

Clarity and Consent

Negotiating Sex on the Playa

Thank you for coming!

Hi! I'm name. I'm from the Bureau of Erotic Discourse, or B.E.D.

BED volunteers stand up and introduce themselves.

Ask for audience volunteers to describe what they hope to get from the workshop.

Clarity, Consent, and Negotiation

The reason we titled this workshop “Clarity and Consent” is that BED’s mission is to help people safely and happily navigate the sexual shoals on the playa. This means getting what you want and avoiding what you don’t want. So this workshop is about clearly communicating your desires and boundaries. We also stress being clear about mutual consent.

At the Bureau of Erotic Discourse we are sex positive, which means that we think that sex is a *very* good thing when it is mutually desired. Our subtitle is “Negotiating Sex on the Playa,” so some of our material is about how to get to an agreement about positive sexual activity. But a negotiation is also successful if it helps you to avoid an outcome that you don’t want, so we also discuss how to convince somebody to go away.

Good sex needs to be negotiated between people. It doesn’t happen magically like you might see on a TV commercial. Two strangers might share a hot glance only to find out that they don’t share basic ideas about what they want. In real life the couple races across the meadow only to have one of them sprain an ankle in a gopher hole and the other one have an allergic reaction to the wildflowers. If they had talked about it they might have been happily making out at the movies.

Sexual communication *requires* sexual respect for yourself and others. But we don’t have a lot of good models for healthy sexual communication, so this workshop will provide a few examples.

We are going to cover the very basics of sexual negotiation today. We only have a short time, so we will focus on the communication that happens between people who have newly met. However, the principles of good communication carry over to all relationships.

Let's watch two hot & sexy folks who are initiating sex for the first time!

VOLUNTEERS: *2 hot and sexy folks try to negotiate a sexual interaction nonverbally—it's awkward and looks stupid. Using mime:*

A touches B, B shakes head, moves A's hand to a more neutral place

B touches A, A jumps back with look of surprise

B touches A again, A shakes head, moves B's hand somewhere else

A touches B, B jumps back with look of surprise.

It ends with crossed arms, back to back, and disappointed looks!

Hmmmm... it doesn't look like it's working. What would happen if they talked about their desires and boundaries with one another?

VOLUNTEERS: *2 hot and sexy folks then negotiate a sexual interaction verbally—passionate making out and fondling ensue. It looks fun!*

Now that looks like they are getting more of what they want! Whoo-hoo!!!

So why do so many people fear Verbal Sexual Communication?

1. Verbal sexual communication is awkward—you are exposing something about yourself that is vulnerable.
2. Verbal sexual communication is hard. As much as we like to think we have gotten away from mainstream society here in Black Rock City, we have still all been conditioned by thousands of fucked up, unrealistic images about sex from the default world, so it is hard to envision a better alternative.
3. Verbal sexual communication risks rejection! Shit! Who wants that? No one wants to be sexually rejected!

Let's just acknowledge, then, that verbal sexual communication can be awkward, difficult, and emotionally risky.

Why not just rely on Nonverbal Sexual Communication?

Can't everyone just tell when their bed-buddy wants to have sex with them from their nonverbal behavior? Unfortunately not.

First, there is the problem of misinterpretation of nonverbal cues. You can't be sure that flirting or making out with you means someone wants to have sex with you. It may mean they are just very friendly! Even engaging in sexual petting does not mean that a person wants to engage in penetration with you. Heavy petting may mean just that the person just likes heavy petting. You can't assume that they want to have sex with you just because they enjoy fondling!

Many people are choosing to engage in petting instead of penetration in order to avoid the increased risk of STDs and pregnancy that penetration poses. So petting and fondling alone cannot mean consent to sex. You need verbal sexual communication to be sure!

Second, there is the problem of assuming passivity means he or she is going along with what you want. One common reaction to sexual trauma is the "deer in the headlights" effect. Like other mammals, humans—both male and female—often respond with paralysis when they feel threatened or under attack. Another common response to sexual trauma is what's called "dissociation," where a person becomes deeply passive and becomes detached, mentally leaving their body to escape.

So just because your bed buddy is being quiet and passive does not mean they consent to what you want sexually. Passivity and silence may mean they are experiencing "what you want" as trauma.

Silence is not Consent!

So what should you verbally communicate about?

Desires and boundaries!

What is a sexual desire?

