



# EMPOWERED

IMPROVING LGBTQ+ MENTAL HEALTH

## Let's Talk About Sexual Boundaries

As we approach Sexual Health Awareness Month in September, we wanted to start a conversation about boundaries within the context of sexual health. Simply put, boundaries are personal limits that we establish for ourselves to protect our safety and well-being. Reflecting on our boundaries allows us to identify our needs, desires, and comfort levels across varying situations. That being said: reinforcing boundaries does not feel simple, especially when setting boundaries involves intimate partners. For individuals within the LGBTQ+ community, it can feel particularly vulnerable to set boundaries, because of unique challenges related to sexuality and gender identity. To normalize and encourage conversations about sexual boundaries, we invite you to reflect upon the considerations highlighted below.

**Consent is non-negotiable.** Consent is enthusiastic, voluntary, and ongoing agreement from all parties involved. Everyone has unique desires and limits that deserve respect and acknowledgment. These desires and limits can also change over time, which ultimately makes consent rescindable. **Queer sex therapist Casey Tanner** describes this as embracing a "consent practice that allows you to say 'no' halfway through trying something." At its core, consent is about communicating, understanding, and respecting another person's boundaries, and vice versa (**RAINN**).

**Sexual boundaries are not only set around physical acts.** According to **licensed therapist and author Nedra Glover Tawwab** sexual boundaries encompass: "how sexual matters are talked about, when, where, and how sexual material is presented, and consent related to sexual or sexually suggestive words, jokes, images, gestures, or touch." This could range from where you feel comfortable touching your partners, discussions about sexually transmitted infections (STI) testing, nicknames you like or words that are completely off-limits, etc.

### **Engage in self-exploration of your boundaries.**

This could involve making a **Yes-No-Maybe chart**, listing the things you like to do (yes), are not open to trying or don't want to try again (no), and things you might consider doing (maybe). **Building body awareness** is also useful, such as observing your physical sensations and asking yourself: How is my breathing? My heart rate? Where am I feeling discomfort? Where am I feeling satisfaction? Getting to know yourself more deeply can be a powerful tool in establishing and reinforcing your own sexual boundaries, and in ensuring a commitment to respecting the boundaries of others.

**Avoid making assumptions about your partners' boundaries, preferences, or knowledge.** Instead, approach boundary conversations with your partners from a place of curiosity and non-judgment. This opens the door to an intentional conversation about boundaries, in order to create a safe experience for all involved. For example, if gender dysphoria is something that may arise during a sexual encounter, developing a shared understanding of language and physical boundaries is important. This could involve check-in questions like, "is it okay if I touch you here?" or requests like, "can you please refer to that part of my body as...?" Another example is the overall assumption that everyone has the desire for physical intimacy, such as sex. Desire is nuanced, such as for folks on the **ace spectrum**, a community that includes sexualities such as demisexual (experience sexual attraction only after an emotional bond is formed) or asexual (does not experience sexual attraction or intrinsic desire for a sexual relationship).

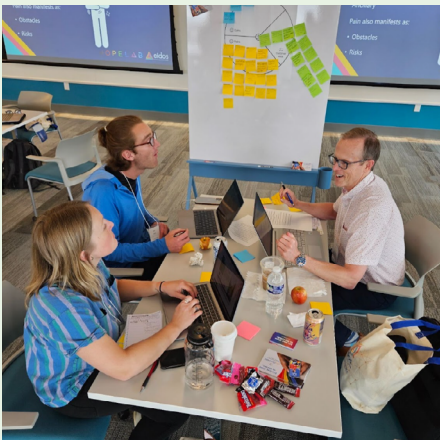
We hope these considerations have sparked a desire to engage in self-exploration around boundaries. Let's carry these conversations beyond the month of September. Remember: your boundaries are valid and deserving of respect.

## HEALTHY TIPS ...for building healthy queer relationships.

- 1 Learn about your partner's identity and sexuality.** Knowing the best way to support each other is important in a relationship and this means taking the time to learn about each other's identities.
- 2 Respect each other's pronouns.** Calling your partner by their right pronouns creates an understanding of respect and validation.
- 3 Support identity and self-expression.** Create a safe space for you and your partner to explore your identities and interests without judgment.
- 4 Respect each other's boundaries.** Regularly communicate about boundaries and respect how they may fluctuate.

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From left: Megan Cliff (Envision:You Program Coordinator), Brian Klipsch (You:Flourish CEO) and Steven Haden (Envision:You CEO)

### Program Highlight

The team members of You:Flourish, a social impact venture of Envision:You recently attended the University of Pennsylvania Summer Innovation Institute: Collaborative Design and Co-Creation for Health Equity You:Flourish was invited to join this collaborative institute by their partner, the Eidos LGBTQ+ Health Initiative, alongside other startups and nonprofits looking to create innovative solutions within healthcare spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. This five-day immersive experience allowed the You:Flourish team to dive deep into how to prioritize health equity and human-centered design within the soon-to-launch You:Flourish platform. Stay tuned for more updates on this exciting venture, and follow them on social media at [youflourishapp](#).

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### New Staff Highlight

Megan Cliff (she/her) served as a graduate student intern for Envision:You during the 2022-2023 academic year, and is now a Program Coordinator. Her work is focused on the soon-to-launch digital platform You:Flourish, the LGBTQ+ Behavioral Health Provider Training Program, and our internal Technology & Innovation initiative. Megan received her B.A. in Sociology from UC Davis in 2016, and her Master's in Social



Work with a certificate in Human-Animal-Environment Interactions from the University of Denver in 2023. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community on her own sobriety journey, she connects with Envision:You's mission of creating and promoting affirming care. Megan can be found exploring the outdoors with her dog Flipper, or finding new restaurants and bakeries to try.