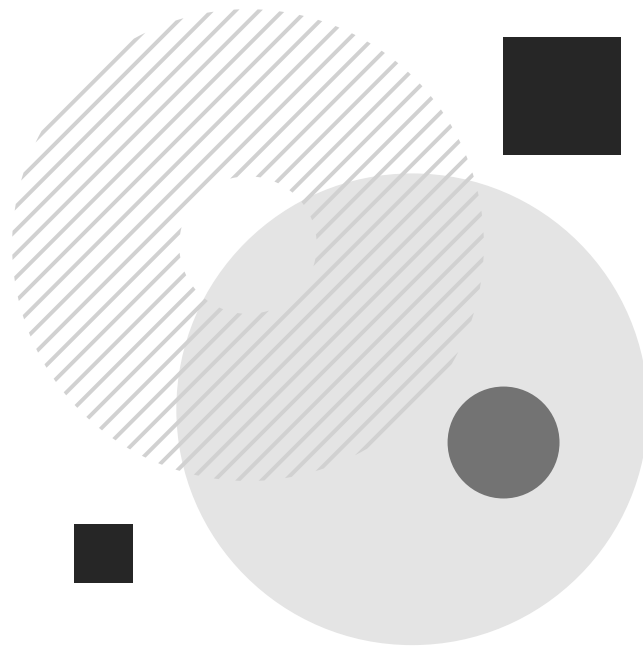


# UNPACKING THE GREY AREA:

## Force, Fraud, Coercion, and Sexual Violence Handout



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## **Force, Fraud, Coercion, and Sexual Violence**

### **Handout**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Talking about consent can be complicated and confusing. Because we live in a culture that doesn't value consent, it means that we often don't learn:

- The components of consent and what it looks like in different situations
- How to give, ask about, and revoke consent
- How to discuss and establish boundaries
- What to do when our consent is violated

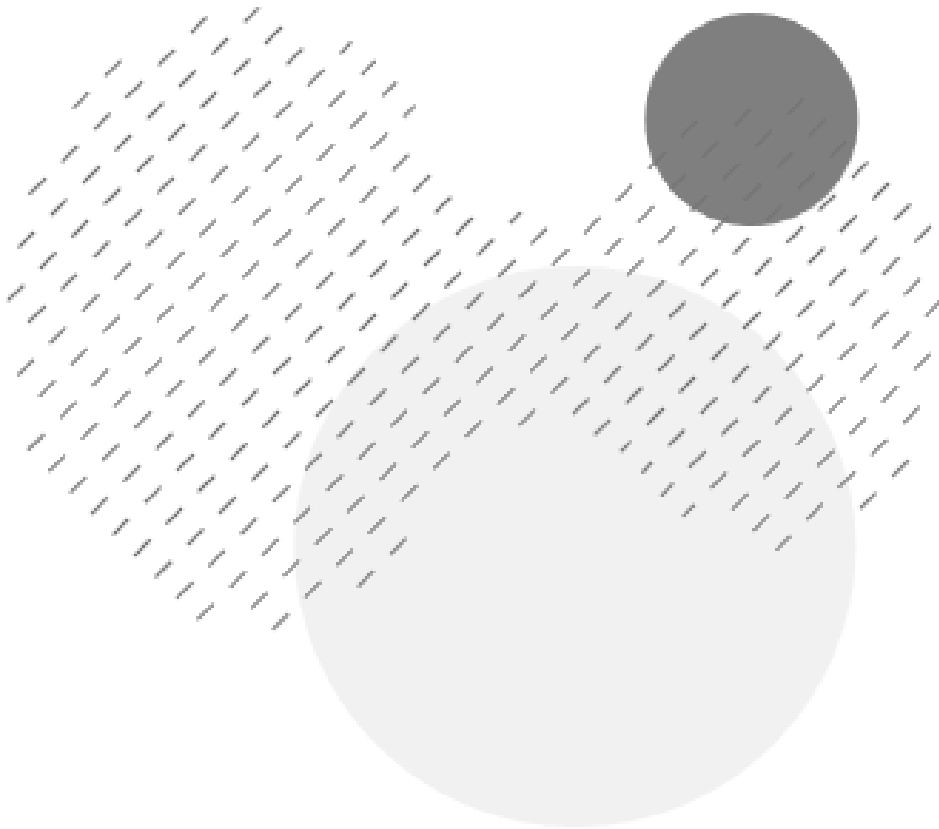
This makes it difficult for people, especially youth, to identify all the actions and behaviors that fall under the term sexual violence. Instead, people sometimes take direction from the media about consent and sexual violence. Even if they identify their experience as sexual violence, they don't know where to go to receive support. This can lead to intense feelings of shame, anxiety, frustration, hurt, and fear.

