

# **The Consent Checklist**

**Meg-John Barker**

# The Consent Checklist

This zine is about the conditions that are required for [consent](#): a kind of checklist that we can apply to any situation in life. I'm hoping it'll be a useful starting point for conversations about how to do various things consensually. There's a list of situations we might consider at the end.

Here's my 8 point checklist of conditions which make it more likely that people will be in consent: that they'll feel free, safe, and able enough to tune into themselves and to communicate openly with others about their needs and limits, their wants and boundaries.

1. **Consent as the aim:** Have we made consent the explicit aim of our interaction rather than something happening?
2. **Informed consent:** Is everyone fully informed about what's being asked for, offered, etc., why, and where everyone is coming from?
3. **Ongoing consent:** Is consent ongoing before, during, and after an encounter, or throughout a relationship?
4. **Relational consent:** Is this a relational interaction where everyone can bring their needs and limits, wants and boundaries to the table?
5. **Consent and wanting:** Are people able to clearly express and be heard about what they want and don't want, and what they consent to and don't consent to?
6. **Multiple options beyond a default script:** Are we aware of the default script for 'success' in this situation, and have we shifted this to multiple options and an agreement to default to the lesser one on the table?
7. **Power awareness:** Are we aware of the cultural and personal power imbalances between us and their potential impact on capacity to feel free-enough and safe-enough to consent?
8. **Accountability:** Can we notice when we've been non-consensual, name that with the person concerned (if they're up for it), hear the impact, and offer to make reparations?

Before unpacking these, let's touch on what the word consent means, and what we're up against when we try to relate consensually.

# Consent

The dictionary definition of consent is *'permission for something to happen or agreement to do something'*. What I'm asking here is what conditions make it most likely that those involved can give their agreement for something to happen. In order to be able to do this they must be able to:

1. Tune into how they feel: what they need and want, where their limits and boundaries are.
2. Communicate about this with the others involved, knowing that they are free-enough, safe-enough, and able to be honest, and that their position will be heard and respected.

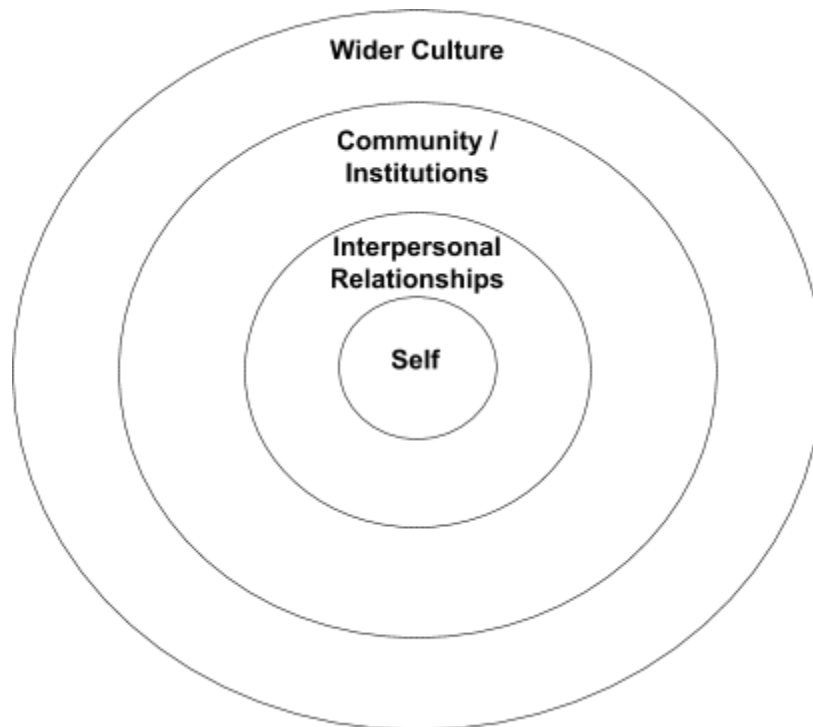
The conditions for consent in interactions are therefore pretty much the same as the conditions for good relationships with others (and with ourselves) [more broadly](#). If we don't feel free, safe and able to tune into ourselves and to communicate what we feel with others, then we can't be in consent in any specific interaction. And if we don't feel free, safe and able to tune into ourselves, and communicate who and how we are to others, then we can't be fully ourselves in relationship: we'll be covering over the vulnerable bits, only sharing certain parts of ourselves.

