

What is sexual 'aftercare' and what does it mean for consent education?

July 18 2024, by Jennifer Power



Credit: Subodh Bajpai from Pexels

Sexual consent is about good communication between sexual partners before and during sex. Far from being a simple act of saying "yes" or "no" prior to sex, [affirmative consent](#) involves checking in with a sexual

partner throughout a sexual encounter, and tuning into verbal and nonverbal responses.

When we talk about [consent](#), however, we don't always talk about what happens after sex.

Communication and care are important in sex. Even if someone has freely and enthusiastically consented, respectful treatment by a sexual partner matters. No one consents to feeling disregarded or uncared for. Respectful sex includes how we treat partners before and after sex.

It's time to include [sexual aftercare](#) in the consent education discussion.

What is sexual aftercare?

[Sexual aftercare](#) refers to checking in with a partner after sex to make sure they are OK. It might also involve doing certain things to help someone feel safe and relaxed.

Aftercare can look like [many things](#). It may involve making space for attending to physical concerns, such as rehydration or, for women, going to the toilet to avoid urinary tract infections. It may also involve spending time with a partner to help each other wind down or to tune into what else is happening in their life.

In some cases, aftercare might be a quick process of checking in and paying attention to how someone is going. In all cases, aftercare is about ensuring care and respect for a sexual partner extends throughout a [sexual encounter](#).

The term "sexual aftercare" comes from the [kink community](#). In kink-based sex, people may set up particular ["scenes"](#) that eroticize power dynamics and deliberately push physical and emotional boundaries;

aftercare is about [regrouping after the scene](#). It helps everyone settle into a comfortable emotional and physical place.

Within the kink community, [negotiating](#) a sexual scene ideally involves planning the sexual play as well as the aftercare. Asking someone what they are likely to need after sex is part of the process of arranging what people want to happen and negotiating boundaries and consent.

A new term for an old idea

Showing care for a person after sex is obviously not a new concept although the ways we speak about it vary. The terminology we are likely most familiar with is "cuddling" after sex. There is a lot of research which shows the [importance of cuddling](#) after sex when it comes to sexual and relationship satisfaction.

Beyond cuddling specifically, [post-sex intimacy](#), affection and communication also support relationship satisfaction and well-being.

Indeed, what happens after sex [matters a lot](#) to the quality of a sexual encounter and how someone feels after sex.

Aftercare refers to a considered (or planned) approach to connecting with a partner, and ensuring their well-being, after sex. For this reason, aftercare is becoming part of contemporary conversations about sexual communication, consent and pleasure.

Aftercare and consent education online

The internet plays an important role in [sexual health](#) and [consent education](#).

Following the global #MeToo campaign and the rise of [feminist digital activism](#), issues related to consent and [resistance to sexual violence](#) have achieved a high profile in online spaces. This has generated a large volume of online content in places like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram focused on consent and what respectful sex should look like.

This content encourages [political action](#) against [sexual violence](#) as well as [personal reflection](#) and [learning](#). These creators challenge us to wonder: what do I need from a partner to feel safe? How do I tell a partner about my sexual needs?

Alongside this, the internet has created opportunities for people to tune into different sexual experiences and [communities](#), such as [kink communities](#). In recent decades, the language of "kink" and processes of sexual negotiation and consent that happen in kink communities have been adopted into the "mainstream" in part because they have become accessible online.

The "mainstreaming" of kink culture, or at least greater awareness of these cultures, has seen ideas from kink find their way into [digital content](#) about [consent, respect and sexual pleasure](#).

Why does aftercare matter for consent?

Consent is fundamentally about care and respect for another person. It is about tuning into what someone is comfortable with, checking in with them and ensuring they feel safe throughout a sexual encounter.

Introducing the concept of sexual aftercare into consent education facilitates a focus on consent as an ongoing dialogue. It provides practical guidelines for people to talk to [sexual partners](#) about what they need when it comes to sex and [how they want to feel](#). How do you want

to feel after sex? What will help with that?

Bringing discussion about aftercare into the negotiation of [sexual consent](#) encourages deeper conversations about what people want and need for safe, respectful and pleasurable sex.

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