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Looners
Inside the world of balloon fetishism
By Karen McIntyre

In the spring of 1997, Shaun had just broken up with a boyfriend, and his roommate had moved out. Living alone for the first time and relieved of the fear that someone might walk in the door, he was finally able to indulge his fantasy. The young man sat on his couch and started blowing up balloons.

Shaun had loved playing with balloons since he was a child. When he hit puberty, he felt his first orgasm rubbing against a balloon. It was then that his relationship with the object took on a new meaning. "I had spent my entire life trying to hide it from one person or another, be it parents, lovers, roommates or friends," Shaun says.

But now he found himself in the privacy and intimacy of his small, two-bedroom San Jose apartment. "So here I was, like a diabetic kid given free license to ransack the candy store. I emerged myself fully." The living room and spare room became stuffed wall-to-wall, floor to ceiling, except for a path to the TV. The balloons were mostly 12 to 16 inches in diameter, plus a few three times that size. Shaun, who stands 6-foot-2, filled his bedroom to the top of his chest. He fell asleep buried in multi-colored inflatables. "The feeling was just an irrational sense of happiness."

Shaun is one of at least several thousand looners, as they're called. Although the exact number of balloon fetishists – or any fetishist – is debated and impossible to know, Shaun is unquestionably not alone. Websites and YouTube videos portray the

subculture of people who share Shaun's interest. Women – some naked, some fully dressed – masturbate with balloons on porn sites. They ride them, suck them, have sex with them, blow them up and pop them. And sometimes groups of scantily clad women just play with balloons, sexy-pillow-fight style. Troubled actress Lindsay Lohan declined an offer of \$50,000 in September to pop a few balloons – fully clothed – for a fetish website, according to celebrity news site TMZ.

Despite the x-rated results revealed by a Google search, the balloon fetish community extends beyond porn. Looners share stories and ask questions about their fetish on Facebook, Twitter and other Internet sites. About 1,200 people are regular members of Balloon Buddies, a popular listserv in the looner community where otherwise uncomfortable and often ashamed balloon people gather and discuss their preoccupation. Balloon Buddies was started as a pen pal group in the 1970s by a man from Maine nicknamed Buster Bill. Several thousand people have circulated through over the years, according to Shaun, who now co-owns the site and is planning the group's 35th anniversary party. Members share which colors, sizes and brands of balloons turn them on. They discuss when and why their fetish began. And there is often a friendly debate between poppers and non-poppers, as the community is divided between those who dislike and are sometimes terrified of a balloon bursting and those who are turned on and sometimes orgasm from it. Shaun says poppers are generally more dominant and non-poppers more submissive. But Paul Abramson, a licensed sex therapist who teaches sex classes at UCLA, thinks the distinction is trivial, "like trying to distinguish Miller from Bud drinkers."

Mike, a non-popper from Philadelphia, shares ownership of Balloon Buddies with Shaun. He has made balloon fetishism a source of income as well as a pastime, selling products like porn videos to looners in every continent except Antarctica. He began hiring the women seen fondling balloons on his sites, mellyloon.com and looneynudes.com, to monetize his hobby and pay his student loans. Now, the money he makes from the sites support him and his wife. She photographs and films the models but is not a looner.

Mike has met looners of all varieties through his business as well as at balloon community get-togethers. He says balloon people are everywhere, and aside from being predominantly male, they can be anyone. They're gay, straight and transsexual. They're liberal, conservative, racist and hippy. They are doctors, lawyers, physicists, policemen, garbage men, firemen, jailbirds, politicians and actors. Mike's interactions with balloon fetishists have left him with one conclusion: "Balloon people are closer than you think."

The many types of people who are into balloons parallel the many types of balloons. Nothing shows this better than Shaun's small home office in a San Francisco Bay Area suburb. Plastic storage drawers cover two of his office walls, each one filled with deflated balloons Shaun sells in his spare time on his website grandballoons.com. "You know what they say; do what you love." He's inflated more balloons than the average person, but still he gets lightheaded as he blows up a standard 16-inch balloon and lets it drift around the room. Even his cat rubs against it.

