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Strangulation during sex: Not a kink

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This article discusses sensitive topics, including domestic violence and sexual assault.

Strangulation, erotic asphyxiation, breath play, choking, whatever you choose to call it, is becoming an increasingly normal part of sex for young Australians. A recent Melbourne University study (https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/4978840/Sharman,-Fitzgerald-Douglas-2024.pdf), led by Melbourne Law School's Professor Heather Douglas (<https://law.unimelb.edu.au/about/staff/heather-douglas>), found that more than half of young people aged between 18-35 are practicing strangulation during sex.

I mentioned this study at a party recently (great party chat, I know) and was met with shrugs and confusion. My friend questioned why I was so worried about a seemingly "normal part of sex". The conversation continued as I shared more of my concerns around sexual strangulation. My friend suggested I was "kink-shaming (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/kink-outside-the-box/202008/kink-shaming-how-did-we-get-here>)". I am all about sexual liberation and moving away from purity culture (especially for women), but even as a young and progressive feminist, I struggle with the normalisation of strangulation and that any time you raise concerns around this "kink", you're accused of "kink-shaming" (as if that is such a faux pas).

What sparked my interest in this topic is my own lived experience. The first time I was strangled, I called it consensual. It was strangulation during sex with my then-partner, and in my warped reality, it felt like liberation. I craved a sense of control, a twisted idea of expressing my sexuality. But the truth is, I was trapped in a cycle of domestic violence. Unknowingly, I encouraged her actions, hoping it would somehow give me more currency in other parts of our relationship.

Leaving that relationship became a turning point. When I asked a new partner to perform something similar, I was met with a firm and concerned "no". That single word shattered my distorted reality and forced me to confront the truth: I'd confused trauma with kink. This isn't

everyone's experience with domestic violence, but it was mine.



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The second time I was strangled, it wasn't consensual, nor remotely close. Drugged on a second date, I was strangled during a brutal sexual assault. It wasn't hot, it wasn't sexy, it was terrifying and something that has changed my life forever. The world flickered in and out of focus, as I lost consciousness with each second she constricted my breathing.

The aftermath of retelling the ordeal to countless doctors and nurses was a blur. A cold hospital room, sterile and sad, became my reality as they checked for physical damage, thankfully mostly absent. The trauma, however, carved its mark deep. This is my story. A story of a confusing line blurred by abuse, and a stark reminder that "no" can be the most empowering word you hear.

My question is, are women between the ages of 18 and 35 really into erotic asphyxiation, or are they conditioned to act in whatever way they need to, to appease their (usually male) sexual partner? Amid a domestic violence crisis (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-16/national-domestic-violence-vigils-honour-women-who-have-died-/104609848>), where more than 50 women (at the time of writing this article) are believed to have died at the hands of a man this year alone, why would anyone want to be strangled? I mean, isn't the dangerous reality of what strangulation can do to someone the big ugly elephant in the corner of the room?

Despite my experience, I know that sex can be a wonderful, beautiful, transformative experience that can change your life in all the best ways. I believe this is particularly true for women. As a lot of them will probably tell you, your first sexual experience can be lacklustre, probably awkward, but not traumatic. I wonder if, as strangulation becomes increasingly more common and socially acceptable; those first sexual experiences will turn from awkward to having more serious impacts.

"A small level of pressure can have a significant impact" says Maree Crabbe, director and co-founder of It's Time We Talked (<https://itstimewetalked.com/>), and leader of The *Breathless* campaign (<https://www.breathlesscampaign.com/>). Crabbe says the impacts of strangulation can ensue in the "minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and even years" after it occurs.

There is no doubt that talk of and strangulation during sex itself has increased. Experts like Crabbe believe this is due to young people being exposed to the concept through social media and mainstream popular culture. Not to mention, porn, which according to the Melbourne study (https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/4978840/Sharman,-Fitzgerald-Douglas-2024.pdf) was found to be the most common way for young people to learn about sexual strangulation.

Senior project officer at Women's Health NSW, Jackie McMillan points out that the use of strangulation and sexual choking can occur in a relationship simultaneously. McMillan speaks of an experience that is eerily familiar to me, stating, "The same victim and survivor may be negotiating strangulation in one part of their home, and sexual choking in another, but view their role (and their agency) in each situation very differently".

While I recognise that the women who have been killed (mostly by their male partners) aren't directly related to sexual strangulation, it does beg the question, is strangulation in the bedroom a gateway to being strangled outside of the bedroom? As McMillan puts it, "coercion does not stop at the bedroom door" and "sexual choking in a relationship characterised by violence can further normalise the perpetrator placing their hands around your neck".

It is important to recognise that while experts have noticed a normalisation around sexual choking, it does not mean it is a new concept. Those who engage in the practice consensually must have access to judgement-free health care, that includes information about the risks of certain sexual acts.

For me, understanding the dangers of strangulation during sex was a turning point. It helped me understand what I was subjecting myself to and empowered me to reevaluate what I am and aren't okay with. Let's face it, sex should be about pleasure, it should feel good and be fun.

*If you or anyone you know is affected by domestic, family or sexual violence and needs support, please call **1800 RESPECT** (<https://1800respect.org.au/>).*

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