Glossary | Relationships and Sex During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Asking before you ask: Communicating with someone to see if it is okay to broach a specific topic or ask a question. Examples: "Do you mind if I ask what social distancing practices you are comfortable with?" "You mentioned before that sometimes triggers come up during sex; is there a good time to talk more about what you need or how I can support you if that happens?"

Checking in: The process of taking time to ask someone about their feelings, needs, boundaries, etc. Can be used in romantic, sexual, platonic, familial, professional, and other relationships. For example: "How are you doing?" "Does this feel okay?" "How did that feel for you?" "Is there anything I can do to support you?" "Should we do something different next time?"

Disproportionate impacts: When the percentage of people from a particular demographic population that experiences a specific phenomenon is greater than can be explained by their numbers within the general population. These greater impacts generally reflect patterns of oppression and marginalization of those same social groups. For example, despite only making up around 25% of the UW-Madison population, students with disabilities experience sexual violence at a higher rate (27%) than those without a disability (14%). This can be explained, at least in part, by how societal and cultural ableism makes those with disabilities more vulnerable to violence. Other populations that experience disproportionate rates of sexual violence on campus include transgender and non-binary students, Native and Indigenous women, Hispanic/Latinx and bi/multiracial students, queer and bisexual women, and queer men.

Fractal: In this context, a way of approaching social change that centers micro-level interactions and interventions as models that ripple effect into broader (r)evolutions. Focuses on self-work and relationship-work as essential and foundational to culture change work. Articulated and promoted by author and movement leader adrienne maree brown in her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds.* As brown says, "How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale." Example: If I want to live in a world free of rape culture, I can aspire to practice consent in small ways in all of my relationships, by checking in with my friends, family, roommates, and partners about their needs, feelings, and boundaries on an ongoing basis. You can read more about brown's understanding of fractal change here.

Impacts for other people: The way our choices can affect those around us, particularly in ways that circumscribe their choices. For example, not telling a friend, partner, or roommate that you have been exposed to COVID-19 potentially affects them in a negative way by limiting the information they have to make informed decisions about taking care of themselves and navigating your relationship.

Individualize: The societal process of ascribing characteristics or causes of certain outcomes to individual people. This is in contrast to recognizing that many social outcomes reflect widespread and often institutional, cultural, and systemic patterns and values. To individualize means to overlook the social origins of a problem. Individualizing can lead to blaming those who are impacted by harmful norms instead of taking collective responsibility for changing those norms. For example, people who engage in high-risk drinking may be encouraged to see their relationship to alcohol as a personal or mental health issue. At the same time, as a community we often fail to talk about how high-risk drinking and the negative community impacts it leads to are supported and reinforced by the dominant cultures of UW-Madison and Wisconsin as a whole (and beyond). Individual agency, reflection, and responsibility are

important; however, addressing individual behavior without assessing or addressing social contexts makes it nearly impossible to create meaningful culture change.

Liberation: Freedom from oppression. Collective liberation is a framework for talking about what we are working towards when we envision a world where all humans and all life are valued and respected. Example: Actions we take to counter racism in the form of anti-Blackness are also choices to invest in both a present and a future of Black liberation.

Marginalization: Considering a community of people as outside the dominant norm and acting as if their wants, needs, experiences, feelings, and contributions don't matter or are secondary to dominant or normative cultural identities. Refers specifically to the historical oppression and minimization of oppressed peoples including BIPOC, LGBTQ+, disabled, immigrant, women and femmes, poor and working glass, Global South, and other populations targeted by structural violence. Marginalization varies by cultural and historical context; the characteristics of people considered "other" and unworthy depends on time, place, and who holds power.

Normalize: Normalizing describes a social process whereby ideas, attitudes, stereotypes, and behaviors become widely perceived as "normal" or "acceptable." When talking about the normalization of sexual violence, examples include victim blaming sentiment (e.g., "they were wasted -- what did they expect would happen?"), media wherein it is "normal" to see women in various states of undress or as sexual objects, attitudes and stereotypes that men are or should be sexually aggressive (e.g., "boys will be boys"), and social circumstances where it is seen as "normal" to have sex while intoxicated due to alcohol and drugs – or to pressure someone to drink more in order to get them to be "more willing" to have sex.

Quarantine bubble: A group of individuals who agree to intentionally discuss and agree upon shared practices for interacting with each other and isolating from those outside the bubble. Envisioned to balance the need for physical safety with social support during the pandemic. For example, Mya, Elliot, and Amari might agree that they are all comfortable spending time indoors with each other without masks on, but any other interactions with others will happen outdoors with masks on and social distancing. Quarantine bubbles, or "quaranteams," require trust, transparency, and ongoing communication.

Relationship violence: Also known as dating, domestic, or intimate partner violence. The use of power and control by one intimate partner (boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, current or former romantic partner) over another. Examples of dating violence include threatening a partner or their family, coercing them into doing something they don't want to do, belittling them, controlling what they can and cannot do, deciding who they can go out with and when, isolating them from friends and family, controlling their finances and access to resources, or physically hitting, kicking, punching, slapping, or scratching. Relationship violence can also include sexual violence or stalking.

