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

- Describe how to communicate consent and sexual pleasure;
- Identify strategies to negotiate barrier use; and,
- Describe how to talk about STIs, testing, and treatment with partners.

We've given you communication tools, now we're going to get into the real business of applying them to tough topics.

The first topics we’re going to discuss are sexual pleasure and consent. Imagine that you’re getting busy with your partner. They try to stimulate you, but it’s just not doing it for you. It seems so simple to tell them what you want—and you want to tell them—but you can’t actually get the words out. Maybe you hope that they will just know what to do and that it will happen eventually. The truth is you might be waiting a long time. Why is it so hard for us to actually communicate what we want or don’t want in the moment? It could be that we’re afraid that our partner will feel insulted or embarrassed. We might worry that we’ll ruin the mood. Or we may be uncomfortable using language or other non-verbal methods to get our point across.

Everyone has different communication styles; how they convey their wants and desires during sexual situations may be different from non-sexual scenarios. Let’s think about those worries from a different perspective. How is your partner supposed to know your sexual needs and desires if you don’t communicate those things with them? They aren’t a mind reader. Giving them something concrete to work with will help lessen their anxieties and make them more comfortable. They are no longer just guessing and trying a whole bunch of stuff, even though that can lead to some fun discoveries. While you might be worried about insulting them, a partner who respects you cares about your sexual enjoyment and is willing to take direction, as long as it doesn’t violate their boundaries. Finally, if you’re worried about ruining the mood, tailor your
language to the existing atmosphere so that it becomes a part of the experience, rather than a distraction. Really, communicating your innermost desires with your partner is a skill and can build intimacy over time.

We want to encourage you to review the communication models and strategies covered in the other communication lesson: SPARK, assertive communication, I-statements, and DESC. Some models will be better suited for certain types of communication, but they all have a variety of uses. It really depends on your own communication style and preferences.

**We have intentionally paired discussion of sexual pleasure with consent.**
Oftentimes, we think of consent as being addressed only in the context of sexual assault, which we will talk about in another lesson. In reality, consent is also a vital component of sexual pleasure. Have you ever had a pleasurable sexual experience that you didn’t consent to? We bet the odds are pretty low.

**But what does consent even mean? It’s a clear and enthusiastic yes!**

Does that mean you have to say, “I consent to you kissing me! I consent to you touching my breasts, penis, anus, or whatever!” and then continuing that process throughout the entire experience? Well, it doesn’t have to necessarily be like that. Remember, you can communicate in both verbal and non-verbal ways. By saying what you want, you’re consenting to that activity. For example, if you want to receive oral sex you could say, “It would really put me over the edge if you would go down on me.” Or, for example, if your partner asks you to perform oral sex on them, you can consent by seductively saying, “I can’t wait to go down on you.” Both are examples of a clear and enthusiastic yes! How would you do this using non-verbal techniques? You could gently nudge your partner’s head towards your genitals. If they are already in that general vicinity, you could rock your hips towards their mouth or make moaning or grunting noises as they approach the area. As an added bonus, feel free to throw in some positive reinforcement after an enjoyable session to let your partner know you appreciated what went on.

**Sexual communication and consent are an ongoing conversation throughout the experience.**
Just because you consent to one activity does not mean that you want to do everything your partner suggests and vice versa. Consistently checking in with
your partner can make sure that you’re both on the same page. That could be as simple as asking, “Does this feel good?” Another part of that conversation could be letting your partner know that you’re enjoying the experience by moaning, breathing heavy, arching your back, or sensuously whispering, “Yes!” and also looking for those cues from your partner.

**On the other hand, how do you know if you’re partner is not consenting?**

It may be subtle, like suggesting that you try another activity. Or it could be more direct like, “I’m not comfortable with that,” “I don’t want do to that,” or a simple “No.” It can be hard to actually say something and sometimes we have to rely on our partner’s non-verbal cues. Is the person physically responding to your touch, or are they motionless, pulling back, or turning away? What are their eyes telling you? Maybe you hear an “Ouch!” or an exasperated sigh. And sometimes, your partner may not communicate any noticeable verbal or non-verbal signs, and sometimes non-verbal signs can be difficult to interpret. That’s why being an attentive partner means checking in. Really, you should get in the habit of relying on verbal communication to make sure there is consent. That way you’re less likely to misinterpret what is going on.

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**Communicating Consent**

**Video Transcript**

Abby: For consent, communication is also really important. Especially in the beginning of a relationship, because I think that we are not great in our culture about consent and need to get better at what that looks like and what that means and making sure that our partners are consenting partners because that’s what we want for having a good sex life.

Maddy: You have to really check-in with the other person; it’s your responsibility to make sure that you are not violating that other person, that you are not making them feel uncomfortable.