Shaun used to make nearly \$2,000 a week selling balloons, but blames the general downturn in the economy for a decrease in sales, which has left him earning anywhere between \$80 and \$500 a week. Shoppers visit Shaun's site to buy hard-to-find balloons from around the world. More than half of his domestic buyers live on the East Coast, although there are many in California. And more than half of his sales are international, with a spike in Germany. Shaun estimates about 85 percent of his customers are looners. They buy 72-inch balloons big enough to climb inside of, 10-to-15-foot hotdog-shaped Airships, figurines like little ducks that are hard to blow up, and anatomically correct rear ends called Derrie-Airs. "You name it," Shaun says, "there's an interest for it." Although he admits that at \$7.99 a pop, the blow-up buns have proved to be a bad investment.

The stimulation balloons provide also varies widely, as latex can appeal to all senses. The scent can be especially important to looners. According to Shaun, "The smell of a room that has a lot of balloons, especially after they have oxidized over a period of a couple days, is nearly indescribable." Each brand possesses a smell as distinct to looners as perfume. The odor is subtly sweet with a hint of rubber. One sniff, and Shaun can identify a Rifco brand product because its latex smells slightly of chocolate chip cookies. He says the aroma adds to the experience, as does the feel and sound of balloons. "The sensation of swimming through hundreds of balloons in my bedroom was overwhelming and amazing." Shaun likes to hug and squeeze balloons, hearing their snaps and squeaks. "I love feeling the strain of them, watching them warp from the pressure and seeing how much it takes to pop them."

Some enthusiasts care more about a balloon's size, color and brand. Twenty-seven-year-old Chris Burney from Rutland, Vermont, says he dislikes solid colored balloons and prefers Crystaltone and transparent balloons – the see-through ones. He also doesn't like themed balloons, like those designed for holidays. Burney's favorite brands are Tuf-Tex and Qualatex. Another thing: "Size is important to me. The bigger the better." Burney can orgasm by blowing up a balloon until it pops – a "b2p" in looner terms.

Associating balloons with orgasm doesn't surprise Paul Abramson, the UCLA professor. "Orgasm is an extraordinarily powerful reinforcer," he says. "If you routinely pair it with something, that 'something' will have stimulus power; the proverbial Pavlovian bell," he says, referring to the bell that stimulated dogs to salivate in a classic experiment.

For other looners, balloons provide stress relief more often than sexual climax. Lynda, a 55-year-old teacher who lives outside Los Angeles, says balloons are more sensual than sexual for her. She prefers agate balloons, the swirly multi-colored ones that look like oil on water. "I'm a very vivid person. I like the screaming hot pink and lime green." She keeps balloons tied to her desk like some women keep flowers. "I find them nurturing. I find them reassuring." Sometimes Lynda will slip behind her desk and inhale the balloons, leaving her with a smile and what she calls a "latex-induced coma." At home, Lynda and her longtime boyfriend own three helium tanks. They sometimes fill the bedroom, living room or shower with balloons. Lynda built her own cage out of PVC pipe and soft netting. She traps herself in the cage with balloons, turns on a large fan, and allows the balls of latex to

whip around her, stimulating her senses to invigorating heights. She equates the feeling to a junkie's high, "so intense, so wild and awesome" that she collapses in ecstasy afterward like one does after incredible sex. Lynda also will sometimes use balloon play to help herself fall asleep, like a baby with a pacifier. Pacifiers were made of latex when Lynda was a child. She remembers rubbing her pacifier on her nose, and she credits this toddler experience with her olfactory infatuation with balloons in adulthood. Lynda knows a handful of looners with the same pacifier association, and nearly all balloon fetishists draw some childhood connection.

