



Centre for Social Research in Health

Crystal Clear Podcasts

Episode 2 - Cultures of Care: Conversations with people who provide support to crystal users

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 people who support gay and bisexual men with their crystal methamphetamine use, looking at some of the ethos of care that can exist in crystal using cultures. We'll talk about some of the triumphs, but also acknowledge some of the difficulties those supporters faced, and how we might model support on the best practices that the project has identified.

Like the last podcast, we have three guests who will each respond to current gaps identified in the support needs of friends, lovers and family members of people who use crystal. We will hear today from Joe, Craig and Nate, who have all supported other people with their crystal use.

But first we will start by listening to an interview excerpt collected from the Crystal Pleasures and Sex between Men project. This excerpt talks about the importance of support from a peer perspective, taken from an interview with Ronald, a 49 year old man in Adelaide.

EXCERPT

There's a lot of people that I've met and I'm thinking "oh my god, what can I do? You desperately need help." I tried to speak to them as much as I possibly can, to try and say, "hey you need some help you know". And having people like myself who do actually do substances, we're probably the best ones to put it out there to try to help. If someone is not dealing with the gear, I can then go into that conversation and they will listen, because they can see me doing the same thing.

TOBIN

First, for this podcast is Nate, a queer man living with HIV who works in the community sector. Nate has experience in providing peer support to friends who use crystal for sex.

So Nate, how important is it to you that others are having fun and not experiencing harm?

NATE

So, I draw very much from my own experiences. I've certainly come into contact with harms as a result of using crystal. A lot of the way that I learnt about how to keep myself safe was from engaging with other people who use crystal. And so I think there is a role for peers to share that information, share that knowledge. I think that's very much within the culture of gay and bisexual and queer men.

Also I've got a lot of knowledge from people who use other substances. So from some of the drug user organisations, some of those messages that I would use say for heroin or opiates - "Start low go slow" - can also be really useful when it comes to methamphetamine.

TOBIN

Next we'll hear from Joe. Joe moved to Sydney from New York with this husband 2 years ago. Joe now works in professional training and development.

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

JOE

The quote that was said resonates with me so much, because I'm not somebody that uses crystal and I never have. But I do use and have used other substances. So I understand, you know, the mindset that you have to be in. And it was always something that frightened me with my relationship with my friend is understanding some of it, but not always understanding everything with it. And it really you know put up a barrier sometimes for me to be able to feel like I could clearly communicate what those thoughts were. And so, you know, I really wanted to make sure that I was providing support, but it was challenging, because I know that I've not been in that space either.

And so I, you know, also looked to my friend for a lot of guidance when it comes to that, because I feel like if he feels comfortable talking to me, he can also help guide me through this at the same time. You know, as somebody who cares for somebody that uses, I think that seeing that holistic picture and sometimes being outside of that can, you know, be hard. But it can also be a blessing for that individual because you have that perspective that they may not see themselves.

TOBIN

Nate, how is the care that you provide for others reflected more generally in the ethos of care within the queer community?

NATE

When I was a baby queer, so to speak, I started to explore more fetish sort of BDSM subcultures within our community. Within that subculture, there was this ethos of care. Almost an oral history or oral knowledge that was passed on between lovers or sex partners. And so I think culture of care already exists, particularly within those subcultures.

I think it's a little bit different now. We've got the internet, we've got social media and ways of connecting with people across the world that perhaps wasn't there when I was younger. But I still feel like the best way that we are able to share that knowledge is from person-to-person. Through our own experiences and imparting that knowledge to people who want to know.

TOBIN

Joe, what do you think?

JOE

I think being able to talk about the experiences! And that was something that my friend that was really hard was being able to open up what happened over that bender and being able to have an honest conversation. And it was hard for me, because, you know, as gay men, we like to brag about our adventures and being promiscuous and that's fun, but there was always a part of me that was like, "well you were high the whole time, so is that really fun or were you just going through the actions"?

Being able to talk about those experiences really allowed me to understand what is going through his head through that journey. I think the best way to be able to provide support to people is to listen.

TOBIN

So as someone who doesn't use crystal, how do you know when the person is using crystal is maybe moving from that area of having fun to it maybe being a little bit challenging or problematic?

JOE

When I noticed that things changed in our relationship is when I felt like it may be problematic.

And there was a period of time where you know we would be texting and talking on a very regular basis and as he started to use, that would kind of drop off. He wouldn't say that to me and he wouldn't tell me that he was using, but there was this element of me always playing the person that was like, "I'm not going to believe he's using until he uses those words and tells me". But then it was always me texting and being like "are you okay, I haven't heard from you in 2 days, what's going on?" And then finally he'd divulge, you know, "oh I've been partying". And that's fine!

But there was always this element that he was so scared to tell me that. He was hiding those things from me, because he was fearing that judgement that may come or perceived judgment that may come.

* * *

TOBIN

It's clear that there are also support needs for those who support others in their crystal use. Now we'll hear from our guests about some of the positive and negative aspects they've experienced in providing care for others. We'll ask them about how they support themselves as supporters.

