

Overcoming the Fear of Saying “No”

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It is not uncommon for survivors of sexual violence to struggle with or have a fear of saying “no”, even in consensual sexual relationships. For many, this stems from the fact that during their assault, they never had an opportunity to say no, or their requests were ignored. Understandably, this can cause survivors to believe that any future attempts to say no will be futile, so there is no point trying.

Reasons survivors may struggle with this may include:

- They do not realize that they have the right to say no. This is particularly common for survivors who were abused at a young age or for whom rape was their first sexual experience.
- Their religion has taught them they do not have the right to say no in a marriage.
- They do not have enough self-confidence to realize they deserve to be respected and that they are able to say no.
- They do not want to admit they are struggling with their sexual healing, so they go along with anything to push through the difficulties.
- They have no basis for what is a healthy relationship, so they believe that sex will always be forced.
- They mistakenly believe that because they were okay with something before, they should not say no at a later date.
- They are made to feel guilty by their partner for refusing certain things.

Effects of not saying no

You may start to notice some effects in your life and in your relationships from your fear of saying no. You may end up feeling silenced in your relationship because although you are not happy about being unable to say no, you are still not able to find ways to express your desire to say no. If your partner is not aware of this, you could end up feeling resentful towards them.

Many survivors struggle with showing affection with their partners, because they fear it could lead to more and they would be unable to say no. In turn, they end up doing things they are not comfortable doing. Having sex when you are uncomfortable or do not want to can be harmful even to healthy relationships. Remember that it is perfectly acceptable to agree to something one day, and to say “no” to it the next. Even in a good, healthy relationship, you and your partner do not have to be up for doing everything every day. A good sexual relationship includes knowing what acts you do and do not enjoy, and choosing when to engage in them.

What do you fear?

One of the main reasons that survivors of sexual violence fear saying “no” in their relationships is because in their past, refusals have always been ignored. They then believe that all future relationships will be similar, and that any attempt to say “no” could make the situation worse or more violent. This is a very common fear among survivors, and you are not alone.

Survivors may also worry that if they refuse certain acts, their partner will be upset or will leave the relationship. Some may even feel as though saying no means they are not performing their duties, however misguided that belief may be.

Overcoming the fear

It is important for you to realize that you always have the right to say no. It will take some time to find ways to address these fears, but it is possible. Some suggestions include:

- Talk to other survivors and non-survivors to learn about relationships and what is appropriate and acceptable in a healthy relationship.
- Reassure yourself that saying “no” does not have to result in rape.
- Practice saying “no” in safe, non-sexual contexts until you become comfortable using the word. (i.e. “No, I do not like olives on my pizza.” “No, I do not want to go see that movie.”)
- Talk to your partner and explain that you have a hard time saying “no”. Consider developing a code word or non-verbal sign.
- Explore your sexuality to learn about your genuine likes and dislikes.

- Realize that you don't have to like everything, and saying "no" doesn't have to have a negative impact on a relationship.

Note: This article was compiled from the discussion "Overcoming the fear of saying "no" in the Sex & Intimacy forum.

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