In order to consent to something, we have to fully and profoundly know that we don't *have* to do that thing, now or ever. This applies whether the thing in question is having sex with a partner, doing the task we'd set ourselves on a particular day, hanging out with a friend, or being in a certain relationship or group. We have to know that nothing is contingent on it, that we're not bound by entitlement or obligation, that there'll be no punishment if we don't do it, and that there's no assumed default 'normal' script or path that we're expected to follow here: like what other people do, or what we've done before.

How can we construct our relationships with others and ourselves to enable consent? What systems and structures of support do we need in order to do so? That's what this zine explores.

# Consent at Every Level

Non-consent is [normalised at every level](#): wider culture, our institutions and communities, our interpersonal relationships and everyday interactions, and within ourselves ([self-consent](#)). You could go through this diagram considering the messages you received about consent - and how consensually you were treated - at each level growing up, and the same for now.



Given this, it's worth thinking about how - at each level - we might shift the micro-culture around us in order for interactions and relationships to become more consensual, as well as what systems and structures we might bring in to support that. It's important to be gentle with ourselves and others: to recognise that we're up against years of training in habits of being non-consensual, within wider systems and structures that support non-consensual behaviour.

It's also vital to remember this [isn't just about sex](#), it's about everything. The extent of non-consensual sex may be the thing that's shown us how important consent is, but:

1. We will struggle hugely to practise consensual sex if the relationship that the sex is happening within is non-consensual in other ways, or if people have deeply non-consensual relationships with themselves because of the wider culture around them and how they've been taught to treat themselves.
2. We can damage ourselves - and each other - just as much with other forms of non-consent as with sexual non-consent, and these forms of coercion, pressure, persuasion, bullying or manipulation can often be more insidious and harder to recognise given how culturally normalised they are.

# 1 - Consent as the aim

Perhaps the main shift we need to do is to make consent the [aim of every interaction](#), encounter, relationship, or situation, instead of the more common aim of getting what we want and/or giving someone else what they want.

Think about the definition again: Consent is *'permission for something to happen or agreement to do something'*. Most of the time our aim in any situation is for the 'something' to happen. Success means that something-we-want happens, whether or not consent is present. We need to shift this so that success means that consent is present, whether or not the something-we-want happens. If we don't make this shift, people are going to keep applying pressure to get a 'successful' outcome: to avoid the sense of awkwardness or failure that happens if we don't get what we want, or if we don't give other people what they want.

- We've had a successful hook-up if consent happens, whether or not sex happens.
- We've had a successful work exchange if consent happens, whether or not the task we wanted gets done.
- We've had a successful exchange with friends or family if consent happens, whether or not we end up socialising with them in the way we wanted to.
- We've had a successful day if we've been consensual with ourselves, whether or not we completed our to-do list.
- We're running a successful event if the people present are in consent, whether or not it's unfolding exactly as we imagined.
- We're having a successful relationship if it's consensual, whether or not it contains the amount of sex, romance, commitment, or shared time that we think we want, or imagine should happen in that kind of relationship.

It's worth making this explicit in any interaction or encounter. Let others know that this is your understanding of consent, and invite them into conversation about how you'll mutually ensure that consent is prioritised over whether or not the thing happens.