Let's listen to a second interview excerpt from the project. This is from Lucas's interview, a 33 year old man in Melbourne.

EXCERPT

People are scared to talk with their friends and peers about drugs, especially if you start to perceive yourself to be problematic. I guess we need to be non-judgemental. But at the same time, you really, like... people need to be willing to change or help themselves. It's impossible to do something for someone, in fact, it's really draining to do something for someone when they can't help themselves. And that's through both my experience and other things I've seen. I don't know, I guess it's like maybe trying to remind people about the importance of social connection and meaningful engagement with community.

TOBIN

So Nate, how have you provided support for people who are using crystal, especially when it's combined with sex?

NATE

One of the things that's really important is around, like the participant said, around being non-judgmental. I think that there's a lot of stigma in the community and that means that maybe people don't feel comfortable talking to say their GP or maybe their best friend who might not be using crystal. It's really critical that if someone is coming forward and saying to me, "I think I've got a problem" or "what do you think about this?" that in that instance, it might be the only opportunity I have to speak to them.

Also, trying to normalise the experience for them. Going "yeah, you know like maybe this thing you are experiencing, other people experience that as well". So it makes them feel like they're not alone. I think that's really important. Because if you feel like you are getting into some problems with crystal is that you feel really isolated, that you feel really alone. I know I experienced that myself.

TOBIN

And now we'll hear from our next guest, Craig. Craig spent 20 months in a residential rehab facility and now supports other men with their crystal use. Craig, you have a different perspective based on your experience?

CRAIG

I support men who have sex with men through SMART Recovery, which is at Thorn Harbour Health. SMART Recovery runs all through Australia, up in Sydney and over in Perth, Adelaide. And it's based on empowering people who have substance issues to then take control and make set goals.

So that it's not an abstinence program. Need to be realistic about things - expecting people to be abstinent isn't a goal that a lot of people want. But they want to get their use under control, so if I can help them achieve that, it's a win/win situation.

TOBIN

So Joe, you are not going to be there the whole time always for these people that use crystal, there's times when maybe you need to just pull back and let them have some time out or do you really invest and stay with that person for a journey?

JOE

I have stayed with person and it has been a journey.

For more than a year now, we meet once a week on Mondays and we plan every day's activities. So we write down and I have a journal in my phone, you know, it's you know going through what activities are happening. Is there a gap in the week? Because we know that when you get bored that that becomes a better possibility to use.

And okay, that's fine if the goal is not stopping right now. What is the goal and how can I support you? And understanding that as a loved one, support has to change and you have to be flexible. And that's something that I'm learning every day to be better about being flexible about how I provide support.

TOBIN

So Nate the support and services that you might seek are not a 'one size fits all'? You may get that from various places and sources?

NATE

What worked for my own experience might not work for everyone. All you have to ask is, "were that person's needs met or not"? And so that was a really good lesson for me. And I think that's the most important thing. Like, if I am supporting someone else and I give them a referral or I say,

“you might want to check this out” and then they say, “well it doesn’t work for me” then don’t keep doing it. If it’s not working for you, don’t do it, try something else.” I think that’s really important. Don’t put up with something that doesn’t feel right or maybe it’s stigmatising or maybe they don’t understand the queer experience or whatever the case maybe. It’s important to know when things aren’t working and acknowledge that and then try something else.

Early on, I tried to help everyone that asked for my help. What ended up happening is that ended up being really difficult for me emotionally and also psychologically. I will always give people the information they need, but depending on how long I engage with them depends on how willing they are to make those changes or to take on board the things I have to say.

TOBIN

Craig, what do you think?

CRAIG

With my friends, I do have to take a step back when I’m supporting them. Otherwise I can be dragged into that emotional turmoil that is going on inside their head.

TOBIN

Craig, is there anything that you find draining as a supporter?

CRAIG

It’s when there’s an expectation from the other person that I can fix them. Because I’ve got that experience, I’ll be able to wave a wand and some fairy dust will come out and everything’s going to be okay. Whereas the person I’m supporting really has to empower themselves and take those steps towards making some change.

And it’s also the expectations I’m placing upon myself of wanting to help someone or help my friends. But I have to remind myself that I’m not Superman. I need to look after myself and take a step back as well. The expectations that I place on myself can be quite high. If that all goes to shit, then I’m just going to beat myself up and that doesn’t help anyone.

TOBIN

So Joe, is this something that you would agree with?

JOE

I think it can be frustrating and I also think that at times, specifically working with my friend that had a period of no use with crystal, that I really had a hard time when he went back to it. There were parts of me that felt like I had failed. It was very fatiguing, like I was really tired and was noticing that it was effecting my relationship with my husband, that it was reflecting and kind of effecting the work that I was doing. Because I was putting a lot of energy into it and then feeling like there was no outcome or that we were kind of cycling back to behaviour that was years ago. We just need to have the chance to communicate openly about how this is affecting both of us.

I know that that first day when he stopped using is not the day for me to come all out and say, like, air my grievances, because it’s not going to be effective, you know? We can work through those things for the first couple of days and then come back to that conversation. But that first day is not going to be an effective conversation for us to be able to move forward together.

