

THE ADULTING VAULT

# Consent and Healthy Relationships

*What Good Looks Like, and How to Recognize What Does Not*

*Everything They Forgot to Tell You*

Consent is usually taught as a single rule about sex, which leaves out almost everything useful. It is a practice that runs through an entire relationship — how decisions get made, whether a no costs you something, whether you can change your mind. This guide covers consent properly, describes what a functioning relationship actually looks like day to day, and names the patterns that indicate something has gone wrong. That last part is written carefully, because the patterns are easier to see in a list than from the inside.



## Please Read This First

---

This guide is general educational information, not medical advice. It is not a substitute for diagnosis, treatment, or care from a qualified clinician who knows your history. Nothing here creates a provider-patient relationship. Do not delay seeking care, or disregard advice you have been given, because of something you read here. If you think you may have a medical emergency, call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department.

### CURRENCY OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is general educational information about relationships and consent. It is not legal advice, therapy, or a risk assessment. Legal definitions of consent and of abuse vary by state. If you are trying to assess your own safety, a trained advocate — free, confidential, and available 24 hours a day through the resources listed in Part Five — can help far better than any written guide.

## Part One: Consent, Properly

*Five conditions. Miss one and it is not consent.*

| Condition    | What it means                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Freely given | Without pressure, guilt, threat, or wearing someone down. Repeated asking until they give in is not agreement.                                          |
| Reversible   | Anyone can change their mind at any point, including partway through, including after saying yes.                                                       |
| Informed     | Based on accurate information. Lying about something material — a condition, a barrier method, another partner — undermines the consent that was given. |
| Enthusiastic | Actively wanted, not merely tolerated. The absence of a no is not a yes.                                                                                |
| Specific     | To this, now. Agreeing to one thing is not agreeing to another, and last time is not this time.                                                         |

**THE TWO THAT GET OVERLOOKED**

**REVERSIBLE** — "you already said yes" is not an argument. Consent withdrawn is consent ended, at any point and for any reason or none.

**FREELY GIVEN** — consent cannot be given by someone who is incapacitated by alcohol, drugs, or sleep. It is also compromised where there is a significant power difference, which is why relationships between a manager and a report, or a teacher and a student, are treated differently.

### Stealthing

Removing or tampering with a condom without a partner's knowledge violates the consent that was given, because what was agreed to is not what happened. It is treated as a criminal or civil offense in a growing number of jurisdictions, and it is worth naming plainly because people who do it frequently do not think of it as a violation.

### Consent outside of sex

The same principle governs a great deal of ordinary relating, and noticing it there is what makes it recognizable in higher-stakes moments.

- Sharing something someone told you in confidence
- Posting a photo of someone without asking

The Adulting Vault · Everything They Forgot to Tell You

- Physical contact — hugs, touching, tickling, including with children
- Committing someone to plans on their behalf
- Looking through someone's phone
- Giving someone's contact details to a third party

A relationship where these small consents are respected is one where the larger ones generally are too. A relationship where they are routinely overridden is telling you something.

## Part Two: What Healthy Actually Looks Like

*Less romantic than the films, and considerably more comfortable.*

People are taught extensively what unhealthy looks like and almost nothing about the alternative, which makes it hard to know whether what you have is fine. Here is a working description.

| Marker                                                                       | In practice                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A no costs nothing                                                           | You can decline — sex, plans, a request — without punishment, sulking, or a price paid later.                    |
| Separate lives persist                                                       | You both keep friends, interests, and family. Time apart is unremarkable rather than negotiated.                 |
| Conflict resolves                                                            | Disagreements happen, get discussed, and end. They do not go underground or reappear as ammunition months later. |
| Repair happens                                                               | Both of you can apologize without it becoming a performance or a bargaining chip.                                |
| Money is transparent                                                         | Neither person controls the other's access to money or requires an account of every expense.                     |
| You are the same person                                                      | Your personality, opinions, and humor do not change depending on their mood.                                     |
| You can be wrong                                                             | Making a mistake produces a conversation, not a punishment.                                                      |
| Growth is welcome                                                            | Your success is good news to them rather than a threat.                                                          |
| <b>THE MOST USEFUL SINGLE QUESTION</b>                                       |                                                                                                                  |
| Are you more yourself in this relationship, or less?                         |                                                                                                                  |
| People frequently cannot name what is wrong but can answer that immediately. |                                                                                                                  |

### Ordinary friction is not a warning sign

Every relationship has arguments, bad weeks, irritating habits, and periods of distance. Conflict is not the signal. The signal is the pattern — whether things resolve, whether both people are safe to be honest, and whether it costs you something to have needs.

## Part Three: Communication That Works

---

*Three habits that do most of the work.*

### **Describe rather than diagnose**

"You always ignore me" is a diagnosis and produces defense. "When I brought that up twice and it did not get picked up, I felt like it did not matter" is a description and produces conversation.

