

## **Creating a Culture of Consent**

Hey everybody, it's Amber here. I want to talk about something that is really important to me, and really foundational to my teaching and how I interact with my students, and that's creating a culture of consent. So I want to talk about the topic of hands-on adjustments and creating that culture of consent around touch in our classes. So offering hands-on assists and adjustments to our students, whether we should be touching people at all, who's qualified to touch, how we should touch, when it's dangerous to touch. It is a hotly contested topic within the yoga community.

I mean I just think we should be honest. Depending on our teacher training program, the amount of time that we spend learning adjustments can be vastly different, from spending a mere couple hours on it, to requiring new teachers to shadow, assist, or mentor other experienced teachers for a time before they're allowed to make hands-on adjustments.

So many massage therapists are required to go through upwards of a thousand hours of training before they're allowed to put their hands on anyone. And so as yoga teachers, especially 200-hour teacher training graduates, I don't think it's unfair to ask if we are qualified to touch people at all, especially with no regulation whatsoever around our understanding of individual anatomy, physiology, body reading, movement assessment, or any sort of formal apprenticeship in physical adjustments.

Now I'm not suggesting that every asana teacher should stop adjusting their students. Many hands-on adjustments are helpful, nurturing, and clarifying, and many students find comfort and better body awareness through physical touch. However, I do propose that as teachers we stop and think before we physically touch. So before I touch my students I try to offer verbal cues to correct alignment; let the palm face the floor, bend deeply through the knees and draw the hips back, and so on. It forces me to be clearer in my instruction and work on my verbal communication skills as a teacher.

If we still want to touch our students we can ask ourselves a few questions. Do I have consent to touch? Is this adjustment helpful? Is it necessary? Is it nurturing?

So I think that if you're going to offer hands-on adjustments, I believe that it is unethical to do so without obtaining consent before you touch a student. So there is one school of thought that places the burden of giving or withdrawing consent for touch on the student, such as if there's anybody that, you know, doesn't want to be touched, well they should have come to me before class and asked me not to touch them. Another popular technique for obtaining consent is asking students to raise their hand at the beginning of class if they prefer not to be touched, like when everybody's in child's pose or something like that.

But unless you're in a profession like a massage therapist, physical therapist, doctor, chiropractor, priest, where you've given license to touch, then I am of the opinion that the ethical burden is on you. It's on us as the teachers to obtain consent every single time.

So why is it so important to obtain consent. First of all, it empowers the student to keep their asana practice in their own hands. So there's a big difference between walking over to a student and adjusting the rotation of their arm in side angle pose, let's say, versus approaching them and asking is it all right if I help your arm become a little bit more comfortable in this pose with a hands-on adjustment.

Allowing the student the permission to say no, thank you, or simply adjust their own arm at your verbal cues, which is what happens a lot of times, empowers them to remain in control of their own practice and their own body.

It also signals to the student that their body is their own, and that they have agency in other areas of their life to consent or withdraw consent around touch. This is a new concept for many people. I've had more than one student tell me in tears at a later time that no one had ever asked them before if they could touch them, they would just reach out and grab them, or touch them, or hug them, or whatever, their parents forced them to hug people as a kid, all that kind of stuff. And when I asked their permission it made them realize that they could set those boundaries around touch with others in their lives.

So many of us have issues around touch, because of trauma, because we're just having a bad day and we don't want anybody to touch us, because we're menstruating and we want to like choke people out when they try and touch us, because it triggers unpleasant memories, our body is in pain. No matter what the reason, gaining consent before touch really does help to keep everyone safer.

So let's talk about some ideas for obtaining consent. The first one that I want to talk about are consent cards. I first heard about these being used at Kula Annex in Toronto, which created a positive space initiative to make their community an anti-racist, fat-positive, trans-positive, queer-positive yoga studio. So these are the cards that you see on the right that say "Yes" on one side, and "No" on the other side. They're handed out at the beginning of class, and each student places a card at the top corner of their mat so that anytime throughout class consent for touch can be given or withdrawn depending on the student's mood or comfort level. And actually these are products that people have put into production now. I found these Letter Press consent cards on Etsy, that are there in the center. And the Yoga Flip Chip is a product that's a little bamboo screen-printed chip with "Assist" on one side, and "No Assist" on the other side.

So there are lots of ways you can do this. You can do it on the cheap and make your own. One time at one of my yoga retreats I had my students create their own consent cards, and so it was a fun ice breaker, it was a good way to talk about consent, and also to have students really even more feel like they're involved in that process.

Okay, so we talked about consent cards. Some other ideas for obtaining consent: Asking. Every single time, every time, even in the same class to the same person. I use this one in my own classes. Just because I touch the student at the beginning of class doesn't mean they want to be touched near the end. Again, it is about agency. So I often will ask a student, may I offer you a hands-on adjustment to help you find, lengthen your spine, or is it okay if I give you a hands-on adjustment to help you feel a little bit more clarity in this pose. If they say I'm not sure, or if they pause and don't answer, then I just step away.

I don't often touch my students, and so this doesn't become burdensome or annoying in classes, because I find that verbal cue are often all the student will need. If I really feel like a student needs a touch to be clarifying, or to improve their chance at safety, then I will just ask.

So a few more ideas that Diane sometimes employs in her classes is that you can set up consent at the beginning of class. So she sometimes says something like, when I step into your space to offer an adjustment, please just nod yes or no.

Finally, during class you could step into their space where they can see you. Please never sneak up on a student, or grab someone behind without them knowing you're coming. Step into their space, pause, and allow time for them to say I'm okay or decline your assistance. But if their body language is receptive, then you can proceed.

Again, this isn't one that I use myself. I really prefer black and white, you know, yes or no coming from the student every single time. And I really like consent cards for that reason, but you can't always have them. But these are some other ways that I think that other teachers have found to obtain consent in their own way.

So after you've offered an adjustment, a good way to ask for feedback is better or worse, not does this feel good. So if you ask, oh, does that feel good, or I've had teachers adjusting and be like oh, it feels so much better now, doesn't it? Like that is sort of leading the witness, for lack of a better term. If the student wants to, you know, please the teacher, or not contradict the teacher, they feel like they're being put on the spot, they might be feeling like that they should answer in the affirmative. And so I really like better or worse. So if it's better, then yay, and maybe we continue down that path. If worse, then I just have the student come out of the pose or go back to what they were doing and I step away.

So I really think that consent around touch, you know, it is going to complicate your classes. It is going to make things a little bit different than maybe what you're used to. And, you know, I want to remove some of the guilt around this that you might be feeling, you know, thinking like, oh my gosh, have

I re-traumatized someone, have I overstepped my bounds, do people think that I'm, you know, evil or whatever. Like I want us to leave that behind, that's in the past.

I think this is something that you can consider for your teaching practice, and also maybe just for your personal life. You know, I ask people's permission before I hug them. Most touch that I offer to most people, unless I am in relationship with them or I ask, is a handshake. So anything beyond that I feel like the burden is on us to ask. It doesn't hurt to ask. And even though people might be like, oh, of course you can hug me, they're not going to be offended that you asked. Some people will be offended, or hurt, or traumatized, or just made uncomfortable if you don't ask. So I like to err on the side of asking.

But I do want to acknowledge that this isn't kind of the default mode that our society operates in. You know, people don't have body autonomy and consent around touch drilled into their heads since they were children, at least not most of the people that I know. And so I think this can be a novel concept for people, but really important and really powerful in all three of those body positive foundations that I talked about around agency, consent, and permission, and it can be a real positive direction for our students. So I encourage you to think about this and decide how you'll obtain consent in your classes.