



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

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Only Yes Means Yes: Demystifying Consent

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Susannah, Violence Prevention Advocate

Marissa: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop podcast, intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on a healing topic.

This week, our topic is Only Yes Means Yes: Demystifying Consent. We are your hosts. My name is Marissa and I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center.

Susannah: And I'm Susannah, I am the Violence Prevention Advocate at The Women's Center.

So, before I worked at The Women's Center, I was a middle school teacher and for one year, also a high school teacher. I taught Language Arts or English. Now that I'm working at The Women's Center I still get to teach; I get to go and talk to classes about different topics. And one of the topics we're going to cover today is consent. And then I'm also a survivor of teen dating violence, so that's part of why I do what I do.

Marissa: So, a little bit of background and overview into what we're going to be going into for this podcast: I want to talk a little bit about the stats behind teen dating violence and teen sexual assault. We know that nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year. More than 50% of college sexual assaults happen in the first few months of the academic school year as well. And moreover, girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experienced the highest rate of intimate partner violence, almost triple the national average.

Unfortunately, all of this is normalized due to something called rape culture, which is a society or environment whose prevailing social attitudes have the effect of normalizing or trivializing sexual assault and abuse. We will be diving a bit deeper into this concept and the issue of domestic violence and sexual assault among teens and young adults.

Specifically, like Susannah mentioned, we will be defining consent and all that is necessary to engage in a healthy romantic and or sexual relationship. If you need any help during any of this, we will also be discussing supporting a friend and how you can get connected with resources and additional support within your community.

Susannah: Some of the signs that you might be in unhealthy relationship include if your partner is checking your phone or your email without your permission, is constantly putting you down, calling you names, extreme jealousy or insecurity, an explosive temper, isolating you from family or friends, making false accusations against you, mood swings, physically hurting you in any way, possessiveness, telling you what to do, or pressuring or forcing you have sex.

Marissa: And a lot of those are examples of tactics of abuse that we will see on what is called a Power and Control Wheel. We will include a link to the Teen Power and Control Wheel, along with a bunch more resources on our website below this podcast. But again, to summarize, teens in an abusive relationship may deal with some things such as peer pressure, isolation or exclusion, sexual coercion, threats, maybe minimizing, denying, or blaming of the experience, as well as intimidation, using social status, as well as anger or emotional abuse. That is also encompassing the physical and sexual violence piece of teen dating violence.

Susannah: So, what is sexual assault? To put simply, it is any sexual contact without explicit consent. That includes unwanted touching or fondling, forced performance of oral sex or penetration, forced penetration without intercourse, forced intercourse (which is also called rape), or attempted rape. The defining characteristic of all sexual assault is that it is done without consent.

Marissa: [Affirms] I know it's hard to escape this news in our headlines as well. We hear this all the time: frats accused of spiking drinks, sexual assault and dating violence in the sports world. We know that at UW-Madison, one in four women report being sexually assaulted during their time there. So why do we think that sexual assault is so common on these college campuses? What is behind this?

Susannah: There are lots of possible reasons that college probably could be a more dangerous time in terms of sexual assault, and that has a lot to do with the culture of college. It could include hookup culture, parties and party culture, drugs and alcohol, high expectations of how college is supposed to be, peer pressure, the Greek system, hormones, new independence—being away from your parents or from the rules that you were used to growing up as a kid. Just the general attitude about sex, and then gender roles and expectations. And though they may seem normal, and as part of the culture, none of them are an excuse for sexual assault, and none of them justify placing blame on victims. Unfortunately, a lot of times these things are actually used to victim blame.

Marissa: What is victim blaming? Unfortunately, like Susannah said, we hear this all over the place and unfortunately, many “tips for sexual assault prevention” unfairly place responsibility on women and other potential victims. Things like always having to walk in a crowd or you keeping your eye on your drink, as opposed to maybe instructing people to not put things into your drink. Victims are often asked questions that seek to discredit their attack and prove that they were somehow to blame that something they did made this happen to them. Susannah, I think you have a couple of examples of that.