***VOLUNTEERS** take the stage and loudly express sexual desires. Examples are “I want to be caressed. I want to lick your breasts. I want to be kissed slowly and gently. I want to be spanked. I want to massage your feet. I want to make love. I want to watch you touch yourself. I want to have that very attractive, long vegetable up my butt.”*

This may not be exactly how you’d say it in an intimate moment, but we want you all to practice stating desires and boundaries loudly and confidently.

*Then the **audience** practices stating their sexual desires loudly. Now turn to someone beside you, give them confident eye contact, and express a sexual desire.*

What is a sexual boundary?

***VOLUNTEERS** take the stage and loudly express sexual boundaries. Examples are “I don’t want to be spanked. I don’t want to touch you below the waist. I don’t want to be stared at. I don’t want to have genital contact. I don’t want to swap fluids. I don’t want to have sex. I don’t want anything up my butt, especially not that vegetable!”*

*Then the **audience** practices stating their sexual boundaries loudly. Now turn to someone beside you, give them confident eye contact and express a sexual boundary.*

Starting the Negotiations

1. To assess and express your desires and boundaries

This is hugely erotic and fun! Prospective bed buddies may actually “melt into your arms” when you make your sexual desires clear. It takes the guessing out of sexual play and it is so honest and open and sexy!

2. To ask about and honor your bed buddy’s desires and boundaries.

In a sexual interaction, it is not about anyone “giving in” to another person’s desires. Getting one’s sexual desires met is not as high a priority as respecting your bed buddy’s boundaries. So you need to go with the least amount of intimacy that either of you wants. Respecting sexual boundaries is essential!

Remember:

COMMUNICATION IS THE BEST LUBRICANT!

Good communication makes it more likely that you will get lucky and it also **greatly** enhances the experience of sex itself.

So now we’re going to engage in a Sex Game

[Procedure] Get in pairs with someone you don’t know. Everyone pause and think up a sexual desire that is not yours and a concurrent sexual boundary that is not yours. These can be outrageous, wild, fun, stupid, whatever. It doesn’t matter. Just think up a sexual desire and boundary that seem fun to try out.

[Imaginary Setup] You and this very hot person you met yesterday have just returned to your tent from a great dance party at a cool camp in Black Rock City. You had a really good time and you are very attracted to your new friend.

[Goal] Each one of you has to imagine you are in that scenario and communicate both your desires and boundaries to your friend in as lovely a way as possible and ask about their desires and boundaries. Be as realistic as possible. Try to let your personality guide you and speak in your own words!

VOLUNTEERS model the game first in a skit, explaining it as it goes: then let participants play the game. First play with partner then change pairs with someone else. At this point, feel free to substitute in your own desires and boundaries in the game (it’s good practice!).

What if someone is not interested in hearing your sexual boundaries?

There are people out there who don't care about hearing your boundaries. These folks are sexually callous and more likely to commit sexual assault or rape. How do you know if you are interacting with a person like that? Some people make it very obvious, for instance, by just grabbing you sexually without asking.

We are now going to practice saying "NO!" to someone who violates our sexual boundaries like that. Get in a circle. Say "NO!" one to the next, around the circle. Then re-emphasize on a second go-round with a "No! Back Off!"

OK, now let's shift gears and imagine someone we love or lust for asks us if we would like to engage in our favorite sexual act. Let's all say, "Yes, that sounds like fun!" in a circle. What a difference!

So some people who don't care about sexual boundaries are obvious. Others aren't so obvious because they wait to violate your boundaries until you are alone. How can you identify them? You can look for the warning signs. Here are some Red Flags for identifying people who do not care about sexual boundaries:

1. Puts you down or degrades you (or others) in front of people
2. Tries to control your time, location, friends, etc.
3. Makes sexually offensive comments, uses hostile language to describe sex
4. Verbally manipulative to try to get you to have sex

VOLUNTEERS: *Act out each one of these briefly and with emotion.*

Using verbal self-defense

If you face someone who is manipulative and trying to get you to have sex when you do not want it, there are a number of verbal self-defense techniques you can employ. Remember that you do not have to explain yourself, or make excuses for yourself, or apologize. These are *not* successful self-defense strategies.

We are going to practice one of the most effective self-defense techniques, called “Broken Record.” Here, you simply state your boundary in the same way over and over again. The defender simply and calmly says “You cannot talk me into having sex with you, I don’t want it,” until the jerk gives up. Be firm, calm, repetitive, and excruciatingly boring.

