



Centre for Social Research in Health

Crystal Clear Podcasts

Episode 1 - Crystal: The Beauty and the Trap

VOICEOVER

Crystal Clear: Negotiating Pleasures and Risk around Sex on Crystal.

This podcast series is part of the Crystal Pleasures and Sex between Men project.

Please assess your own capacity to listen, in case this podcast is triggering or upsetting to you.

This podcast is recorded on Bedegal Land.

The host of this podcast series is Tobin Saunders. Tobin is a proud, gay, HIV-positive health-educator and peer-activist. He's a longstanding and well-respected agitator for social change.

TOBIN

I'm your host, Tobin Saunders.

It's important that we can talk openly and without judgement about crystal methamphetamine. Crystal is commonly used in combination with sex among gay and bisexual men in Australia.

Today we will be talking to gay and bisexual men with lived experiences of crystal use, exploring their perceptions of its pleasure and risk, what concerns them about their use, and how they managed it. We have three guests on this podcast, Bill, Trav and Joey who will each be responding to some key themes identified in the Crystal Pleasures and Sex between Men project.

To start, let's listen to an excerpt from an interview with John, a 58 year old man living in Melbourne.

EXCERPT

I'd always been a bit paranoid about sex because of the HIV and I suppose fairly inhibited. And using crystal it's just like a switch going off, so there's totally no inhibition. Once I started injecting, that was another step up from this total sense of freedom. It's really hard to describe: it was euphoric and this extreme horniness that comes over you just in an instant. And everyone seems to have a pretty similar response sexually and the fact that they are all saying "fuck yeah, fuck yeah" and just, you know, immediately rip off their pants or whatever!

TOBIN

Let's start with Bill. Bill has been using drugs socially for about 40 years and now works as a consultant in the fields of harm reduction and gay men's sexual health.

So Bill, how does that excerpt resonate with your experiences of using crystal for sex?

BILL

I think it's perfect. I think he captures exactly what every, well, gay man in this instance, would experience. And what it makes me think is I wouldn't be surprised if he continues speaking and said that it was the best sex he's ever had in his life, because that's something that you hear again and again. And it was certainly my experience.

The unique beauty of crystal is that it is just so pleasurable. And it's different to ecstasy. Ecstasy was the sort of thing where you'd run around feeling good and loving and friendly and happy and all that, whereas crystal is a deeper, more pleasurable state to be in, where your senses are heightened. And when it comes to sex in particular, that's why people will say "it's the best sex I've ever had".

TOBIN

Now we'll hear from our next guest, Trav.

Trav is a 36 year old gay man living with HIV for 18 years. He has lived experience of using crystal for sex, but is now in recovery since recognising his use had become problematic, and chooses to abstain from use. He uses his experience of living with substance use issues to create awareness and combat stigma.

Trav, how does your experience differ from our last guest?

TRAV

I guess it was just fun, it was an escape, dropped inhibitions. At the time when I was with my ex-partner, like it was something we did to connect, I guess. It definitely does create that heightened sense, the horniness. I guess I'd call it quite primal.

Living with HIV for 18 years, I've come through a period of where stigma has gone from being very high, especially in Adelaide, I think, compared to Sydney and other cities around Australia. The treatments have changed as well. So I used to have a lot of fear around sex and lived for most of my sexual life worrying about the harm I would do to someone else. And so my drug use did actually allow me to, I feel, be more in control. I think it mitigated the risk.

BILL

For me, crystal came along at a time when the new treatments were working. I was coming back to life, where I had moved from expecting that I would die eventually, as had happened to people all around me. The treatments meant that that was not going to happen. And then crystal came along at the same time. So it was marvellous to be able to use crystal to explore a new way of being sexual and being in the world and being a gay man and making contact.

And I take it a step further and it's not just about HIV. I think many gay men experience some kind of insecurity, particularly around their identity, and their appearance and their attractiveness and their ability to have sex. Crystal comes along beautifully and just takes all that away. And that's why it's so attractive.

It gave me the confidence to approach men in a very bold assertive way that I would never be able to do normally. And that was thrilling and exciting and gave me a sense of wanting to be able to keep doing this because it made such a difference. The awkward sort of dance around, you know, "is he available and he is interested?" and all that just got knocked aside, because you just walked straight up and take control.