Luis: If you want to initiate something maybe start the first 10% and then take it back a little bit. I think if somebody wants to engage in activity they’ll return the favor if you will.

Chris P: We will be cuddling or something like that and I will just touch her more sexually and she’ll just say, you know, she will sort of reciprocate or she won’t, and if she doesn’t reciprocate and then I stop.

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**Consent Communicate Video Transcript Cont’d…**

Abby: I think it’s easier for me to do, to communicate sexual desire through non-verbal. I think I usually move their hand or their head, move my body a certain way. And, you know, through happy sounds.
Chris P: I mean sometimes also we have been just verbal like, "Hey, wanna have sex? Yeah or no, not right now."
Ashlee: Well yeah, I mean you can give them hints. Like kind of encouraging them and kissing them and stuff, like you are kind of into it.
Maddy: If it's not obvious then, it shouldn't—if it's fuzzy, then you shouldn't proceed. You know what I mean?
Nolan: Instead of just playing this constant guessing game where, well does she want me to do this? Does he want me to do this or what do they really want? Then there is just no confusion.
Maddy: Because if you leave it up to the other person to tell you, you know, they are not necessary going to do that. To be safe and to really have a good sexual relationship with someone you have to be checking-in with them. And you have to make that a priority, otherwise it doesn't really seem like you care much about them.

Letting your partner know about your desires and needs is not just something that happens in the bedroom.

In many respects it’s actually easier to talk about these topics when you have your clothes on. How do you broach the subject? Get creative! If you’re watching a movie or TV show with a sex scene, point out to your partner what you like or don’t like in that scene. You could try going together to an erotic store that you both feel comfortable in and indicate what each of you would buy if money weren’t an object. Page through some books on sexual techniques and flag the activities you may want to try. By bringing up the subject in more playful ways, it takes some of the pressure off of the situation.
How do you initiate a conversation about sex?

Video Transcripts

Danica: You just think about it for a couple of seconds and just say it before you can think twice about it. And once you say that first thing and get the ball rolling, it's super easy to just continue a conversation.

Jess: I am super verbal like I'll just be like, “hey, I would like it if you did this instead” or “I don’t really like that” or “I feel uncomfortable.”

Andrew: I like to bring it up after kind of a normal round of sex. Like just laying bed when your clothes are off because you're at your most vulnerable at that point. And that's when you can kind of talk about things that you'll want to do next time.

Luis: Make sure that when you're communicating something. It's at a time where you're both at a high level. No one's feeling depressed; no one's feeling angry; no one's feeling down.

Laura: First of all, make sure you're sober.

Janelle: Knowing that I'm going to have sex with someone and saying, “I need to have a conversation with you.” And then awkwardly sitting down together. I typically make food when I'm uncomfortable, so sitting down to a meal and then, being as blunt and honest as possible. It's not very cute to be eating chili and be like, "So, how interested are you in anal sex?"

Luis: If you can establish that openness early, then it'll make things a lot easier once you hit a point where you really feel like you need a serious discussion about sex.

Maddy: If something is really bothering me, I usually write down what it is I want to talk to them about before I talk to them. So, I'll sort of, kind of know how to get the wording right.

Devyn: We have safe words. So, our safe word is patriarchy. And if you're having sex and somebody says, “Patriarchy,” it's kind of like the biggest turn off in the world.

Laura: Don't wait until you're actually in bed, you know, warming up or getting ready to have sex to bring the topic up.

Maddy: I'm pretty comfortable with it so I usually just bring it up. And I say, “Hey, we’re having sex, this is really important.” And if the person I’m with doesn’t.

What if in the process, your partner says they want to try something that you’re really not into?

This can be a delicate situation. In some respects, there should be some give and take so that you both feel sexually fulfilled. On the other hand, no one should ever pressure you into something you don’t want to do. If your partner does have a request, take some time to think about why you have objections. Does it violate one of your sexual rules or boundaries? Are you afraid that it will hurt or won’t be pleasurable? Do you feel clueless because you don’t know
how to do it? Does it pose any emotional risk? Next, decide if there are ways to mitigate or overcome those hang-ups. If it has to do with stimulation, are there ways to make it more comfortable or pleasurable for you? Can you find books, videos, or other Internet resources to provide helpful instructional hints? Have a conversation with your partner about how important this activity is and how both of you are feeling. Analyzing all of these factors can help you make a decision you can be comfortable with, which will assist you in communicating that choice with your partner.

In the same way, if your partner tells you they aren’t comfortable doing something, respect their decision. It’s not personal. Remember, it takes two people to consent to an enjoyable sexual experience.

How do you communicate boundaries?

