

Talking Therapies: The Power of Consent

With Silva Neves

Suzy:

Hello, welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Susie Walker and I'm the editor-in-chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapists about a range of topics. The need to clearly define consent has come to the forefront of conversations around sexual activity. But how can we tackle the awkwardness around the subject and our more meaningful discussions about it? Some listeners may find the themes that we discuss uncomfortable or distressing. There are links to where you can find support mentioned on our website and at the end of this podcast.

Silva:

You know if people can be more erotically fluent and have that thorough conversation about the erotic mind and what needs to happen in the bedroom, and of course the conversation of consent, there will be a lot less things going wrong in people's sex lives and a lot less people enduring sex that just does not feel right.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist and COSRT member, Silva Neves. Silva specialises in sex and relationship therapy and is a member of the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists. Previously working in the NHS as a psychosexual therapist, Silva has now moved to working in private practice. Silva has also featured on the BBC's Sex on the Couch where he provided psychotherapeutic support to couples struggling to get their relationships back on track. In this episode, UKCP's CEO Sarah Niblock talks to UKCP psychotherapist Silva Neves to unpack where our understanding around consent comes from.

Sarah:

Silva, can you tell me what we mean by consent?

Silva:

Yes, consent is a clear and affirmative expression of the permission to do something, to touch or to be touched in certain places, with certain manners and at certain times. It needs to be specific, and consent can be withdrawn at any time, and saying yes once about something doesn't mean an assumption that it's going to be yes for the next time, with the same activity. So, consent has to be sought every single time before something and especially, a sexual encounter. Also, a silence or an absence of a no does not constitute consent.

Sarah:

I mean, it sounds simple on the face of it, but are enough of us clear about what consent is?

Silva:

Yes, I'm glad you say that, because, sure, it does sound simple, right? But actually, it's not that simple because a lot of people are confused about it.

Some people think that if they notice somebody having a flirty attitude, for example, or wearing sexy clothes, that means it's a consent to be touched - but it's not. Other people don't understand that if someone is intoxicated with alcohol or some drugs, but still conscious, and if that person says yes at the time, that it should be taken for consent. Because they don't realise that that person has impaired thinking and so the consent, even though they might be conscious, and saying yes, might not actually be a true consent, and they have to wait for that person to be sober before acting on the consent. Also, I hear a lot of people in long term relationships where they think that the yes for specific sexual activities, for example, over sex, if it's given once, it means that can happen again the next time without asking for it, and that is also quite confusing for people. As I said earlier, you know, consent is only in the here and now. It's not just as simple as a yes or a no.

Sarah:

Where do you think this lack of understanding stems from? Because you've described situations there where you think surely, surely this should be obvious, but we seem to get this wrong. I'm just wondering why you think that is? Is it to do with the media, or is it social pressure? What's it coming from?

Silva:

Yeah, I think really, at the very beginning, I think it's for sex education to start with. I mean, in the UK now, we have, sex education has just been reformed and to be more inclusive and more mandatory. So, sex education should not be any more just about preventing disease and contraception. It will be a lot more inclusive, but a lot of people that we see in our therapy room right now did not benefit from that new sex education. So that means that without sex education, people are actually really confused about how to navigate sex and relationships. I believe that sex education actually has to start in primary school. A lot of people are afraid of that because they think, oh, gosh, that means that, you know, young children will be exposed to sexual content. And that's not that at all. In primary school, of course, it has to be age appropriate, but it's in primary school, when children can learn to respect other people's differences. They can learn body integrity, and they can learn how to have their own space and expressing that clearly. With many people I hear so often a story of childhood, something like, they had to endure their uncle sloppy kiss every Sunday afternoon when they were children. And at that time, as a child, they felt there was no option to say no. You know, if you think of that, it might now as an adult, it might just sound like an insignificant memory, something that's insignificant that happened. But actually, those moments can really start to construct a subconscious script, that sounds something like, I should not make a fuss, or I have no right to say no. Or I should do as I'm told. And those subconscious scripts then can really have a big problematic effect on people's sex lives. Because as adults, they might not feel confident or assertive enough to express what they want and what they don't want, and they don't always understand that nobody should endure someone's touch or someone's kiss. Another reason why we get it wrong so often is because there isn't a true, constant conversation that is spoken about or demonstrated a lot in our society. There's a lot of stories, for example, fairy tales, as an example, the Sleeping Beauty. She's saved by a non-consensual case. There are many stories, like love stories, for example, that show women needing to just be pretty, and waiting to be picked by man, right? And so, what those stories are telling us is that women just need to be chosen. And if they're chosen, then it means that yes, without the woman actually needing to voice clearly what she wants or needs. And the same happens in modern movies, you know, those conversations of consent are not really shown. Partly is because, well, it's not very exciting dialogue, so you know, films are not going to be bothering with that. But all of those stories, combined with no proper sex education, means that it just leaves people feeling quite lost in what conversation actually has to happen. The things I've just said so far about, you know, the position of women, of course, that's because misogyny is still very prevalent in our society, and not very well challenged, actually, still now and that's an issue. So that's another issue, misogyny, but another issue is that men also can be very confused about that.

