



Negotiation

Negotiation is the work that happens before the play. It is also, when done well, *part of the play* — the conversation itself is intimate, revealing, and useful.

This lesson assumes you've read the Consent module and builds on it: how to actually have the conversation, what to put in it, what to listen for, how to spot a negotiation going off the rails, and how to do it with someone new, a familiar partner, and across the kinds of dynamics OTT members actually run.

What you'll be able to do

By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to...

- **Run** a full first-time negotiation from the eight-part structure — and **scale** it down to a five-minute familiar-partner check-in.
- **Distinguish** hard limits, soft limits, and preferences — and handle each one differently.
- **Make** a vague “I’m into impact” specific by asking what a limit looks like *in practice*.
- **Identify** the warning signs that say slow down or walk away — and the good signs worth looking for.
- **Adapt** the conversation for new partners, uneven experience, groups, and ongoing power exchange.

If the Consent module gave you the principle — that consent is specific, informed, and ongoing — negotiation is where that principle becomes a conversation you can actually have. It is one skill worn at different lengths: an hour with a new partner before an edge scene, five minutes with a familiar one, thirty seconds before a scene grows a limb mid-play. Learn the long form once and every shorter version is just the same moves, faster.

So we build from the inside out. First, why the conversation is worth having at all — even with someone you know. Then the conversation itself: its full structure, and the written tools that feed it. Then the substance you’re trading — specific limits, the three kinds of limit, and what you owe a partner up front. Then how to *read* the person across from you, not just the plan. And finally how the whole thing bends to fit new partners, groups, ongoing dynamics, and the page.

In this lesson: why negotiate at all (§ I–II) · the conversation and its tools (§ III–IV) · the substance — specificity, the three kinds of limit, disclosure (§ V–VII) · reading the person, not just the plan (§ VIII–IX) · adapting it: new partners, groups and dynamics, agreements and aftercare (§ X–XII) · when negotiation says no, and a full worked conversation (§ XIII–XIV).

I. Negotiation Is Part of the Play

The most common mistake is treating it as a hurdle to clear before “the real thing” starts.

It isn’t. The conversation is where the trust gets built; the play is where that trust gets *used*. Compressing or skipping the negotiation doesn’t get you to the good part faster — it removes the foundation the good part is supposed to stand on.

IT HAS ITS OWN INTIMACY

You’re asking your partner about their body, their history, what scares them, what they want — and they’re telling you. That exchange has a texture distinct from anything that happens during the scene itself. Treat it accordingly, not as paperwork.

II. Why Familiar Partners Still Negotiate

Two experienced partners, a scene they’ve done many times — surely they can skip it?

Skip it and you’ll be wrong some percentage of the time. Bodies change: an injury you don’t know about, a sleep debt, a medication started last week, recent grief that makes a familiar intensity feel different. None of that is visible from across a room. This isn’t a full re-negotiation — five minutes, maybe less — but it has to happen.

THE FAMILIAR-PARTNER CHECK-IN — THREE QUESTIONS

“How are you feeling — physically, in your head?” · “Anything different from usual I should know?” · “Same plan, or adjust?” That’s it. Skipping it is exactly how partners get hurt by familiar techniques on a body that isn’t quite the one they expected.

III. The Structure of a Real Negotiation

The long form — a first-time conversation with a new partner. A returning-partner version is far shorter; the check-in is for what’s changed.

- ☐ **Experience & history** with the kind of play under discussion — both partners.
- ☐ **Limits:** hard (non-negotiable), soft (negotiable under conditions), and preferences.
- ☐ **The specifics:** tools, intensity ranges, areas of the body, duration.
- ☐ **Health & disclosure:** injuries, conditions, substances, STI status if relevant, triggers.
- ☐ **Relationship structure:** are either of you partnered, what has that partner agreed to, what rules apply here.
- ☐ **Safewords & signals:** traffic-light, hand signals or taps, an emergency-stop phrase if you want one.
- ☐ **Aftercare:** what each of you needs, and on what timescale.
- ☐ **The “what ifs”:** what happens if a safeword gets called, the scene ends early, or you’re interrupted.

