

Topic 6 — Comfort zones

Introduction

A significant number of sexually active students, about 25%, have experienced unwanted sex. Both girls and boys, but mainly girls. It's a pretty loose term and it includes 'sex I regret' to forced sex (which may be sexual assault as defined by the law). We will go on to the legal definitions of sexual assault and consent in the following topic area. Here, we focus on the 'grey areas' between choice, pressure and coercion. This session provides a clearer picture of what ethical sex could be - a mutually pleasurable and consensual experience.

In an Australian study of young women and men's perceptions and experiences of negotiating sexual encounters (Powell 2007¹) young women consistently described the pressure to have sex:

Sara: *Pressuring you to have sex. (18 years)*

Jill: *Just basically the whole expectation of sex. (19 years)*

Joanne: *It depends on the girl though because there are so many girls who succumb to the whole sexual pressure. Yeah, but it is a really big problem for a lot of girls, it's awful. And that's how the whole regret thing happens anyway. (17 years)*

Melanie: *It might not be that they're pressuring you, it might just be like you love them so much that you just want to do anything for them and make them happy. And you feel like they won't love you if you don't do the things that they want. (18 years)*

Rebekah: *Yeah, cos' like when you're in love and everything, you're supposed to see the other person's happiness before your own, I mean, whatever it is. (20 years)*

Young men described a different kind of pressure:

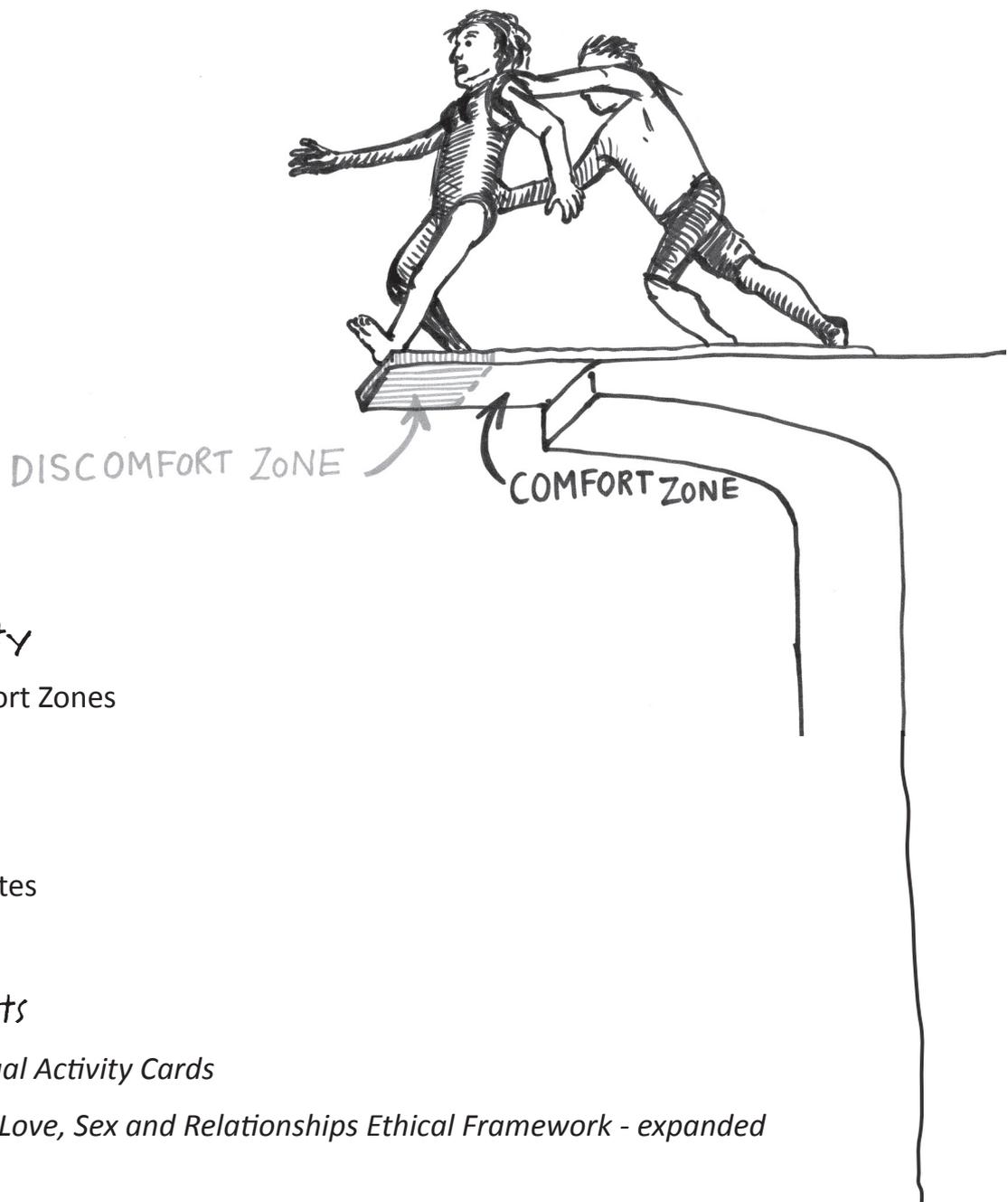
Dan: *I know that just the pressures, the external pressures I guess, you know, expectations to be cool. You've to be doing that, you've got to be treating girls badly and you know, kissing them or whatever and just forgetting them, scoring I guess. If you're a young guy, that's what you think other people are going to be expecting of you. (20 years)*

