

# Own the Awk: Research Results and a Campaign to Promote Open Communication about Sexual Health and Relationships



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## SIGNIFICANCE

- Young adults want healthy relationships and good sexual health but struggle to talk about relationship and sexual health topics with their partners
- **Anxiety, perceived awkwardness, and lack of skills** are major barriers to conversations
- Colleges/universities are well-positioned to reach young adults, promote and integrate the campaign on campus, and build communication skills

## PURPOSE

- To enable campus professionals to understand young adults' communication needs related to sexual health and relationships, learn about the *Own the Awk* multimedia campaign, and apply the campaign on college and university campuses.

## METHODS

<p><b>National study of 1,860 young adults</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted two national surveys (2022, 2024) and 16 focus groups to explore sexual health and relationship communications</li> </ul>	<p><b>Diverse young adults (ages 18-26) recruited</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, education level, income, and geography</li> </ul>	<p><b>The sample and results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With non-probability samples, results are directional but not definitive</li> <li>• Results provide key insights for message development</li> </ul>	<p><b>Guided by research firm and advisory groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young Adult Advisory Group of 15 diverse young adults</li> <li>• Partners Advisory Council of 12 leading organizations</li> </ul>
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## KEY FINDINGS

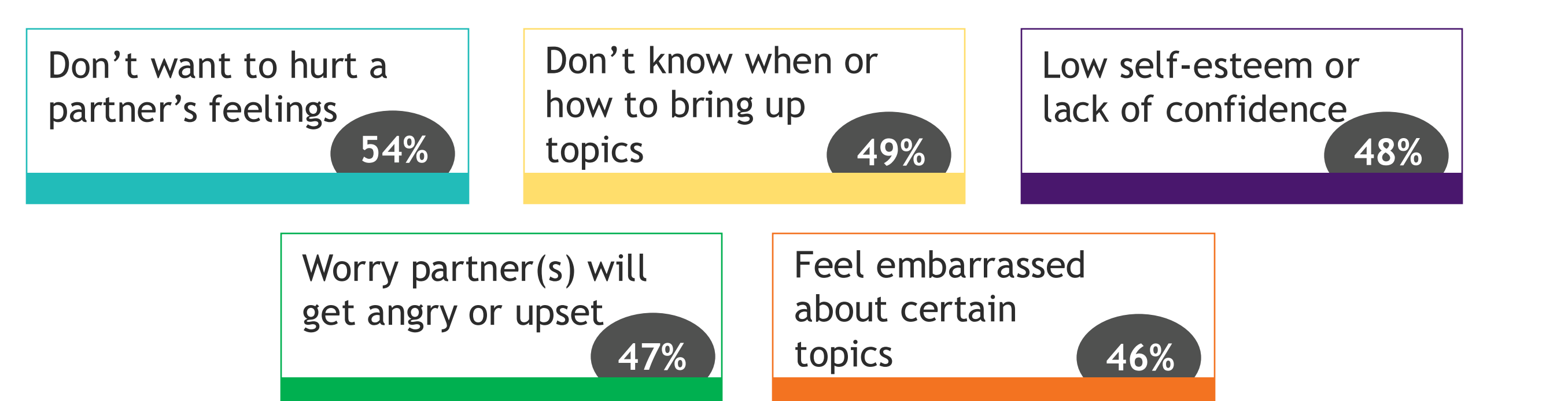
### What Young Adults Value in Positive Relationships

- Most important qualities cited by young adults: **open communication and trust**
- “Communication is a big thing, because if you can’t say how you feel or express something that’s not going well in the relationship, then you can’t really move forward.”
- “When you have open communication in your relationship it makes things less tense.”

### Significant Anxiety and Fear Around Open Communication

- **Approximately 53% of young adults experience** a fair amount or a great deal of anxiety starting a sexual health or relationship conversation with their partner

### Many Barriers to Open Communication



### Young Adults Want to Improve Their Communication Skills

- **97% of young adults** believe better communication skills would improve their interactions

### They Want to Talk More Openly About Many Topics

- Overall, **93% of respondents** said they would like to talk more openly about one or more **relationship topics**, such as:
  - Sexual desires (likes & dislikes), defining the relationship, consent and boundaries, feelings of jealousy, using sex toys
- While **85%** would like to talk more openly about one or more **sexual health topics**, such as:
  - Using condoms, using birth control, preventing and testing for STIs, pregnancy and raising a child

## THE OWN THE AWK CAMPAIGN

### Goal and Communication Objectives

**Goal:** Increase the number of young adults who talk openly & honestly about sexual health & relationship topics with partners.