Experts agree that anyone can develop a fetish, whether it's for clothing, body parts or balloons. But understanding how it happens and to what kind of people is "as complicated and fraught of a question as, 'Why do some people become gay?'" according to author and New York University lecturer Katharine Gates, a self-described kink expert who developed a map linking popular fetishes and other offbeat interests that was reprinted in a college psychology textbook and also wrote about balloon fetishists in her book, *Deviant Desires: Incredibly Strange Sex*.

Although the development of a fetish is not completely understood, experts know they are far more common among men than women. According to *Human Sexuality and Its Problems* by John Bancroft, psychiatry professor at Indiana University School of Medicine and former director of the Kinsey Institute, men are much more likely to develop fetishes because of a critical period during sexual growth when a young man makes a connection between a specific stimuli and a sexual response. A prepubescent boy may get an erection the same time he

platonically admires his teacher's shiny high heels. Because a woman's symptoms of sexual arousal are not as obvious as a man's, the boy is more likely to realize his feeling of desire and eventually associate it with his interest in the shoes. Over time, a fetish is born.

Still, why does this connection between an object and an erotic response become permanent in some people but not others? No one knows for sure. Some people may be born with or develop a predisposition toward fetishism, according to kink expert Gates. Take the female looner Lynda, for example; perhaps the olfactory and pleasure centers of her brain are slightly more connected than those in an average brain, wiring her to be highly affected by the smell of balloons.

No evidence suggests genetics cause people to develop fetishes, however, according to San Francisco psychotherapist and sex therapist William Henkin. The reasons people obtain fetishes are social, not biological, and they often have to do with a person's interactions with parents or other caregivers. Henkin, who has worked with people with alternate sex and gender concerns for more than two decades (although not with any looners), says fetishes tend to develop in people who felt traumatized as young children and may feel some extra need to be in control.

Gates agrees people may be socially primed for a fetish in childhood and puberty. Things happen in people's lives and they notice a particular stimulus works for them – e.g. Shaun's childhood fascination with balloons. They start to hone in on this stimulus during early masturbation, just as Shaun experienced his first orgasms with a balloon, which is common among looners. A child's sexual focus

may narrow if he or she experiences some type of social isolation or failure: being ostracized, lacking sexual information or sexual play, suffering from an illness or living in a hyper-religious setting. Family situations like these can induce anxiety, isolation and sexual shame. A boy could unknowingly program himself to be turned on by a specific stimulus just because it's comforting in a stressful situation, Gates says.

Experts agree fetishes almost always originate in childhood, but they disagree on the exact age. Henkin thinks they arise before 5, and probably before 3. Vancouver sexologist and clinical counselor Pega Ren thinks boys tend to develop fetishes between 2 and 10, with 5 to 8 being most common. "We're prime, we're ripe, we're ready at that age," says Ren, who coaches people about their sexuality on her website smartsextalk.com. "We do not become aware of erotic attraction until puberty, but we are aware of sexual curiosity about the same time we learn to read. We're curious about all sorts of things at that age. It's when we play doctor. It's when, 'you show me yours, I'll show you mine'."

Shaun says he had typical childlike interests and favorite toys that were popular with many kids. He carried around a Snoopy doll and later a Scooter character from the Muppets. But somewhere between 4 and 6, he became fascinated by balloons. Shaun remembers blowing them up and, when it was too hard for him, letting his older brother do it. They threw balloons in the family fireplace, watching flames whip them around until the latex burst. Balloons were one of Shaun's few toys because they were cheap – he grew up in a family poor enough that he didn't take meals for granted. Shaun remembers innocently playing with balloons; he

would sit on them, bat them around and see how big they could get. But unlike most kids, Shaun never lost his interest in balloons. After he experienced that first orgasm masturbating with a balloon as a teenager, “There was a part of me that thought there was something very seriously wrong with me,” he says. For nearly a decade afterward, Shaun refused to touch the objects of his atypical affection. But he sometimes still craved them. Quitting balloons was like quitting smoking, he says. Accepting his homosexuality was much easier than admitting he had a balloon fetish. “I knew there were a lot of gay people out there,” he says. “With balloons, who had ever heard of that?”