1 Sexual pressure and young people's negotiation of consent
Anastasia Powell, Melbourne University <https://www3.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/newsletter/n14.html>

Nath: *There's pressure to conform to the way the other person in the relationship expects you to behave. (19 years)*

Justin: *yeah, I think there's also the pressure that you put on yourself, because you feel you should be behaving a certain way. (20 years)*

These young people are describing the social pressure to conform to a particular set of beliefs about being male, being female, and having relationships. Most young men would say they would never force a girl into sex, but do they know when enthusiasm for sex, and persuasion, tips over into unwanted pressure and lack of concern about the others' experience? The distinction is fundamental to preventing many early negative experiences of sex.



Activity

1. Comfort Zones

Time

45 minutes

Handouts

H1: *Sexual Activity Cards*

H2: *The Love, Sex and Relationships Ethical Framework - expanded*

ACTIVITY 1: COMFORT ZONES

Time: 40 minutes

Overview: The purpose of this activity is to identify the overt and subtle pressures to move out of your comfort zone when it comes to sex. The Sexual Activity Cards contain a range of sexual and intimate practices. They can be confronting, for you and the students. This would never be the first activity you do with a class. Make sure that you tell students these are not behaviours that everyone would or should do.

Key Messages

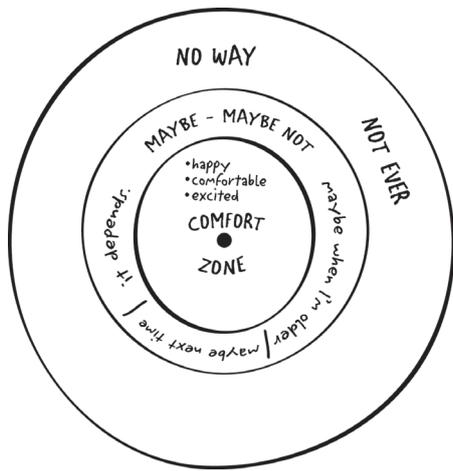
- Figuring out what you're ready for, how far you want to go, and what you want is your right. You are allowed to be uncertain and have this respected by the other person. You are 'allowed' to change your mind.
- Often the pressure a person feels to have sex is not through physical force but by concern about how they will be judged by the person they are with, or even by their friends. This is one effect of gender stereotypes.
- Ethical sex means that young women and men are more able to enjoy sex when they feel ready for it, as a mutually pleasurable and consensual experience.

Preparation and Materials

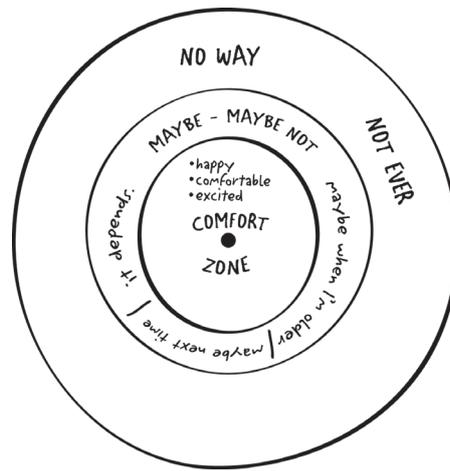
- Butchers paper, 2 sheets per group.
- Textas
- Prepare 10 sets of *H1: Sexual Activity Cards* ie. 2 sets per group. Each set contains 10 cards.
- *H2: The Love, Sex and Relationships Ethical Framework – expanded*, 1 per student.

Part 1

1. Organise the students into groups of 5. As this activity is discussing intimate sexual behaviours it is a good idea to group students with others they feel comfortable with.
2. Each group is to draw two circles (see illustration). One circle will represent Chris's Comfort Zones, the other, Sam's.



CHRIS' COMFORT ZONE 1



SAM'S COMFORT ZONE 1

3. Provide each group with 2 sets of *H1: Sexual Activity Cards*.
4. Read through the Sexual Activity cards and explain of the activities if necessary.
5. Read out the *Chris* and *Sam* biographies.

