Alex identifies that the core feature of the fantasy is the actual sensation that accompanies anal stimulation. Then the *need* is experiencing that stimulation, while the *want* is to engage in whichever type of stimulation Alex is looking for in the presence of or by Jessie.

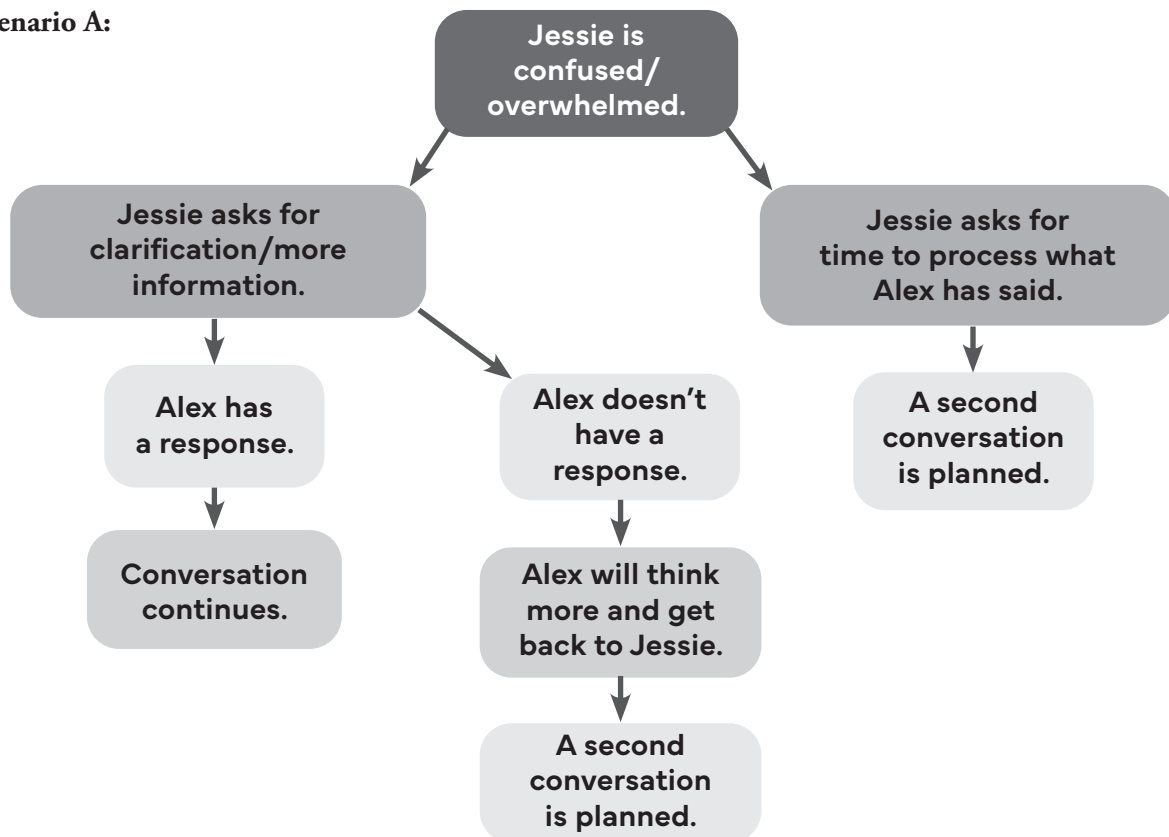
Once Alex has done all this hard work, the last step is simply to ask. Of course, there are an infinite number of ways to start a conversation like this. Keeping the guidelines in mind, Alex may choose to say something like:

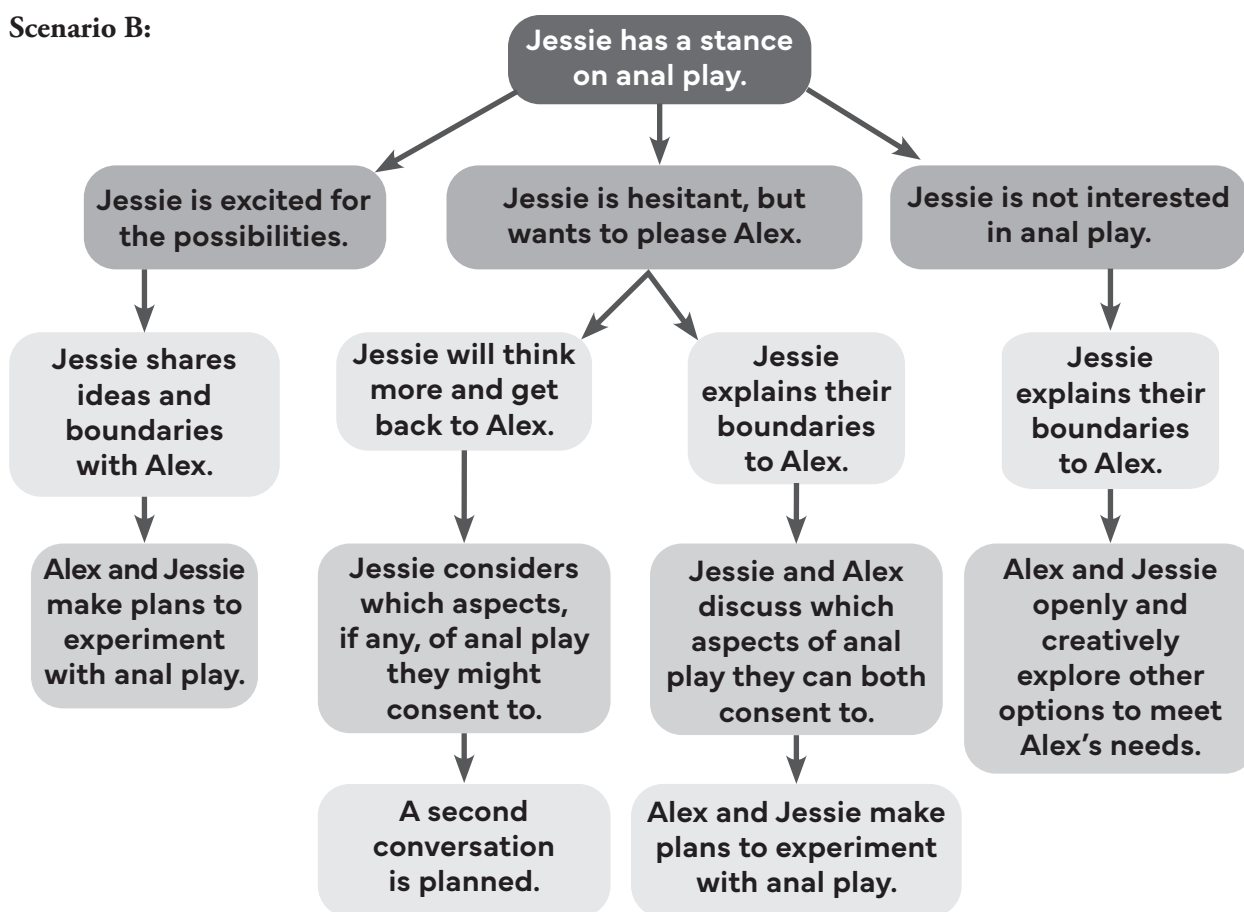
**ALEX:** Jessie, I'd like to chat about some ideas I have about our sex life. Is now a good time, or should we talk later?

The important features of Alex's query are asking permission and letting Jessie know that the conversation will be about sex. Also, Alex is rolling this topic out casually rather than filled with trepidation. Remember, making a request is an opportunity to enhance our sexual well-being; it is not a burden or barrier to it.

Let's suppose that Alex and Jessie find a time to talk, and Alex has told Jessie about wanting to explore anal play. Now, Jessie is receiving a request. Jessie's most important job as the receiver of the request is to stay calm. Alex is being vulnerable and courageous by making a request; it requires a tremendous amount of trust to be so open. By making this request, Alex is showing Jessie that there is a great deal of love and trust in this relationship. Jessie, in turn, should love Alex back by receiving the request calmly and nonjudgmentally. This is just an initial conversation between Alex and Jessie—a preliminary exchange of information. No decisions need to be made, and no consent needs to be given at the end of this conversation. All that is happening is that Alex is giving Jessie information. Jessie can respond in several ways. Depending on how Jessie feels, the conversation can go in several directions. Let's explore some possibilities.