Chris Burney, the looner from Vermont, and Mike, the balloon businessman in Philly, have fetishes rooted in childhood fears of loud noises. Loud and unexpected balloon bursts frightened Burney as a kid, but somewhere between 8 and 12, he started feeling empowered by seeing how big he could blow one up without popping it. By the time he hit 15, the desire turned sexual. “I know it’s hard for people to understand why, but I get an erection from it. I don’t really understand why, but I do.” At 19, he learned about the balloon fetish on an HBO documentary. “I couldn’t believe it. I was like, oh my god.”

Mike’s childhood fear of loud noises never subsided despite his interest in balloons turning into a fetish. The noise doesn’t bother him if it’s on screen: he enjoys watching videos like the ones he produces of sexy women playing with balloons. But if a balloon pops in front of Mike, the fun stops. “I don’t freak out, crawl up in a ball and shake,” he says. “I get startled.”

While for many looners the fetish is seemingly harmless, for others it can be disturbing, even damaging. Mike has witnessed a fanatical non-popper fall into a fetal position and quiver when a balloon suddenly deflated in his presence. The most extreme looners say they have ruined relationships (sneaking to hotel rooms to keep their secret from their spouses), gone into debt buying balloons and lost their sense of reality from their out-of-control preoccupation. Abramson, the UCLA professor, testifies as an expert witness in civil cases in which sex is an issue, and he says extreme fetishes can be unsafe. "I see the worst and most dangerous fetishes in my work as an expert witness; someone has died, been badly harmed." Abramson says the dependence on the fetish is the determining factor. "The more dependent and distressful, the worse it is."

In determining whether a looner suffers from a psychological disorder, therapists will likely fit the person into one of four levels of fetishism outlined by Paul Gebhard, a well-known sexologist with a Ph.D. from Harvard and former director of the Institute for Sex Research. The most innocent enthusiasts, which Gebhard argues shouldn't be called fetishists, slightly prefer specific stimuli, like balloons. Level two fetishists prefer an object like a balloon but don't require one. Level three people would be those who need a balloon to perform sexually. And those who replace a sex partner with a balloon would be classified at the highest level – and at the greatest risk psychologically. The most fanatic non-poppers may be level four fetishists because they treat balloons as if they were human, so much so that they equate a busted balloon with murder.

Mike is well connected in the looner community, and he says people who treat balloons as human partners are the exceptions. For Mike, balloons are like pizza – satisfying in moderation. “It’s like, ‘Ah, it’s Saturday night,’” he says. “I could go for some pizza.” Shaun and his husband play with balloons in bed, but a balloon is not necessary for a satisfactory sexual experience. Burney won’t date women who ban balloons in the bedroom, but he also doesn’t need a balloon to get off. “A female is definitely going to turn me on. If a balloon is put into play, it’s a million times better.” Lynda has applied a simple rule to her relationships: If a man tells her, “I ain’t doing that,” she says, “I ain’t doing you.” Like several looners, Lynda became comfortable with her fixation came after she realized she wasn’t alone. And the Internet is to thank for that.

Most looners grew up ashamed, thinking no one else in the world had a balloon fetish. Then they found people online who share their interest – people who had spouses, children, jobs; perfectly successful, normal people. “This is the moment when they realize, ‘I’m not alone,’” Gates says. The Internet has likely reduced the number of hardcore, level four fetishists, Gates says, by lessening the pressure and eliminating feelings of isolation – one of the worst burdens of fetishism. It then becomes easier to tell a partner about a fetish and helps people to keep their obsession under control.

Some looners also throw in-person balloon parties. Shaun has hosted a few relatively tame gatherings that have included Balloon Buddy trivia contests, balloon inflation races and a roundtable discussion in which looners talk about their fetish. But the largest in-person balloon gathering Mike has heard of included about 40

guests. “I think a lot of people are still embarrassed about this,” he says. Mike is well-known in the heterosexual looner community and Shaun is known among gay looners, yet neither man will allow his last name to be published. Shaun explains: “I’m not ready to walk down the street with a thousand balloons and say, ‘hey, look at me,’ but I’m not ashamed of it either.”