BOTH PARTNERS PARTICIPATE

A negotiation where one person interviews the other isn't a negotiation — it's an intake form. The top shares their own limits, preferences, and experience just as much as the bottom does. And time scales with risk: a new-partner edge scene needs an hour or more; a familiar scene needs five minutes. Let the activity tell you.

TRY THIS

Turn the eight points above into *your own* pre-scene negotiation checklist — in your own words, in the order you'd actually raise them. Then write the answer *you'd* give for each one as the bottom *and* as the top. Negotiation gets easy when you already know your own answers before anyone asks.

IV. Yes / No / Maybe Lists

A written inventory of activities, each marked how you feel about it. They externalise choices that are easier to weigh in writing than in conversation.

- **Starting points, not contracts.** The list shows the territory; the conversation explores it.
- **The “maybes” are where the work is.** Yeses and nos answer themselves. The maybes are activities under certain conditions — talk about what those conditions are.
- **Disagreements are information.** If you mark the same activity differently, slow down and ask why.
- **Use them between sessions, not just before scenes.** A quiet hour with no pressure gets answers you won't get under the implicit clock of a planned evening.

RESISTANCE IS A SIGNAL

A partner who refuses to engage with a yes/no/maybe list — or treats it as bureaucracy — is telling you something. The tools aren't meant to be romantic; they're meant to give both of you a clearer picture.

TRY THIS

Fill out a yes/no/maybe list for yourself now, in a quiet hour with no scene on the horizon. Pay attention to the **maybes** — for each one, write the *condition* that would turn it into a yes. (OTT's own checklist tool is a good place to start.) That single column is most of your next negotiation, already done.

V. Specificity — What Limits Actually Look Like

Most negotiation failures are vagueness failures.

“I’m into impact” — into what? Hand spanking is impact. Caning is impact. They feel completely different and demand completely different consent. “Bondage” might mean a soft tie of the wrists or a full suspension. The same word covers a vast spread of experience.

The fix is to ask what a limit looks like *in practice*. Not “do you have any limits?” but “if we did impact, what would you not want?” or “when you say no breath play, do you mean no hand-on-throat or no airway restriction at all?” Concrete examples turn vague yeses into shared maps — and it goes both ways: “I like a heavy thuddy flogger, escalating slowly; I don’t like canes” lets your partner actually plan a scene that fits.

SPECIFICITY PROTECTS AGAINST “YES” CREEP

Your partner said yes to impact and you switch from a flogger to a cane mid-scene? You don’t have consent for the cane just because both are “impact.” The map you built together had a flogger on it. Adding a cane needs its own ask.

VI. Hard Limits, Soft Limits, Preferences

Three categories — each handled differently. Treating one like another is a common,

costly mistake.

Hard limits

Not negotiable, and they don't require justification. "No breath play" is a complete answer. Asking your partner to explain *why* is a soft attempt to renegotiate the limit. Accept it at face value; decide independently whether the scene works for you with that constraint.

Soft limits

Negotiable under specific conditions — and the conditions matter. "Fine for wrists, not the chest." "Fine sober, not after drinks." The question is: under what conditions does this become a yes? Meet them and you're inside the limit; can't, and you're not.

Preferences

Leanings within their actual range. "Thuddy over stingy." "Restraint more than impact." They shape the scene; they aren't constraints the way hard and soft limits are.

VII. Disclosure — What to Bring Up Proactively

Some information about you affects what your partner can safely do. Disclose it, even

when you'd rather not.

- ☐ **Recent injuries & chronic conditions** that change what's safe right now — the dodgy shoulder, the history with a particular spot.
- ☐ **Substances in the last few hours** that affect your responsiveness. Your partner is reading your responses in real time; they need to know there's a chemical filter on them.
- ☐ **Relationship structure.** Are you partnered, what has that partner agreed to, what rules apply. The social context of the scene, not oversharing.
- ☐ **STI status** if penetrative or fluid-bonding play is on the table. Withholding it to get a yes you wouldn't otherwise get is a clear violation.
- ☐ **Triggers & non-obvious sensitivities.** Not the full backstory — the specific triggers, what to do if one fires, and the neck spot you can't bear being touched.

What doesn't need disclosing: your favourite food, your job, your star sign. Negotiation is about what makes the scene work safely — it's not a job interview.

