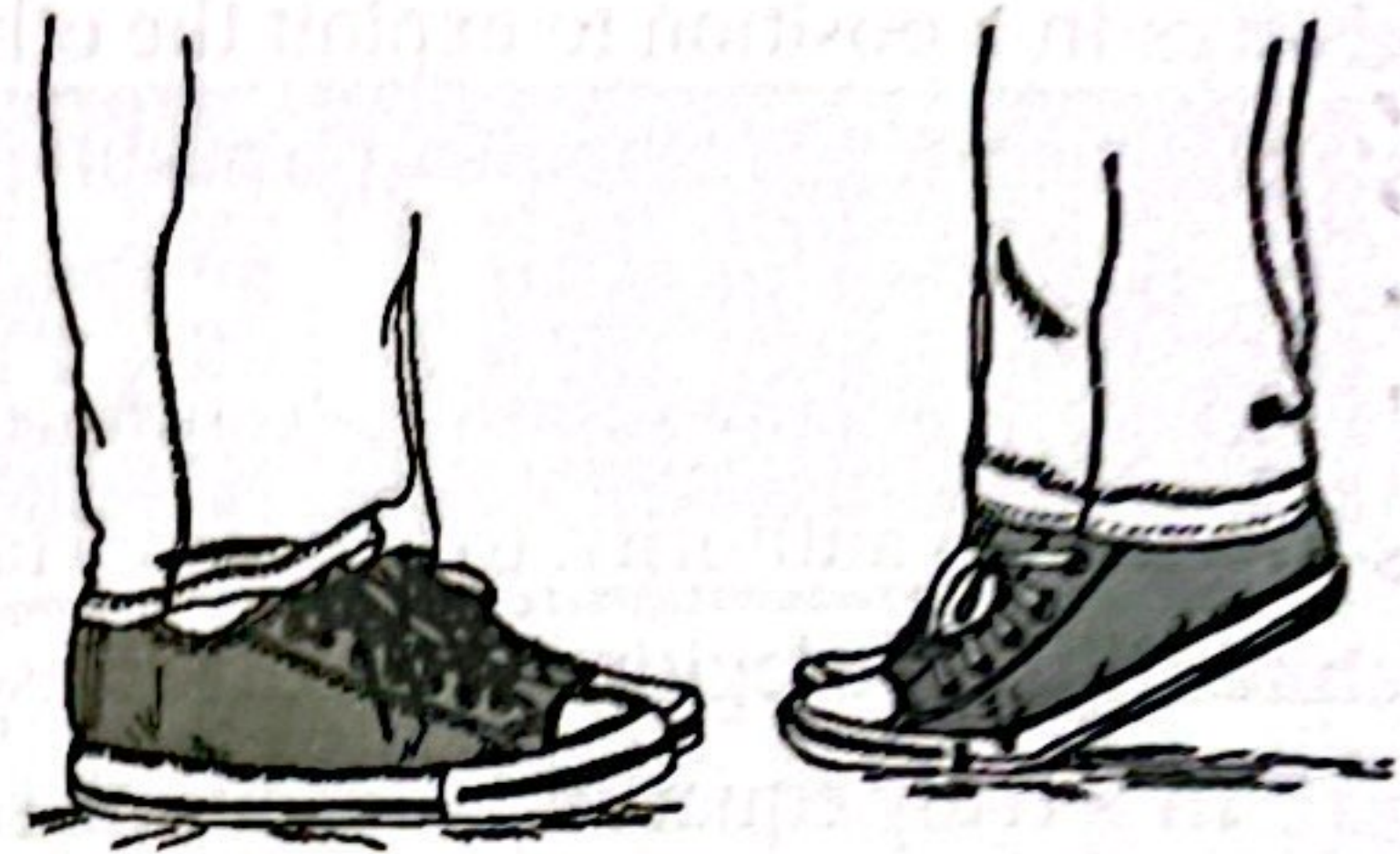


Figure 2.2: How Does Power Impact Consent

I Ask How Power Impacts Consent



Consent can be complicated when one partner holds more power than the other. By being mindful of the ways power imbalances may impact consent, you can take steps to ensure your partner feels comfortable communicating their needs.

What Is Power?