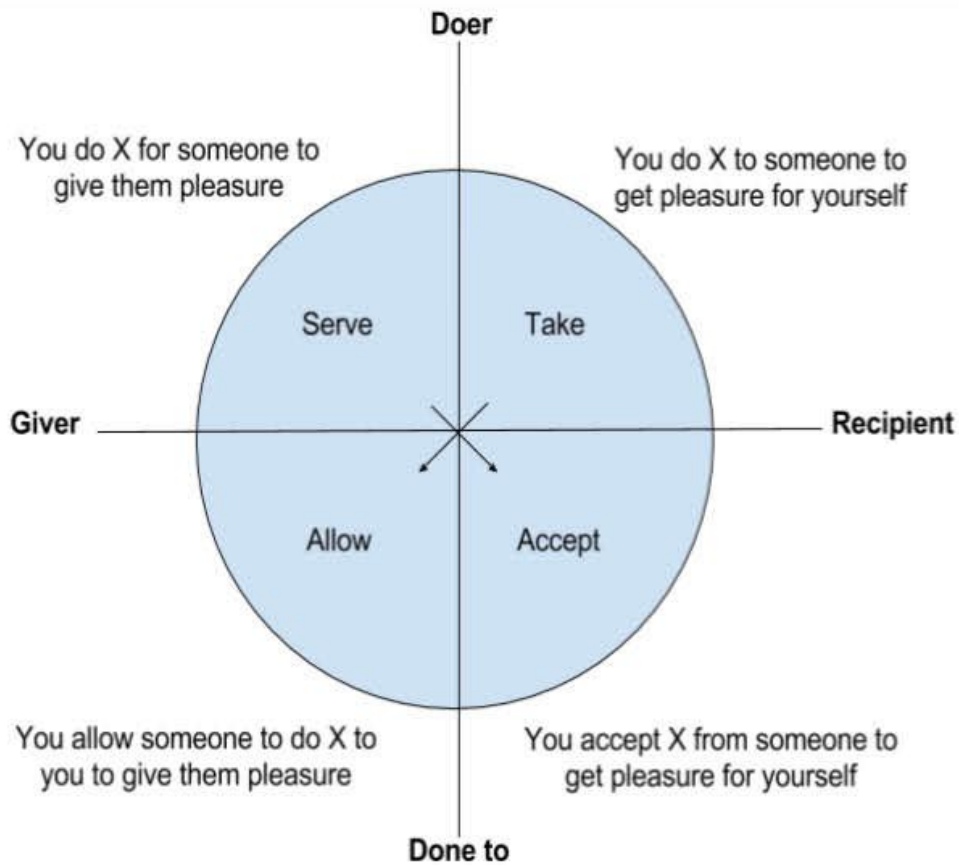
## 2 - Informed consent

To be consensual people have to be informed. That means knowing what's being suggested, asked for, and/or offered, and why. We can't tune into what our wants, needs, limits and boundaries are if we don't know the full picture.

If you're the one suggesting something then try to provide as much information as possible, rather than leaving it up to the other person to have to come back with questions. Consider what information *you* would need in order to give a consensual response in this situation. For example, if you're asking for help, be clear what kind of help you'd need and for how long. If you're suggesting becoming friends, explain what friendship means to you.

Informed consent also involves being clear about the unknowns and uncertainties: the bits you don't know yet. How could you keep someone involved - and enable them to continue to be in consent - as things became clearer? For example, how could you keep it open for somebody to change their mind as you each got more information about what a certain event would involve, about what you could offer in exchange for a task, or about how you felt about someone.

For informed consent it's also important to be clear and open about where you're coming from. This is where I find the [wheel of consent](#) helpful. It's common in our non-consensual culture for people to disguise making a request of someone as offering *them* something. For example, we might be asking for someone's time, energy, and personal risk on a project but present it as a great opportunity for them (journalists and documentary-makers I'm looking at you!) We might start massaging someone's neck because we want to touch them, but act as if we want to help them relax. We might give someone a gift because we want them to like us or feel obligated to spend time with us, but act as if it's wholly for them, assuming they'll be comfortable and happy to receive it. We might suggest spending time with someone as if they want it, when actually it's us who want it.



The wheel can help you to identify where you're at in relation to being the doer or the done-to, and also where you're at in being the one giving something or getting something in this scenario. Particularly it's worth watching out for whether you're convincing yourself - and others - that you're in 'serve' when actually you're in 'take' ('I'm doing this for you'). Non-consensual culture also means we often try to convince ourselves we were in 'accept' when actually we were in 'allow' ('I must have wanted it really').