VIII. Warning Signs

Negotiation tells you whether you should play with this person, not just how. Watch the patterns.

Slow down or step away

- **Steering around hard limits** — vague, deflective, or “I don't really have any.” Most people have some.

Good signs to look for

- They ask “what do you like?” before sharing their own — curiosity, not deflection.
- They ask you to describe what each limit looks like in practice.

- **Mirroring without contributing** — “sure, sounds great” to everything, never adding their own. People who play to please push past their own discomfort to keep pleasing you.
- **Dismissing your concerns** — “we don’t need to talk about all that, trust me.” “You’re overthinking it.”
- **Hard limits that turn flexible** later in the same conversation.
- **A negotiation far shorter than the scene** — a five-minute talk for an hour of complex play is a permission grab.

- They volunteer their own limits and conditions unprompted.
- They give specific examples of what they want, what they don’t, and why.
- They want to talk about aftercare before they want to talk about the scene.

TRY THIS

Pick the one red flag from the left column you’d be most likely to talk yourself out of when you really want a scene to happen — then write the exact sentence you’d use to pause or step away if you saw it. Deciding your line now, on paper, makes it sayable in the moment.

IX. The “I’m Fine With Anything” Deflection

Almost never true, and almost always worth a follow-up.

THE ONE FOLLOW-UP THAT WORKS

“What would you absolutely *not* want?” Not-wanting is easier to access than wanting. People who say “anything is fine” usually don’t know what they want yet, don’t feel safe asking, or were taught that the agreeable answer is the right one — none of them is actually fine with anything. Pull out the hard limits without making them perform desire, then build a scene around what’s left.

What not to do: take them at their word and start something gentle (you're guessing); pick something exciting and watch their reaction (they're a guinea pig, not a partner); or refuse to play until they fill out a detailed list (over-rigid — the right tool is a follow-up question, not an interrogation form).

X. New Partners & Uneven Experience

New pairings need more time and a lower starting intensity — not a chance to demonstrate everything you can do.

- ☐ **Talk limits early** — before you're emotionally invested in the scene happening.
- ☐ **Aim low and move slowly** through intensity. See how you read each other, then adjust.
- ☐ **Don't compress to fit the clock.** An hour with a forty-five-minute negotiation gives you fifteen minutes of scene, not fifty. Compressing the talk to fit a desired scene length is how new pairings injure each other.
- ☐ **Try a low-intensity “test scene”** first — deliberately less intense, to see how you communicate and how aftercare lands. Save the big scene for a later meeting, once you've built data.

When experience is **uneven**, the labour shifts but the votes don't: an experienced top carries more of the explaining (and shouldn't let eagerness substitute for informed choice); an experienced bottom shares what the scene needs without lecturing from inside the dynamic; two new players slow down even further and attempt only what both feel confident with. Experience gap is *information, not power* — the more-experienced partner doesn't get more votes, just more context to share.

XI. Groups, Dynamics & Time

More people, or an ongoing dynamic, change the shape of the conversation.

Multi-partner & group scenes

Each pair-wise dynamic gets negotiated separately. If A tops B and C tops B, you need each piece worked out — what A can do, what C can do, what A and C do around B, what they do with each other. “We all agreed in advance” is not a substitute for the granular agreements, and roles matter (who plays, who watches, who holds space for safety).

AVOID “EVERYONE SAYS YES ONCE”

Group enthusiasm sweeps individuals into yeses they’d never give one-on-one, and a single sweeping agreement gets stretched across a long evening. Build in explicit check-ins; renegotiate as the scene develops.

Scene-based vs ongoing power exchange

HOW IT NEGOTIATES

Scene-based

Each scene gets its own negotiation that expires when the scene ends. Limits carry forward; each scene’s specifics get explicit consent.

Ongoing

A foundational negotiation establishes the structure of the dynamic, then ongoing micro-negotiations handle specific scenes within it. Needs *scheduled* non-scene check-ins — skipping them is how a dynamic quietly turns coercive over months.

