

ASKING ABOUT SEXUAL ISSUES



DISCUSSING RESPECTFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

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INITIATING SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Frequency:

- Do you think you and your partner are sexually compatible? Why or why not, and in what ways? How long did it take to know about your sexual compatibility? Why did it take that amount of time to learn this?
- How and in what ways are your desire to have sex aligned with your partner? How and in what ways are they not?
- How and in what ways are there sexual disconnects between you and your partner? How did those develop?

Sexual Choices:

- What is the breakdown between how often you initiate sex, and how often your partner does? How and in what ways has that changed over the course of your relationship?
- How and in what ways have you discussed sexual desires with your partner? How and in what ways has your partner discussed their sexual desires with you? What barriers exist in your relationship in having these discussions?
- How important is foreplay to you? To your partner? How does foreplay bring you closer together, or distance you from your partner?
- Do you know your partner's sexual history? Have you communicated your sexual history with your partner in a transparent way? How have these conversations come up? How and in what way have you judged your partner's sexual history? Your partner of yours? For what reasons, and in what ways?

BIRTH CONTROL AND FAMILY PLANNING

Birth Control:

- How, and in what ways, did you and your partner initially discuss birth control? Were these discussions direct or indirect, and in what ways?
- Have there been any birth control challenges in your relationship? How were these navigated (disliking condoms, allergies, medical issues experienced due to birth control options, religious connections)?
- Where, and in what ways, do you take responsibility for your own reproductive choices? How, and in what ways, do you support your partner's reproductive choices?

Family Planning:

- How did you and your partner initially discuss having children?
- Were you on the same page, or did you have a different idea? If different, how and in what ways did you reach a decision together?
- How did your childhoods have similar and different dynamics (number of siblings, parental involvement, parenting decisions witnessed as a child)?
- What reasons did you and your partner have for your decisions on children?
- What challenges did you face in having children (if you have attempted to)?
- Did any trauma issues develop due to family planning issues (miscarriage, unintentional pregnancy, death of a child, abuse during pregnancy)?
- How, and in what ways, did you support your partner in having children?

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PARENTING DISCUSSIONS & GUIDING CHILDREN

Discussing sex with children is often challenging, as age-appropriate dynamics exist, and the topic needs to be discussed and planned as a part of communicating about parenting.

- What does it mean to you to discuss sex in an age-appropriate way? How comfortable are you in discussing sexual topics - in general? With your partner? With others? How and in what ways do you feel discomfort in the topics? Why do you think this discomfort exists for you?
- How and in what ways did you learn about sex when you were growing up? At what age? What messages did you receive from your parents about sex? How about your partner?
- How and in what ways can you increase your comfort in discussing sexual topics? How can such topics become a part of your co-parenting strategies?
- Describe what it means for you to love and protect your children? How do your conversations about sex fit into this idea of loving and protecting? How and in what ways do you think your behavior based on this is felt as loving and protecting by your children or partner?
- How do you describe the difference between sexual harm and sexual health? In what ways do your descriptions fit into your sexual relationships? How and in what ways have you engaged in harmful sexual behavior without understanding that it was harmful? What led you to recognize these harms? How and in what ways have you had sexual healthy patterns in your relationships? How and in what ways do these questions fit into having sexual discussions with your children?

COMMUNICATION ABOUT AND WITH EX-PARTNERS

General Components of Ex-Partner(s) Communication:

- How and in what ways does the topic come up?
- Are references positive, neutral, or negative - and for what purposes?
- How and in what ways do you discuss relationship histories with your partner? Who initiates, for what reasons, how does this impact the relationship with your current partner?
- How and in what ways do you have connections with ex-partners? How and in what ways does your partner have connections with ex-partners?
- How and in what ways have previous relationships ended?
- Have you had any sexual connection with an ex-partner since the relationship ended? If so, were you in a new or developing relationship at that time?
- How and in what ways have previous relationships ended? What were respectful dynamics in this process, and what were disrespectful dynamics?