- Objectives:**
- **Increase awareness of the benefits** of open communication.
  - **Increase knowledge** about how to communicate effectively.
  - **Reduce discomfort and anxiety** around having conversations.
  - Encourage young adults to **build their skills and confidence**.

### Campaign Metrics

- Over 12 months, we generated **high levels of awareness and engagement** from intended audiences (young adults, partners, and media).
- **Website traffic:** 227,821 website visits, 286,936 page views, and 220,062 actions (e.g., watching videos, playing card decks, downloading tools), yielding an engagement rate of 76%.
- **Social media:** Young adults responded very positively to *Own the Awk* content from paid influencers, with a 45% engagement rate and 451 insightful and positive comments.
- **Partner promotion:** At least 50 organizations and individuals have promoted *Own the Awk* at least 111 times, and several colleges/universities are implementing the campaign.
- **Media coverage:** *Own the Awk* has secured at least 1,144 stories and podcasts.

### Campaign Components

**Branding**

Attracts and engages young adults by using humor, awkward portraits, and fun. The tagline, “Real Talk. Real Connection.” offers a clear benefit and focuses on empowering young adults to have open and honest conversations about sexual health and relationship topics with their partners.

**Website (in English and Spanish)**

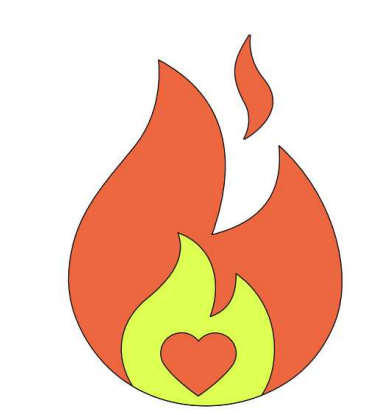
Features seven topic pages based on priorities identified by young adults: Defining the Relationship; Comms 101; Sexual Desires and Pleasure; Feelings, Wants, and Needs; Sexually Transmitted Infections; Boundaries and Consent; and Safer Sex.

**AwkLine Video Series**

Features real-life communication challenges that couples encounter, combined with fun, practical, and relatable advice from sex and relationship expert, Shan Boodram. Video topics include: What Are We, Play It Safe, Dive Into Desires, Lay Down Your Limits, and To Test or Not to Test.

**Award-winning!**

*Own the Awk* has already won 13 awards from leading communications and creative competitions.



**Gimme That Ask Digital Card Deck**

Users can choose from seven different digital decks, with topics ranging from spicy to sweet, and play with their partners, friends, or solo. The 140 questions vary in format, like Red or Green flags, Hot or Not, True or False, and Open-Ended.

**Awk Talk Starters Scripts**

14 realistic scripts on the seven campaign topics are available on the website to help young adults break the ice and keep talking. The scripts are available in both English and Spanish and as downloadable PDFs.

**Toolkits and Social Media Assets**

The partner and influencer toolkits include messaging, outreach ideas, and materials to promote the campaign. The social media toolkit includes ready-to-use graphics, captions, GIFs, and other downloadable assets, in English and Spanish.

**Coming Soon: Own the Awk Store**

Organizations will be able to buy branded campaign materials and promotional items to support outreach and engagement efforts.

## USING OWN THE AWK ON CAMPUS

*Own the Awk* is easy to roll out because it's free, evidence-based, pre-tested, and adaptable to different campus contexts, with ready-to-use materials you can share, print, or order. Below, we share some initial ideas for implementing the campaign on campus and how to connect with us.

<p><b>Get in Touch</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sign up for the <i>Own the Awk</i> bulletin at <a href="http://bit.ly/OTABulletin">bit.ly/OTABulletin</a></li> <li>• Access our partner toolkit on the <i>Own the Awk</i> website</li> <li>• Contact us with any questions: <a href="mailto:nesh@altarum.org">nesh@altarum.org</a></li> <li>• Invite <i>Own the Awk</i>/NCSH staff to engage in joint activities like presentations or webinars</li> </ul>	<p><b>Raising Awareness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Table at welcome back, health fairs, and events with campaign information</li> <li>• Share our graphics, in English and Spanish, and captions on social media</li> <li>• Print &amp; distribute campaign materials (stickers, palm cards, and more)</li> <li>• Record one of our live read scripts to air on campus radio stations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Educational Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include conversation starters, like the card decks, in dorm floor meetings or other interactive events</li> <li>• Create role-playing activities using the scripts in RA or peer educator sessions</li> <li>• Schedule a video viewing session to share and discuss the “AwkLine” videos</li> <li>• Refer students to the website when they seek advice on sexual health and relationship conversations</li> </ul>
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