

# Sexual Coercion & Marital Rape

**Sexual coercion** can happen in many ways, and it doesn't always involve physical force. Sexual coercion, for example, happens when someone pressures or manipulates you into having sexual contact when you don't want to. Sexual coercion can be confusing and deeply distressing. You know what happened wasn't right, but you might not fully understand how or why. You might even believe they couldn't have assaulted you since you said "yes" in the end. Here's one important thing to know, though: True consent is given voluntarily. If you only consent because you want the other person to stop pressuring or threatening you, you didn't really consent. Coercion describes any attempt to control your behavior with threats or manipulation. Sexual coercion, then, happens when someone won't accept "no" and continues to try to convince you to change your mind about engaging in sexual activity.

Once you turn down sex, the story should stop there. But this doesn't always happen. Sometimes, coercion is pretty blatant. For example: "If you don't have sex with me, I'll tell everyone we've been having an affair." Other times, it might take a more subtle form. For example: "Here, why don't you have a glass of wine and get out of those work clothes, and we'll just see what happens." **Coercion typically remains in the realm of verbal and emotional pressure**. That said, it isn't uncommon to give in to coercion if you're afraid the manipulation and pressure will escalate to physical aggression and violence. Sexual coercion often happens in romantic relationships, but it can also happen in other contexts — between acquaintances, co-workers, friends or family, at school, at a party, or anywhere else. If you don't really want to have sex but agree because you feel obligated or don't want the other person to get mad, you aren't consenting voluntarily. Coercion happens when someone wants you to consent when you've already said no or otherwise expressed disinterest. They might use threats, persuasion, and other tactics to get the outcome they want. In a relationship, a partner might try to manipulate your emotions in order to get you to change your mind about having sex or doing anything else. When people use their emotions deliberately to try and convince you to do what they want, that's coercion. Perhaps they say, "Oh, I understand" or "That's fine" but their body language tells a different story. They stomp off, slam doors, and sigh heavily. Maybe they hang their head as they walk away, or even burst into tears. Some abusive partners might refuse to talk to you until you give in or attempt to sway you by trying to get sympathy. **Coercion is often as simple as repeated requests for sex.**

This can happen with someone you've never slept with or even dated. They might text you constantly, begging for a chance, or show up at your work or school to convince you in person. This relentless pestering can also happen in a relationship. Perhaps you haven't felt like sex recently because of physical health concerns, stress, or anything else. Instead of asking how they can offer support, your partner asks almost daily, "Do you think you'll feel up to sex tonight?" Maybe they drop subtler hints instead: "Can't wait until you're feeling better." or "I'll do the dishes if that means some sexy time later." **Guilt is another common coercion tactic.** Your feelings for someone can make you more vulnerable to guilt. You care for them, so you don't want to hurt them, but they might take advantage of that. For example:

- "I've been feeling so lonely. I really need you right now."
- "We haven't had sex in over a week, and it's really difficult for me to go so long without."
- "I can't believe you don't want to have sex on our anniversary. You must not really love me as much as you say you do."

# Sexual Coercion & Marital Rape

People can also make you feel guilty by spinning the situation to make it seem as if you've done something wrong:

- “You haven't wanted to have sex much lately. You must be cheating. If you aren't, then prove it by showing me you want me.”

**Even if you don't feel like having sex, you might still want to connect by kissing, cuddling, talking, or relaxing together. But they could try to pressure you into changing your mind about sex by treating you badly until you agree.** They might:

- get up abruptly or push you away
- completely shut down
- make mocking or rude comments

If you try to kiss or touch them, they might pull away once it becomes clear you still don't want to take things any further. **Another common coercion tactic involves put-downs.** They might try to attack your self-esteem when you turn them down, or act as if they're doing you a favor by wanting to have sex with you. For example:

- “Good luck finding someone else who wants to sleep with you.”
- “You should feel grateful I'm here with you. I could sleep with anyone, and you'd never know.”
- “You're probably no good in bed anyway. No wonder you're single.” Consenting to sex once doesn't mean consenting every time. In the same vein, you can always withdraw consent after you've given it. So if you say, “Hang on, I'm not feeling so good about this after all,” or “Let's take a break,” your partner needs to respect that and stop, immediately. Any other response veers into coercion territory. For example:
  - “But you said we could have sex tonight.”
  - “I'm so turned on, I can't stand it. We have to keep going.”
  - “I'm so frustrated and stressed, I need this.” ***These responses reflect what they want, not any concern for how you feel.*** It's perfectly possible for someone to try manipulating you into having sex with positive pressure, including compliments, gifts and gestures, or other types of affection. They might take you to dinner at a fancy restaurant, send you flowers at work, or give you expensive gifts, all with the expectation that you'll reward their generosity with physical intimacy. Perhaps they say things like: “You look so good I just can't keep my hands off you,” or “I get so turned on just thinking about you.” Compliments on their own don't always indicate coercion. Take note, though, if they respectfully dial it back when you say “no” or keep pressuring you instead. Affirmative consent means “yes” is the only way to consent. Saying nothing does not mean you've given consent. In some situations, you may not want to say yes but feel afraid to say no at the same time. *A respectful person will probably notice from your body language that you feel uncomfortable, and they'll take a moment to find out if everything's all right.* Someone who begins initiating sexual contact without first discussing boundaries or asking what you'd like to do may hope you'll just go along with what they want to do. **Maybe they even wake you up for sex, disrupting your sleep and hoping you'll be too tired to protest.** When you realize a partner, or anyone else, is trying to coerce you into sex, a good first step is to call them out, as long as you feel safe doing so. Be direct and firm. You might say: “I said I don't

# Sexual Coercion & Marital Rape

want to have sex. Trying to pressure me won't make me change my mind." "I'd like to hang out, but I'm not interested in having sex. Why don't we go for a walk?" If they won't drop the issue, it's a good idea to leave or call a trusted friend or family member. Even if you don't feel comfortable discussing what's going on, having someone to talk to (or better yet, come by for a visit) can help you feel safer and less alone. It can feel terrifying to say no to a supervisor, co-worker, teacher, or anyone else who has some power over your job, living situation, or academic career. In this situation, a good option might be saying "no" clearly and walking away — straight to the counseling center or human resources department to make a formal complaint.

**Sexual coercion falls under the broad umbrella of sexual assault, as does rape. According to the United States Department of Justice, rape refers to sexual penetration that you don't consent to. Assault refers to any sexual contact that happens without your explicit, voluntary consent.**

**Since consent given under coercion isn't freely given, it doesn't count as consent. It follows, then, that coerced sex (when it involves penetration) would count as rape, even if the other person didn't use physical force or violence.** Still, it's absolutely fine to use whatever term feels most comfortable for you."

<https://www.healthline.com/health/sexual-coercion#common-scenarios>

According to Wikipedia: "Marital rape or spousal rape is the act of sexual intercourse with one's spouse without the spouse's consent. The lack of consent is the essential element and need not involve physical violence. Marital rape is considered a form of domestic violence and sexual abuse."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marital\\_rape](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marital_rape)

And according to Psychology Today,

"..But there is still a form of rape that remains a "hidden crime"—the sexual assault by an intimate partner. This is partly due to the fact that many women who experience marital or intimate partner sexual assault do not realize they have been raped. Marital rape is defined as any unwanted sexual penetration (vaginal, anal, or oral) or contact with the genitals that is the result of actual or threatened physical force or when the woman is unable to give affirmative consent."

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-compassion-chronicles/202003/intimate-partner-sexual-assault>

A good guide for true CONSENT is the acronym FRIES:

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- Freely given. Consenting is a choice you make without pressure, manipulation, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Reversible. Anyone can change their mind about what they feel like doing, anytime. Even if you've done it before, and even if you're both naked in bed.
- Informed. You can only consent to something if you have the full story. For example, if someone says they'll use a condom and then they don't, there isn't full consent.
- Enthusiastic. When it comes to sex, you should only do stuff you WANT to do, not things that you feel you're expected to do.
- Specific. Saying yes to one thing (like going to the bedroom to make out) doesn't mean you've said yes to others (like having sex).

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/relationships/sexual-consent>

**We considered finding another source for this CONSENT article since we are a Christian practice but decided to leave it to show that even organizations that are opposed to Christian values like Planned Parenthood preach CONSENT and are teaching others to abide by it. How much more should us as Christians be teaching others and practicing it as well in our own marriages.**