

DOMESTIC ABUSE RESOURCE

SEXUAL ABUSE

A relationship does not create automatic consent. Consent must be voluntary, specific to the moment and activity, and it can be withdrawn.

■ WHAT IT IS

Sexual abuse is sexual contact, activity or exploitation without freely given, ongoing consent. It can occur in dating relationships, long-term partnerships and marriage, and it often overlaps with coercion, fear and other forms of control.

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

The central question is not whether the people are married or whether they have had consensual sex before. Look at whether the person can say yes or no freely, without fear, pressure, persistence, punishment or incapacity.

■ THREE SIGNALS WORTH NOTICING

REPEATS

It keeps happening.

ESCALATES

The impact or consequences grow.

RESTRICTS

Freedom, safety or choice gets smaller.

A single incident can be confusing. Repetition, escalation and reduced freedom are often what make the wider pattern easier to see.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

One incident can be confusing. The pattern shows what life is becoming.

CONTINUE → WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

RECOGNIZE THE BEHAVIOR

WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

These examples are not a checklist or a diagnosis. The context matters: frequency, fear, consequences, escalation and whether one person is losing ordinary freedom or choice.

- Pressuring, guilt, threatening or wearing someone down until they agree to sexual activity.
- Forcing unwanted sexual acts, painful acts, recording, or sexual humiliation.
- Continuing after a person says stop, pulls away, freezes, becomes distressed or withdraws consent.
- Sharing or threatening to share intimate images without consent.
- Initiating sexual activity when someone is asleep, unconscious, heavily intoxicated or otherwise unable to consent.
- Ignoring agreed boundaries around condoms, contraception or sexual health protection.
- Using fear, money, housing, immigration status, children or relationship consequences to obtain sex.
- Treating sex as a debt, entitlement, punishment, reward or proof of love.

■ READ THE BEHAVIOR IN CONTEXT

ONE EVENT

Ask what happened in that moment and whether there was fear, force, pressure or intimidation.

THE PATTERN

Then ask what has been happening across weeks or months, especially when the other person resists or says no.

The useful question is not only “Did this happen?” It is “What does this behavior do to the other person over time?”

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Context matters. Notice what happens when a boundary is set.

CONTINUE → PATTERNS TO NOTICE

SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE

PATTERNS TO NOTICE

Patterns are often easier to recognize when you stop judging each incident separately. Look at what repeats, what escalates, what creates fear and what choices are gradually disappearing.



You agree because refusing feels unsafe, exhausting or likely to cause consequences.



Anger, silent treatment, threats or accusations follow sexual refusal.



The other person keeps negotiating after you have already said no.



Previous consent is used as an argument for why you “owe” consent now.



Your boundaries are respected only when they match what the other person wants.



Your sexual choices become narrower while the other person’s sense of entitlement grows.

■ WHY IT MATTERS

Sexual abuse can cause physical injury, trauma, fear, shame, anxiety and loss of bodily autonomy. People may minimize what happened because the person was a partner, because there was no overt physical force, or because they eventually gave in. Pressure and fear still matter.

MYTH

“A partner cannot sexually assault you.”

REALITY

Being in a relationship does not remove the need for consent. Past consent does not guarantee present consent.

Healthy relationships can include conflict, mistakes and disagreement. The concern is a repeated pattern that creates fear, removes autonomy or changes behavior through pressure or control.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Look at the pattern: what repeats, escalates or changes behavior?

CONTINUE → CASE STUDY & PRACTICAL STEPS

ANONYMOUS COMPOSITE EXAMPLE

CASE STUDY

This composite combines common patterns and is written to protect privacy. It is not presented as one identifiable person or investigation.

A person said they had learned that saying no to sex created hours of pressure. Their partner would keep asking, accuse them of not caring about the relationship, become angry, and continue touching them after they had tried to end the conversation. Sometimes they eventually gave in because they wanted the pressure to stop. At other times, their partner ignored boundaries that had been agreed to before sex began. The person did not initially describe this as abuse because the relationship was long-term and they believed sexual assault had to involve a stranger or obvious physical force.

■ WHAT TO NOTICE



Consent has to remain voluntary throughout the encounter; pressure can undermine a genuine choice.



A relationship does not create permanent consent, and agreeing to one act does not mean agreeing to another.



The pattern matters when refusal repeatedly produces pressure, punishment, fear or ignored boundaries.

■ IF THIS IS HAPPENING

- If safe, move to a place where you feel physically secure and consider contacting someone you trust.
- Seek medical care if you have injuries, concerns about pregnancy or infection, or want options explained.
- Preserve messages, images or other evidence only if doing so does not increase your risk.
- You can seek support even if you are unsure what label to use or do not want to make a police report.
- If the person also monitors, threatens or controls you, include those behaviors when discussing safety planning.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

You do not need to explain away every incident before you are allowed to take a pattern seriously. Notice what repeats, what changes your behavior, and what happens when you set a boundary.