

UNDER PRESSURE

NON-FATAL STRANGULATION ● *KNOW THE SIGNS*

WHO ARE WE?

The starting point of this project was a simple statistic. People who are subjected to non-fatal strangulation (NFS), are 750% more likely to subsequently be murdered by that same perpetrator^[1]. The lived reality of this statistic is that many organisations working to combat domestic abuse (DA) and/or intimate partner violence (IPV), consider NFS as the last 'warning shot' before fatalities occur^[2].

Whilst we are aware that statistics can often silence complexity, our research into NFS, particularly in Northern Ireland (NI), does not mirror this. For us, it rapidly became clear that NFS was more common than it was understood.

- ▶ NFS is in the conversations with peers and friends that equate this crime with a kink, namely choking, during sex.
- ▶ NFS is ubiquitous in pornography, where violence against women and girls is being normalised and men's control over women's bodies is rehearsed and performed.
- ▶ NFS is also a pattern occurring in the violent deaths of women in Northern Ireland. Non-fatal strangulation or death by strangulation was a feature in 52% of all femicides in Northern Ireland since 2020.^[3]

THUS, THIS PROJECT SEEKS TO:



RAISE AWARENESS OF NON-FATAL STRANGULATION



OFFER IMPARTIAL ADVICE AND AVENUES FOR SUPPORT



PRESENT RESEARCH-LED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE TO TACKLE NFS

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[1] Training Institute for Strangulation Prevention; Domestic Violence Services Network, Inc.

[2] Alliance for Hope International, <https://www.allianceforhope.org/training-institute-on-strangulation-prevention/online-courses>

[3] Where details of cause of death are known. The real figure could be much higher (Mc Morrow, forthcoming)

TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

WHAT IS NFS?

NFS is an acronym for the crime of non-fatal strangulation. NFS occurs when pressure is applied to someone's neck, face, head, or chest, restricting breathing or blood flow to the brain. It does not require visible injury or significant force to be dangerous. The Police Service of Northern Ireland defines NFS as typically involving a perpetrator strangling or intentionally affecting their victim's ability to breathe. Common methods can include using hands, chokeholds or headlocks, objects like belts or scarves (ligatures), hanging, or pressure from a foot or knee.

It is important to note that NFS is definitionally different from choking (which involves something blocking the airway, like food) and suffocation (blocking the nose or mouth).

WHY FOCUS ON NFS SPECIFICALLY?

NFS is a high-risk form of violence and a strong indicator of potential homicide. We know that victims are eight times more likely to be murdered by their partner if they have been subjected to non-fatal strangulation beforehand.

In the UK, 1 in 4 women accessing support services report having experienced NFS, and 25 percent of domestic homicides involve strangulation⁴

LEGAL QUESTIONS

WHEN DID NFS BECOME A CRIME IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

NFS became a crime on 26th June 2023, under Section 28 of the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The offence is not retrospective.

WHY WAS NFS MADE A STANDALONE CRIME (ONLY) IN 2023?

Prior to 2023, what we now know as NFS could be prosecuted as Assault Occasioning Actual Bodily Harm. However, under this legislation, perpetrators often evaded conviction if there were no visible injuries to the victim. With the new legislation in 2023, prosecutors do not need to prove that the perpetrator had an intention to cause an injury or that any injury was caused. This is important as we know that 50% of victims of NFS do not have any visible injuries.

CAN SOMEONE "CONSENT" TO NFS?

The criminal offence applies to NFS whenever intentional strangulation or asphyxiation occurs. If serious harm results, even if someone consents to having their breathing restricted, then a crime has occurred. Consent, even in a sexual context, is not a valid defence under the law if the "consenting" individual comes to face bodily harm.

WHAT IS THE PENALTY FOR NFS?

This offence can be prosecuted in both the Magistrates Court and the Crown Court. A person guilty of an offence under this section is liable:

- On conviction on indictment in the Crown Court, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years, or a fine, or both.
- On summary conviction in the Magistrates' Court to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years, or a fine, or both.⁵

HELP IS AVAILABLE

WHEN SHOULD I SEEK HELP IF I EXPERIENCE NFS?

If you have experienced NFS, you should get medical help as soon as you possibly can. Getting medical help does not automatically mean that you need to report the event to the police. It is normal to be confused, or have an unclear memory, after NFS. This is often because your brain has been starved of oxygen.