Informed consent means being as clear as possible with ourselves - and others - what we're asking for, suggesting, offering, etc. and where we're coming from.

## 3 - Ongoing consent

Consent isn't a one-off interaction, it needs to be ongoing throughout any encounter or relationship. Just because somebody has agreed to something, enjoyed something, or offered something once - or several times - doesn't mean they'll do so again. Just because we had energy and enthusiasm at the start of an interaction or relationship doesn't mean we still will some way into it. Things change.

It's good to have an overarching agreement that it's always okay to pause or stop, and that there won't be any kind of implicit or explicit punishment for doing so (e.g. not being asked again, the other person expressing frustration, the relationship changing drastically).

In the lead up to a social, sexual, or work engagement we might make a habit of checking in with each other whether we're still all in a good place for that to happen (physically and/or psychologically), reminding each other that it's always fine to cancel or postpone, perhaps building in contingency plans so that we know that we can do so without adversely impacting others. If it goes ahead we could start the encounter by checking in with each other how we're doing, and what we have capacity for. And during the encounter we can build in some pauses or check-in points to see where we're at now. If it's an ongoing relationship we could keep reflecting on this process and how we might develop it to maximise everyone's capacity to consent.

### **Access intimacy**

Here - and in many other places - consent relates to the concept of [access intimacy](#), from disability activism. This recognises that we all have different needs and it's important to be mindful of these, to help others be able to express them, and - ideally - to develop such intimacy in the relationship that we're aware of those needs and have built them into our exchanges. Examples include knowing that our friend needs to sit centrally in order to hear everyone, will require a comfortable seat, or won't be able to focus for more than an hour. We'd know to ensure that the situation meets those needs, so they don't always have to be the one doing the extra labour of pointing it out (again!) or suffering if they don't have it in them to do so this time.

The point here is not to treat disabled people differently by making a thing of their body and mind perhaps having different needs and limits to everyone else's. In sex it's useful to approach every body in front of you as unique, making no assumptions, and finding out how it works - regardless of whether you're aware that someone is disabled or not. In every encounter it's useful to assume that everyone present will have different needs and limits, and to create micro-cultures of ongoing consent so that everyone is able to express these, and how they change over time, meaning the situation works as well as possible for everyone involved.



## 4 - Relational consent

Consent is often presented as a one-way interaction: one person asks or initiates and the other person agrees or refuses (yes or no). As well as viewing consent as ongoing rather than one-off, it can be useful to see it as relational rather than one-directional. How can we shift into a situation where everyone can bring their wants, needs, limits, and boundaries to the table, where we can share these openly, and then decide what we're going to do accordingly? **Needs** and **limits** are the things we absolutely must have - and not have - in order for it to work for us. **Wants** are the things we'd like to happen, and **boundaries** express what we'd prefer to have present - or not - for it to be a comfortable, positive experience for us.

For example, you and a new potential friend have agreed that you'd like to hang out. How might the conversation go? You could list the following:

- Needs: Somewhere accessible by public transport
- Limits: To be in bed by 10pm otherwise I'll be too tired the next day
- Wants: To be able to have deep conversation, so nowhere we'd be overheard
- Boundaries: No pressure to drink alcohol because I don't enjoy that

They could list:

- Needs: Some place quiet because I struggle with crowds
- Limits: Somewhere I can spend less than £5 over the evening because I'm on a low income
- Wants: Somewhere familiar so that I can relax
- Boundaries: Not somewhere we might run into lots of folks we know so we can focus on each other

This can lead into a conversation about where the overlaps are between us, and what situations could best meet these needs, limits, wants, and boundaries.