TOBIN

So Bill, are you or were you ever worried about the sexually addictive qualities of crystal?

BILL

One of the problems with meth is that when you meet someone, what's really happening in your head is "wow who is this man, he is fantastic, we should go on like this forever because he's the one". I think that's what's going through the head of most gay men in that situation. But in fact it's the drug causing you to think that way. But in the heat of the moment, that's not what you are aware of.

The pleasure of it is caught up with the excitement and the wonder and the hopes and the dreams and the expectations and all these sorts of things. I think when we talk about crystal and sex, we don't acknowledge the kind of sex that people have. People will be open to exploration and fantasy and games and behaviours that they probably wouldn't ordinarily do. Everyone says they feel like a porn star. That's not simply because of their performance, but it's because they feel like they're in the middle of a fantasy.

That might not be addictive, but it's certainly incredibly attractive and memorable and makes you very eager to see what can happen next time.

TOBIN

It almost sounds like two types of sex? Crystal or non-crystal sex?

BILL

[laughs] And that's why crystal is so attractive.

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TOBIN

What is pleasurable and what is risky often don't stay the same. Instead perceptions and experience of crystal can change over time and according to different circumstances.

Next we'll hear from those same men about some of the ways that they've assessed changing risk and how they managed their use.

Let's listen to a second excerpt of an interview from the project. This is from Harry, a 53 year old man in Adelaide.

EXCERPT

We've got a party coming up this weekend, my partner loves this party, so he says "come on let's go, let's modify how much we use it, let's set the boundaries before we go". And I'm with him on that. I said, "Well let's work out when we start and when we stop, I don't want to do too much in terms of when we do it, when we blast". Because I've been gradually upping the dose or the amount when I'm chasing that high. So we are going into it with a kind of like, "well this is the attitude, we've got to get off, but let's do this responsibly".

TOBIN

Let's hear from Joey.

Joey is a 65 year old gay man living with HIV, in a long terms serodiscordant relationship. He and his partner occasionally use crystal to enhance the sex they have together in ways that prioritise the pleasure and safety for them both.

Joey what are your thoughts on this?

JOEY

I think when I was first introduced to crystal with my partner, I found it quite overwhelming, the first experience. When I tried crystal, it was like "whoa, this is a bit more intense". After our first play

together on crystal, I made a decision that this was something that I was not going to do regularly, because it was quite potent.

After a 30 year dependency on speed, I decided I did not want to go back down that path. Now it's maybe two or three times a year and it's more a celebratory thing that we do. So on birthdays, New Year's, for example.

We have a very intimate loving relationship. We've been together 8 years. But when we do crystal it takes our relationship to a whole new level of intimacy. We become quite sexually adventurous, but we also maintain safeguards. Being in a serodiscordant relationship, meaning I'm positive/he's negative, his safety is my main concern.

TOBIN

So Joey, how important is it that you get the opportunity and feel comfortable to talk about these experiences with crystal and sex?

JOEY

I talk about strategies that I use to minimise the risk associated with crystal use.

I sort of have seen firsthand the problems that it does cause, especially when people are using daily/weekly. For me, you know, when you're on crystal, the comedown period, your heart rate might be normal but your thought processes are still a little bit off. So I always say to people "do not sign any legal documents, do not make decisions in that week when you're coming down, because to be perfectly honest, you are still slightly intoxicated, even though you feel straight."

This is from my own personal experience. The first time I tried crystal, the comedown was like "what the fuck?!" I'd be totally normal one moment and then next thing, head spin and that went on for a few days. And so it has to be handled with respect.

No two experiences are the same. Some events might be quite adventurous, others may be quite laid back, so we can never really determine how it's going to turn out.

I allow myself months between using, solely for that fact that when I do have a shot, it's like the first time. People are always chasing the dragon, chasing to get that initial 'whirl hurl' feeling. When you are using it daily/weekly, you become quite desensitised to that effect. So for me, the greater distance between using makes the actual effect of the drug more potent.

TOBIN

So Joey, it sounds like you and your partner have got some great planning in place when you choose to use crystal and have sex?

JOEY

That's absolutely correct.