Chris Burney, by contrast, is open enough about his fetish that he agreed to be featured on an episode of the TLC television series *Strange Sex*. Since the show aired in August, Burney has been criticized by what he calls the “vanilla world” – people who don’t have a fetish or are ignorant about them. But Burney says speaking out about balloon fetishism was the smartest thing he’s ever done. “Finally being able to come out and be myself and finally being able to walk down the street with a smile on my face, it was well worth it.” He traveled a long road of secret shame to get to this point. “I remember the day that I literally got turned on by watching someone blow up a balloon. I said to myself that I would never tell anyone in my life. It was a secret. And I kept the secret for 10 years.” But what once embarrassed Burney has become a source of pride. On his twenty-seventh birthday this past February, he maneuvered his 6-foot-7, nearly 400-pound body inside a 72-inch-wide transparent balloon and posted the video for his fans on YouTube – his fiftieth balloon fetish video on the site.

Burney says the greater fetish community acts as a support system and reminds him that he’s not alone. Since coming out, he has been inspired to help people understand that it’s all right to be themselves. Burney says it also has helped

him cope with difficult times. In the last few years, Burney's father died, he has been unemployed, split up with his fiancé, suffered a mild heart attack and was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. Coming out as a looner is what he credits for changing his outlook on life and helping him cope. "If it wasn't for the fetish community, I wouldn't be where I'm at today."

As important as the fetish community is to Burney, and contrary to what non-fetishists may think, he insists that balloon eroticism isn't necessary for him to be happy. But it certainly helps. "Having a balloon fetish is not a big deal, it really isn't. It's awesome."

Lynda says her boyfriend accepts her fetish because it's not immoral, not fattening, it's relatively cheap and brings a smile to her face. Shaun confesses to a scar on his inner thigh from a balloon pop gone wrong. Still, balloons are on the mild end of the fetish spectrum compared to masochism, sadism or an obsession with sharp objects. And playing dirty with balloons is healthier than more conventional addictions, like those involving alcohol, drugs or cigarettes.

"There's nothing wrong with having a balloon fetish," Shaun says. "As long as you let it enhance your life, not control your life." After balloons have been floating around the house for a while, Shaun says he'll store them away for weeks at a time just to make sure he doesn't get carried away. Following his first balloon binge 14 years ago, Shaun knew he had to keep his infatuation under control. He remembers rummaging through his apartment to save a few special balloons, which he deflated, put in a sock and threw in the dryer so the warped rubber would contract and the balloons could be re-used – his non-wastefulness a lingering effect of his poor

upbringing. But for the rest, he began “a massive assault of balloon popping.” Sitting, stomping and bouncing on them started to feel like a chore, so Shaun retrieved a sword from his collection and dashed through his home jousting bursts of color until the floor was sprinkled with ripped bits of rubber. “To me, a fetish can be healthy,” Shaun says. “To a point.”

Gates, the kink expert, agrees. Everyone has their own prurient interests. “If all you’re interested in is what body parts do, I think that’s rare.

“We’re primates. We don’t just have sex for procreation.” People have sex to bond and relieve tension among other things. “There are many reasons sex shouldn’t be limited to what two sets of genitals do,” Gates says. “We’re all kinky, and I’m glad we are.”

Master's project source list

Looners: Inside the world of balloon fetishism

By Karen McIntyre

Interviews:

Chris Burney, Vermont looner

Shaun, Bay Area looner

Mike, Philadelphia looner

Linda, LA looner

Paul Abramson, UCLA professor and expert witness

Katharine Gates, New York author, kink expert

Pega Ren, Vancouver sexologist

William Henkin, San Francisco psychotherapist

Articles, books and other resources:

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(Paul Gebhard's four levels of fetishism)

Various balloon porn websites, plus social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube
and Twitter

enjoyable