SAM AND CHRIS

Sam has never had a boyfriend, although she has kissed a few boys. Everything changed when she met Chris at a party. He is a few years older than her and while they aren't officially boyfriend/girlfriend (although she'd like to be) they have been with each other a few times now. She is a bit obsessed with him and can't get him out of her mind.

There's a party on tonight and he's texted her a few times to see if she'll be there. She feels both excited and nervous. She'd definitely like to be with him again but she doesn't want to go too far. The first time she was with him he tried a few times to slip his hand in her jeans but she didn't let him. It's got so heavy so fast and he seems to expect a lot. She knows he's had plenty of girlfriends and she's flattered that he wants to be with her.

Chris is looking forward to seeing Sam tonight. She's got this way of talking that he loves and she is hot. He's had quite a few girlfriends. He's had a lot of sex. He knows she hasn't been with many (any?) guys but he'll keep trying.

6. The groups must now take a guess as to where each *Sexual Activity Card* should be placed in Chris and Sam's respective Comfort Zone maps. Allow 10 minutes. Each group does not have to have total agreement on card placements, they just have to mainly agree.

7. When all the groups are ready, allow extra time so everyone can walk around and see how other groups placed their cards.
8. DISCUSS:
 - Was it easy or difficult to decide what Chris and Sam would feel ok about doing?
 - Was there much difference between Sam and Chris?
 - Was there much variety of opinion on your group, between groups? Were you surprised?
 - Observe that two people may have very different Comfort Zones and that within this classroom there were likely many different ideas about what would be a exciting and in-the-comfort-zone kind of activity.

Part 2.

1. Read out the following scenario:

Chris and Sam get together at the party. They are finally alone. They are out in his car. Her shirt's off. Her jeans are down. She's gone further than she'd planned but it was hard to stop because it felt so good. But now she wants to stop. He keeps trying for sex and she wants to stop.

What happens next?

- Some students may suggest that she has no choice and she can't back out now. *Make sure you correct students at this time. Remind them of Sam's right to stop at any time; to change her mind at any time, and to have this respected.*
 - Some students may suggest a 'compromise' eg that she has oral sex with Chris even though it's outside of her comfort zone. *Make sure that you correct students. If she is doing something she does not want to do, it is not a compromise.*
2. How does the Love, Sex and Relationships Ethical Framework help to understand this situation? Ask the group to divide into pairs and distribute the handout *H2: The Love, Sex and Relationships Ethical Framework – expanded*, 1 per student. Allow up to 5 minutes for pair discussion to assess Sam and Chris' situation using the framework.
 3. Bring the group back together to discuss what they decided.

Holding hands



Tongue kissing



Sharing a secret

Rubbing against
each other

Vaginal intercourse

Hands into and under
each other's clothes

Anal intercourse

Touching bodies with
clothes on

Oral sex

Flirting

Sending each other
romantic messages

Long phone
conversations

LOVE, SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS ETHICAL FRAMEWORK — EXPANDED

Relationships are often experiments - we are learning what we want, need and feel ok about, as we go along. Here are some basic ideas about sexual relationships that apply between women and men, women and women, and men and men.

When we say sex, we are including everything that involves sexual touching or being sexual with someone else. Sending nude pics or sexy texts is not touching, but it applies to those too. Some kinds of sex, specifically vaginal sex, anal sex, and oral sex carry extra STI and/or pregnancy kind of risks.

Taking care of me

- Am I doing what I really want to do?
- Am I looking forward to it?
- Is it going at a pace I feel good about?
- Am I being pushed or rushed into something?
- Am I doing it because I'm frightened they'll be angry if I say no?
- Am I being threatened? Am I safe emotionally and physically?
- Do I know they'll treat me with respect and concern?
- I feel I can choose between some kinds of sex and say no (or 'maybe some other time') to other kinds of sex
- Am I sure that just because I've done something before, doesn't mean I have to do it again.
- Do I feel able to talk about using condoms and/or contraception?
Do I know where to get Emergency Contraception if I/we need it.
- Am I sober?

Taking care of you

If I really, really want to have sex, and I think the other person might be unsure (I don't really know what they are feeling and thinking), Will I stop and check what they want.

If we are so drunk that we can't know, or communicate what we want, then we should stop.

Am I committed to respecting the other person's privacy?

Do I know what the other person wants?

Do I know that sometimes the only way to know what the other person wants to do is to stop and check.

Am I looking for non-verbal signals, as well as words?

- I'm not just doing it because it's expected of me. I'm not doing it because I 'owe' it to them.
- We have a safe place to be with each other

Having an equal say

- Is my partner frightened I'll be angry if they say no?
- How can I make myself clear?
- Are we both into it? Are we both into doing the same things? How do I find out?
- Am I sure I am not forcing, pressuring or threatening anyone else?