If some time has passed since the event, it is still very important that you seek medical advice. Symptoms can occur even weeks after the event and medical attention can help in many ways.

The Institute for Addressing Strangulation has an excellent Victim Information Leaflet that you may wish to access on their website.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK THAT SOMEONE IN MY LIFE HAS EXPERIENCED NFS?

If you think that someone you know has experienced NFS, the best thing you can do is provide social support. This may look like gently asking how they are doing or if something has happened, reassuring them that you will help them during difficult times, and offering them resources such as the NFS website.

It is important that you do not try to take control of the situation or force them into action, as attempting to leave an abusive relationship is incredibly dangerous. You can find more information about supporting individuals you suspect have experienced NFS here: <https://womensaid.org.uk/information-support/the-survivors-handbook/im-worried-about-someone-else/>

[4] The Institute for Addressing Strangulation 2025

[5] The Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland: <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/non-fatal-strangulation>

HEALTH:

WHAT ARE THE RISKS TO MY HEALTH AFTER EXPERIENCING NFS?

NFS starves your brain of oxygen either through cutting off blood flow or preventing you from breathing which present both mild and serious risks to your health. In the immediate aftermath of NFS you may experience memory loss, pain and swelling, an inability or difficulty swallowing food and water, damage to arteries in the neck, damage to the spinal cord, or seizures.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN TO MY HEALTH LONG-TERM?

Experiencing NFS can significantly raise your chances of experiencing future stroke and aneurysms. Medical professionals view NFS as having the same contribution to both future strokes and aneurysms as high blood pressure. If you have experiences with NFS in the past, you should inform your general physician of it when taking down your medical history, so that they are aware of increased risk.

DOES NFS ALWAYS LEAVE VISIBLE INJURIES?

No, NFS does not always leave visible injuries. 50% of NFS victims will have no visible external injury to their head or neck.⁶ However, the absence of visible injuries does not mean that serious harm has not occurred. Internal injuries do not always have physical indications and anyone who has experienced NFS should seek medical help through their GP or Emergency services.

SHOULD I STILL SEEK MEDICAL HELP IF I FEEL “OKAY”?

Yes. Internal injuries caused by NFS may go undetected but can still be life threatening. Seeking medical help can greatly reduce the risk of future complications. Medical centres have professionals and resources regarding intimate partner and sexual abuse that can help you in whatever next steps you choose.

IS NFS FATAL?

NFS can become fatal due to complications from internal injury to veins and arteries of the neck, damage to the spinal cord, and disruptions to the normal delivery of oxygen to the brain. Similarly, those with underlying medical conditions are at higher risk of these complications becoming fatal, such as those with respiratory and heart conditions, and clotting defects

SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS:

CAN STRANGULATION DURING SEX – OFTEN REFERRED TO AS “CHOKING” – BE CONSENSUAL AND SAFE?

The professional advice, from both a medical and legal perspective, is clear: there is no safe way to strangle someone.

The significant health risks of sexual strangulation do not disappear if people engage in it ‘consensually.’

It takes less than 4.4 lbs of pressure (less than the amount needed to open a drink’s can) to enact injuries on the jugular vein. It is estimated that it only takes 11 psi (a unit of measurement of pressure) to cause arterial anoxia (a total loss of oxygen). The average male handshake is 80-100 psi.

Disabling symptoms such as dyspraxia, amnesia, and unconsciousness can occur in as little as four seconds, which compromises a person’s ability to withdraw consent or stop the activity.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT:

The information provided in this document is purely for general informational and educational purposes. The content in this document does not constitute legal or medical advice.

FURTHER INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE FROM:

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADDRESSING STRANGULATION: <https://ifas.org.uk/>

PSNI: <https://www.psnipolice.uk/safety-and-support/advice-and-information/non-fatal-strangulation>

ALLIANCE FOR HOPE INTERNATIONAL: https://www.allianceforhope.org/strangulation-legislation#international_country

HELP AND SUPPORT ARE AVAILABLE FROM:

WOMEN’S AID FEDERATION NORTHERN IRELAND: <https://www.womensaidni.org/>

NEXUS NORTHERN IRELAND: <https://nexusni.org/>

MEN’S ADVISORY PROJECT: <https://mapni.co.uk/>

[6] Institute for Addressing Strangulation 2023