

## COMMENT

# When abuse masquerades as 'rough sex'

*Even with consent, there are real health risks associated with sexual choking*



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Sean Combs' trial has highlighted the insidious nature of coercion, control, and violence in intimate relationships. Photo: Getty Images



*Expert opinion from Victoria University Wellington - Te Herenga Waka*

**Opinion:** Sean 'Diddy' Combs – also known as Puff Daddy or P Diddy – is on trial in the United States on a raft of sex-trafficking, forced-prostitution, and racketeering charges. The case against the American rapper alleges that he and his associates were responsible for coercing women into drug-fuelled sex marathons known as 'freak-offs'. Combs is alleged to have controlled, abused, and raped his ex-partner Cassie Ventura.

Singer Dawn Richard [testified](#) that Combs was frequently violent toward Ventura, punching her, choking her, dragging her, and slapping her in the mouth. Kerry Morgan, a former long-time friend of Ventura, also testified she had witnessed his violence against Ventura and that she herself had been choked and assaulted by him.

The Combs trial has highlighted the insidious nature of coercion, control, and violence in intimate relationships. It has also drawn attention to ‘choking’ – a term now commonly used to refer to strangulation.

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Strangulation is a common and dangerous form of violence. It involves compression of the neck – an area highly vulnerable to injury – with hands, an arm, or objects, such as belts or scarves.

Strangulation is also deeply gendered. In New Zealand, [a fifth of women](#) who experience physical violence from an intimate partner have been purposely choked or burnt at least once.

Strangulation often leaves no visible injury, but it can result in a range of serious health consequences. These consequences might be felt immediately, or they might arise in the days, weeks, or months following the event.

People who have been strangled may report difficulty breathing, a sore throat, confusion, vision changes, or loss of consciousness. Strangulation can also result in miscarriage, traumatic brain injury and death.

Strangulation is a known red flag for escalating violence in relationships. It is troubling, then, that the same act – applying pressure to the neck – has become an increasingly common aspect of some people’s sexual lives, often under the guise of ‘rough sex’.

## How common is ‘choking’ during sex?

In Australia, [research](#) with young adults aged 18 to 35 found over half – 57 percent – had a history of partnered sexual choking. In the US, a 2021 survey found a [quarter of undergraduate students](#) at a large university reported being choked during their most recent sexual event.

Data about the prevalence of the practice in Aotearoa is limited. Project Gender sought to gather some insights through a [survey](#) (promoted via social media) of online dating and sex. Thirty percent of the 823 respondents to this survey reported being choked or suffocated during consensual sex with a partner from a dating app.

Being choked during sex may be increasing in frequency, but it is not always wanted. It is often reported as a “scary” experience – particularly for women. A third of respondents in Project Gender’s survey said they “never” or “rarely” consented to being choked.

## The influence of pornography

Choking during sex is eroticised in pornography, presenting it as a pleasurable and legitimate act within the pursuit of (mostly) male heterosexual pleasure.

These portrayals occur in material marketed at 'mainstream' audiences, outside of content aimed at audiences seeking portrayals of safe, explicitly consensual BDSM – bondage, domination, submission, and masochism.

Young people report they often first learn about choking through pornography, which can act as a default source of information about sex. However, pornography is not the only arena in which choking and strangulation is depicted. It is eroticised in popular films such as Polish erotic drama *365 days*, and in chart topping music hits such as 'Lovin on Me' by Jack Harlow or 'Take My Breath' by The Weeknd.

Choking is also discussed in sex and relationships advice in magazines such as *Men's Health* and *Cosmopolitan*. Articles often reference the pleasures that can be found – usually for women – during choking. [Online articles](#) also frame choking as a positive and 'safe' behaviour. Few articles are subject to expert or medical review.

Collectively, these repeated portrayals may reinforce wider messaging that suggests rough sex or 'choking' is ordinary or should be expected. Additionally, these portrayals may neutralise the potential harms associated with these practices.

## Challenging the 'rough sex is normal' narrative

While some people may enjoy partaking in 'rougher' styles of sex, irrespective of consent it is important we do not lose focus on the health risks associated with choking.

To help challenge and contextualise broader narratives that are shaping contemporary ideas and sexual expectations, reliable information about sex, relationships, consent, and violence needs to be available to everyone.

Rather than learning from the fantasy-based, stereotypical images of sex in mainstream pornography, a good place to begin is with [resources](#) developed in conjunction with experts, [clinicians](#), sexual educators, and others with specialist insights.

These resources provide concise and accurate information about the realities of choking during sex, enabling people to make more informed decisions about their sexual lives.

### WHERE TO GET HELP

**Safe to Talk national helpline** 0800 044 334 or [www.safetotalk.nz](http://www.safetotalk.nz)

**Women's Refuge (For women and children)** – 0800 733 843.

**Shine (For men and women)** – free call 0508-744-633 between 9am and 11pm.

**1737, Need to talk?** Free call or text 1737 any time for mental health support from a trained counsellor

**What's Up** – 0800 942 8787 (for 5–18 year olds). Phone counselling is available Monday to Friday, midday–11pm and weekends, 3pm–11pm. Online chat is available 7pm–10pm daily.

**Kidsline** – 0800 54 37 54 for people up to 18 years old. Open 24/7.

**Youthline** – 0800 376 633, free text 234, email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz), or find online chat and other support options here .

**National Rape Crisis helpline:** 0800 88 33 00

If you or someone else is in immediate danger call 111.