Questions Specific to Children with Ex-Partner(s):

- How and in what ways is your current partner involved with your children?
- How and in what ways do you navigate child custody with your ex-partner?
- Is your current partner threatened by your connection to your ex-partner and your children? If so, how and in what ways? How and in what ways do you support your current partner in this?
- Do you have transparency with your current partner about any financial arrangements with your ex-partner and children? How do you describe this transparency, and if you are not transparent with your current partner, why do you not communicate these dynamics?
- How and to what extent is your current partner involved in parenting your children you have with an ex-partner?

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PAST SEXUAL HARMS AND TRAUMA ISSUES

For BIP Participants:

- If a participant in BIP has past sexual harms & trauma issues, how and in what way was this brought to your attention?
- How does the individual discuss this in the context of their relationship behavior?
- What sources of support does the participant have for addressing and working through these traumatic experiences?
- If this dynamic exists, how much hurtful behavior is related to poor self-care and distance from a partner?

For Victims/Survivors:

- How and in what ways does the participant offer compassionate support/care of their partner over this and other previous harms? How do they understand trauma? Does the participant also have trauma issues, and if so how do these interact?
- Remember - sexual harms and trauma may lead to toxic acting out of sexual harms, such as desired pain during sex, resistance toward a partner who is not abusive, oversexualized behavior, and challenges with sexual boundaries both with a partner and others
- How can you keep from victim-blaming in cases where a participant is describing their partner engaging in traumatic responses within their relationship? Is the participant aware of these dynamics?
- Does the victim/survivor have suspicions of the participant due to previous experience with a cheating partner? If so, how can this be navigated with respect and health? Have the participant's harmful behavior been in part a response to these accusations, and if so, how has that exacerbated the problem?
- Has the participant and/or victims/survivor received previous counseling/therapy, and if so, how did they experience this therapeutic support? What dynamics may have been learned in these settings that might complicate BIP classes?
- How and in what ways can tools from family systems theory be brought to bear in these contexts, and how might they fit in problematic ways? (ACOA characteristics, toxic interaction dynamics, repairs of damage)

METHODS OF ANALYZING HARMFUL BEHAVIOR

Context:

(Perspectives Structuring Events)

- What situation was occurring at the time of the behavior?
- How did others understand situations?
- Was there an agreed perspective?
- How was this agreement reached?
- What is the history and/or pattern of behavior that informs the context?

Impact:

(Changes Made to Lives & Perspectives)

- How was the other person impacted by the behavior?
- What was the end result of the situation?
- Impacts are about others, not about the individual who caused harm, so where is the focus of the story/situation?

Intent:

(Planning & Intentional Purpose)

- What did the individual want to happen as a result of the behavior?
- What were overall and specific motives?
- This component only matters in the mind of the individual causing harm and is often impossible for the other person to understand - is there an overemphasis on intent as a reasoning for the harm, rather than a focus on how to repair the impact on others?



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IRRITATING AND ALIENATING SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

EVERYDAY HARMS THAT EVOLVE OVER TIME

Considering that hurtful behavior is layered, it is a trap for people to think only of the tip of the iceberg of harm. Harm builds over time, and things at the top tend to have echos of the past that started and built gradually.

Questions to Ask:

- What things do you do that frustrate or irritate your partner, in an everyday sense, that are more low-level harms in your relationship?
- How and in what ways does your partner do things that irritate you, and how do you respond to them?
- How often do bigger arguments evolve from small irritations, and in what ways?
- How, and in what ways, have you voiced irritation about sexual issues in your relationship? How does your partner do so, and how do you respond?
- How and in what small ways do you push your partner away emotionally? Mentally? Physically? Sexually?
- What is important to your partner, sexually, that is not important to you? What is important to you, sexually, that is not important to your partner, and how do you respond to this?