We plan well in advance. I do not go out at the last moment to try and get on, so to speak, I always have it there on tap ready to go for when we plan to actually have the event.

I work it around my work, where I have a week off work. So that when I come back to work I am completely sober, which is really important for me.

TOBIN

And what about you, Bill?

BILL

What I had to realise was that I might have had a plan about what I was going to do. My plan was about going out and having a good time and having a party and meeting other men. What happened to me would be that those men would then have drugs with them or I might have some with me and they would suggest, "let's do this or let's have that". And in the spur of the moment, you would say "yes" and suddenly you'd taken more drugs than you planned or you were doing something that you hadn't expected to do or whatever. And I had to realise that that's a reality, that's part of the nature. If you are going to go out to meet someone then it's quite likely that all these things will happen that, of course, you hadn't predicted. And I had to learn to think that through beforehand and to be prepared for it to happen. So that it gave me a little bit of an expectation that when it happened, hopefully there would be something in my mind which said, "oh, just a minute, this is what I thought might happen, and I don't need to do it".

Having said that, it's nowhere near that easy. Often it's a lot of, of course you'd say "yes". Because in the heat of the moment and he was fantastic and you felt great. To have to plan what's going on is not easy.

TOBIN

So how do you enhance the pleasure of sex on crystal without increasing the risks, especially if it's a situation that is unexpected?

BILL

Well, planning based on your experience. Knowing "alright if I'm going to have a weekend, these are the kinds of drugs I will take, this is the amount I will take, these are the sorts of things I will do" and trying to put that into action. And then if you find in retrospect that you weren't able to hold to that, then a level of honesty with yourself, which says "well wait a minute, I took many more drugs than I wanted to, what happened? Am I comfortable with that? What went on?"

And next time you are just a bit more prepared to be able to manage that kind of experience because you've used the experience from the previous time to inform how you manage yourself better.

TOBIN

Do you think the experience of using crystal over a longer period of time gives you a bit more agility around assessing that changing risk?

BILL

Yes, as you come become more experienced at using it, you do become more familiar with the way it affects your thinking and your attitude towards the man or the men you are with.

Everyone has experienced or seen people that have become very messy by taking their drug use too far. So if you are a host or in a situation of some kind of responsibility for a group situation, being assertive about someone not needing to take anymore. Distracting them or making it clear that they are already in a good enough state, there's no need to go further.

But there's another element to this which is simply looking after each. And I think as gay men, we have to acknowledge that we participate in drug use and sex because it's part of our culture and it's something that we enjoy doing and we're very fortunate to have that. And with that, I think it's no great request to say that we look after each other, just as we would hope someone would do to us in a similar state.

TOBIN

A culture of care...?

BILL

Absolutely, this is all happening within a gay cultural sexual context.

TOBIN:

So Trav, how does this resonate with your experience of using crystal for sex compared to maybe other drugs?

TRAV

That culture of care and safety, like, that went on with Ecstasy, I just feel was completely not there when it came to using ice. And that the primal and primeness and all of that that, like, in the complete tunnel vision towards sex sometimes, I guess took away from that care and safety. Well in my circle anyway.

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TOBIN

But what happens when patterns of use get out of control, sometimes this happens and we're going to explore this more in the second and third podcast by looking at how men support other men and what professional services can do.

Let's end this podcast by discussing some of the specific concerns that men have expressed with crystal and sex. At what point does crystal use become a concern? Are those concerns around the amount or frequency of crystal or the type of sex that can be had? And what happens when lines or limits are crossed?

We will hear from our three guests on how they check in with their own crystal use. This next excerpt is from an interview with Sean, a 49 year old man in Sydney.

EXCERPT:

Well, my concern was that something seems to have changed recently. That all of a sudden it's like, "well, am I doing this because I now want to have sex or am I doing this because crystal makes me feel good?" So my concern is like what changed? And where is it heading? Sometimes I have the crystal at home and I haven't used it at all and I've had control. But sometimes I feel like I'm becoming addicted, or I am addicted. I feel like I want to have it, even if I'm not having sex. So something has changed.

TOBIN

Joey, what happens when you get concerned about your crystal use, or lines or limits that you might have crossed?

JOEY

When it gets to the point of rent not being paid, food not being bought, having to porn things - there's a problem.