Susannah: Some of the things that survivors report being asked are things like, “is it possible you're just regretting it?” Some people refer to that as buyer's remorse, which just goes to show that we see these things, these sexual relationship, as transactional. And so, if a woman wakes up and she regrets what she, you know, “what she did”, then she might accuse her partner of sexual assault, which is actually a myth. There's this obvious, this one comes up all the time, “What were you wearing? Why didn't you scream?” “Are you afraid your partner will find out;” so if you were with somebody who you weren't in a relationship with. “Haven't you heard of the buddy system?” “Why did you spend the night?” “Why does your roommate say you were joking about it later?” “Are you sure you want to ruin this person's reputation?” That's one that has been reported very widely, especially in support of male athletes at colleges. A really obvious example of this would be the Brock Turner case—worrying about his potential instead of the effect that his actual sexual assault had on the victim.

“How often do you hook up with people when you're drunk?” “Why didn't you call the police?” “Why didn't you report sooner?” “How much did you drink?” “Were you flirting with him?” “Why didn't you run?” “Did you actually say no?” “What were you doing out so late?” So again, these are all questions that are kind of assuming that the victim is making up the story.

Marissa: And here is the honest to goodness truth on that: there is one singular cause of rape, one hundred percent of the time, and that is rapists. Sexual assault is never a victim's fault. I'm going to say that again: sexual assault is never a victim's fault.

And, and so what do we do with that? What do we do with this information? We believe that, wholeheartedly. We again believe that sexual assault is never a victim's fault. I don't care if I sound like a broken record on that because that is a fact.

Other things we can do are asking for consent, always, every single time for every single intimate or sexual interaction. Then we need to respect that answer as well and share what we know. We should all be talking about consent more in our daily lives, I think.

Susannah: Absolutely. So, consent, just in case you're wondering, is defined as a mutual agreement, to engage with someone sexually, at least in this context. So, the mutual agreement is the most important part of that, that there needs to be no power dynamic that would artificially make it seem like an agreement (which we'll talk about later.) because we believe in wholehearted affirmative consent. Where you mutually agree without any stipulations to engage with someone sexually, that is consent.

Marissa: And there is a very handy way to memorize all that you need for consent. A lot of folks call this FRIES. F stands for freely given, R stands for reversible, I stands for informed, E stands for enthusiastic again, meaning that you are also looking forward to whatever is going to unfold. And S means specific.

Susannah: So, to break that down, freely given means that it's truly voluntary and that there are no strings attached. So, it also can't be given while you're drunk or high. So freely given means that there is nothing impairing your judgment or your ability to consent. And it's also not given out of fear. So, any threat or coercion would mean that that was not freely given consent, even if somebody says, Okay, okay, whatever, fine. That's not freely given consent.

And what's important is that it's reversible, it's never out of obligation, and it's an ongoing conversation. There's a lot of kind of tropes about dating and gender roles and how men and women behave in relationships, which we know is not what all relationships look like anyway. But because of those gender roles, there's often an expectation of, 'okay, we went on this date, and now you're going to do...', you know, whatever the sexual thing is. But it's not actually an obligation—you have complete autonomy and you get to decide no matter what happened on this date, no matter whether somebody bought you dinner or you pay for your own, you are not obligated to do anything. It's also an ongoing conversation and that if you change your mind at any point, mid-whatever, you can still say, "No, I'm not feeling this." And the person needs to respect that. Just because you said yes before doesn't mean that yes continues on to whatever this person wants. So then what's not consensual is if you agreed in the past, like even if a week ago, or maybe you're even in a dating relationship with this person and you have had sexual contact, that does not mean that your consent can just be taken

for all time, for the rest of this relationship. That's not how it works. So, you can change your mind at any time.

And then, informed consent means that there is a discussion about any risk. So, that would be talking about birth control, risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (which we call STIs). So, if you have sex with somebody who you find out afterwards had an STI but they didn't tell you, then that is no longer something that we would consider a consensual relationship or consensual encounter because you did not have the information needed to make the best choice. If you say that you don't have any STIs or if you say that you're on birth control when you're not, or that you'll use a condom but then you don't, that would mean that that was not consensual.

And then, enthusiastic consent means that it's clearly communicated through words. There is no gray area here. It needs to be very clear; it's not implied, it's not through body language or eye contact, or any of the things that we kind of traditionally looked at as like, "he's into it/she's into it." Because what we found is really that people are not the best judges of that. We read in people's body language what we want them to be saying. We ignore the signs when they're not interested. So, the enthusiastic aspect of consent is that it's communicated through words. And it's not giving in to repeated sexual advances. If you have to wear somebody down, then that is not consensual. Even if they say in words, "Yeah, okay," that's not consensual because that person didn't want to be there in that situation.