SOME EXAMPLES OF IRRITATING & ALIENATING SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

- Differences in desired frequency
- Flirting behavior
- Acting insecure about the relationship
- Selfish sexual behavior
- Sexual insensitivity to other's desires, boundaries, physical space
- Pressuring for sexual behavior
- Not engaging in loving touch / engaging too much
- Using pornography in ways partner does not like
- Causing sexual discomfort (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual)
- Talking about / comparing past sexual experiences
- Public displays of affection
- Hygiene issues causing disgust in partner
- Making assumptions about partner's desires or interests
- Not discussing sexual behavior within an intimate relationship
- Dismissive, disrespectful, hurtful comments about partner's body

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CONTROLLING SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

MAKING PEOPLE DO THINGS OR KEEPING PEOPLE FROM DOING THINGS

Many irritating/alienating behavior become controlling once the individual is aware that the behavior causes that harm in their partner. At that point, continuing the behavior may be an attempt to make their partner accept behavior they do not like. This is an inherent part of negotiating space and identity in a all relationships. It is not inherently abusive or violent to refuse to stop a certain behavior, although the consequence could be ongoing problems or discontent.

Questions to Ask:

- How and in what ways do you pressure your partner sexually? How do you respond if your partner fails to respond to your pressure?
- How and in what ways has your failure to communicate about sexual issues contributed to issues in your relationship?
- How and in what ways has your partner attempted to communicate sexual desires where you have refused to respond? Describe your reasons for not responding.
- How and to what degree does loving touch and affection play into your relationship? How and in what ways do you and your partner have different levels of desire for affection?
- In your relationship, how has irritating or alienating behavior turned into control?

SOME EXAMPLES OF CONTROLLING SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

- Confiding emotional/mental energy in someone other than an intimate partner, particularly if it is a part of developing an emotional affair (grooming-based flirting behavior)
- Jealousy, while a natural/neutral emotion, can turn into controlling behavior if it shifts into accusations/assumptions or becomes petulant
- Pressuring behavior or violating sexual boundaries until your partner will acquiesce
- Pushing partner to provide details of sexual behavior from their past
- Compelling partner to engage in sexual fantasies they are not interested in
- Trading sexual favors for common responsibilities
- Refusing to discuss sexual desires or content when a partner wants to do so
- Making assumptions, avoiding, or pushing family planning decisions/discussions
- Resisting commitment to a relationship if a partner wants it, but not being open and transparent if disinterested
- Enforcing religious beliefs about sexual behavior when partner disagrees or manipulating religious texts to pressure
- Failing to notice, appreciate, ask about, or acknowledge partner's sexual boundaries



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ABUSIVE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

UNINTENTIONALLY CAUSING PAIN AND/OR FEAR

Controlling behavior easily becomes abusive, particularly if there is an imbalance in control within the relationship. Abusive behavior evolves control into causing fear and/or pain.

Nuances between "harm" and "pain/fear" are great, and why it is necessary to consider CONTEXT, IMPACT, and INTENT. Impact is most important to consider with abuse, as intent could be explored to determine if a behavior might be an intentional violation. Many examples of abuse are borderline violent, and a desire to or knowing behavior will cause pain/fear but choosing to do it anyway will instead make that same behavior violent.

Questions to Ask:

- How and in what ways have you caused fear in your partner, but did not mean to? Unintentionally causing unwanted pain?
- How has unintentional fear or pain impacted your sexual relationship with your partner?
- How and in what ways have you dismissed your partner's complaints about your behavior because you didn't mean to do it? How has that impacted your relationship?
- How and in what ways have you attempted to repair unintentional harms in ineffective ways? Why do you think they were ineffective?