At the same time, sexual violence advocates sometimes don't connect with people in a way that reflects their sexual experiences. This includes:

- The way advocates define actions by using words like sexual assault, rape, and sexual harassment, may not align with what that person experienced.
- Advocates' understanding of sexual violence can be limited. In particular, some advocates struggle with how to support survivors who experience many types of non-contact sexual violence.
- Advocates' understanding of people's complex relationships can be incomplete. Advocates sometimes struggle to understand the intricate ways in which youth and LGBTQ+ people communicate, relate to each other, and navigate social pressures.

- The examples advocates use (in training and talking to survivors) to demonstrate that giving and revoking consent might not apply to real-life situations.

When people do not understand consent and sexual violence, they will continue to cause, experience, and be affected by sexual violence. If advocates aren't able to connect survivors in a way that's intentional and recognizes sexual violence in all its forms, survivors will continue to go without support.



## **ANALYZING MEDIA**

TV, movies, music, and social media contribute to what is considered normal concerning consent, sex, and violence. While the purpose of much media is to entertain, the ideas presented influence how we think of ourselves and others and interact with the larger world around us. Overwhelmingly, much of the media portrays sexual violence as a physically aggressive experience when, in reality, sexual violence includes a wide range of actions and behaviors. Media also overlook how frequently sexual coercion tactics (specifically persistent sexual advances, verbal and emotional manipulation and deception, and intoxication.<sup>1</sup>) are used to perpetrate sexual violence. This makes it difficult for survivors to understand all of the sexual harm they experience.

As advocates, it's important for us to analyze the underlying messages in the media and think about what those messages mean for sexual violence advocacy. While we have some questions below to help you explore, click this resource for an entire lesson plan on [Decoding Media Messages about Consent Using Consent Videos to Increase Media Literacy by Planned Parenthood](#).<sup>2</sup> These questions can be used in discussions with survivors or by analyzing one piece of media and discussing your reflections with a group of staff.

- Consent<sup>3</sup>
  - What was the last TV show, movie, song, or social media post you saw that had a sexual situation?
    - What happened? What was described?
    - Do you think the sexual activity was wanted by everyone involved?
    - How could you tell?
    - How realistic was the example you saw?
    - What signals, if any, were there giving consent?

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<sup>1</sup> Carr, J. L., & VanDeusen, K. M. (2004). Risk factors for male sexual aggression on college campuses. *Journal of Family Violence, 19*(5), 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOFV.0000042078.55308.4d> and Struckman-Johnson, C., Struckman-Johnson, D., & Anderson, P.B. (2003). Tactics of sexual coercion: When men and women won't take no for an answer. *The Journal of Sex Research, 40*, 76 - 86.

<sup>2</sup> You can bring these questions into a conversation with survivors when it feels natural and appropriate. Advocates should *never* use these questions like an interview because that does not support trust-building with the survivor.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from DECODING MEDIA MESSAGES ABOUT CONSENT Using Consent Videos to Increase Media Literacy (Planned Parenthood 2015).