Video Transcript

Janelle: If you’re doing something and it was really quick and I didn’t realize it was happening and I realize that it’s going on and now I’m uncomfortable, you need to notice when I’m like, tense. So, I need to trust my partner to do that, and if/when I notice it, I say, "Stop now, please." Then, I expect them to stop. And for us to kind of take a break and for me to tell them why I am uncomfortable with that.

Luis: If you don’t feel like having sex, and you kind of feel pressured by your partner, sometimes the best thing you can do is maybe move away from the situation and verbalize it in a way that they understand.

Andrew: In the moment if you’re not comfortable with something, you just have to kind of say it. I mean you can try and I don’t know like, change position or try to get out of it a little bit, but eventually just speak up and say, "Hey, I’m not comfortable with that. Let’s do something else." Or maybe just suggest something else.

Janelle: I expect my partner to ask me what I am okay with and what I’m not okay with, and if they don’t ask me, then I will be like, "I am okay with this!" or "I’m not okay with that." And what my hard no’s are and what my soft no’s are. Hard no’s being like, "Absolutely not, don’t do that." And soft no being, "If you want to do that when we are in the situation, you can ask, and I’ll give you like an answer, and I expect you to respect that."

Aoife: If somebody is saying, "Ehhh, I don't know," then it's probably a big indicator that they are uncomfortable with it. And depending on how important something is to you...

How do you communicate boundaries? Video Transcript cont’d...
Aoife: ... to continue that conversation and be like, "Oh, what is it about it that's uncomfortable for you" to see if it's something that they just don't understand or they hadn't experienced before or if it is something they are truly not interested in or it's like a trigger for them in some way. And then you know where you can like, continue a conversation and where things might progress or where, you know, it is just a boundary for them. And you have to respect that.

There are going to be some things that you are just not willing to do. These are your boundaries.
Two key examples of typical boundaries have to do with STI and pregnancy prevention. Remember, sexual health is a human right and you have the right to protect yourself from disease and pregnancy.

First, let's talk about barrier methods like condoms, dams, and gloves.
Like sexual pleasure, you can communicate that you want to use a barrier in a variety of ways. A verbal response could be direct, like "Should we use my condom, dam, or glove, or yours?" or sexy and funny such as, "The only thing I want to come between us is a thin sheet of latex." Non-verbal messages can be as simple as putting the barrier on yourself, or putting it on your partner without any discussion. With some practice, you could even use your mouth to put an external condom on a penis or dildo. We'd recommend practicing on an inanimate object beforehand so that it goes smoothly in the moment. Remember, you still must pinch the tip, make sure to guard your teeth, and feel free to use your hands to assist.

Why might a person not insist on using barriers?
A partner may:
• feel anxious or embarrassed,
• not want their partner to think they don’t trust them,
• are using another form of contraception,
• not have barriers readily available,
• not feel like they are at risk, or
• believe that barriers ruin the moment or don’t feel good.

Here is a list of reasons that a partner might give for not wanting to use a barrier and possible responses.
# Barrier Negotiation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What your partner says:</th>
<th>What you can say in response:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I’m already using birth control.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I’m happy that we’ve got that covered, but using barriers helps protect us from STIs.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;But I’m negative for STIs.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;That’s awesome that you’ve been tested, but not all STIs show symptoms that can be tested for. Using a barrier helps us cover our bases just in case.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I don’t have a condom, dam, or glove.*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;That’s okay, because I do!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;But just this once?&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;It only takes one time.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It doesn’t feel as good when I use one.*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Let’s take our time and have fun finding the right one for you. We can experiment with flavors, textures, scents, and lube.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;They ruin the mood and take too long to use.*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Let me give you a helping hand and put it on* or &quot;Will you help me put it on?* or &quot;It ruins my mood if we don’t use one.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Don’t you trust me?*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;This is not about trust. I want to make sure we’re both safe, and using one helps me feel comfortable and better able to enjoy myself.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We haven’t used one before. Why now?*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I want to start making sure that we’re both having enjoyable experiences without having to worry about anything.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;But I’ve never been with anyone else.*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;It would allow me to focus on helping you enjoy your first time if we’ve got barriers taken care of.*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep in mind the communication methods that have already been addressed and tailor these responses to the style that makes the most sense for you. Remember, these are just a starting point and can be modified to suit your situation. Rehearse what you would say out loud in front of a mirror, or with a friend so that it’s easier to say once you’re in the moment. You can bring up the topic when you start to fool around or before you begin a sexual relationship.

If your partner still insists on not using a barrier, you have the right to stop.
The other person may not realize how important this is until you let them know that you won’t be continuing with this session until protection is used. A partner who respects you and cares about your health will use a barrier method if they are asked. If they won’t, you may want to seriously consider if they are the best person to have a sexual relationship with.