SOME EXAMPLES OF ABUSIVE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

- "Make-up" sex where someone does not feel safe to refuse
- Progression of emotional affairs
- Following partner as a progression of jealousy (potential or actual stalking behavior, where intent is nebulous)
- Sexual humiliation as a part of engaging in sexual desires a partner does not share, or violating an unknown sexual boundary
- Using pornography when a partner is explicitly against its use
- Negatively comparing partner to prior sexual partners
- Dismissing or demeaning partner's past history of sexual harms, the partner's experience of trauma as a result, or failure to support partner against previous perpetrators
- Any BDSM behavior without full consent and comfort
- Cheating on partner physically while under the influence



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VIOLENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR



INTENTIONALLY CAUSING SEXUAL PAIN AND/OR FEAR

Since violence and abuse are identical to victims/survivors, the nuance is better considered as a method of assisting perpetrators in understanding how to make repairs. For abuse, the repairs are often to validate and not to explain motive or intent, or to only do so after validating the pain and fear and working to understand it. As violence is intentional, addressing pain and fear is important, but also working to understand and dismantle entitlement behind the motive as well as the disconnect from the relationship that allowed violent behavior to build to that point.

Questions to Ask:

- How and in what ways have you meant to make your partner upset, afraid, or to experience some sort of pain? For what reasons, and how did those reasons justify your behavior?
- How and in what ways have you attempted to get revenge on your partner? What impact did that have on your partner?
- How and in what ways has your intentional harm toward your partner impacted how you think about your relationship?
- How and in what ways did your intentional harm toward your partner impact your sexual relationship? What changed in your partner's behavior toward you? Your behavior toward your partner?
- How and in what ways have you intentionally used your partner's use of medications or drugs to take advantage of their altered state? How and in what ways have you given your partner drugs or medications without them knowing?

SOME EXAMPLES OF VIOLENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

- Sexual/emotional affairs (including finding a new partner before ending a relationship)
- Sharing sexual secrets to intentionally shame, embarrass partner, or damage future relationships
- Posting explicit photographs or videos of partner online without consent
- Spending money on an illicit affair, where such monetary expense causes financial pain to a partner or family
- Physically forcing partner to engage in sexual behavior the partner is not okay with
- Giving partner an STD/STI due to sexual affairs or IDU behavior (this is physical violence)
- Lying about contact with ex-partners when knowing a partner is upset by this contact
- Threatening religious consequences for not engaging in sexual behavior
- Enforcing strict gender roles a partner does not agree with
- Reproductive coercion (several kinds, may vary in context and not be violent if it does not cause pain/fear)
- Drug facilitated sexual assault

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SEXUAL INCLUSIVENESS

LISTENING, INQUIRING, & INCORPORATING

Within an intimate relationship, sexual inclusiveness has to do with listening and inquiring about a partner's desires, adapting your boundaries to mix with your partner's (or discussing them openly), and making decisions together about issues related to sexual expressiveness. It is working to actively engage with a partner about sexual desire, to include different communication and pleasure that is shared.

Questions to Ask:

- How and in what ways do you ask your partner questions about their sexual interests, desires, and incorporate those into your affection and intimacy?
- What sexual behavior do you know that you and your partner both enjoy, and how do you foster that connection? How do you know that you both enjoy this sexual expression?
- How and in what ways have you incorporated your partner's sexual desires (that are different from your own) into your intimate relationship?
- How and in what ways do you accept and encourage your partner's sexual boundaries, and how and in what ways do you communicate your own boundaries?
- What sexual expressions, beyond intercourse, bring you and your partner closer together? How and in what ways does that build your connection to your partner?

SOME EXAMPLES OF SEXUAL INCLUSIVENESS

- Discussing your sexual interests and desires without pressuring your partner
- Making family planning decisions together, such as choices to have or not have children, birth control, attachment to ex-partners, etc.
- Compliments toward partner about affection, physical characteristics, and noticing the difference between what your partner provides as a service to you and what unique traits make your partner special
- Making sure you understand your partner's desires before acting on them
- Recognize that sexual frequency differences go through phases, and honoring your partner's boundaries as a part of that process
- Showing affection beyond sexual intercourse
- Foster connections that both include and are beyond sexual connections
- Navigating sexual-based conversations in ways that are not judgmental, but rather express curiosity and connection to your partner's life and desires
- If you have experienced sexual harms, take proper self-care steps and discuss with your partner. If your partner has sexual harms, be supportive of your partner's self-care needs

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SEXUAL TRANSPARENCY

OPENNESS AND REFLECTION ABOUT VALUES, HISTORIES, & INTENTIONS

Healthy and respectful sexual behavior requires that partners communicate their boundaries, desires, and history related to their sexual intimacy. Transparency partially requires individuals to know themselves and be able to reflect on their own needs and interests, which can complicate relationships in a number of ways if one partner is not reflective or mindful. Transparency builds intimacy in a relationship, so when it builds and flourishes, so can your relationship, but alternately if transparency is limited or does not exist it is much more challenging to be emotionally / mentally / spiritually intimate with a partner.