Because although the stories of romance that we hear in our society are kind of more gender based, we have to also think about the fact that men can have the consent breached too, for example, it's perceived acceptable for a woman to slap a man's bottom, but it's not acceptable the other way around at the moment. Now, of course, part of that is because there's a myth that men are more sexual than women, and therefore men are always up for it. And if men are always up for it, that means they don't really need consent, because the answer is always going to be yes and, of course, that's not right. So, you know, as you can see all of that together, if you try to, you know, pull all these things together, and people not actually sitting down and thinking about it properly, can leave people very confused and that's how, then things go wrong.

Sarah:

You are so right, and on the money about the lack of any kind of clear or positive media representations. And as you say, we grew up on these stories, these myths about, you know, women either needing to be rescued or needing to be tamed. And of course, the stereotypes that persist that men are somehow always ready for sex and always willing for sex. You've mentioned so far heterosexual relationships, in your experience, is this an issue also within gay or other types of relationships?

Silva:

Yes too and quite different, but it does also happen in gay men relationship, for example, because, again, the myth is that gay men should always be ready for sex. Being highly sexualized, is part of gay men's identity as well. And that's also because there's been so much ostracisation over gay male sexuality. So, it's right that they reclaim, but as a result of that, they also assume that if somebody wants to have sex with another one, then the other one will be ready for it. And again, there's not a lot of conversation in the gay male population about sometimes not wanting sex or sometimes not wanting to be touched, or sometimes preferring other forms of intimacy compared to actual sexual torture and sexual contact and those conversations are not happening either. Also, in our society, there is literally no models of two gay men, for example, or a lesbian couple, or a transgender couple, living a life like everybody else, on a normal Sunday afternoon, in a normal house doing normal things. The images that we have of LGBTQ people is either out in the streets during pride, or in clubs, or in sexualized scenes or environment.

Sarah:

Now, this topic must have been particularly enhanced by being together 24/7 during lockdown. And it's not surprising with these kinds of stories and myths and stereotypes are bounding that we do feel particularly awkward about bringing up the subject of consent with a partner. Are those the main reasons, would you say? Or are there any other reasons why it can feel like a difficult conversation to have?

Silva:

Yes, it's an awkward conversation among partner, because people are just not comfortable with having an erotic conversation. And you know, most people have sex. But not many people actually know how to talk about it, which is strange, really, if you think about it, but again, it goes back to sex education. A lot of people feel anxious in the bedroom, or they feel anxious to even approach the subject of sex with their partner because there is a myth that people should know what's going to happen. People think sex is natural, sex should happen naturally and therefore, I should know what is in my partner's mind and it should just happen. I hear that so often: it should just happen. Even people that know each other very well, they can just go into an area of the erotic and be completely in the dark because they don't actually know what their partner likes or wants. What is their partner's turn-ons or fantasies? And sometimes they haven't even themselves, you know. sat with themselves and just think, what does turn me on? What are the parts of my body that I like to be touched that creates more arousal than other parts of my body? What are my sexual fantasies that I enjoy very much over others?

And so all of that actually requires the two people in the relationship, or three people or four people, depending on your relationship setup, to be really quite erotically fluent. And in order to be erotically fluent, you first have to learn the language, and learning a new language - I know that because I'm French, I learnt English. Learning a new language is awkward, it takes hard work, you've got many, many components to learning a language before you can become fluent at it. So, people have to really kind of like work at it. It's not something that just happens. And once people do have that language, of, you know, this is my body, this is what I like to be done with my body, then, actually, they can have a much better conversation about consent because they know what they're talking about.