**Resource**

"Get Real! His Religious Beliefs Say No Condoms, But I Need Them. What Do I Do?"
What if a partner doesn't want to use a condom or dental dam?

**Video Transcripts**

Janelle: If I was in a relationship and my partner wanted to use a dam and I wasn't comfortable with it or if I wanted to use a dam and my partner wasn't comfortable with it, I would want to be asked or ask my partner what their hesitation was and just make sure we were on the same page in terms of what we thought sex was and what we thought safe sex was and what our boundaries were.

Robin: If I was really strongly feeling that I should be using a condom or a dam and a partner was uncomfortable doing that, or just adamantly said they wouldn’t, then I personally chose to abstain from participating with that person.

Andrew: Yeah, it's a challenging conversation to have. Most of the time, I just am straightforward. She'll say that she really wants it or something like that, and I'll just say, "You know what? The only way that we are doing this is if we have a condom."

Luis: It's happened to me before and I'd plain and simple say, “There’s going to be a condom or there’s not going to be sex.”

Andrew: We've had a few pregnancy scares and just—I don't want to have one more.

Chris H: I think it's the responsibility of both parties to know how to put on a condom because if the guy does it wrong or like if the girls doing it, and she does it wrong like, you have to make sure you, you know, you should both be checking to make sure you are safe. It's not one person's responsibility to make sure you are being safe and smart because it's a group activity, so it should be like a group decision.

Luis: Usually, if they really want to have sex then they’ll know too that's what needs to happen.

When you bring up barriers, it's a good time to talk about contraception if it's applicable to you and your partner.

Depending on the type of relationship you have, you could make it simple, such as “Are you on birth control?” or something more equitable like, “What are we doing for pregnancy prevention?” If you’re the one who is using contraception, you can volunteer this information before your partner asks. You don’t have to tell them what method you’re on if you don’t want to, but they might figure it out if it’s visible, like the patch. It’s a courtesy to let them...
know about any method that is in your vagina if they are going to be poking around up there so that they are not caught off guard.

“When was the last time you were tested?” is a simple and direct way to start the conversation with your partner. Whenever you’re starting a new sexual relationship with someone, it’s a good idea to be tested before you get physical. That way, when you broach this question, you’ll be able to let your partner know that you’re being responsible and that you respect their well-being, as well as your own.

If you’re diagnosed with an STI, you need to tell any current or previous partners that may have been exposed through sexual contact.

Again, another situation where it can feel hard to inform others, especially partners that you’re not in contact with or separated on bad terms. Being responsible means letting your partners know so that you can limit the spread of the STI. You’re not doing anyone any favors by keeping the issue a secret. How would you feel if a past partner knew they had an STI and didn’t tell you? Contact everyone who might have been exposed. When you communicate with them, just be direct about the situation. “I went to the clinic for my routine testing and I found out that I’m positive for __________. You might have been exposed and should get tested.” You should also let them know if the STI can be treated or cured. Or “I noticed a sore on my genitals and think we should both go to the clinic together to get tested.” They may react in a variety of ways, but if the person gets violent or uses emotionally abusive language, remove yourself from the situation. Remember, STIs don’t usually show symptoms and sometimes they may be in the body for a long time without detection, so placing blame is not helpful in these situations.

If your current or past partner tells you that you might have been exposed to or have an STI, you may experience a lot of emotions.

This is natural, but it is not helpful to blow up at the person who delivered the news. Talking with a friend, peer educator, counselor, or provider can help you work through your feelings. A provider will be able to answer any questions you have about the testing or treatment process.

What about new partners? This is usually a concern for people who have a viral STI that is being treated, but will never be cured. If you are ever in this situation
you’re going to have to feel out when is the right time to tell new partners. You may want to wait until you think you’re going to begin a sexual relationship, but you probably don’t want to leave it until immediately before you start getting hot or heavy. Giving your partner information on how you’re managing the STI, how it’s transmitted, and how you’re going to reduce the risk of transmission are all things to consider and communicate.

Finally, there are going to be some topics that can be more complicated to talk about with a partner.

Issues around sexual dysfunction, past sexual abuse or violence, infidelity, or other relationship issues can have both physical and emotional impacts. If you feel that the communication tools provided in this course are not enough to prepare you to talk about these issues, you may want to consider talking to a professional. There are specialists that are licensed to provide sex and relationship therapy to both individuals and couples.

**Community Resource**

**Relationship and Sex Therapy – Center for Sexual Health**

**Resource**

**Locate a sexuality counselor or therapist – AASECT**

*Parts of this lesson were adapted from:*


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