And then, it's specific. That means it's given for each activity, which means, you know, maybe somebody is willing to make out but they don't want to do anything else. Making out does not imply consent for something else; it's specific to the activity, and it's not consensual if a partner chooses to move on to another activity that hasn't been explicitly communicated or consented, agreed upon.

So, when you're thinking about fries, all five of those things need to be true in order for you to have consent, so it has to be freely given reversible, informed, enthusiastic and specific. Because anything that isn't 100% consent is 100% not consent.

Marissa: Absolutely. And I know a lot of folks have maybe heard about the concept of consent through what kind of is the old standard now: 'no means no.' And I'm calling it the old standard because while it gets some things right, it is missing some other points. So 'no means no' essentially means if somebody says "no" or "stop", that's what you need to do. That's something that the standard gets right. It also is right in that you cannot assume that a person who says no is "playing hard to get," right? You know, they're not trying to be a tease: they're saying no, so we need to respect that. This also gets it right by saying that no doesn't mean "not yet" or "convince me": it means no.

However, what it misses is that a lack of a verbal "no" is still not consent. I believe one of the statements that you had mentioned earlier, Susannah, was "why didn't you say no," or "why didn't you fight harder to say no?" Either way, if you say no one-hundred times

or if you don't say no, that's still not consent. And what the standard also misses is that intoxicated or underage people are not legally able to consent. And, also, there's a decent amount of physical or social threats that can prevent a victim from saying no. Perhaps somebody who is in an abusive relationship, and sexual abuse is part of this, I'm sure there's a lot of threats or intimidation that's preventing that person from saying no, even though they really mean no.

Susannah: We are moving toward this gold standard of 'only yes means yes'. Obviously, it's flipping 'no means no' to 'yes means yes', but also 'only yes means yes'. So not allowing for interpretation there, which means that "maybe" is not consent, saying nothing is not consent. Past consent, revoked consent is not consent. Sexy clothes are not consent (that's when we hear a lot). He was asking for it; flirting is not consent. Body language is not consent. Not saying no, as we mentioned, is not consent. Not resisting is not consent. Involuntary sex responses are not consent, that's a big one too. So, only yes means yes.

Marissa: So, I know Susannah, you usually have a discussion about consent afterwards, when you're giving these classroom presentations. We still wanted to provide these sorts of things to think about and we'll give you a little bit of time to think about these things. And we'll talk about them too; feel free to pause the podcast to think about these questions.

So, I know something you often ask folks is why is that old 'no means no' model of consent no longer considered to be enough? What are some gender expectations and relationships maybe used as excuses for contact without consent? How does a history of dehumanizing and objectifying women contribute to rape culture? And, what are some possible consequences of sexual assault?

Susannah: So, we kind of already talked about why the 'no means no' model isn't enough. That is still, unfortunately, what a lot of people will fall back on. People who aren't trained in consent or don't have a violence prevention background who are now in charge of communicating consent to maybe a team or residents in their dorm or whatever it is—they might say "no means no" because that's just what we've been saying about consent for all this time. but sexual assault encompasses more than just rape, which is something that people don't understand. And as we said, 'no means no' leaves a lot on the table that people can use to take advantage of somebody, like "she didn't say no" or "he didn't say no" and that's consent, which we've already discussed is not true. And that's why we at The Women's Center are trying to promote the idea that 'only yes means yes', which gives a more positive view, and really, it's about how not getting a no should not be the standard. Like, if I were trying to navigate a relationship and I go home with somebody and they don't say no, that's not cute to me, that's not attractive.

We should want a yes if you are looking for a fulfilling and, you know, enjoyable sexual experience with somebody, you should want them to want to be there and not just kind of comply.

Marissa: Definitely. And onto that next question about gender expectations. Something that is so often not talked about in the realm of men and boys who've experienced sexual assault is the expectation that men always want sex and they're always down for it no matter what. Men still need to give consent too, and, you know, assuming that one gender is more sexualized than others isn't an excuse to not ask for consent.

Susannah: Another gender expectation that I've heard a lot of survivors talk about, especially female survivors is that a lot of times will see a sexual encounter that they had as something that they kind of just did. They didn't necessarily want to be there, but they didn't say no, and they don't necessarily understand that that was not consensual. And that has a lot to do with the gender expectations, especially that are played out in movies and I guess even music—just the idea that men are sexual aggressors, and that they are pursuing sex, and not even really pursuing women, but pursuing sex. The relationship is more like a predator and prey honestly, than two people in a mutual agreement, which is what we talked about consent being.

