

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Trends in Choking/Strangulation During Partnered Sex on Campus

BOTTOM LINE

Understanding the changing norms and the growing trend of choking/strangulation during partnered sex among young adults.

RESEARCH

Studies have shown that in heterosexual partner sex, men are significantly more likely to choke¹ their partners and women are more likely to be choked with or without consent. Debby Herbenick and her colleagues (2021) found that 64% of women, 29% of men, and 55% of TGNB+ students disclosed that they had been choked during sex. Also, 28% of women, 59% of men and 55% of TGNB+ students had ever choked a partner during sex.

The first qualitative study of 24 men aimed at identifying the language used, how they learned about choking, their experiences, and their understanding of consent and safety practices. Choking was the term that most of the young men used and pornography, partners, friends, and non-expert media sources were cited as sources of first learning about choking. Men disclosed that they choked their partner because they were doing it for their partner's pleasure or they felt it was exciting, kinky, or sexually adventurous. Some men described discomfort or concern about choking or the level of intensity their partners asked to be choked. Some occasionally mentioned the potential of bruising, loss of consciousness or death as a result of choking. However, none of the men seemed aware or concerned about the other forms of potential harm such as increases risk for depression anxiety, recurrent headaches or traumatic brain injury.

The second qualitative study of 24 women had similar goals of examining language, how they learned about choking, their experiences, and their understanding of consent and safety

¹ The term choking will be used in this review because it is the term used in the campus environment. However, strangulation is a more accurate term.

practices. Like men, the women learned about choking from pornography, social media, partners, as well as erotic stories and magazines. While many women reported enjoying choking, others said they did it to please their sexual partner. Most of the participants had been choked many times and some dozens or more times. The researchers also identified a possible pattern where women were initially choked by a partner without consent or communication and said the experience was uncomfortable or scary. And yet when the relationships ended many women continued or even initiated choking with other partners. Given the dangers associated with choking, still very few of the women had ever sought out information on safety practices or risk reduction and very few had established safe words or gestures prior to choking.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

In line with the authors' recommendations, clinicians, sexuality educators, and those involved with policies affecting adolescent health and university campuses will benefit from understanding that contemporary sexual practice repertoires have changed. Many readers of this newsletter have previously noted that the types of behaviors reported in the assessment and treatment of adolescents have changed over time. This has taken place concomitantly with easier access to online pornography, increased use of social media and changing social norms. Having some knowledge of the sexually explicit media that many are exposed to, the practices that have become more common, and the effects of peer influence and social media are key to effective practice. A helpful role of practitioners and educators can be to provide information about the risks of these practices and inquire about the motivations for these practices.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Our field began with professionals, and those who had been victimized, simply wanting to end sexual violence. Over time, we realized that a public health perspective was needed in addition to other perspectives such as criminological and psychological perspectives. With time, we learned that understanding sexual and adolescent development is also crucial to preventing further harm. However, while there is easy access to information about normative sexual development 0-12 years of age, there is little public information about development from 13-22 years. In this adolescent/young adult decade, there is less information and increased need to exploration. That leaves the question of what is healthy exploration for this age group, what is normative for this age group, and how do we ensure that the youth understand their family and community values while developing their own values. The challenge will be to encourage exploration and ensuring that there are enough protective factors and processes. This study shows that our field, and the professionals within it, can have a critical role to play in understanding current sexual practices and how we can guide all adolescents in the direction of healthy sexual respect towards others.

CITATION:

Herbenick, D., Guerra-Reyes, L., Patterson, C., Rosenstock Gonzalez, Y. R., Wagner, C., & Zounlome, N. (2022). "It was scary, but then it was kind of exciting": Young women's experiences with choking during sex. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 51(2), 1103-1123.

ABSTRACT:

Choking/strangulation during sex is prevalent among young adults, with one study finding that 58% of women college students had ever been choked during sex. However, no qualitative study has examined women's experiences with choking/strangulation during sex outside of intimate partner violence. The purpose of our qualitative interview study was to investigate women's experiences with choking and/or being choked during partnered sex. Through in-depth interviews with 24 undergraduate and graduate women students ages 18 to 33, we sought to understand how women communicate about choking, their learning about and initiation into choking, their feelings about being choked and choking others, as well as consent and safety practices used in relation to choking. We found that women had first learned about choking through diverse sources including pornography, erotic stories, magazines, social media, friends, and partners. While all 24 women had been choked during sex, only 13 of 24 had ever choked a partner. They described having engaged in choking with men as well as women and with committed as well as more casual partner types. Participants described consensual and non-consensual choking experiences. While many women enjoyed choking, others did it largely to please their sexual partner. Women described different methods and intensities of having been choked. Although very few had ever sought out information on safety practices or risk reduction, and only some had established safe words or safe gestures with partners, participants consistently expressed a belief that the ways in which they and their partner(s) engaged in choking were safe.

CITATION:

Herbenick, D., Guerra-Reyes, L., Patterson, C., Rosenstock Gonzalez, Y. R., Wagner, C., & Zounlome, N. O. (2022). "If Their Face Starts Turning Purple, You Are Probably Doing Something Wrong": Young Men's Experiences with Choking During Sex. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 48(5), 502-519.

ABSTRACT

Choking/strangulation during sex has become prevalent in the United States. Yet, no qualitative research has addressed men's choking experiences. Through interviews with 21 young adult men, we examined the language men use to refer to choking, how they first learned about it, their experiences with choking, and consent and safety practices. Men learned about choking during adolescence from pornography, partners, friends, and mainstream media. They engaged in choking to be kinky, adventurous, and to please partners. While many enjoyed or felt neutral about choking, others were reluctant to choke or be choked. Safety and verbal/non-verbal consent practices varied widely.