

How to Tell Your Mate #MeToo

Since October, the #MeToo movement has dominated social media—and our cultural conversation—for good reason. The scope of sexual misconduct in this country is enormous.

One in four women is a victim of sexual violence, according to CDC data, and 84 percent of people say sexual harassment is a constant feature of American workplaces, per an exclusive *Cosmo*-SurveyMonkey poll. And as high-profile allegations keep surfacing in the news, millions of women are reliving their own experiences, and some are wondering how to talk about them...not on Twitter or FB but at home.

Tackling #MeToo—and the anger, confusion, and heartache the topic may provoke—with your partner can be tough, says relationship therapist Laura Berman, PhD, host of *Uncovered Radio*, a national show about life and love. “If it goes well, it can bring you closer together. But if your mate doesn’t get where you’re coming from or if he’s not empathetic, it can cause tension or even a rift.” Read on for how to have this convo, whether you’re a #MeToo survivor or not.

It might be a fraught talk, but he should always have your back.

1 Set an Objective
Pre-talk, think about what you want to get out of the discussion. Maybe news headlines are pissing you off so much that you need to vent or you feel it’s time to tell your guy your personal story. Once you nail down an intention, find a quiet, relaxed setting.

Then bring up the latest public scandal, and ask him

what he thinks about it. “This is kind of a litmus test,” says clinical psychologist Megan Fleming, PhD, a sex and relationship expert in New York City. “It gauges his overall attitude and thoughts.” In other words, if he responds in a way that makes you feel supported (e.g., “It’s amazing that these women are coming forward”), you know you have a safe space

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INTIMACY AFTER TRAUMA

Being a #MeToo survivor doesn’t doom you to an unsatisfying sex life. Follow these steps to reclaim your sexuality in your own time.

Talk About It

Either in therapy or with a trusted partner. “This releases any feelings of shame or self-blame,” says Laura Berman, PhD. It also helps you process your feelings.

Rediscover Solo Pleasure

Spend time doing any physical activity that helps you feel more powerful and in control of your body, suggests clinical psychologist Lonnie Barbach, PhD, cofounder of the Happy Couple app. Then progress to sensual experiences, like applying lotion naked or gentle masturbation.

Move Slowly Together

“Start with cuddling and kissing, then graduate to mutual massage to build trust and comfort,” says Barbach. If that feels good, you can move on to below-the-belt foreplay.

Take the Lead

Before you attempt intercourse, let your mate know what you like and what areas are especially sensitive for you. “If you have flashbacks, have him just hold you or not even touch you,” says Debra Borys, PhD. Knowing that you can stop will help you regain a sense of sexual safety.

LOVE & SEX

2 Explain What You Need

Next, if you feel ready, share your objective with your guy. Be clear that you want his ear, support, understanding, and empathy, as opposed to advice or evaluation, says clinical psychologist Debra Borys, PhD, who specializes in treating trauma in Los Angeles. “Most men are socialized to approach communication about problems in an immediate, action-oriented way by giving suggestions about what to do. Setting expectations prepares him to simply listen and be supportive.” Declaring your intentions also helps your partner see that you’re looking to him as an ally, rather than the enemy.

This process worked for Jandra S., 28, a writer from Nashville, Tennessee. After the #MeToo hashtag went viral, she felt ready to tell her husband about her personal sexual-assault story. She started by saying she was glad to see people coming forward but also sad that so many women are suffering. “I approached it with honesty,” she explains, “and I didn’t ask him for anything other than just to listen.”

3 Share Your Story

If, like Jandra, you have a specific experience you want to bring up, be direct and say, “This is hard for me to talk about because it’s upsetting, but....” Then explain what happened to you. In Jandra’s case, she told her mate about the time she was dancing at a Calvin Harris concert and a stranger shoved his hand down her skirt and tried to fondle her. As requested, her husband just listened...and has been empathetic in their follow-up conversations.

in which to share your views or experiences. But if his reaction makes you pause (“C’mon, she was asking for it” or “When will this male witch hunt end?”), you’ll want to first find out why he feels this way, make room to hear his thoughts, then invite him to discuss it further, says Fleming. (For advice on how to do this, see “Brace for Bumps,” page 118.)



When you can see eye to eye on this subject, everyone benefits.

#IWILLSPEAKUP

Many men are now using this hashtag to support #MeToo survivors.

4 Brace for Bumps

Ideally, your partner will also respond with understanding and support—but there is a chance that he won't. If instead he is judgmental, condescending, or dismissive or makes light of you or the victim in the situation you're discussing, try to show curiosity about where he's coming from, says Fleming. Then explain how his responses make you feel, using "I" statements. For example: "I'm not sure you understand how I feel about this" or "I feel hurt that you're focusing on what I [or the victim] might have done, rather than holding this guy responsible for his behavior."

It might feel grating to remain calm, but pouncing on him angrily won't further the conversation. That said, you can take a break—especially if your guy blows off your "I"

statements—and pick it up again later. Remember that your perspective might be foreign to your partner (and vice versa) or he might feel helpless, so it may take a few tries to get your feelings across. Often, emotionally complex topics have learning curves—it's rare to be fluent in them right away.

5 Keep the Convo Open

Just like you would do when talking about politics or religion, you can make it a point to revisit sexual misconduct periodically to ensure you're seeing eye to eye for the long haul, says Lewis Howes, author of *The Mask of Masculinity*. If, for instance, your first attempt ended in an argument, you can try a different tactic next time, perhaps by bringing up behaviors you and he find acceptable versus unacceptable at

work and why. (Sometimes, it's easier for guys to talk about hyper-specific situations than abstract ideas, says Howes.)

Also, know that you don't need to divulge every detail of your #MeToo moment at once. Sharing in stages can work just as well. When Rachel D., 27, an image consultant in NYC, had her ass slapped and grabbed by a client, she confronted the man—then told her boyfriend right away. What she didn't reveal was that, after the incident, the client refused to pay her unless she met with him in person. She refused and was never paid. It wasn't until more than a year later, when the #MeToo movement began, that Rachel told her BF the rest of the story. "He was outraged but also proud that I took control of the situation," she says.

6 Look to the Future

If you feel like you've accomplished your objectives and gotten the support you need, you can move forward together by suggesting what your mate can do to help. "I told my husband he can tell his friends when a behavior is unacceptable and encourage others to treat women with respect," says Jandra.

If, on the other hand, over time and several talks, your partner isn't empathetic or supportive, know this: "That's not a good thing in terms of the relationship's longevity," says Christine Nicholson, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Kirkland, Washington. It could be that he has blind prejudices about women or he's confused about his own #MeToo moment as the victim or perp. If you don't both commit to addressing the reason, you may be in for a rocky road, says Nicholson. And you'll need to decide whether you want to stay or go. ■