

Bears & Health

PNP Bears

Crystal Meth, the Gay Community and Bears: Part 2

In Part 1, we looked at the problems of crystal meth abuse. First, at the fact that it has gone from being a raging epidemic in west coast gay communities to those on the east coast. Although it has most noticeably affected urban gay men, the bigger picture is that methamphetamine is now the second most popular illegal substance in the world. Maybe it's because I'm older (58), but in the bear circles I've moved in, I can't recall ever hearing specifically about crystal (aka crank, ice). But pnp (party and play)? That's a term one does encounter in bear profiles and chats.

We also looked at the health risks crystal is associated with: sexual compulsivity and addiction, and a dramatic increase in the risk of acquiring and transmitting HIV, syphilis and drug resistant strains of gonorrhea, in addition to the already well-known medical, neurological and psychiatric complications of speed abuse and addiction—heart attacks, strokes, seizures, anxiety, depression, psychosis and sudden death. Over the decade of the 1990's, speed-related emergency room visits tripled.

Some people may claim safe "recreational" use of crystal meth the way some make that claim for cocaine, marijuana, alcohol, tranquilizer and opiate use. For all, however, to flirt with crystal meth is to flirt with one of the most dangerous and devastating drugs and epidemics—this one bound up with the others, especially HIV—ever to invade our communities.

Not everyone who uses a drug, even the most highly addictive ones—alcohol, cocaine, tranquilizers, opiates, amphetamines—becomes addicted. Some seem more prone to addiction than others, though in the case of these

drugs the risk of addiction is great and universal. Whatever the exception that proves the rule, once addictive patterns and behaviors have been established, the success rate of those who subsequently attempt to use any of these drugs in moderation is just about zero. I've been working in addiction medicine for 25 years and have never met an alcoholic or heroin or cocaine or pill or speed addict who returned from the extreme consequences of addiction—the loss of home, partner, family and work, from hospitalizations, detoxes, rehabilitations and incarcerations—or anyone who was in recovery who was able to return to any kind of safe or moderated usage. Not one.

So crystal is definitely bad news bears. On the other hand, demonizing crystal and its users will only aggravate the problem, since shame and guilt—as opposed to the legendary triple A's of recovery: awareness, acceptance, action—are major players in the addiction cycle. As with alcohol, opiates, tranquilizers and other drugs and medications of abuse and dependence, the best approach is understanding, compassion and communication. Some patients may need inpatient detoxification, especially if there is psychosis, seizures or major cardiovascular problems. However, for the long term, for the maintaining of abstinence, the most promise seems to be coming, as you might expect, from recovery, from CMA (Crystal Meth Anonymous), which utilizes the 12-step model of Alcoholics Anonymous.

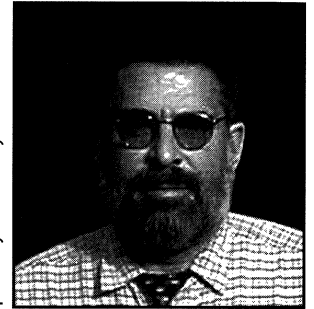
In recovery, the first step is to admit one's powerlessness over the chemical or substance or behavior, in this case crystal. The second and third steps are about having the willingness to seek

help. There are many suggestions for recovery—like going to a meeting a day for the first three months, getting a sponsor (someone with some time in recovery with whom you can check in and up on yourself), and working the 12 steps. But there is only one requirement for membership: a desire to stop (the substance use, the behavior).

Most of the other suggestions, often in the form of slogans, are simple and gentle—e.g., Easy Does It, First Things First, One Day at a Time, HOW (honest, open-minded, willing). Humor also plays its part—e.g. "You're like Cleopatra—Queen of De Nial," or "Underneath some skirts there is a slip." And then of course there's the well-known Serenity Prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Five years ago in New York City there were no CMA groups. Today there are many groups and meetings to choose from, most of them gay. A recent forum on crystal featuring Harvey Fierstein was attended by hundreds. In fact, there are now so many resources that your best bet is just to Google in crystal meth and refine your search as needed. You can also contact www.lifeormeth.com; SAMHSA, the national drug information resource center: 800-729-6686, www.samhsa.gov; CMA (Crystal Meth Anonymous): www.nycma.org.

photo by Joel Bradley



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