## 5 - Separating out consent and wanting

As we saw in 'consent is the aim', we often muddle consent and wanting. It's good to tease these apart. It's perfectly possible to consent to things we don't particularly want to do. We're probably all sometimes going to have to do that in order to help somebody else out, or to get something done, get paid, etc. However the important piece here is that everybody knows what's going on, that they don't assume that just because we're consenting to something that means we're wanting it, or just because we're wanting it means we're consenting to it.

Acknowledging this distinction means that, for example, we can build in care for the person who is having to put extra energy into doing something that's not really their thing, rather than acting as if it's something they want just because we want it and they've agreed to it. Also we can dig a little deeper into how to ensure consent even in situations where the other person seems enthusiastic. We can really want something without it being a good idea for us to do it.



On [megjohndanjustin.com](http://megjohndanjustin.com) we came up with the idea of a spectrum for this, maybe from -10 (really don't want to do this thing) to +10 (really want to do it), with 0 as a neutral place. So if the two people in the previous section come up with the possibilities of meeting at a cheap cafe, in the park, or at one of their places, they could then check in where they're at from -10 to +10 on each of those options to help them make that decision together.

## 6 - Multiple options beyond the default script

It's often harder to consent under conditions where only two options are made available, one of which is culturally - or otherwise - seen as the 'successful' option, and the other not. I find the whole concept of dates horrific for this reason! If we both understand that 'success' would be us having erotic and romantic attraction for each other and wanting to see each other again, and anything else would be failure, how can we really be present to the encounter, tune into how we feel, and be honest with each other?

However, I love meeting for coffee with people I connect with (which might seem a lot like many people's concept of a date I realise!) Under those conditions we've already reached 'success': we agreed we have some kind of connection and wanted to have coffee together. It's perfectly fine for it to be a one-off, and there are multiple other options available to us, e.g. deciding to meet up again in a few months or next time we're in the same place, recognising some kind of developing friendship, suggesting a shared future work thing, or realising a frisson of attraction.

So for [consent](#) it's great if we can offer several options to choose from, together, rather than just one option which you can do or not do, with not doing it being a loaded kind of choice. In an erotic encounter, for example, instead of assuming that the default script of penetration and orgasm is the aim, we could start by exploring a range of things that we might do together and deciding between us which we want to start with, again with ongoing check-ins. If we're running an event we might offer the group a few options for activities and decide between us how to proceed, instead of stating that the group is going to do a specific activity and that people are allowed to opt out if they don't want to do it. This is often a very hard thing to do under group dynamics, social scripts of participation, and the human desire to fit in and belong.

### Defaulting to the Lesser Option

Once there are multiple choices on the table, it's also important to default to the lesser option that the two - or more - people want. If one person wants to kiss and the other wants oral sex you default to kissing. If one person wants to hang out every other month and the other every week you default to every other month. Of course realising the [discrepancy](#) between you might mean that the person who wants more needs to explore other ways of getting those desires met than in this relationship. It has to be okay for people to express lesser desires, and for desires to change over time or as more information becomes available.

As with the situation of people pretending to be offering something when they're actually requesting it (in 'informed consent'), people often pretend to offer more than they really feel able to because of social scripts and other pressures. This can leave the other person confused and unhappy because they're receiving an unclear mixed message. If we can, it's definitely [kinder to be honest](#). Again that requires everyone cultivating the conditions under which such honesty is possible and safe-enough for everyone.

## 7 - Power awareness

All of this requires awareness of [power dynamics](#). People often don't feel free, safe, and able enough to tune into themselves and to be open about their needs, limits, wants and boundaries. This is generally because they fear implicit or explicit punishment.

We all need to keep asking ourselves what we can do to make it genuinely possible for others to make - and articulate - consensual choices in their relationships and encounters with us. Unless somebody really feels able to say 'no' to us, without fear of the potential impact of that, then they're not in consent. It needs to be just as easy for them to say 'no', 'I'm not sure', 'maybe under these conditions', or 'I'm not ready yet' as it is to say 'yes' or any version of 'yes'.

It's worth reflecting on what forms of power we have in any dynamic, culturally or personally:

**Culturally**, we might consider where we - and another person - are at in relation to each other on gender, race, disability, sexuality, class, age, and any other relevant intersecting axes of privilege and oppression.