One thing that we do not do if something negative has happened in our lives, we will not go near crystal. Solely for the fact that it's going to exacerbate and in terms of mental health, we have had some losses recently and we are just sort of working through that process.

TOBIN

What do you think about that Bill?

BILL

I know a number of men who will use crystal sporadically, for, you know, there will be a long weekend coming up and there'll be a party of some kind, or they've arranged a hook up with some people that they regularly do. And they plan their weekend! And they will use, you know, Saturday night Sunday and then recover on Monday. And that works very well for them.

I do think though is what we need to do is to talk about the unique qualities of crystal and why I say that there's a beauty and a trap. Which is, yes, there's a beauty, which is that it gives you immense pleasure and the opportunities to explore all these things. But you need to be aware that it's the drug doing it and if you keep pursuing the drug, then it can slide very easily. And we see that a lot with gay men. It slides into becoming problematic. And I think that's where we need to be talking as a community so that that's acknowledged and recognised and that people can be aware of it or their friends can be aware of it or the community as a whole can be more aware of it. So that we talk in a black and white way about the nature of the drug.

TOBIN

Trav, what triggered you or what made you consider abstaining from crystal?

TRAV

My recreational use, I would call it, went from what I call to be recreational where I could put it down after the weekend it ended or the fun that I was having to just wanting and needing it more. My life became unmanageable. I lost a 15 year relationship, stress of family, all that sort of stuff, and I guess it took me a long time to realise that that was out of control for me.

I still romanticise and have that romanticised view of my use when it was still in that recreational stage. And, you know, catching up with my friends and the potential of sex and that going on and all that horniness and that energy that went on.

I guess when I started to realise that it was out of control was when my use became a coping mechanism for anything else in my life. Like, it just moved from being fun to being if I, well I guess if I had a traumatic event or anything like that. And I guess it just snowballed for me from there.

TOBIN

Was there a moment, a sort of light bulb moment or a point that you just said "I've had enough"?

TRAV

Look, it was when I had a bipolar episode. I always thought I had depression, but was diagnosed as bipolar, and whether that came from my drug use or not I'm not to know. But I guess that was when I really started realising that things weren't really fun anymore. And then losing my 15 year relationship and... And yeah, that's when I guess I chose to make a conscious change in my life and, you know, that hasn't been easy either. Like I've had a lot of relapses to use. And it's just through those relapses and what I learn, and trying to choose things that work and what don't.

TOBIN

So Joey are there times when maybe circumstances have changed and your perceptions of risk have been adjusted?

JOEY

There have been occasions, especially being HIV on antiretrovirals where my health has been in decline at various times. Obviously, during those times I'm not going to indulge in chemicals. My heart is fine, but as I've got older it's one of those things that I've had to make that decision, "okay I have to reduce because there are risks involved the older I get." The side effect of antiretrovirals can be difficulties with the heart, or problems with the heart. So I sort of manage my health very well. But this is something that I do take into consideration.

I've got to be sensible about this. Hence giving up smoking, doing the right things. We look after ourselves, but the fact is I'm still a 65 year old gentlemen, so...

TOBIN

Words are powerful. We mention the word 'recovery', 'problematic use' 'abstaining'.

Trav, how do you feel about those terms that can sometimes be polarising in our community and what do you prefer to use?

TRAV

I use a range of things. I don't like to be defined by anything. I've come up with living with HIV and in the early days of that, I used to be very defined by that. It was my disease. And so gradually like I've just come to realise that I can't do that to myself, like it's... I'm a human first before I live with problematic drug use and yeah I guess, I try to be very careful.

And it's something that is still emerging for me. I mean, part of my what I call living in recovery or an abstinent life, I attend 12-Step meetings, something that comes up there everyday is that people ID there what they call "clean time" as the number of days they've lived abstinent of drugs or alcohol and that still really... I don't know how it sits for me.

TOBIN

That just came to my mind immediately the concept of clean and dirty when it comes to people with sexually transmissible infections?

TRAV

I don't necessarily class myself as a dirty person because I experimented with drugs and had a life of using recreational drugs successfully, what I would call for quite a few years.

TOBIN

So Joey, what does abstinence look like or mean to you?