24/7 IS A DESTINATION, NOT A STARTING POINT

Healthy long-term power exchange is built up from shorter, more contained dynamics. Couples who try to start at 24/7 typically find the foundational trust isn’t there and the check-in habits were never built — the dynamic contracts back down (often after harm) or breaks apart.

Renegotiating after a break — and mid-scene

Played with this partner before, but it's been months? Don't pick up exactly where you left off — people, bodies, and circumstances change. Read it as a fresh conversation: briefer than a first-time negotiation, longer than a familiar check-in. And when a scene wants to grow — more time, a new activity — renegotiate *before* the new thing, not during it. “Want to add restraint? What would that look like?” Thirty seconds, then resume. “Let me just try this, tell me if you don't like it” isn't renegotiation — it hands your partner the burden of stopping you.

XII. Written Agreements & Aftercare

Two things worth settling before you need them.

Written agreements

Uncommon, but useful for some dynamics — they force a clarity that conversation can paper over. Treat them as *living documents*: a contract untouched in two years is almost certainly out of date.

USEFUL FOR	UNNECESSARY FOR
Long-term D/s or M/s dynamics with protocols; 24/7 power exchange; relationships with significant ongoing impact (cohabitation, finances); multi-participant dynamics where the pairwise agreements benefit from documentation.	Single scenes, casual play, short-term arrangements. Don't write a contract for an evening.

Aftercare

Negotiate it *before* you need it — asking “what do you need now?” mid-crash asks someone to do a complex assessment with the wrong tools available. In the pre-scene talk, each person names their typical needs: physical (warmth, water, being held or given space) and emotional (validation, quiet, talking it through or not yet), plus the timeline.

AFTERCARE FOR THE TOP IS PART OF THIS CONVERSATION

Not an afterthought. Tops drop too — sometimes harder, having just held an enormous amount of physical and emotional responsibility. And a scene that runs over and leaves no time for the aftercare you both negotiated isn't a complete scene.

XIII. When Negotiation Says No

Sometimes the honest end of the conversation is no scene at all — and that is the negotiation working, not failing.

Everything up to here has assumed the talk ends in a yes you both shaped. Sometimes it ends in no — and not because anyone behaved badly. A negotiation that surfaces a reason not to play has done exactly its job: it found the problem with *words* instead of with a body. The skill nobody teaches is how to let one end well.

The limits don't fit

A hard limit on one side meets a must-have on the other. Nobody is wrong; the scene simply isn't there. Name it plainly — “that's a no for me, and I think it means this particular scene doesn't work” — and you've lost nothing but an hour.

Your read says no

Nothing on paper is disqualifying, but something in *how* it's going sits wrong — the deflection, the pushing, the hard limits that soften when you hold them. You don't owe anyone a justification for trusting your own gut. “I don't think we're a fit for this” is a complete sentence.

They won't negotiate

A partner who treats the conversation as an obstacle — won't name a limit, won't offer their own, calls it overthinking — has already answered the question. The refusal to negotiate is the result of the negotiation.

NO ONE IS OWED A YES

Not a long acquaintance, not a generous gesture, not the fact that you've already talked for an hour. Sunk time is not consent currency. The moment continuing would cost you a limit or override your read, the right move is to stop — warmly if you can, plainly if you must.

Walking away well is its own skill. Be clear, be kind, and don't litigate it: “I've enjoyed talking, and I don't think this scene is one for us.” You don't have to win the exchange, because it isn't one — and a clean no is a better night than a scene you talked yourself into.

TRY THIS

Section VIII had you draft the sentence that *pauses* a negotiation when something flickers wrong. This is its other half: the line that *ends* one for good, once you've decided no. Write yours now — short, warm, final, the kind you could give someone you genuinely like — so it's there when you want the scene and your gut doesn't.

XIV. A Negotiation, Start to Finish

*Everything above, in one conversation — two people planning a first impact scene.
Watch the eight parts surface, rarely in order.*

Robin: Okay — before the fun stuff. What have you actually done? Not the version you'd tell to impress me.

Sam: Ha. A couple of paddle scenes with an ex, and honestly that's it. I liked it, but I couldn't tell you much yet about what I'm into. You?

Robin: Years, mostly floggers and canes — which mostly means I have to watch myself. My normal is probably way past yours.

