

For many people it is essential to take a break from sexual activity at some point in their healing. This break is an opportunity for you to consider your own sexual self without any concerns about someone else's sexual desires. It also ensures that your time and energy can be focused on healing and not on worrying about sex or sexual advances. Taking a break from sexual activity is an important option for survivors to have, regardless of how long they have been in a relationship and whether or not they are married or common-law. When you decide to be sexually intimate with someone, challenge yourself to take some steps towards engaging in healthier sexual activity, such as:

- Only have sexual activity when you really want to, not when you feel you should want to (such as after a long period away from your partner, on your anniversary, or on another special occasion).
- Take an active role in sexual activity. Communicate with your partner about how you are feeling, your preferences, including what you don't like or what makes you uncomfortable, as well as your desires.
  - Give yourself permission to say no to sexual activity at any time, even after you have initiated or consented to sexual activity.

It can be helpful to discuss guidelines regarding your shared sexual intimacy that can help you feel safer during sexual encounters. The following is an example of a list of guidelines that you can use in your own relationship. Discuss this list with your partner, and feel free to add to it or take away items so that it results in a complete list of ground rules that make you both feel more comfortable.

#### **The HealthySex Trust Contract\***

- It's okay to say no to sex at ANY TIME.
- It's okay to ask for what we want sexually, without being teased or shamed for it.
- We don't ever have to do anything we don't want to do sexually.
- We will take a break or stop sexual activity whenever either of us requests it.
- It's okay to say how we are feeling or what we are needing at ANY TIME.
- We agree to be responsive to each other's needs for improving physical comfort.
- What we do sexually is private and not to be discussed with others outside our relationship unless we give permission to discuss it.
- We are ultimately responsible for our own sexual fulfillment and orgasm.
- Our sexual thoughts and fantasies are our own and we don't have to share them with each other unless we want to reveal them.
- We don't have to disclose the details of a previous sexual relationship unless that information is important to our present partner's physical health or safety.
- We can initiate or decline sex without incurring a negative reaction from our partner.
- We each agree to be sexually faithful unless we have a clear, prior understanding that it's okay to have sex outside the relationship (this includes virtual sex, such as phone or internet sex).
- We will support each other in minimizing risk and using protection to decrease the possibility of disease and/or unwanted pregnancy.
- We will notify each other immediately if we have or suspect we have a sexually transmitted infection.
- We will support each other in handling any negative consequences that may result from our sexual interactions.

Once you and your partner have agreed on your complete set of guidelines in your sexual relationship, you should also discuss what the potential consequences will be for breaking one of the guidelines.

\*Taken from <http://www.healthysex.com> by Wendy Maltz

**Automatic Reactions to Touch.** Even after you have set up guidelines to make sexual activity feel safer, you may still experience automatic reactions to touch; such as a flashback, a panic attack, a sense of sadness, a sense of fear, dissociation, nausea, pain, or freezing. These reactions are unwanted and upsetting to both you and your partner, though fortunately with time and healing they will minimize in frequency and severity.

In order to gain control of your body and mind during an automatic reaction, you want to ensure that you stop all sexual activity. Take time to make yourself aware of and acknowledge that you are having an automatic reaction. Try to consider what triggered it.

Once you have made yourself aware that you are experiencing an automatic reaction, take some time to calm yourself and make yourself feel safe again. Pay attention to your breathing, and try to take slow, deep breaths.

Take some time to bring your mind and body back to the present by reorienting yourself in your surroundings. Remind yourself that you are no longer living the sexual assault or abuse. Using your different senses, make yourself aware of your current environment. What do you see? What do you hear? Touch some of the objects around you to ground yourself to the present.

After you have overcome an automatic reaction, take some time to rest and recover. These reactions are overwhelming for both your body and mind. When you are ready, take some time to think about the trigger of your automatic reaction, and if there is some way you could alter the situation somehow so that the trigger does not happen or does not affect you in the same way. For example, perhaps changing the set up of the room would be helpful, or asking your partner not to do the activity that you believe may have set off your flashback. Also, if you are being triggered while being intimate with a partner, discuss with your partner what you would like her/him to do when you have an automatic reaction (e.g. stop what they are doing, hold you, talk to you, sit with you, etc.) Ask your partner to watch for signs that you are having an automatic reaction, and to stop sexual activity immediately when you have one.

**Relearning Touch.** Many survivors find that because of their sexual assault or abuse they experience sexual touch or certain sexual activities as negative and unpleasant. Through specific therapeutic exercises you can learn to enjoy and feel safe during sexual touch. There are exercises that you can do on your own, and also those that you can do with a partner. A series of relearning touch exercises are described in Chapter 10 of Wendy Maltz's book [The Sexual Healing Journey](#). If you are in a partnership at the time that you want to actively begin healing sexually, it is important that you work together. It is essential that you feel safe and comfortable with your partner and that your partner always respects your limits and is prepared to follow your lead throughout this process. Partners who act in ways that mimic sexual assault or abuse, such as touching without consent, ignoring how you feel, or behaving in impulsive or hurtful ways will prevent you from healing. Building emotional trust and a sense of safety in a relationship are important prerequisites to enjoying sexual intimacy.

**Conclusion.** Fortunately, the effects that sexual assault or abuse have on your ability to enjoy sexual intimacy can be minimized and healed with time and effort. The process of sexual healing is one that must be done slowly and patiently, and it works best if it follows or coincides with other healing regarding the assault or abuse. The guidance of a counselor can be very beneficial in the process of sexual healing, and is often recommended as this process can trigger difficult memories and emotions. While sexual healing is something that may take much time and energy, ultimately it will lead to enjoyment of sexual intimacy that is consistently positive and pleasurable.

All of the information in this document was taken from an article, "Sexual Intimacy After Sexual Assault or Sexual Abuse" by the University of Alberta Sexual Assault Centre, pages 3-6. If you would like to read the entire article, visit <https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students/sexual-assault-centre/-/media/b0b9b41c178e4e61b22cf41a837fe870.ashx>.