Sarah:

Where do you get that critical vocabulary from? Where do you look for that? There will be international listeners listening to this, no doubt, but certainly in Britain, where we're recording this, we are renowned for being incredibly repressed and uptight talking about sex. And as you say, it's very strange living in such a sexualized culture now to be saying that, you know, that we just don't have the words to express how we feel in an everyday relationship. So, I'm just wondering if you have any recommendations of resources or places that people can look to find more accessible terminology and gain that critical vocabulary?

Silva:

It is a good point, isn't it? In our sexualized society now, we see sex everywhere, but nothing is actually about how do we talk about it seriously, not in a titillating way, but in a serious way, right? And yes, well, there's not many places, is the answer. But the good thing is that now there are more and more and more people talking about it. In the UK, we have fantastic sex positive, sex educators that are really active on social media who will put some content on their social media posts about clear and concise messages, and food for thought for people to think more about that is to do with consent and that has to do with body shape, diversity and different sexual activities to really reduce the shame about it all, but also to burst so many myths that there is around. And now there are more and more authors that publish books that are sex positive books about sexual education, and how to navigate all of those grey areas and awkward moments. But of course, it's not going to be given to you, you have to go there and look for those things. So, one good point is to really maybe follow some of those sex educators or sex positive sex educators on social media. And take it from there, start there. And also of course, you can go and see a sex therapist or a psychosexual therapist like me, and we will have plenty of books to recommend to clients.

Sarah:

It's so interesting what you're saying as a psychosexual expert. Are you saying that better communication, better articulacy, might help us to see a decrease in sexual trauma?

Silva:

Yes, definitely. You know, if people can be more erotically fluent, and have that thorough conversation about the erotic mind, and what needs to happen in the bedroom, and of course, the conversation of consent, there will be a lot less things going wrong in people's sex lives, and a lot less people enduring sex that just does not feel right, without them being able to say no, right? I hear that so often people say, sex is not good, but I just do it anyway. You know, without the assertiveness that they can say, actually, no, why would I continue something that doesn't feel right, I can just stop it anytime I want. And so there will be a lot less of that, that's for sure. But, of course, there's always going to be, unfortunately, there's always going to be sexual offenders out there, who will not respond to any sex education or any education on consent and that's because of their own psychological disturbances and those will always be out there. So, you know, we will see less sexual trauma in one way and in another way, there will still be some around unfortunately, some crimes.

Sarah:

Absolutely. And I think here we make a really clear distinction between a kind of incongruence in a sexual relationship, a power balance, that in a consensual relationship that may lead to trauma, and obviously, a relationship that is born out of a total lack of consent. I mean, we all make that distinction between the sort of criminal aspect and the consensual. But on that basis, I think that probably most people in their lives at some point would reflect and think, actually, that wasn't good in some respect. It may have been consensual, but it then it kind of straddled the line. How can a psychotherapist, such as yourself, how would you go about supporting someone who's experienced that kind of sexual trauma?

Silva:

Well, it would be first to learn from what's happened in the past and to think, okay, so, you know, you say it was consensual, but something went wrong, so what did go wrong? What was the issue? What wasn't said? What was unclear? And to help clients understand that consent is not just saying yes or no, but it's actually an empowering conversation that gets the two people involved in the sexual act, or the three people, or the four people, to be all of them in the driving seat of their sex life, and their relationship - not one leading the other, but both together, equally on the driving seat. And that fosters a very deep sense of respect. And that's when sex can then really, really flourish, as well as relationships can really flourish in that way. But if we have a client that comes in, and the issue is that they are having serious symptoms because of the sexual trauma that's happened in the past, and that they want to resolve, then that's when you think about as a psychotherapist, you think about doing trauma work, really. One of the golden rules of trauma work, especially sexual trauma, is first to always believe the client. A great majority of people who have been sexually abused will not report the abuse to the police, for example, because of a fear of not being believed. And also, the silence is something that sex offenders usually use to silence the victims in part of the grooming process, so that they can continue to use that person. So often, the client will break the silence for the first time in their lives in the therapy room with you, so it's really important at that moment that we always believe them - always listen and always believe them, and that in itself is really healing. And the second golden rule of sexual trauma therapy is to pace the client. Because often when they break the silence, they might just want to go in there jumping there, try to resolve it and sometimes they might lose their sense of the here and now. And they might go straight into that traumatic memory and relive it as though it's happening now. And that's what we call re-traumatisation and we absolutely must avoid that. And the client won't always know that they're going there. So, it's really the therapist that needs to really pace the client, just one bite sized chunk at a time, you don't have to dive in there. And before you even attempt to help the client to do any processing of their trauma, it's always a good idea first to give clients plenty, plenty, plenty of emotional regulation resources. How they can regulate their emotions in between sessions, what are their internal resources and external resources to be balanced to start with. And if those golden rules are observed, then the rest can be done according to the psychotherapist's modality. There isn't one therapy that is superior to another one in terms of sexual trauma work. But of course, there are some therapies that are more trauma specific, like trauma informed CBT, for example, EMDR, somatic experiencing, you know, those are the trauma specific therapies, but actually a lot of the sexual trauma, you know, if it's really well contained, can be done with any modalities.