Risk: Exposure to danger, vulnerability, uncertainty about potential impact, feeling a loss of control, or the potential for something harmful to happen. For example: Even respectful safer sex involves some level of risk, emotionally and/or physically, because it is inherently vulnerable. At the very least, there are opportunities for insecurity or rejection to surface. The potential of exposure to COVID-19 is also a risk currently present in any in-person interactions with others.

Root causes: The underlying conditions that ultimately lead to social (and other) phenomena. Example: The root causes of widespread sexual violence include: lack of information, modeling, and skills about respectful sexuality and accountability practices; the normalization of coercion and leveraging power against others in various spheres of life; and historical and ongoing patterns of oppression. Together, these forces communicate that boundaries, self-determination, and humanity - especially of marginalized individuals and groups - are not valued in our society.

Safety planning (can also be called wellness planning): A process of assessing the vulnerabilities and/or dangers one is facing and thinking through strategies to access security and support. Developed by domestic violence advocates to support survivors of relationship violence in navigating and existing abusive relationships, but can be applied to any situation where one wants to think through ahead of time how best to care for themselves and who can help in challenging circumstances. Here is a model from Love is Respect, a healthy relationships and dating violence resource for teens and young adults (they also have a 24-hour helpline, textline, and chat). Example: A student who identifies as LGBTQ+ may be going to live with relatives who are homophobic and/or transphobic and wants to think through ahead of time who their supports will be and how they will cope and deal with family relationships during this time.

Sexual assault: Any physical sexual contact without consent. Sexual assault is a form of sexual violence, and it includes rape (such as forced vaginal, anal, or oral penetration, being made to penetrate another person, or drug-facilitated sexual assault), groping, child sexual abuse, or the torture of a person in a sexual manner.

Sexual harassment: Any unwanted attention of a sexual or gendered nature. This includes but is not limited to comments about someone's body or clothing; asking someone repeatedly to date or hook up; sending unwanted nudes; asking personal questions about sex, their sexuality, gender, or body; or discriminating against someone based on their actual or perceived gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Sexual harassment is a subjective and personal experience – only the person to whom the action or attention was directed can say whether or not whether the behavior is unwanted and crosses a boundary.

Social capital: In this context, the interpersonal and societal reward that individuals receive for acting in ways aligned with the dominant culture. Appears in the form of validation, popularity, support, and belonging, ranging from subtle and implicit to explicit in nature. Example: Dominant U.S. society values sex, particularly among men, so men who have a lot of sexual partners may be given "props" by their peers and have a positive reputation for doing so (while women, transgender, and non-binary individuals may be stigmatized for doing the same behavior). The existence of social capital, and its opposite, social ostracization, can make it hard for people to make authentic choices in regards to their own needs, because they may have to choose between behaviors that feel right for them and those that grant them access to community belonging, which is also an essential human need. Social capital also varies by identity; behaviors may be socially rewarded among some but punished among others. While often practiced unconsciously or unintentionally by groups, social capital is frequently leveraged as a tool of oppression and social control.

Stalking: A pattern of unwanted attention, surveillance, and/or contact that makes the other person feel uncomfortable and afraid. Includes but is not limited to repeatedly calling or texting someone, monitoring their social media accounts, tracking their location, showing up where they are, and giving

unwanted gifts. Can include an element of objectification and dehumanization. Stalking is frequently perpetrated by a former romantic partner but occurs among people who have other or no preexisting relationships as well.

Trauma histories: Having past lived experiences of events or circumstances that were physically or emotionally harmful, overwhelmed your ability to cope, and had lasting harmful effects on your mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual wellbeing. Examples: sexual and relationship violence, child abuse and neglect, war, oppression, poverty, sudden loss of a loved one, physical assault or accident. Trauma is subjective, so whether an event is traumatic depends on the person's experience of it. Trauma responses vary person-to-person; some common impacts are anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, emotional reactivity, flashbacks, fear, shame, trouble with memory or focus ("brain fog"), and feeling a loss of control. While painful, these are normal, common responses to intense and frightening experiences. Trauma survivors are resilient and healing is always possible.

Triggers: Reminders of past trauma that can cause an individual to feel distress or to psychologically relive the traumatic event. Could be a sound, sight, smell, touch, location, or proximity to a person who caused the harm or reminds the individual of someone who caused harm. For example, hearing a racial slur as a Black, Indigenous, or other person of color – in addition to being an act of violence itself - can be a reminder of the trauma of surviving ongoing racism and emotionally link to other experiences of discrimination and racist violence.

Yes/no/maybe tool: A process developed by sex educators that individuals can use to reflect on their own sexual wants and boundaries and that partners can use to discuss these together. Can be applied to non-sexual situations as a framework to assess personal needs and relationship possibilities and parameters. Example: Someone might say "yes" to video chatting, "no" to hanging out in person indoors, and "maybe" to sexting during COVID-19. Here is an example and more explanation from the sexual health site Scarleteen (inclusive, comprehensive, supportive sexuality and relationships info for teens and emerging adults).