VOLUNTEERS demonstrate the strategy

Start by pleading (come on, you’ll like it)

Move to guilt trip (you’ve been leading me on all night)

End with anger (you’re nothing but a fucking tease)

The “broken record” technique is our next sex game.

[Procedure] Get in pairs with someone new who you haven’t worked with.

[Imaginary Setup] You’ve just been to your first actual burn! It blew your mind—the energy of the crowd, the sights and sounds of it all. You and a sexy friend you just met a few hours ago decide to wander off into the desert together to find some privacy and watch the stars turn.

Decide who is going to be the jerk and who is going to stick to their boundaries. The jerk will say anything to get the partner to have sex and they don’t care about their partner’s boundaries. The person who is going to stick to their boundaries doesn’t want to have sex and will employ a broken record to stop the advance. Be as realistic as possible, but without touching or threatening to touch anyone in any way during this game! Do it once and then switch roles with your partner.

About sexual assault

There are many myths in this culture about what rape really looks like. The typical rape in the United States does not happen by a stranger with a knife leaping out from behind a dumpster to grab an innocent woman and drag her into an alleyway.

Most rapes happen between people who know each other, in someone's home or tent. The typical rape involves no weapons and most rapes happen quietly when one person is passive and crying and the other doesn't care about their partner's sexual boundaries. With better sexual communication and sensitivity, these rapes are preventable!

To avoid committing sexual assault yourself you need to engage in consultation, reciprocal communication, and the exchange of views before you initiate sex. *Assess* and *express* your desires and boundaries! *Ask about* and *honor* your bed buddy's desires and boundaries! Either person can stop at any time.

You can also improve your sexual communication skills by practicing alone or with a safe friend. Start with non-threatening subjects, move to more explicit ones.

In your sexual interactions in the real world, you need to also be on the lookout for people who do not respect sexual boundaries. Likewise, you should remain on the lookout for people who are not actually consenting to have sex with you even though you want them.

Note: Alcohol and drugs impair judgment. They may decrease sexual inhibitions, which can be fun, but they also decrease one's ability to say "no" or resist a sexual advance. Having sex with someone who is too inebriated or stoned to consent is legally and morally rape in all 50 states. Don't do it.

It is also our responsibility to take care of other people, especially here at BM! So look out for your friends. Help them protect themselves. Feel free to ask questions and help out if someone is being preyed upon.

VOLUNTEERS enact helping out someone else who is being preyed upon: skit of 3 people. A is trying to coerce B (who is intoxicated) into going into their tent. Person C verbally breaks in to say, 'Hey, that's not cool, leave them alone.'

Putting it together – steps for negotiating sex

Assuming that you want to get laid at Burning Man, the Bureau of Erotic Discourse suggests you take the following easy steps:

1. Assess your own desires and boundaries. What kind of sexual interaction do you want to engage in? What kind of sexual interaction would violate your boundaries? It's important to be very clear with yourself on both counts. Do you want oral sex or just a snuggle bunny? A make-out partner? A hot and heavy interlude with a ton o' lube? In terms of your boundaries, do you not want to engage in penetration? Do you want to play with bondage but avoid orgasm? Be clear with yourself before you even search for a partner.
2. Select someone interesting and coherent. You don't want to have sex with someone who is so loaded that they can't express what they do and do not want. It's illegal, unethical, and flat out repulsive.
3. Approach your new friend and talk to them. Comment on how sexy and awesome they are. Ask questions. Flirt shamelessly. If the vibe is good, get up your nerve and tell your new friend what you want to do with them. Say it in a sexy, direct fashion. Promise them attention, affection, and communication.
4. If your new friend refuses your offer—either in a gentle or rude way—say you appreciate that they considered your offer anyway. Continue flirting with them if that seems fun, or wish them a great burn and walk away with your head held high. That was a success! You told someone your desires, you were rejected, and the world didn't melt! Now go get a cool drink, lick your paws, reassess the situation, and start from the beginning with someone else.
5. If, however, your bed buddy seems interested in your expression of your desires, ask about their desires and listen with rapt attention. Ask if they would like to participate in an erotic game where you each express your desires and boundaries to one another. If they agree, listen attentively and speak clearly. Discuss safe sex and birth control, if applicable. Then decide what fun and naughty things might work for both of you and propose them. If your bed buddy agrees, then get busy, you hound dogs! And take as much pleasure from not doing things that your bed buddy doesn't want to do as you get from engaging in things you both want.

Questions and Answers

Try to keep each Q and each A brief.

Thanks for coming to the workshop! Have fun and be safe!

And please take some buttons!