- Force, Fraud, and Coercion
  - What in the TV show, movie, song, or social media post that made you unsure if there was consent?
  - What signals, if any, showed the people involved enjoyed what was happening?
  - What signals, if any, showed they understood what was happening?
  - What did someone do to try to make someone consent? Was there:
    - Persistent sexual advances?
    - Verbal manipulation?
    - Intoxication used to make someone give in or forget?
    - Threats to do or physical harm?
  - How does what happened line up with ideas of romance and flirting? How are they different?
  - How does what happened in the TV show, movie, song, or social media post line up with what you would call consent?
  
- Boundaries
  - What are boundaries?
  - How are boundaries and consent related?
  - Why is it important to have boundaries in general?
  - Why is it important to have sexual boundaries?
  - Why is it important to respect someone's sexual violence?
  - What might sexual boundaries:
    - Sound like?
    - Look like?
    - Feel like?
  - What are some things people might feel when their sexual boundaries are respected?
  - What are some things people may feel when their sexual boundaries are not respected?

When we're able to think critically about how media impacts our perception of the world, then we can see how our actions, behavior, and perceptions of consent are also impacted by the culture we live in.

## **THE ROLE OF THE SEXUAL VIOLENCE ADVOCATE**

As sexual violence advocates, our role should reflect the needs of the sexual violence survivors in our communities. We should always find ways to:

- Help survivors access healing and safety
- Model and practice skills that support survivors feeling calm, regulated, and in control
- Connect survivors with information and resources
- Collaborate with community partners to improve conditions for survivors

In connecting survivors with information and resources, a piece of our role is to have a nuanced understanding of sexual violence and consent. We need to be able to:

- **Understand the umbrella of sexual violence.** We need to understand and recognize the full spectrum of sexual violence, which includes both contact and non-contact behaviors. This includes contact sexual violence that happens in systems. For example:
  - Excessive touching and unnecessary procedures birthing people experience during labor and delivery. For more information on this topic, please read the [Sexual Abuse to Maternal Mortality Pipeline report by Restore Forward](#).
  - Excessive touching and harassment of trans people receiving medical treatment and exams
  - Roughness and neglect when cleaning and bathing people with disabilities in care facilities

For more information about defining sexual violence in advocacy programs, go to [It Matters! How Defining Sexual Violence Defines Advocacy Programs by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Resource Sharing Project](#).

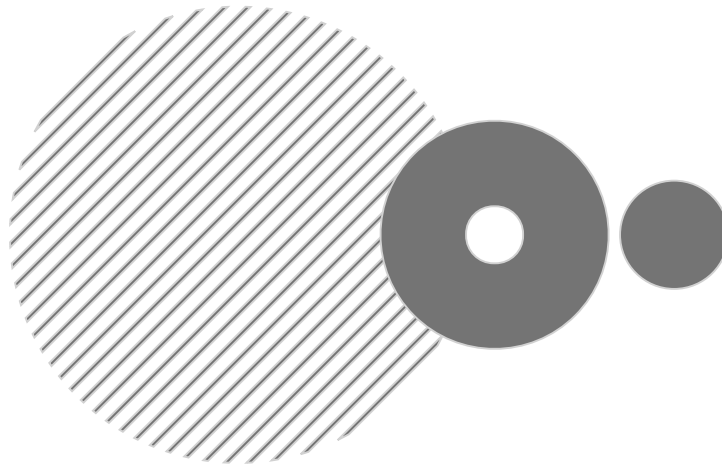
- **Understand what non-contact sexual violence is and recognize it in different forms.** Non-contact sexual is sometimes viewed as not as severe as contact violence, but that is untrue. Non-contact sexual violence includes behaviors like catcalling and exposure of genitalia. It also consists of abuse of social media technology through such actions as the threat of and distribution of images and information

(such as doxxing and “revenge porn”). Also, with [image-based abuse](#), non-contact sexual violence can include one or multiple unknown harm-doers and be continuously shared online, which can lead to survivors feeling more isolated. Advocates need to understand and recognize the effects of non-contact sexual violence (especially image-based abuse). Advocates also need to become more comfortable with technology and social media and know how to help survivors maintain security and privacy online. For more information, definitions, and resources surrounding image-based violence, please check out [Digital Violence Terms by the United Nations Populations Fund](#).

