

THE DANGEROUS RISE OF SEXUAL STRANGULATION

With studies showing non-consensual strangulation during sex is rife, Closer examines the worrying – and very risky – trend...

When Lucy Johnson* flirted with her boss Aaron* at the London bar she worked in, she had no idea it would end in violence.

Lucy, 29, says, 'I looked forward to seeing Aaron every shift and then we started to go out and socialise in a group when we weren't behind the bar. He didn't live far from me and we'd often have drinks at each other's places. He always made me laugh and we'd have a good flirt.

'We'd kissed a few times and then one night at his place we ended up in bed together. We started having sex and it was great, but then suddenly, with no warning, Aaron put both his hands around my neck and was leaning down on me heavily.

'I couldn't take in air, shout, or move him off me. I furiously slammed my hand on the mattress, like tapping out in judo. I felt utterly powerless. There was nothing I could do.

'Then he stopped and rolled off me. In my stunned state I realised he was trying to strangle me in a sexual way, but he hadn't asked my permission. He fell asleep and I left. I was upset but the shock made me brush it off. It scares me to think how it could have ended.'

COMMON

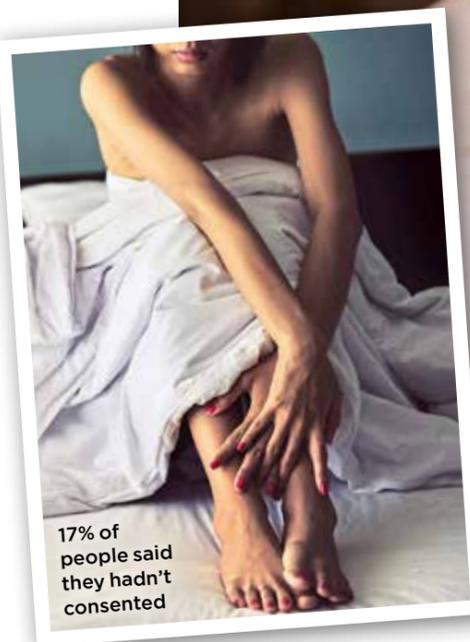
Sadly, what Lucy went through isn't unusual. A recent survey from the Institute for Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) found strangling during sex is most common for those in the 16 to

34 age group, with 35% of respondents reporting that they'd been strangled by a partner during consensual sex – but in addition, 17% of people said they hadn't consented.

'Porn has a big role to play in the increased popularity of choking,' explains Annabelle Knight, Sex & Relationships Expert at Lovehoney. 'This can have a particularly negative impact on young people, and recent trends indicate that its consumption among youth is increasing.'

In February this year, the Government released its independent pornography review, which proposed outlawing 'degrading, violent and misogynistic content', including making it illegal to post and possess pornography showing women being choked during sex.

Lina Ghazal, Head of Regulatory and Public Affairs at Verifymy, says, 'This report draws a clear line between the rise of extreme adult content online and increasingly damaging attitudes and behaviours. Choking, aggression and degradation are widely available online and I think that's what's really shocking. For too long, harmful



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pornography has been allowed to proliferate online, skewing perceptions of what is considered 'normal' sexual activity, so the proposed ban is welcome.'

PAIN

Latest research from Ofcom shows the average age that children first see online porn is 13 – although 27% come across it by age 11. Lina says, 'Consuming this content at a young age can lead to them forming warped and often violent views of sex and encourage dangerous practices like choking.'

'Age assurance technology has a key role to play. Following

'WITHOUT ANY WARNING, HE PUT BOTH HIS HANDS AROUND MY NECK'

Ofcom's new guidelines, adult sites have until July to impose effective age verification methods like email-based age estimation or ID checks to keep underage users away from inappropriate material.'

Being strangled, whether consensually or not, has a number of health risks – which if severe enough can lead to a stroke or even death. Medical Director for IFAS, Professor Catherine White, explains, 'Your neck has a number of structures within – your arteries, veins, nerves and windpipe. It's an area very vulnerable to trauma. Strangulation causes a reduction in the circulation of blood, therefore depriving your brain of oxygen.'

'Often people say they

experience a "euphoric" feeling during strangulation, but that feeling is your brain cells being damaged – and you can't regenerate new ones. If strangulation happens frequently, you're putting yourself at risk of nerve damage, stroke and even death.'

BOUNDARIES

For Lucy, what happened is something she's still struggling to come to terms with. She says, 'Aaron strangled me so hard that I had bruises around my neck, and I could see the finger marks. It took a week for them to fade.'

'On my next shift with him, he actually commented on the bruises, but I brushed over it. I have a friend who really enjoys choking so I figured it was just a

preference thing and maybe I was a prude. I left the job soon after.'

'Now, looking back, I wish I'd shouted at him and said it wasn't OK and that he should check before doing anything like that, but in the moment you don't really process what's going on. I don't think it was malicious, but he behaved as if it was a normal thing to do when it really isn't without consent.'

Lucy adds, 'Even now I don't like to think about it, but I believe it's important to talk about as women need to understand their boundaries and communicate them to men more.'

● * Names have been changed throughout
● To find out more about IFAS, visit ifas.org.uk. For more info about Verifymy, visit verifymy.io

'I still get flashbacks'

Eva*, 18, was at a party when she started kissing a boy she liked – and he began to strangle her. She recalls, 'I was on a night out for my friend Amelia's* 18th, and I started to get close to one of the guys there, Chris*. I'd fancied him for a while and he was recently single, so we kissed a few times in the club. When we went back to Amelia's afterwards, we made a bed from the sofa cushions and carried on kissing.'

'But suddenly his hands were around my neck and he was strangling me. I was so shocked that I went limp. Every fibre of me wanted to fight him off and tell him to stop, but I couldn't do anything. I have no idea how long I was in that position for, it all slowed down and felt like hours – as though I was looking down on myself. It was probably only seconds. Then he stopped and carried on kissing me.'

'I said I needed the loo and went to sleep with some of the other girls. I felt ashamed, as if I'd given him the go ahead or asked for it. But the next morning, I confided in Amelia who said he had a reputation for doing it.'

'I feel so angry. I didn't report him but I did get one of our other male friends to talk to him and explain that whatever he sees in porn it isn't "normal" and choking isn't what every woman likes or expects. I hope he'll never do it again.'

'I now avoid him at college, and I'm trying to put it behind me. But I still get flashbacks of feeling so helpless and panicked. I just wish he'd asked – instead he left me frightened, confused and scared about what's going through men's heads.'



Professor Catherine White is concerned



Lina Ghazal says a proposed ban is welcome