### **Ask before assuming**

A large share of relationship conflict is two people responding to intentions they invented. "What did you mean by that?" is unglamorous and resolves an enormous amount.

### **Say what you want**

Hinting, going quiet, and expecting to be understood are strategies people learn where directness was unsafe. They rarely work with someone who is not monitoring you for signs of displeasure. Being direct feels risky and is usually easier for both people.

**What is something I want that I have never actually said out loud?**

---

### **Repair**

The ability to repair after conflict matters more than the ability to avoid it. A real apology names the specific thing, does not attach an excuse, and changes something. "I am sorry you felt that way" is not an apology; it is a rephrasing of the complaint.

## Part Four: Patterns Worth Recognizing

*Written as a list because these are much harder to see from inside.*

Controlling behavior rarely arrives as an obvious event. It usually accumulates, each step small enough to explain away, until the situation is one you would never have agreed to at the start.

### Early patterns

| Pattern                    | How it presents                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Intensity very fast        | Overwhelming attention, declarations, and pressure to commit early. Feels flattering. Compresses the time you would have used to assess someone. |
| Boundary testing           | Small limits ignored, then framed as a joke or as passion. Establishes that your no is negotiable.                                               |
| Isolation, gradually       | Criticism of your friends and family, tension whenever you see them, until it becomes easier to stop.                                            |
| Monitoring, framed as care | Wanting your location, your phone, your messages — presented as closeness rather than surveillance.                                              |
| Jealousy as proof of love  | Reframing possessiveness as the depth of their feeling.                                                                                          |
| You start managing them    | Adjusting your behavior to prevent a reaction. Often the first thing that changes, and the last thing people notice.                             |

### Established patterns

- Being made to doubt your own memory of events that you clearly remember
- Financial control — restricted access to money, an accounting demanded of every expense, work sabotaged, debt taken in your name
- Threats of any kind, including threats of self-harm if you leave
- Any physical force, or fear of it, including blocking a door or driving dangerously
- Pressure or coercion around sex, or consequences for declining
- Punishment following any attempt to assert a limit
- A cycle: an incident, then remorse and warmth, then rising tension, then another incident

### TWO THINGS WORTH SAYING DIRECTLY

It does not have to be physical to be abuse. Coercive control — monitoring, isolation, financial restriction, and intimidation — is recognized as abuse in its own right, and is treated as a criminal offense in a number of jurisdictions.

Recognizing yourself in this list does not mean you have to do anything today. It means it is worth talking to someone trained, who will not push you.



## Part Five: Where to Get Help

*Free, confidential, and available whether or not you are ready to change anything.*

### SUPPORT LINES

National Domestic Violence Hotline — call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), chat at [thehotline.org](https://thehotline.org), or text START to 88788. Free and confidential, 24 hours a day, with support in over 200 languages.

StrongHearts Native Helpline — 1-844-762-8483, culturally specific support for Native American and Alaska Native communities.

Deaf Hotline — video phone 1-855-812-1001.

In immediate danger, call 911 if it is safe to do so.

For distress or thoughts of self-harm, call or text 988, or chat at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org).

### A note on digital safety

- If your device may be monitored, use a different device — a library computer, a friend's phone
- Clear your browser history after visiting support sites, or use a private browsing window
- Most support organizations put a quick-exit button on their pages for this reason
- Check for location sharing and shared accounts, which are frequently forgotten

### What advocates actually do

They do not tell you to leave, do not require you to make a report, and do not need you to have decided anything. They listen, help you think it through, explain options including ones you did not know existed, and know what is available where you live.

Leaving is also the period of highest risk in many situations, which is why safety planning with someone trained matters more than acting quickly on your own.

### If someone tells you

- Believe them. Disbelief is the most common reason people stop telling anyone
- Do not issue ultimatums about leaving. It tends to isolate them further from you
- Ask what would help rather than deciding

- Stay in contact even if they stay. Being the person still there matters enormously later
- Give them the hotline number and let them use it in their own time

## Closing

---

The reason consent is worth understanding as a practice rather than a rule is that it gives you something to check against continuously. Not only in the obvious moments, but in whether your no still works, whether you can change your mind, and whether you are as much yourself as you were.

Most relationships that go wrong do so gradually, and the people in them are not naive — they are responding reasonably to each individual step. Which is exactly why a list like Part Four is useful, and why talking to someone outside it helps more than thinking harder from inside it.

### KEEP THIS SOMEWHERE

National Domestic Violence Hotline — 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) · [thehotline.org](https://thehotline.org) · text START to 88788

StrongHearts Native Helpline — 1-844-762-8483

Deaf Hotline — video phone 1-855-812-1001

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988