- **Discuss How sexual violence affects individuals, families, and communities.** Even if we haven’t experienced it directly, everyone is impacted by sexual violence. Advocates need to understand how sexual violence impacts groups of people and how things like child sexual abuse, incest, and grooming can affect their understanding of consent.
- **Discuss how it affects institutions and legislation.** Not everything that falls under the umbrella of sexual violence falls under the laws of each place. Also, technology often advances faster than the pace of policy, and rules must be created to regulate its use. Advocates need to understand the laws around sexual violence and how those laws affect survivors’ ability to seek support in the criminal legal system.
- **Know the language different groups use to describe sexual activity and sexual violence.** Language is constantly shifting and changing, and this can make it difficult to define sexual violence, consent, and related concepts. Advocates need to bridge the gap between formal definitions surrounding sexual violence and the language used in everyday life. This includes slang terms used by youth and LGBTQ+ people and cultural terms from your own cultural background(s). To do this, advocates should research these terms and have authentic and mutual conversations with community members to develop an understanding.
- **Provide real and tangible examples when discussing consent and boundaries.** Sexual activity often happens very quickly and might not involve verbal communication. Advocates should consider providing examples of sexual consent that are fluid, inclusive, and include apparent renewals of consent. These examples should consist of multiple aspects, including:

- Survivors understanding their own interests, wants, and needs regarding sex.
- Conversations discussing boundaries, limits, and communication with their sexual partners (and really, everyone in their lives!).
- There should be clear respect for established boundaries and time for discussion about new sexual activity.
- Frequent check-ins before, during, and after sexual activity.
- Acknowledgment and pauses when there are changes in body language, including eye contact, tone, facial expressions, pacing, and breathing

This understanding needs to be responsive to the cultural aspects of our communities and evolve with societal changes, technology, and social media.





## **ADVOCACY SKILLS**

It's important to note that many people will not use words like sexual violence, assault, and harassment to describe what happened to them. Instead, they might identify their experience in less concrete terms, not knowing what to name what happened but knowing that it made them feel unsafe, uncomfortable, and unpleasant. This is why it's so crucial for sexual advocates to be able to provide emotional support. Survivors may say things like:

- “She just kept kissing me, even though I told her I was tired and wanted to go to bed.”
- “I didn't know he was recording. I feel so embarrassed and stupid.”
- “It wasn't real rape; they didn't take off clothes.”
- “I wasn't sure what was happening, but I know I felt weird and anxious after.”

Although being able to identify Choice Points and use Grounding techniques are key skills in providing emotional support, we are going to focus on Empathetic and Active Listening, Safety Planning, and Boundary Setting when discussing consent and sexual violence with survivors. Click here for resources on [Choice Points](#) and [Grounding](#) by the Resource Sharing Project.

1. **Active and Empathic Listening.** It's important that advocates can listen to what a survivor is conveying and be able to provide emotional support. Even if we can't offer a survivor any other resources, and they don't use the exact terms sexual violence, it's still valuable and healing to provide active listening. Advocates should be able to:
  - Validate a survivor's feelings and experiences.
    - “I heard you say you felt [\(restate the emotion\)](#).”
    - “It's okay that you feel [\(restate the emotion\)](#). What you're dealing with is difficult.”
    - “It sounds like you did what you needed to keep yourself and your brother safe.”
    - “It's okay for you to feel confused about what happened. I'm here if you want to process it together.”
  - Frame their experiences.