JOEY

Abstinence is not a word in my vocabulary. For me, it's "never say never". I will always use drugs, but it's just the way I choose to use them. It's not putting people down that use more regularly than I do, I just find what works best for me is just less regularly, better impact in terms of the experience, more enjoyable, absolutely, just by having it a fewer times a year.

TOBIN

The drug can also create some fantastic opportunities for intimate conversations and some great negotiating!

BILL

The beauty of crystal is that when we say it disinhibits you, it also allows you to have much more personal conversations. And that's not unusual for people to have really quite intimate connections with people, and talk quite intimately and personally. And so you are able to say to them, "look, you know, are you okay about the kind of sex you've just had" or "are you on PrEP" or "are you positive" or "are you on treatment?" And if you find out for example that someone, particularly it might be a younger gay man who's not on PrEP and who is concerned about the sex he's just had, then it's simple enough for you to tell them about access to PrEP. And "here are the numbers to use".

You know, you use your phone to find sex and find drugs. You can use your phone to put them in touch with a service just as easily.

TOBIN

Bill, when did you decide to give it a rest?

BILL

Possibly because I was older and had already been through some difficult times in earlier years. I reached the point where I decided that I didn't want to keep using crystal.

Having done that then, I have to be careful because if you are on apps and you are looking at hooking up, then you are constantly being asked if you are wired or if you want to hook up and use drugs. And that can be difficult for me, because you look at the bloke on the app and you think “wow” and straight away your head goes into all the possibilities. But I decided that I don’t want to do that. I just make very clear that I don’t use drugs, and we see where it goes from there.

TOBIN

So how does that sit with you Trav?

TRAV

To tell you the truth, probably, like, part of me and I’d probably call it a bit of FOMO, fear of missing out that goes on.

TOBIN

FOMO, so fear of missing out of what or on what?

TRAV

I guess in the sense of living with HIV, it allowed me to actually relax and actually detach from living with HIV. But in the same sense as being in control of more, I would say than if I was drunk, like out of my brain and... Because I feel that I was more in control of looking after someone else. It’s not so much a fear now that undetectable is untransmissible is proven, but yeah.

TOBIN

What do you think about that Bill?

BILL

Crystal doesn’t change you, it doesn’t, you know, you don’t hallucinate or you don’t trip or you don’t become someone else. You are just extraordinarily alive and there’s a serenity about it. There’s a confidence. There’s a sense of being incredibly powerful. And not worried.

TOBIN

That’s one of the appeals!

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Responses that are focused only on risk or harm are unlikely to be relevant for men. We need to reflect on sex positive culture of gay and bisexual men. This can include discussion of feelings of belonging and importance of networks, the sensations and sensorial nature of the drug, and the feelings of sexual disinhibition and confidence that come with it.

We’ve heard that there are multiple reasons why men find crystal attractive for sex. Openly discussing the combination of drugs and sex, and the reasons why gay and bisexual men might do these, is difficult. One thing we need to do is talk about this in a non-judgmental way and avoid sensationalising the issue or inducing panic. For instance, people who come into contact with services sometimes have issues with their substance use. But services often don’t see clients who can talk to the pleasures of sex on crystal, including non-problematic use.

Gay and bisexual men should constantly check in with the pleasures and harms experienced. They may change in different contexts or change over time. It may be a good idea to get into the habit of doing environmental or contextual assessments. For example, being a good host to party’s means reducing the risk of harm for your guests. What’s your own risk audit?

Our guests have described some of the ways that they manage their use. And we should celebrate men’s agency in this area, as well as looking to see how these risk reduction strategies can be institutionally recognised and supported.

So not all use has to be experienced as problematic in order to seek advice, help or resources.

VOICEOVER:

You've been listening to *Crystal Clear: Negotiating Pleasures and Risk around Sex on Crystal*.

This podcast is produced by the Centre for Social Research in Health at UNSW Sydney in partnership with ACON, Thorn Harbour Health, South Australia Mobilisation + Empowerment for Sexual Health and Western Australian Aids Council.

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Any information relayed on these podcasts is correct at the date of recording.

We would like to thank our guests, partners, collaborators and funders.

If you are worried about your or someone else's crystal use, please refer to the information on the website for help. Support is available should you need it.

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