By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Identify and describe models of communication; and,
- Explain why identifying personal desires and boundaries is an important component of sexuality.

We’ve spent a lot of time in this course talking about various aspects of communication and how they relate to sexuality.

Now we’re at the point where we’re going to give you some solid tools on how to actually communicate.

Why is it so hard to talk about sex?
Think back to how we’ve been socialized on this subject and what we’ve observed from our family, friends, partners, providers, and the media when they talk about sex. Sometimes it’s a struggle to find examples of healthy modeling. When it comes down to talking with a partner about sex, the experience can lead to all sorts of reactions. You may find yourself embarrassed, nervous, or filled with anxiety. You might be worried about how your partner might react or afraid of hurting your partner’s feelings, ruining the mood, or not knowing if you’re saying the right thing in the right way. These are all typical thoughts. You may feel especially vulnerable when you’re being so open and honest with another person. The best thing that you can do is to acknowledge these feelings and move on. We’re going to give you some strategies on how to tackle these issues in order to minimize future anxieties.
**Why is it so difficult to talk with partners about sexual pleasure, health or boundaries?**

**Video Transcripts**

Janelle: I think that it’s very difficult to have those kinds of conversations, with your partners because we are raised to not have those conversations.

Ty: Society has sort of built this idea that sex is simultaneously something to be ashamed of as well as placing this really huge amount of value on it. Like it—where sex defines the relationship.

Devyn: I think that part of our culture is not to talk about those things.

Janelle: Those kinds of conversations make you incredibly vulnerable if you’re being completely honest about what you want and what you don’t want. It puts you in a really vulnerable spot where somebody can either love you for it or just kind of toss you to the curb for it.

Maddy: You’re really letting someone in to the deepest insides and thoughts of your mind.

Devyn: I didn’t grow up learning how to set boundaries and talk about my sexuality and talk about what I might want in bed. And I don’t think that it’s something that we necessarily have the language to talk about all the time.

Luis: The fear of how the other person’s going to feel, is really what kind of makes people not as good at communicating those things.

Janelle: It’s also pretty uncomfortable because you have to be completely and utterly honest. But it’s important 'cause if you don’t do that, then you’re not gonna have good sex.

Nolan: The perception of sexual activity is that your partner should know exactly what he or she is doing. Every time I talk to people, if they’re not satisfied with sexual activity of their partner, instead of talking to them about it, they’ll complain about it. Because I think there’s just this common notion that, "Oh well, everybody else must know what's going on." And people feel either incompetent or they feel like they would offend somebody else by talking about what pleasures them. Or maybe they’re just embarrassed about talking about it.

Chris P: Just very recently, my wife revealed to me that I am apparently not that very great at going down on her. I thought I was great and I—She seemed like she was really digging it. You know, it took us 3 years to be able to have that conversation and be like, no, you know, I wish you would do this more. And I think it’s just because we have this expectation that you’re supposed to know it all. We don’t want to
Why is it so difficult to talk with partners about sexual pleasure, health or boundaries? Video Transcripts Cont’d…
Chris: … shame our partners. Like I really don’t like it when my wife sucks on my nipples. And I had—it was hard for me to tell her that ‘cause she seemed to really like it, and I didn’t want to stop her, but I was like, I just don’t like that. It doesn’t feel pleasurable to me; it kind of hurts. So, it was just, it was just hard ‘cause I didn’t want to hurt her feelings really.

The first strategy we’re going to talk about is the SPARK model.¹
We’ll be using this model to address a variety of communication topics. SPARK stands for:

Stay positive
Practice
Apply a variety of strategies, such as verbal, nonverbal, comical, or sexy
Relax and reassure
Keep it in the mood

An example of staying positive is acknowledging that your partner is probably also uncomfortable or nervous talking about sex. If you seem positive, your partner will pick up on that. Staying positive can also include praising your partner for doing things you enjoy. It will likely derail the conversation if you only point out what they are doing wrong. There is a difference between being constructive and being negative.

If you’ve got something you want to say to your partner, but you are worried it might not come out right, practice it!
This could be alone and in front of a mirror or web cam so you can see yourself talk, or it could be with a friend who can help give feedback or role-play with you. Just like public speaking or a class presentation, the more you practice, the more prepared you’ll feel.

When you’re communicating with your partner, try using different strategies.
So often we rely on one style, when we may forget that our partner could be more receptive to another style. Examples of verbal styles include: sexy, comical, clinical or formal, direct or assertive, aggressive, passive, and instructional. Examples of non-verbal styles include: physical, visual, and noises. These are just a few examples. Can you think of other styles?
Next, relax and reassure yourself that you can do this. If you’re relaxed, it’ll make it easier for you to convey what you want.

Finally, keep it in the mood. Tailor what you’re going to say to the situation. Are the two of you keeping it light and fun, straightforward, or really amorous? Make your language and tone fit the mood so that it’s a more natural part of the experience.

The next strategy we’re going to discuss is assertive communication. Let’s think about this strategy in comparison to passive and aggressive communication.

Not clearly stating what you want to happen, agreeing to something that you don’t really want, or just not saying anything at all characterizes passive communication. People who are afraid of being offensive or hurting other people’s feelings may use this style. An example of passive communication would be someone asking their partner if the oral sex they are performing feels good, and their partner replies, “It’s great!” when in fact they really aren’t enjoying the experience.

