

Sexual Choking: What the Research Actually Says

SEO Title Tag: *Is Sexual Choking Safe? What the Research Says | Love Psychotherapy*

Meta Description: *A clear look at the research on sexual choking — health risks, legal status, and lower-risk alternatives — from an LGBTQ+-affirming, kink-aware therapist.*

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Target Keyword: *is sexual choking safe*

Quick Takeaways

- Traditional BDSM safety literature warned against choking; it was never taught as a 'safe' technique.
- Injury from choking often leaves no visible marks, and there's no proven safe duration or method.
- Research links repeated choking to memory, motor control, and mental health effects.
- In most U.S. states, consent is not a legal defense to choking.
- Jaw/neck holding, collarbone pressing, and non-restrictive collars can offer similar sensations with far lower risk.

Sexual choking has become common enough that a lot of people assume it's a low-stakes, entry-level kink — something you graduate into before trying "real" BDSM. The research tells a very different story. Compression or restriction of the neck, whether by hand or ligature, carries risks that have nothing to do with how experienced or careful the people involved are, and the kink community's own historical safety literature reflects that.

It Was Never Part of Traditional Kink Safety Education

This surprises a lot of people: foundational BDSM and leather safety manuals largely warned against choking rather than teaching it. Classic texts from the 1970s through the 1990s described breath restriction as inherently dangerous, some explicitly stating there's no way to compress the airway or blood vessels in the neck without risking cardiac arrest. That guidance hasn't changed — what's changed is that choking has become normalized in mainstream media and pop culture, often alongside "how-to" advice that implies there's a safe technique, when the safety community's own coalition partners largely don't teach the practice at all.

What the Research Actually Shows

A growing body of research on sexual choking points to real, documented harm:

- **It's alarmingly common:** surveys of college students and adults have found a large majority of women, along with a substantial share of men and gender-diverse people, report having been choked during sex — and a large share say they were only sometimes or never asked first.
- **Injury often isn't visible:** a significant share of fatal strangulations leave no visible signs of injury at all, which means the absence of marks doesn't mean the absence of harm.
- **Cognitive effects are measurable:** research has found associations between choking and difficulties with memory and motor control, along with changes in brain activation patterns after repeated exposure.
- **There's no safe window:** contrary to popular belief in a "3-4 second rule," even brief interruptions in blood flow can trigger a cascade of cellular damage once circulation resumes.
- **Mental health correlations:** people choked repeatedly report higher rates of sadness, anxiety, and depression than those who haven't been.

Consent Doesn't Change the Legal Picture

This is the part that catches people off guard: in the large majority of U.S. states, consent is not a legal defense to choking, because the law treats the risk of serious injury or death as something a person can't sign away in advance. Some states require proof of intent to harm or an actual injury for it to be prosecutable; many others don't require either. A relationship being consensual, kinky, or long-term doesn't change how courts have approached this — appellate rulings have specifically held that consent isn't a defense to the underlying charges.

If Breath and Neck Sensations Are Part of What You're Drawn To

The desire for a sense of vulnerability, restriction, or altered consciousness during sex is common and not inherently a problem. The issue is specifically airway and blood-flow compression — not the broader category of sensation or power exchange it's often grouped into. A few alternatives that aim for a similar feeling without cutting off breath or circulation:

- **Jaw or neck holding:** a hand placed on the jaw or neck without any pressure on the airway or blood vessels — the visual and psychological sensation without the physiological risk.
- **Collarbone pressing:** light pressure on the collarbone to simulate the feeling of restriction without touching the neck itself.
- **Breath play through instruction:** asking a partner to hold their breath, or to breathe into your mouth, rather than restricting airflow externally.
- **Collars, gags, and hoods:** items worn around the neck or face that are specifically designed not to impede breathing or blood flow, chosen for the psychological and aesthetic effect rather than physical restriction.

If choking is something you or a partner want to continue exploring despite the risks, that's a decision within your own autonomy — but it deserves to be made with accurate information, not the popular myth that there's a safe way to do it. There isn't a technique, a duration, or a level of experience that removes the risk.

Talking to Partners About This

If a partner has asked to be choked, or is choking you, without ever discussing it beforehand, that's worth raising directly — not as a judgment of anyone's kink, but as a request for the same negotiation any other high-risk activity deserves. "I want to talk about what we do with breath and the neck before we do it again" is a reasonable, complete request.

Want support with this in your own relationship or practice?

Love Psychotherapy, LLC offers LGBTQ+-affirming, sex-positive, neurodivergent-owned clinical care and life coaching, with telehealth available across thirteen states and in-person sessions in Madison, Wisconsin. Reach out to schedule a consultation.

Well wishes. 🙏

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Pronouns: They/Them

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