**Personally**, we might consider aspects like how much money we each earn, how much security we have in various ways, where our health is currently at, what our histories are with trauma and/or mental health, what other relationships we have and how those are, how much experience we have relevant to our interaction, how attractive and/or successful we're seen as by the wider world, etc.

We might have ongoing open conversations about these things and how they impact us and our dynamic. For more one-off encounters, we might check in with ourselves and each other more briefly about what might be present in the dynamic that makes it easier/more difficult to consent, and how we'll do our best to mitigate that.

We might decide that a power imbalance is too great for a certain kind of relationship to be possible, or that we need to go very slowly in order to keep checking in given the disparities that are in place. We may need to take time over such conversations in order to build enough trust to be able to share these things with each other, but as always that should be preferable to the non-consent of pressing ahead before everyone has the information and awareness they need.

## 8 - Accountability

Given that we live in such a non-consensual culture, and have generally learned non-consensual ways of treating ourselves and others, it's inevitable that we'll behave non-consensually at times. Hopefully applying this checklist regularly will help us to see when that's happened. If we practise accountability in micro-moments of non-consent, it hopefully becomes easier when bigger violations occur.

In situations of non-consent wider culture encourages us to: deny that what happened was non-consent, blame the victim, minimise the impact, and insist that it wasn't part of a wider pattern of behaviour (these are at the heart of common rape myths). We probably do this to reassure ourselves that we have some control over whether we ourselves are victimised or not, and that we couldn't be a 'bad person' ourselves if we have violated another's consent. Admitting to non-consent - under a wider cultural system of non-consent - is not about saying we're a bad person or a monster. It's simply acknowledging that we'll all fall short of consensual behaviour at times, and that this hurts others, and that we understand that and want to do better.

What people generally want after they've been treated non-consensually is to hear the person who treated them that way:

- Acknowledge that they are telling the truth
- Take responsibility for it
- Understand the impact of it
- Reassure them that it won't happen again

Often doing these things leads to a sense of relief for the person who has behaved non-consensually too, whereas defending against any sense that they might have been non-consensual leads to toxic feelings of blame and shame. It's important not to require anything from the person who you have treated non-consensually, and to take things on their timeframe, just letting it be known that you're available for whatever they need. It may take a while till they feel ready for contact, or they may never be able to do so. They may not be able to forgive, or it may be that this comes easily once you've acknowledged what happened.

In situations where the consent violation is more major, where the situation is complex, or where there is a lot of trauma, it may be necessary to follow an accountability process rather than having direct contact. There's information about how to do that in the further resources. It can be useful to have a group of supportive people already set up in your life who you will go to if somebody has treated you non-consensually, if you realise you've treated somebody else non-consensually, or if somebody tells you that you've treated them non-consensually. Their role is to support you through any process, helping you deal with the impact on you of recognising that you are a survivor and/or person who has behaved non-consensually, and liaising with the supportive people of the other party if there is an accountability process.

# Applying The Consent Checklist

So to summarise, here's the checklist of aspects of consent to consider and address in any encounter, interaction, relationship, or situation.

1. **Consent as the aim:** Have we made consent the explicit aim of our interaction rather than something happening?
2. **Informed consent:** Is everyone fully informed about what's being asked for, offered, etc., why, and where everyone is coming from?
3. **Ongoing consent:** Is consent ongoing before, during, and after an encounter, or throughout a relationship?
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7. **Power awareness:** Are we aware of the cultural and personal power imbalances between us and their potential impact on capacity to feel free-enough and safe-enough to consent?
8. **Accountability:** Can we notice when we've been non-consensual, name that with the person concerned (if they're up for it), hear the impact, and offer to make reparations?

We can make this list something we consider regularly in an ongoing relationship.

- How did we do in our last encounter?
- What might we tweak to make mutual consent even more possible in future encounters?