- Power is the ability to influence the actions and choices of others.
- Power can be obvious, like in the case of a supervisor or mentor, or it can be less apparent like when there's a difference in sexual experience.

Imbalances of Power

- Relationships have a power imbalance when one person has the power to influence things like money, a place to live, a job, or a reputation.
- Having power over someone can influence how comfortable they feel saying no to sex – someone may fear negative consequences for not consenting.
- When someone abuses power over a partner, they may use verbal threats or not. Either way, consent is never possible when someone feels they don't have a choice.

Examples of Imbalances of Power

- **Age differences and sexual experience:** An older or more sexually experienced adult may make a younger or less experienced adult feel they need to "prove" that they are mature or experienced.
- **Level of ability:** Some adults who have physical or intellectual disabilities, older adults, or those who need assistance from a caregiver may rely on their partner in some areas of life, but their decision-making in other areas should still be respected.
- **Position in society:** Someone may have more social privilege than their partner – through their education, job, wealth, citizenship, or other factors.
- **Privilege:** White privilege, male privilege, and other unearned advantages are part of the power some of us bring to relationships.

Checking In

- Before asking for consent, consider how holding a position of power might influence the situation.

Ask yourself: "Would this person say yes if I didn't have power/authority over them?"

Make Consent Clear

- If there's a difference in power between you and your partner, your partner may feel less able to tell you their needs.
- Let them know they can tell you when they're not interested in doing something.
- Ask questions in a way that communicates you're okay with their answer – no matter what it is.

For example, "I hope you know you can tell me how you're really feeling - saying 'no' is always okay."





Exercise 2.1: Think About Consent

Can you describe them in terms of the characteristics of consent, cooperation, compliance, and coercion? What power differentials existed? Use the questions listed below to think about these complicated issues.

Understanding consent definitely begins with a simple idea: **YES means YES and everything else means NO.** But it can be more complicated than that. Understanding consent requires consideration of the many complex motivations, thoughts, feelings, substance impairments, and relationships of the people involved. Like other issues, consent is also impacted by social and cultural context.*

- a. Do you agree that unwanted sexual contact through force or threat is non-consensual and illegal? Why or why not?
- b. Let's think about the ability of someone to safely decline a sexual encounter: Women historically have been socialized and expected to give in to male demands and desires, and some women will feel less secure declining advances than other, more empowered women. Other factors may play a role: A man making advances when three of his buddies stand beside him; a man making advances when a woman is in his apartment alone at 3AM. How would you know whether someone is truly consenting, complying, or being coerced?
- c. Level of drug or alcohol induced impairment: How do you know if someone is too intoxicated to consent? What would you look for? How much intoxication is too much, and how would you know when true consent is not possible?
- d. Relationship status: Sometimes behavior which indicates consent within marriage clearly does not mean consent on a first date. The ways of communicating consent are different for established vs. less acquainted partners. But even in established relationships all situations are not so clear. Can non-consensual acts can still occur in a marriage or long-term relationship? Why or why not? What are the factors that might be confusing for you?
- e. Time after the act to reflect and consider: Is consent or non-consent established at the moment an event occurs? Was something consensual if later in time it is reflected upon as non-consensual? Is it possible for someone to not recognize until after the fact that he/she felt coerced?
- f. Laws: To what extent does the legal climate contribute to the sense of consensual sexual behavior? Can certain types of illegal sex be consensual—with sex workers or sex between teens? What's the difference between legal and consensual?
- g. Social context: If intoxicated Jane hooks up with Kevin at a party, and in one case her friends applaud her ability to land the captain of the lacrosse team, and in the other case they frown at how he manipulated her and used his social status to seduce her, how might she see the situation differently? What if her friends call her a "slut" afterwards? If certain behaviors seem to be "normalized" how does that raise the risk for victimization and perpetration?
- h. The person who initiates the sexual encounter may also fall in the category of legally unable to consent (minors and intoxicated people, for instance). Whose responsibility is it to determine age of consent, or intoxication level, and how should this be done? What is the responsibility of the other person to determine whether engaging in the sexual encounter is right or wrong?

* Modified with permission; posted by Dan Rosen on the ATSA list-serve 3/8/19.