**Scenario A:**



**Scenario B:**

Notice some of the features of both these scenarios. Most paths lead to having a second conversation, and perhaps a third, and a fourth. Because sexuality is complex, finding common ground can take quite a while. Push your clients to stay patient and open and they will get there in time.

### ***Setting or Receiving a Boundary***

In the flow charts in the previous section, there is mention of identifying boundaries. As you read in chapters 4 and 5, a boundary is a metaphorical line that we cannot cross without the relationship or scenario becoming unsafe. Have your clients think of their boundaries as the instruction manual for how they stay safe and healthy in relationships with other people. For example, if a client has a friend or family member that comes to them for emotional support time and time again, leaving them feeling depleted, they might need to set a boundary. Perhaps the client can communicate with them less frequently, or tell them that they can only talk for ten minutes at a time. Such a decision is not a punishment for bad behavior. Instead, it allows them to sustain a relationship with that person without feeling depleted and resentful.

Boundaries are vital to true consent. After all, how can we trust that a yes is a yes, if we never hear a no? When it comes to sex, boundaries are what allow your clients to experiment and explore without the danger of the scenario becoming unsafe. Knowing the boundaries of each partner and encouraging them to express those boundaries to one another is what allows them to have great, satisfying sex. In short, learn to love boundaries, and teach your clients to love them, too.

The first step to setting boundaries is to identify them. Perhaps your clients have clarity around certain things that they absolutely do not want to do. Excellent! These are called *hard boundaries*. A hard boundary is a very clear “no,” and it is not subject to negotiation. In other words, there is almost no scenario in which that particular act is acceptable for your client. Keep in mind that if they set a hard boundary now but something changes in the future, they are absolutely allowed to revisit it. In this situation, it is only the person who set the boundary that is allowed to bring it up for reassessment.

Hard boundaries tend to be the more obvious ones—things that your clients are opposed to, turned off by, or fearful of. *Soft boundaries* are a bit trickier. These are the things that we are unsure of but not necessarily opposed to. Perhaps there is something that your clients have fantasized about, but they are unsure whether or not their partner will enjoy it in real life. Maybe there is something that is not one partner’s cup of tea, but it is perfectly acceptable to them should it be something that their partner is very interested in. These are soft boundaries—they are flexible, but it’s not quite set on *how* flexible they are. It’s important that your clients communicate to their partner that something is a soft boundary, because exploration of it, both verbal and physical, requires proper caution, privileging of consent, and care for each partner’s experience.

In the previous section, Alex and Jessie began a conversation about incorporating anal play into their sex life together. With the exception of ending the conversation due to overwhelm, all options incorporate some explanation of boundaries. Even if Alex and Jessie are both interested in anal play, that does not mean that they are both equally interested in all potential aspects of it. Perhaps Alex wants to be penetrated, but Jessie does not. They should both know this before embarking on any sort of physical exploration.

There is one potential response that deserves more attention: Jessie is hesitant but wants to please Alex. This is a common scenario when talking about sexual wants and needs. Please note that someone wanting to please their partner is 1) *not* consent and 2) *not* a good enough reason to do something that they do not want to do. Often, people put pressure on themselves to anticipate and fulfill the desires of their partner for fear of infidelity or breaking up. To be clear, setting a boundary does not cause either of these events. The dissolution of fidelity or a relationship requires an active choice. While it is true that some people decide to end their relationships after realizing that it is not possible to be adequately satisfied in that relationship, this choice is the result of much communication and consideration, not a single instance of setting a boundary. While it is also true that sexual incompatibility makes relationships difficult, they do not need to end because one desire was not able to be fulfilled. Healthy relationships can bend and flex to accommodate a wide variety (though not all) of disparate needs, both met and unmet, of the parties involved.