We might want to cultivate a group of people in our lives to keep talking with about how we're doing on consent. They can be the ones who support us through times when we realise we've behaved non-consensually and/or being treated non-consensually by others, and we might be that for them also. If this becomes a regular ongoing conversation this can make it easier to respond well when such [issues come up](#).

In a non-consensual culture we're not going to manage it perfectly every time, but by acknowledging this we can keep moving towards more consensual relationships with ourselves and our people, hopefully cultivating communities and micro-cultures of consent which can ripple out and enable more consensual relating in the wider world.

In order to keep internalising and applying this list, I've come up with a bunch of situations which we can work through to consider how we could best check all these points.

- How we treat ourselves in relation to our own everyday life/work
- Asking someone for help
- Arranging the holidays with family
- Spending a day with a friend
- Going on a date
- Spending the evening with a partner
- Requesting somebody do a work task for you
- Letting someone know you're interested in a relationship with them
- Having a hook-up
- Developing a friendship
- Checking in on an ongoing colleague, friendship, or partner relationship
- Having someone round to eat together
- Making a big life decision
- Someone in your life getting sick
- Showing your appreciation to someone
- Figuring out how to spend a period of time alone
- Apologising to someone
- Giving a gift
- Organising and running an event
- Borrowing money
- Changing plans
- Supporting someone who is struggling
- Arranging a social event
- Deciding whether to get involved in a project

It can be useful to use sex as an analogy when thinking through how consensual something is. For example, if your response to someone saying they don't want to do something with you is to try to persuade them, think how unacceptable that would be if what they'd refused was sex with you. If someone assumes you'll spend a certain kind of time with them, consider how it would be if it was a certain kind of touch.

## Further Resources

These ideas are explored more in these books of mine:

- Barker, M-J. (forthcoming 2020). *Sexuality: A Graphic Guide*. London: Icon Books.
- [Barker, M-J. \(2018\). \*The Psychology of Sex\*. London: Routledge and Psychology Press.](#)
- [Barker, M-J. & Hancock, J. \(2017\). \*Enjoy sex \(How, when and if you want to\)\*. London: Icon Books.](#)

And these posts:

- [routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/thepsychologyofeverything/consent.php](http://routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/thepsychologyofeverything/consent.php)
- [rewriting-the-rules.com/sex/wheel-consent-im-fan/](http://rewriting-the-rules.com/sex/wheel-consent-im-fan/)
- [rewriting-the-rules.com/conflict-break-up/consensual-relationships-revisited/](http://rewriting-the-rules.com/conflict-break-up/consensual-relationships-revisited/)
- [rewriting-the-rules.com/sex/bdsm-101-consent-consent-consent/](http://rewriting-the-rules.com/sex/bdsm-101-consent-consent-consent/)

They are also themes that we regularly cover on the Meg-John & Justin podcast:

- [megjohnandjustin.com/sex/handshakes-and-consent/](http://megjohnandjustin.com/sex/handshakes-and-consent/)
- [megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/power-and-consent/](http://megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/power-and-consent/)
- [megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/make-consent-aim/](http://megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/make-consent-aim/)
- [megjohnandjustin.com/sex/deliberate-non-consent/](http://megjohnandjustin.com/sex/deliberate-non-consent/)
- [megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/sex-discrepancies/](http://megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/sex-discrepancies/)

These zines can help with self-care around this, staying with the feelings that come up, and negotiating consensual sex and relationships:

- [Barker, M-J. \(2017\). \*Hell yeah self care\*.](#)
- [Barker, M-J. \(2016\). \*Staying with our feelings\*.](#)
- [Barker, M-J. & Hancock, J. \(2017\). \*Make your own sex manual\*.](#)
- [Barker, M-J. & Hancock, J. \(2016\). \*Make your own relationship user guide\*.](#)

For more on these themes, check out:

- [Love Uncommon's posts on self-consent](#)
- [Kitty Stryker's Ask: Building Consent Culture](#)
- [Mia Mingus on Access Intimacy](#)
- [Transform harm](#)
- [Building accountable communities](#)
- [What about the rapists?](#)