Learning As We Go

Few of us are born knowing how to 'do' relationships. We can learn, and learn from our mistakes.

What can I learn from this?

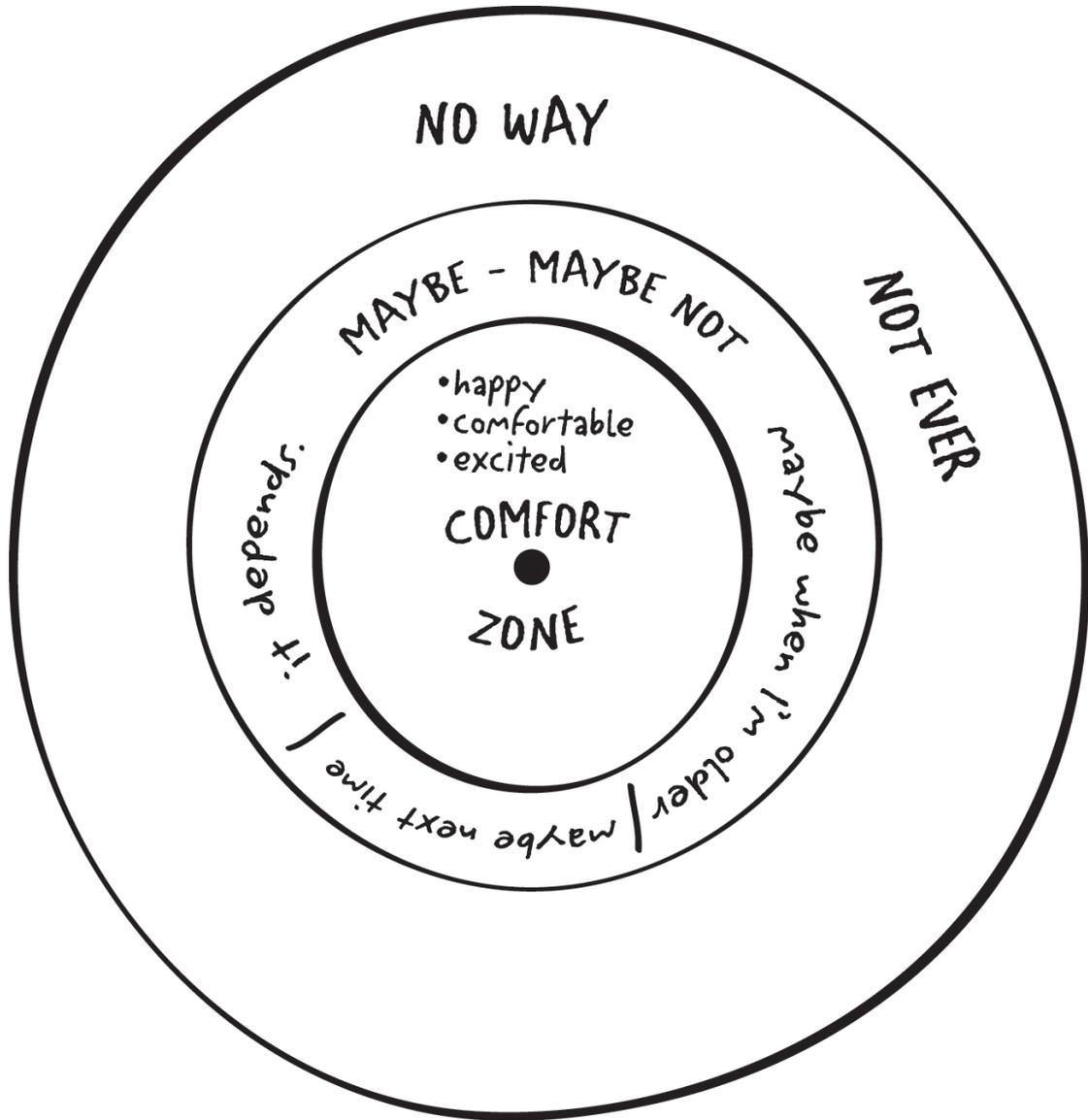
What happened?

How could it be different?

What was my role, what was the other person's role?

What would I do next time?

COMFORT ZONES MAP



References in this section

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2011). *Young Australians: Their health and wellbeing*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Hillier, L., Jones, T., Monagle, M., Overton, N., Gahan, L., Blackman, J., & Mitchell, A. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3: The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people*. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society.

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Mitchell, A., Patrick, K., Heywood, W., Blackman, P., & Pitts, M. (2014). *Fifth National Survey of Secondary School Students and Sexual Health 2013*. Melbourne: Australian Research