Jessie's work regarding this conversation is to get a sense of their own hard and soft boundaries. Jessie may be interested in trying something that they have never tried before, but they don't know if they will like it or not. Communicating their soft boundaries is important because it clues Alex into moments or acts that they should be cautious around or pay extra attention to. Some people use a traffic light as a metaphor for sexual boundaries—green means go (yes), red means stop (no), and yellow means proceed with caution.

When Jessie sets boundaries with Alex, both partners must respect the boundaries. This means that Alex does not try to go beyond the boundary while interacting with Jessie, and Jessie does not remove a boundary while interacting with Alex. Boundaries should not change during a sexual interaction, but that does not mean they can't ever change.

### ***Reflecting on Sexual Exploration***

This brings us to the last step of sexual exploration. Let's say that Alex and Jessie successfully discussed, planned, and engaged in a sexual interaction involving anal play. Now it's time to reflect on that experience together. What did they each like, not like, or wish was different? Had the interaction been what either of them expected? What do they want to do again? Is there a direction that they would like to explore further?

Importantly, Alex and Jessie need to revisit the issue of boundaries. Having had this experience together, has anything changed for either of them? Are any yellow lights now green or red? Were there any events that occurred that neither of them had anticipated but that they must now discuss? Boundaries evolve and change over time, so boundary conversations must be ongoing and revisited.

Now, let's suppose that Alex and Jessie's interaction did not go well. Alex, in the heat of the moment, tried something with Jessie that Jessie did not consent to. Jessie began to feel unsafe and stopped the encounter. Both Alex and Jessie are now upset. Before they can debrief and reflect on the experience, they need to reestablish their connection. Perhaps they hug, apologize, or share an intimate joke—something specific to their relationship that helps them feel connected to each other. When they are both ready to talk about what happened, they can discuss what took place, what about it hurt, and how they can prevent the situation from being repeated.



## Client Handout

# Practicing Sexual Communication

Think about your sex life. What do you wish your partner knew about your sexual satisfaction? What would improve your satisfaction? Pick one thing to talk to your partner about. Ideally, choose a topic that has value but is not the most important thing to you. This is practice, after all. Decide how you will connect at the end of the activity (e.g., hug, watch a show) before embarking on it. Choose which of you will speak first, and follow these steps.

### **Speaker:**

1. Identify what you want to do: express a concern, make a request, or set a boundary.
2. Ask permission to talk to your partner about it.
3. Be specific and clear in your communication; remember to use I-statements.
4. Ask for your partner's initial thoughts.
5. With your partner, decide when to discuss the topic again.

### **Listener:**

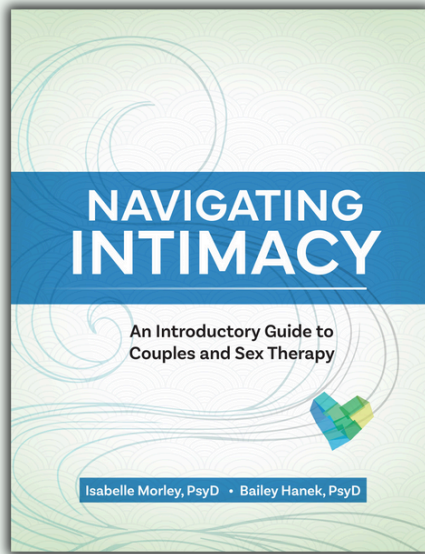
1. Listen to your partner calmly.
2. Ask for clarifying or additional information if needed.
3. Form a nonjudgmental response. If you are aware of where your boundaries are already, state them. If not, ask for time to process this new information.
4. With your partner, decide when to discuss the topic again.

Now, switch roles and repeat the exercise. Be sure to end the exercise with your prearranged activity.

### ***Practicing Sexual Communication Debrief***

Ask your clients to share what it was like to be so open and vulnerable with their partner. How did it feel to have their partner listen and respond calmly? What was it like to experience their partner trusting them enough to be honest? How did this conversation differ from previous conversations that they have had about sex?

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