

CHICAGO

Hooked on suspension

Followers say they achieve inner peace, but there could be risks

By Tracy Swartz
REDEYE

Miss Ammunition nervously taps one black platform stiletto heel as she waits backstage at Gothicfest in Chicago on a recent Saturday afternoon. Though this is the seventh time Miss Ammunition will suspend from metal hooks in her body, she says she still feels nervous about the impending pain.

She lies face down on a massage table, closes her eyes and inhales deeply as she prepares for the needle. She yelps as the hooks pierce her flesh. Minutes later, she lifts herself from the table with two large hooks in her upper back, two hooks on the back of her thighs, two hooks above and two below her black thong on her back side.

She walks a few feet to the stage at Excalibur in River North. Body piercers weave ropes attached to a steel frame into the eight hooks as she lies on her stomach on a table.

Then, amid techno music, artificial smoke and about 50 Gothicfest revelers, Miss Ammunition, whose real name is Amourena Tsokatos, rises horizontally into the air. As she is lifted off the table, Tsokatos says she reaches a Zen-like state. Her flight ends about 20 minutes later, and the hooks are pulled from her body. Blood trickles down her calves.

"You get so high and you feel so accomplished," said Tsokatos, 26, of Lincoln Park. "It's truly a journey."

Some Chicagoans like Tsokatos are practicing "suspension," a controversial practice in which participants hang by hooks embedded in their flesh.

But health experts warn that suspension can cause skin tears, infections and scarring—and is a dangerous way to mask emotional issues.

Suspension is a form of non-suicidal self-injury that involves focusing on physical pain rather than emotional pain, said Wendy Lader, president of S.A.F.E. Alternatives, a self-abuse treatment program in Chicago.

Lader said that if people are suspending to mask emotional pain, "usually it's a pattern of having a difficult time handling emotional issues." Lader has never treated a suspension patient, but she said she has talked to family members of suspenders about their concerns.

"I think that this is a problem," said Lader, who co-authored "Bodily Harm: The Breakthrough Healing Program for Self-Injurers." "It's not dealing with the



Miss Ammunition, a.k.a. Amourena Tsokatos, performs a Superman suspension using eight hooks to support her weight at Excalibur in Chicago.
[CHASE AGNELLO-DEAN/REDEYE PHOTO]

real issues. I would not think it would be the best way to obtain a true, long-lasting sense of inner peace."

Nevertheless, people are suspending in Chicago and nationwide. **Suspension.org**, an online community for suspension artists, lists about 25 suspension groups around the country. Chicago's 313 Suspension Team has grown to nearly 100 members, including Tsokatos, according to team president Steve Bennett of Oak Forest. "It's something that relaxes me. I found a way to calm myself," Bennett, 30, said. "Once you leave the ground, that's where most people achieve that sense of accomplishment."

Bennett said suspension creates energy, including sexual energy. Bennett, a body piercer, described his first suspension in 1997 as a "life-changing experience" and said he has hanged more than 140 times from hooks in his wrists, knees, back, butt, calves and shoulders.

In 2002, he formed the suspension team, which is composed of regular performers and occasional suspenders in the Chicago area. Private suspensions are held year-round. The team performs public shows about five to 10 times a year in clubs

around the country, Bennett said, though he has seen bookings increase recently.

Bennett said the team does not have a set price for its performances, but sometimes charges a booking fee. Neither Bennett nor the Gothicfest promoter would disclose how much the team was paid to appear at

the show, where Chicago's 313 Suspension Team member Brenda Smage of Madison, Wis., performed a suspension in which multiple hooks are placed in the chest and stomach and the suspender is pulled with her head facing the ceiling.

Smage, who said she has 19 body piercings, said she started suspending last year after seeing online photos of the practice. "It's never disappointing," said Smage, 22.

After the hooks were removed Smage bled on her plaid skirt. But that's not the worst suspension drawback she has experienced. She said she had to get eight stitches in December after a knee suspension.

It's not the blood, but the potential for infection, that worries Anne Laumann, associate professor of dermatology at Northwestern University.

After discussing suspension with RedEye, Laumann attended Gothicfest to

watch multiple suspensions and observe how the hooks were implanted in the flesh.

"The main issue is afterward if it gets infected," Laumann said. "If you put metal hooks through the skin, you are making tunnels for infection." Laumann also pointed to scars on Tsokatos' body. Scarring is permanent, Laumann said.

Bennett, who helped pierce Tsokatos at Gothicfest, said the team takes medical precautions. Hook insertions are performed by trained body piercers, he said. The equipment is sterilized and used only once. Bennett said a certified emergency medical technician also is present at each event—a service he has never had to use.

Bennett said the main concern when suspenders get into the air is that they could pass out. If Bennett sees his team members start to pass out, he said he usually pulls them down because it's not safe for them to lose consciousness.

As Tsokatos floated in the air at Gothicfest, Chris Zuniga, 29, of Franklin Park watched. He had never seen a suspension before and decided to check out the show while he waited for a band to perform.

Zuniga said he had no problem with the exhibit because those who practice suspension "should have the free will to do what they want."

But "it's just not my thing," Zuniga, said. "I don't want any holes in me."

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WHY DO IT?

Chicago suspenders say they suspend to achieve inner peace and a feeling of euphoria that comes from being able to float. Others say they hang to modify their body in a more intense way than tattooing, while some suspenders attempt to create sexual energy.