



The Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence *News consumers need accurate information if they are to understand the reality of domestic violence in general and domestic violence homicides specifically. This media guide aims to help reporters, copywriters, headline writers and editors understand the distinction between the terms “choking” and “strangulation” when describing this act of violence. The media has played a critical role informing the public that domestic violence homicides are predictable and therefore preventable and that help is available for victims and survivors. Similar to putting domestic violence homicide in context rather than reporting on it only as an individual tragedy, using accurate terminology rather than colloquialisms underscores the public health and public safety aspects of these crimes. We’d like to acknowledge the input of journalists, law enforcement, advocates and survivors in drafting this resource.*

This guide aims to help reporters, copywriters, headline writers, and editors understand the distinction between choking – *an accidental internal obstruction of the airway*, and strangulation – *a tactic of control and abuse*. The appropriate usage of these terms is beyond mere semantic accuracy or labels.¹ When journalists correctly utilize the term “strangulation,” they increase the public’s familiarity with a specific form of abuse and acknowledge the severe short and long term consequences of this type of violence. Portraying abuse accurately reflects your concern for both the victim’s experience and public’s response to domestic violence. It also reflects awareness that these acts were taken by a perpetrator and not an accident.

Choking

- **Definition:** internal obstruction of the airway.
- **Correct:** Children can choke on hard candies.
- **Incorrect:** The victim was choked by her ex-boyfriend.
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Strangulation

- **Definition:** external force by the hands, arms, legs, or ligature that results in restriction of oxygen intake and blood flow to the brain
- **Correct:** Mr. Smith was arrested during a previous incident when he strangled Mrs. Smith to unconsciousness.

Strangulation is a powerful method of coercion and control; it’s an expression of abusers’ ability and willingness to take their victims’ lives at any time.

Quick Facts About Strangulation:

- Strangulation can render a victim unconscious in seconds.
- Strangulation blocks veins and arteries in the neck so that oxygenated blood cannot flow to the brain and deoxygenated blood cannot flow from the brain.
- It takes just 11 pounds of pressure to cut off blood flow.

¹ Allison Turkell, “And Then He Choked Me’: Understanding, Investigating, and Prosecuting Strangulation Cases.” *Family and Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly*, Volume 2, No. 4 (Spring 2010) 339-344.

- Temporary or permanent brain damage can occur in as little as 30 seconds; brain death can occur in four to five minutes.
- The seriousness of strangulation is a common precursor to further lethal violence.

Victims of strangulation can suffer permanent trachea damage, soft tissue damage, seizures, or changes in behavior. Internal injuries caused by strangulation can become life threatening days after the incident. Despite its lethality, **strangulation may leave no visible injuries.**

Strangulation Is an Identified Risk Factor for More Violence

A study of femicides from 1994-2000 found that 56% of female homicide victims experienced a previous strangulation incident by their partners.² A 2008 study confirmed that prior non-fatal strangulation was very highly associated with (i.e. is a risk factor for) future lethality³. In Massachusetts, High Risk Teams in Newburyport and Framingham have identified even higher percentages of victims that they are working with who have experienced strangulation.

Why Language is Important

Reports of strangulation are an opportunity to alert other victims of the severity of their experience and encourage them to seek medical care and support services from a trained domestic violence advocate. Precise language conveys understanding of the seriousness of this unfortunately common type of abuse, assuring victims that if they come forward, they will be heard and their experience will not be minimized.

Reporting Victim Experience

It's not uncommon for victims themselves to incorrectly label their experience with the vernacular term. Some survivors use language like "choking" or will say the attacker grabbed their neck. This minimizing language is also a common defensive mechanism for victims who are not ready to confront the dangerousness of their situation. Reporters can balance their need to report accurately with the desire to respect the victim's portrayal of her/his experience.

Example: The victim told a bystander she was choked.

Better: At the scene, the victim described being strangled.

It's also important to keep in mind that victims of strangulation may change their story over time. During strangulation attacks, the victim's brain is deprived of oxygen which can hinder the person's memory of the incident.

Strangulation is often just one incident within a campaign of physically or emotionally abusive behaviors. In fact a strangulation incident or any potential domestic violence behavior needs further exploration to give the incident proper context. Police, neighbors, or the victim's friends and family can help provide this context if asked about specific behaviors such as whether the alleged perpetrator displayed any other indications of dangerousness, such as controlling or jealous behaviors. More generic statements from a neighbor, such as "he's such a nice guy," are generally uninformative, give no actual background or context to the incident, and detract from the severe violence of a strangulation attack. Further, it often serves to confuse rather than inform the public, including other victims, about the real nature of domestic violence.

² Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Daniel Webster, Jane Koziol-McLain, et al. "Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results from a Multisite Case Control Study." *American Journal of Public Health*, Volume 93, No. 7 (July 2003) 1089-1097.

³ Glass, N, et al (2008). Non-fatal strangulation is an important risk factor for homicide of women. *Journal of Emergency Medicine* Oct; 35(3): 329-35.

Strangulation Under the Law

At the state level, Massachusetts is taking steps to legally recognize the seriousness of strangulation assaults by creating an independent category of felony assault in the general laws. Currently strangulation is only defined as one of a series of acts in the attempted murder statute. Establishing strangulation as a separate felony reflects current knowledge about strangulation as a proven precursor to homicide and appropriately reflects the severity of this offense. Other states have already passed similar legislation defining strangulation as a separate felony, and still other states have rewritten legislation to ensure strangulation is covered under their existing definitions of felony assault. This new law would provide prosecutors with another tool to stop perpetrators before they commit murder.

RESOURCES & NATIONAL EXPERTS:

Massachusetts:

- Jane Doe Inc., the Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence – statistics, analysis and comment (617)557-1807; www.janedoe.org
- Jane Doe Inc. membership - local perspective; http://www.janedoe.org/who_we_are/jdis_members

National:

- National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) – national experts on policy and practice; (202) 543-5566; www.nnedv.org
- National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) – leader on program development, policy and technical assistance and training that addresses the nexus between domestic violence, sexual assault and elder abuse/neglect; (608) 255-0539; <http://www.ncall.us/>
- Dr. Jacqueline Campbell – national expert on domestic violence risk assessment and ; (410)955- 2778 (Mirla Martin, assistant)
- Jon Tiplady – national trainer on police response to domestic violence, former Lieutenant Danvers Police Department, MA (978) 265-4127

MATERIAL TO PUBLISH:

For information, services and help for yourself or someone you care about:

- Safelink: 1-877-785-2020 is a 24-hour, free and confidential multi-lingual domestic violence hotline in Massachusetts
- To find the domestic violence program nearest you outside of Massachusetts, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233).
- To learn more about domestic violence and sexual assault, visit www.JaneDoe.org.
- To find programs that help people who abuse/control their partners, visit http://www.janedoe.org/know/know_resources.htm.

Note that JDI can also provide material (such as statistics, common warning signs, etc.) to be used as sidebars and supplementary materials (in print or online). These items can also be downloaded from our website at www.JaneDoe.org.