On the other end of the spectrum is aggressive communication. This style is characterized by the use of put-downs, threats, force, or coercion in order to get your way. People who are not afraid of how other folks interpret their actions may use this style. Going back to our original example about oral sex, an aggressive response would be “That was terrible, do you even know what you’re doing?!” Both of these styles are ineffective and sometimes unhealthy forms of communication that are not helpful in relationships.

Assertive communication is in the middle of the passive and aggressive styles. People who use assertive communication are clear, direct, and honest with their opinions, feelings, and desires, while still respecting the feelings and boundaries of the other person. Being clear and direct requires you to be specific; don’t beat around the bush. You don’t want the other person misinterpreting what you say. Compared to passive and aggressive styles, an assertive style is less likely to cause conflict or hurt feelings and may be better.
suited for talking about sex with your partner. An example of an assertive reply to our oral sex scenario would be, “I love that you want to make me feel good. Can I guide your hands to show you what has really gotten me off in the past?” In this example, you are focusing on the positive, not hurting the other person’s feelings, but are communicating what works for you while offering guidance.

**One form of assertive communication involves good ol’ I-statements.** The use of the word “you” when you’re talking with your partner can sometimes result in the other person feeling like you are blaming them and can stir defensiveness and conflict. When you replace you with I, you take the focus off of your partner, and instead direct it towards how you feel. The basic recipe for an I-statement is:

I feel _____ when___________ and I would like__________.

When you are delivering an I-statement, be conscious what your tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions are communicating. Sometimes, your language may be assertive, while your voice and body is giving off a passive or aggressive vibe. Where are your eyes looking? Do you have an open or closed body posture? Do the end of your sentences sound more like a question than a statement? Practicing in front of a mirror or with a friend can help you be aware of these other types of communication.

If the other person gets defensive or aggressive, step back and state what you want for the both of you. For example, “I want us to both be satisfied,” or “I would love it if we could work out this issue.”

**Another assertive strategy is the DESC model.**

This is generally used in conflict resolution or constructive feedback situations. The goal is to help the person either improve or sustain what they are doing. It’s not meant to make someone feel bad. DESC stands for:

**Describe** the behavior  
**Express** the impact  
**Specify** the new or continued behavior  
**Communicate the Consequence**

When describing the behavior, make sure it is actually a behavior and not an opinion. Be specific about your observations so that the other person knows exactly what is being addressed. Leave out any exaggerations and don’t try to attribute their motives—stick to the facts. Stay away from using words like never or always to describe behavior. You can use I-statements when expressing the
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Impact of the behavior. This impact could be personal or how the behavior is affecting you as a couple.

At this point, pause and let your partner respond. It gives them a chance to know that they aren’t just getting railroaded, but are actually a part of this conversation.

Next, specify what you want to see in the future. Remember, this model is not just for constructive feedback, but it’s also for reinforcing positive behavior. Follow this step by communicating the consequences of behavior, either what will happen if they don’t change, or what will happen if they do. Positive consequences are more effective than negative consequences. Finally, check in with your partner and listen to what they have to say. Find out if they have any questions and if they understood what you have said.

**Here is an example of using the DESC model.**

One partner could say:

“I’ve noticed that when we’re having sex you ask me what I want and check to see if I’m enjoying myself. When you do this, it makes me feel respected and I know that I can be honest with you.”

They should pause for feedback and only continue once their partner has had a chance to respond. After, they would continue:

“I would love for you to continue asking and listening to my desires. This will help me feel relaxed and better able to enjoy myself. I also think it brings us closer together as a couple.”

Finally, they would ask if their partner understands or has questions.

**When you’re on the receiving end of communication, be an active listener.**

That means really listening to the other person without any other distractions and not thinking about what you want to say next. You can show someone that you are actively listening by repeating back, paraphrasing, or reflecting what they have said. For example, “So what you’re trying to say is that you feel ________ when ________ and you’d like ________.”

It takes time and practice for people to work on their communication and there can be growing pains in the process. If your partner is using language that you
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interpret as blaming, be patient and try not to get defensive or aggressive. We realize that it’s sometimes easier said than done. It may help to take a moment to remove yourself from the situation and cool off before resuming the conversation.

One final model we want to mention is nonviolent communication.

This model is comprised of four components: observations, feelings, needs, and requests. In practice this model represents aspects of other models we have discussed. Further, it relies on the modes of self-empathy, receiving empathetically, and expressing honestly. While we feel like this model could be another valid tool in your toolbox, the concepts require more explanation than we can cover in this lesson. If you’d like to learn more, you may want to pick up a copy of the book Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Rosenberg and Gandhi.

Resource
Nonviolent Communication

Next, we’re going to do some work to make sure you’re prepared for sexual communication.

The first thing we want you to do is think about what sorts of sexual activities you enjoy or might want to try. Why is this important? We’ve all had times in our life when we’ve regretted something we’ve done or wished we would have gone through with something and didn’t. By consciously thinking ahead of time about what might be enjoyable to you, you’re more prepared once actually with a partner. You’re also more likely to be confident in your decisions because you’ve clarified them beforehand. When you pair that with the communication skills we’ve covered, you have the ability to clearly articulate your desires and boundaries. This can lead to more satisfying sexual encounters.

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