Sam: Yeah, that's... kind of a relief, actually.

Robin: Good. So — hard nos. Anything just off the table, full stop?

Sam: No face. No canes — the ex used one once and I hated it. Oh, and nothing that leaves marks I can't cover, I've got a beach thing Saturday.

Robin: Face, canes, no visible marks. Mine's short: I don't play with anyone who's been drinking, and that includes me.

Sam: No problem, I'm sober. Um — can I ask something? I don't actually know if I'd like heavier stuff. Curious, but kind of nervous about it.

Robin: Then we don't go there tonight. We stay light to medium, and “heavier” is a door only you open, another night — not me.

Sam: So... that's a soft limit? Something I might do, just not now?

Robin: That's exactly it. And while we're there — what's the *bad* kind, for you? Stingy, thuddy?

Sam: Stingy, I think. The paddle was more of a thud, and that part was good.

Robin: Useful. Soft flogger, then, crop stays in the bag. I'll keep to your backside and the back of your thighs, nowhere near your lower back or kidneys. Anything going on health-wise I should plan around — injuries, meds?

Sam: Left shoulder's bad, so nothing that hauls my arms back. And... this feels awkward, but I started a new med a few weeks ago and it makes me slow to feel things.

Robin: Not awkward — that's exactly what I need to know. It means I lean less on you *telling* me you're fine and more on watching you — your breathing, how you're holding tension, your skin — and I check in out loud more often. Anyone else with a stake in this for you?

Sam: I've got a partner — open relationship, they know I'm here. We're fluid-bonded, no barriers between us, so I keep anything with other people non-sexual.

Robin: Clean line, I'll hold it. Safewords — I run traffic lights. Green, keep going; yellow, ease off or check in; red stops everything. If words won't come, two taps on me or the floor is red.

Sam: Traffic lights, two taps for red. And... what happens after? I always get weird about that part.

Robin: Honestly, best thing you've asked all night. What do you need coming down?

Sam: That's the thing — I don't know. With the ex there sort of wasn't an after.

Robin: Then we go gentle and find out. Water, a blanket, I stay close; you tell me in the moment if you want holding or just quiet, and either one's right. I'll take a few minutes for myself after, too — this takes something out of me, and I'd rather say so now than seem checked-out later.

Sam: That already feels really different from before.

Robin: That's the whole idea. Last thing: if you call red, or someone walks in — I stop, no questions, cover you, and deal with everything else second. Good to start light and feel it out?

Sam: Yeah. Let's.

TRY THIS

Go back through the exchange and label each of the eight parts as it appears. They arrive out of order, and a few get folded into a single line — finding them in a conversation this messy is the actual skill, not reciting them in sequence.

KEY TAKEAWAY

If you remember one thing: **the negotiation is part of the play, not the hurdle before it.** Make limits *specific* instead of vague, treat hard limits / soft limits / preferences as three different things, scale the conversation to the risk, and let what you hear tell you whether to play at all — not just how. Everything else in this lesson hangs off that.

Habits That Make Negotiation Easier

Come back to where we started: negotiation is the work before the play that, done well, becomes *part of the play*. Like any part of the play, it's a skill that compounds — a few practices that get you better at it over time:

- **Negotiate about small things.** Where to eat, what to watch — practising explicit-preference talk in low stakes builds the muscle for high stakes.
- **Don't make negotiation conditional on imminent play.** Talk limits in calm, non-scene contexts so the pre-play version isn't the only time you ever discuss this.
- **Notice your own deflection patterns.** Do you say "I'm fine with anything"? Avoid naming what you don't want? Knowing your habits lets you correct for them.
- **Get good at hearing "no."** A no gracefully received makes the next yes possible; received badly, it trains your partner not to give you one.
- **Build vocabulary.** The more specific your words, the more specific the conversation.
- **Re-read your own agreements occasionally.** Long-term partners drift from what was agreed; periodic re-reading surfaces it before it's a problem.

OFF THE TRAXX · FOUNDATIONS

The negotiation conversation is part of how you build the relationship. Treat it that way, and the play that follows tends to be deeper, more responsive, and considerably safer than scenes that started from “let’s just see what happens.”

Foundations curriculum · the conversation is the craft.