So, there are lots of ideas and lots of stereotypes about women and sexuality in general, that sex is an obligation. We've got the whole concept of 'wifely duties', and all these things that kind of asexualize women and make women seem like they're just kind of vessels for men's sexuality, and not sexual beings in their own rights.

Marissa: [Affirms] And I think that that analogy you used, that predator-prey relationship, definitely demonstrates that history of dehumanizing and objectifying women. If we're not seeing women as women, as sexual beings like you said, then we're seeing them as prey, as vulnerable people. If they're not considered as people in that moment, that definitely leads to normalizing of assault.

Susannah: That contributes to rape culture because if you're not perceiving the girls or women in the world as fully human or as equals, then it's a lot easier to dehumanize and oppress them and assault them.

Marissa: Yeah, it's all about that power and control, and perpetrators really put themselves at an advantage to control others when they're not even seeing them at the base level as another human, as a fellow human.

Susannah: [Affirms] And then with the possible consequences of sexual assault, that word consequences has different connotations. So, there are consequences for a survivor of sexual assault, and there could be consequences for a perpetrator, although that is less common. So, some of the possible consequences for a survivor would be things like PTSD or depression, those mental health concerns that could come from having that traumatic experience.

The consequences as a perpetrator, those get a little more complicated and depends on a lot of things. There are so many people involved in the decision-making process for discipline, the consequences are usually pretty minimal if there are any.

Marissa: And by consequences for survivors, we don't mean anything that the survivor earned or deserved in the course of this sexual assault. Again, sexual assault is never the fault of a victim. We're talking, you know, more side effects, things that happen in the aftermath, difficulties that the survivor may be facing as a result of this trauma.

Susannah: Yeah, and one of those things specifically when we're talking about seeking justice or reporting a sexual assault, the consequence or the result, the side effect for a survivor might be re-victimization, having to tell the story over and over and maybe not being believed. A lot of survivors of sexual assault report that that re-victimization is actually more harmful than the assault itself.

Marissa: Absolutely, and, you know, as a whole, culturally, a consequence of individual sexual assaults occurring is that continued normalization of rape culture, that continued statement of “this is okay,” “it's going to be swept under the rug,” and “perpetrators are going to be protected.” It perpetuates that cycle, and so we feel talking about this—not only defining consent as what it actually is, but also talking about rape culture itself and how survivors can get support—that definitely helps break the cycle of rape culture.

Susannah: [Affirms] So if you are wondering how to get support for yourself, or how to help a friend who has been assaulted or who has concerns about whether or not something was consensual, you should tell your friend about your concern for their safety and well-being. So, if you're just observing and they're not coming to you, you should just reiterate to them that the reason that you are reaching out to help is because you care about their safety and their well-being. You should listen to them nonjudgmentally and supportively. If they're talking about their experience, whether it's dating violence, intimate partner violence or if it's an incident or sexual violence, let them tell their story and believe them. That's one of the hardest things for victims is that

so many people won't believe, and that's why so many victims don't actually tell anybody because they're worried that they won't be believed.

As a friend, that's the thing that you can do right away is believe; no judgement, not asking those questions of “well, what you're wearing and how much did you have to drink,” all the victim blaming. You’ve just got to kind of cast that aside and be supportive of them. Do not blame, shame, or guilt them; tell them that this was not their fault that the abuse or the assault is not their fault ever. They did nothing to deserve it, and the responsibility is completely on the perpetrator of the violence.

You can find your local domestic violence or sexual assault agency, there should be an agency near you wherever you are, that you can reach out to. You can also go to loveisrespect.org, which is a great website that talks specifically about dating relationships or sexual relationships with young people. If you're in college or university, then there'll be a Title IX office on campus somewhere where they can help you out and kind of help walk you through some next steps and whether or not you'd like to report depending on the situation.

Marissa: Thank you so much for joining us for Only Yes Means Yes: Demystifying Consent. Our next session will be about Financial Empowerment with our Life Skills Advocate, Jesikah. If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience, please call our 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women’s Center at www.twcwaukesha.org.

Thank you so much for listening and be well.