- “It sounds like you wanted to (action or behavior) but not (action or behavior). Did I get that right?”
- “Many people freeze when they’ve been in a similar situation. Our brains react this way; it’s not a choice.”
- “Arousal is our body’s natural response to stimuli. Just because you were physically aroused doesn’t mean you consented.”
- “You are the one who gets to name what happened to you. I can provide you with support if and when you’d like.”
- Gently redirect victim blaming. Sometimes, others may blame survivors, or survivors might blame themselves for the sexual violence or how they responded to what happened. Letting go of self-blame is a slow process and one that advocates can support with consistent, kind messages like:
  - “Consent is more than just saying no.”
  - “Other people get drunk and leave the bar with friends, too. That is not an invitation to sexually assault you.”
  - “When they uploaded your picture without your consent, they did something wrong.”
  - “It sounds like they didn’t respect the boundary you set. What do you think?”

2. **Safety Planning.** Safety and trigger planning can help keep people safe holistically. It can be very helpful for survivors to have a short checklist when navigating sexual situations and to think critically about their sexual boundaries and desires. Here are some questions advocates can give to survivors to help them think about sexual safety planning.

- What are my triggers? What about sex makes me feel unsafe or uncomfortable? How do I want to communicate them to my partner?
- What sexual activity do I like or find exciting? What am I curious about? How do I want to communicate them to my partner?
- What are my boundaries? What are my partners?
- If I am triggered, what do I need to feel calm? What do I need to feel centered in my body?
- If I feel triggered, what do I need my partners to know? What do I want them to do? How can they help?

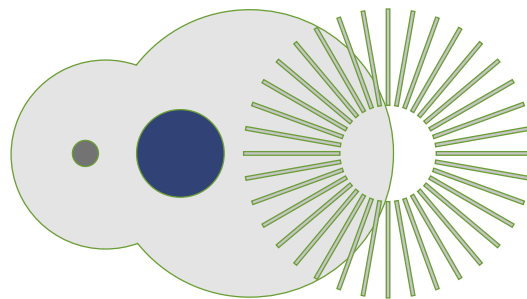
- If I feel triggered, what do I want my partners **not** to do? What are some things that may re-trigger me?

For more information about safety planning, check out [Survivor Support: Working through Triggers by the Resource Sharing Project](#).

3. **Boundaries.** Boundaries can be complex for many survivors to identify, set, and maintain, but they are a key part of consent. Some of the trauma around sexual violence is trying to re-establish those boundaries and figure out what to do after those boundaries are violated. When assisting survivors with boundaries, it may be helpful to remind survivors that:
- Boundaries help keep everyone safe and set clear expectations about acceptable actions and behaviors.
    - “It might feel awkward to set a boundary about seeing your cousin again. You may find that the more you set them, the easier they become.”
    - “Everyone has a right to have boundaries and have their boundaries respected, including you.”
    - “What would setting this boundary mean for you?”
  - Knowing and expressing their boundaries helps others understand what they want and need and more clearly establish consent.
    - “Knowing what you like and don’t like can help prevent confusion or misunderstandings with the other person.”
    - “What is your boundary about being exclusive while sleeping together? How do you want to talk about that with your current partner?”
  - Sexual violence is the boundary violation, not setting the boundary itself.
    - “What they did was wrong.”
    - “It sounds like they misused your trust in them, so they should feel guilty for what happened, not you.”
  - Planning on how to respond when someone violates their boundaries can help stop re-traumatization and harm.
    - “What boundaries do you want to set the next time your friends still want you to go out and drink? What do you want to do if they keep asking you about going?”

- “While you can’t make someone respect your boundary, you have a choice about how you plan to interact with them afterward.”
- The role of the advocate is also to support survivors in the boundaries they set.
  - “I think you made the best choice for you, and I support that.”
  - “Instead of focusing on the right or wrong decision, how about trying: does this decision feel good to me?”

When we commit to communicating about consent openly and realistically, we get one step closer to stopping sexual violence. Advocates must support survivors through the full spectrum of sexual experiences and provide resources along with compassionate and empathetic support. By understanding how it happens and what it looks like and using culturally responsive examples to address and identify the actions, we have the power to ability to shift the narrative around consent and sexual violence.



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June 2024

This publication was written by LaShae Lopez, with contributions from the Resource Sharing Project, Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

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*This project was supported by Grant No. 2020-TA-AX-K030, which was awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this program are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.*