Sarah:

What in general, do you think that we can do to keep conversations much more open around consent?

Silva:

Well, I think a podcast like this one is a great start. And also, as I said earlier, just really exposing ourselves to the good part of social media, when we have those sex educators that give information, is a good place to start in terms of information. And then the conversations can really happen as often as possible, really, almost as any other conversations.

Our conversation about consent, especially sexual consent, doesn't have to be done behind closed doors in the dark, it can just be a conversation that we can have out there in the open. I really encourage everybody to do it to bust all those myths that can be so damaging about sex and relationship. And we don't have to do it all at once: one step at a time. The power of collusion is so strong in the topic of sex and relationship and each time we hear something that doesn't sound quite right about consent, or a sex myth that pops up, if we don't change it, then we collude with it, and then that myth gets a little stronger, and then shame gets a little stronger, and then awkwardness gets a little stronger. So really, to have more open conversations about consent is to try to reverse the process and to pick it up each time it comes and challenge it and have the conversation. Also, as a psychotherapist, because you know, we're talking about consent, and because it's a subject I'm passionate about, I use it in my consulting room. For example, if a client comes in for an initial consultation, at the end of my initial consultation, I don't book a second session straightaway with them. I give them all of the information about how I work, and I then ask them to sleep on it overnight, so that they can take their time to make an informed consent as to whether they want to engage in therapy with me or not. And I think that this process of getting the clients to give them old information and get them to really take their time to check if they want to enter in a therapy relationship with me is key. And it's a great model of consent.

Sarah:

Absolutely, you're living and breathing, your mechanisms for healing. And I think that your work is so clear an exemplification of what I think is so wonderful about psychotherapy and is very much client led, it's at the client's pace. The other thing I think that you said today, which comes across so clearly in your work, but I think in psychotherapy as a whole, is that if only we had a psychotherapeutic critical vocabulary, if each of us had more of a psychotherapeutic lens on the world and on everyday life, we'd all be able to cope much better. And it shows how communication through positive relationship is key to a positive and successful life.

Silva:

Yes, I totally agree with that. And also, our psychotherapy world, there is room for improvement too, because I hear of so many psychotherapy trainings who don't really spend a lot of time on the topic of sex and relationships. And I think that if there were more time spent on that, maybe psychotherapists would also be able to pick up a lot easier when those awkward conversations come in the room.

Sarah:

Yes. Well, thank you Silva. I hope those conversations will be a little less awkward now and well, your words are very important. And as you say, a podcast like this just starts that conversation going. As we know in psychotherapy, if just one person does it and that can impact on so many people around them. So, thank you very much, Silva, for your brilliant explanation today. Thank you.

Silva:

Thank you for inviting me.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Silva Neves speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If, after listen to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the find therapists section of the UKCP website and have a look through, the website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and use the Find a Therapist tool. Alternatively, you can find support by searching for a rape and sexual assault referral centre on the NHS website www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services or you can contact victim support by calling 0808 168 9111. You can also find therapeutic support by the COSRT website www.cosrt.org.uk.

We'll also be discussing consent in psychologies magazine this month you can find us online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP's psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first - It also helps others to find us too. So, join us again next month. Until then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.