Questions to Ask:

- How and in what ways do you discuss your sexual history with your current partner in transparent ways? What details are you hesitant to share, and for what reasons? How might these details be relevant to your current partner, and in what ways might they be irrelevant, and for what reasons?
- How and in what ways do you discuss your current intentions surrounding your sexual behavior? If this includes use of pornography, how and in what ways do you navigate that sexual behavior with your partner?
- What are your values and traditions about sexual expression, and how and in what ways do you discuss these with your partner? How do you teach sexual values/traditions with your children, and how do you navigate this with your partner?

SOME EXAMPLES OF SEXUAL TRANSPARENCY

- Learning about the compatibility between you and your partner before making greater commitments
- Discussing sexual history and desired relationship configuration at an appropriate time (preferably before certain sexual behavior occurs)
- If you have a non-monogamous preference, be transparent about that as early as possible to make sure that is compatible with your partner
- Transparent discussions about values behind pornography use
- Planning strategies of discussing age-appropriate sexual children's education with your partner
- Communicate your sexual boundaries and notice your partner's boundaries
- Filter negative self-talk regarding sexual issues with your partner and either productively and respectfully discuss or find an appropriate outlet to work past it
- Understand and acknowledge that trusting behavior in areas beyond sex impact your sexual relationship with your partner
- When feeling jealousy, express it respectfully, be reflective about that jealousy, or identify it as negative self-talk and change those thoughts



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SEXUAL SUPPORTIVENESS

SUPPORTING DESIRES AND PLEASURE INCLUDING AND BEYOND PHYSICAL PLEASURES

Being supportive of your partner is an important part of relationship health and respect overall, when it comes to sexual intimacy, being supportive (as opposed to entitled) involves several verbal and nonverbal interactions that demonstrate care and create comfort.

Questions to Ask:

- How and in what ways do you support your partner's sexual desires, needs, and interests that are different than you own?
- What does it mean to you to accommodate your partner both sexually and beyond? How can you increase your ability to accommodate your partner's needs, including self-care, and connections to you and others? What does this have to do with your sexual relationship with your partner?
- How and in what ways do your self-care needs complement your partner's? Detract from your partner's? How and in what ways do you manage to connect your needs together?
- Where and in what ways does your emotional, mental, and spiritual support of your partner impact your sexual relationship with your partner?

SOME EXAMPLES OF SEXUAL SUPPORTIVENESS

- Practice non-judgment about your partner's sexual desires, and of your own
- Practicing loving touch your partner appreciates
- Supportiveness of partner's desired sexual frequency
- Negotiation and compromise in meeting sexual desires
- Giving pleasure to your partner without making it about you
- Supporting any self-pleasuring desires your partner might have, and acknowledging your own
- Openness to evolution of your relationship's development both with sexual-based changes and beyond
- Creating space for your partner's physical comfort both including and beyond sexual behavior
- Activities that involve a variety of affections for your partner
- Negotiating religious practices regarding sexual behavior as partners, making joint decisions
- Understand how your partner most feels loved and work to provide that (may not be physical)
- Asking about your partner's sexual interests when expressed, providing information about your sexual interests before expressing them if they may conflict
- Work to understand any trauma or damage your partner may have experienced due to sexual harms in the past, and support your partner's methods of coping and healing
- If your relationship ends up being sexually incompatible, work toward mutual support or respectful endings to the relationship, particularly if the incompatibilities are extensive

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