TOBIN

So Nate, it’s okay to disengage at times?

NATE

Absolutely. And I think it’s really important that when you are providing care for others that you have the capacity to provide that care.

TOBIN

How have you exercised self-care when you've been supporting other people around crystal and sex?

NATE

So it's about taking that time out. And it's about working out what my needs are. It's sort of, I guess, kind of standard self-care 101 - making sure that I'm getting good sleep, that I'm eating well, that I'm exercising. But it might also mean you know checking in with maybe a psychologist or maybe a counsellor or maybe even just a really good friend who has the capacity to kind of allow me to talk through what I'm feeling or some of the challenges in supporting others have been.

I think it's really important to understand what your own needs are, and how to get that support so that those needs are met.

TOBIN

Craig, what does care look like to you?

CRAIG

For myself, when I'm giving myself self-care, will be connecting with nature, being gentle with myself, meditation. Not much good to others if I don't have a good self-care plan.

Having gone through rehab in a total of 20 months, my support network through peers that have been through the rehab with me is quite strong, that I can unload and I can talk to about any stresses that are going on.

And then care for others is also being gentle with them, being non-judgmental, empathic as well. And that's really important not to disempower people.

TOBIN

Craig, do you find having those healthy boundaries challenging sometimes if you are feeling a little stressed and somebody's really needing your support? How do you balance that?

CRAIG

For myself, I can get quite short, frustration setting in, a little bit judgey as well. Which doesn't help anyone - it doesn't help the other person and it certainly doesn't help myself.

* * *

TOBIN

So what does a good model of peer support look like? How can we put in place plans to help our partners and friends who are using crystal? We'll hear of one such model first before we talk to our guests about what support they feel that they need in order to keep on providing support work that they do.

This excerpt is from an interview with Joseph, a 34 year old man in Sydney about what he needs from his friends.

EXCERPT

I have a last line of defence. I'm completely open with my best friend about everything that's in my life. He doesn't take drugs and we've had the discussion a lot about my use and there's been a couple of times where he's said he's been concerned. So I've had very frank discussions with him on what to watch out for from my side if it's gone too far. There are things that he can watch out for. Like, if I don't talk to him for days or if I'm talking to him at weird hours or if I'm repeating

myself, asking the same question over and over. But he also knows that if I think that it's become a problem, then I'll actually say to him, initiate a conversation about this, like, "I need some help to kind of back" or something. So we have that plan in place.

TOBIN

So Nate as a supporter, sounds like you are not doing this alone, it's really important to have support networks and relationships?

NATE

Yes, I think that is really one of the things that I've learnt along the way, is that I'm also not alone in supporting others. And it's really important that I have those supports in place for myself.

TOBIN

Joe, what are your thoughts on this?

JOE

When I had somebody else that was outside of the circle and was able to talk to them about this, it really helped me communicate better with my friend. And allowed me to understand the correct words to use and to feel like I'm not enabling, but I'm also not inhibiting, their use. They can be a free person, but I can be a support person as well.

TOBIN

So Craig are there any times where you're supporting someone and might feel a little out of your depth, and feel confident to refer that person your supporting on to an organisation or an institution, just to help out?

CRAIG

Most of the time! I'm not the Yellow Pages of support networks. And it's not about me trying to provide all the support, it's not about, say, feeding my ego. It's about the other person and getting the best for them and the best support that's out there. And if I can help facilitate that, then it's a two-thumbs up, win/win situation.

TOBIN

So Nate, how does institutional support intersect with the type of peer support that you provide?

NATE

The important parts about providing peer support is knowing what you can do and what you can't do. Like, where my expertise starts and ends and when I need to refer someone onto professional support. Certainly, you know, I'm not a counsellor or a psychologist and so what I can provide is a support from my own experiences and my knowledge of how the service system works.

I also know when it's like, hey you know, having that conversation with the person you are supporting, saying, "look, this is starting to escalate beyond my capabilities, I really think you should seek some support here or here".

Actually, there is quite a lot of different supports out there. So we've got websites, which talk about some of the harms or risks and how to use drugs more safely. There's ACON, who provide some counselling support for people who use crystal. And then there's other supports through phone lines; you can go see a private counsellor or psychologist.

There is really a lot of support out there. However, sometimes there can be a little bit of a wait. And sometimes there's not an alignment between when that person's ready for that support or needing that extra support from an external body or an institution versus when they are actually able to get that support. And so it's important to, sort of, still be there for that person and, I guess,

reassuring them that, you know, they are doing the right thing, that extra help is on its way. Being present, again making them feel like they're not alone, is really important.

TOBIN

Joe, when do you seek support from elsewhere in order for you to keep providing support to gay and bisexual men that use crystal for sex?

JOE

I look for appropriate services and I look for more knowledge. There's kind of a constant understanding of what's happening with the community but also how that's changing. Then understanding that, you know, yes maybe it was just crystal, but now there's guys who take PrEP and boner pills and crystal. And what is that doing? And how is that changing the space?

And you know, because that's really making it a safe space to play, but what can you do to understand that there is still harm associated with that and that there's still ways that you can have fun while not pushing yourself too hard? And I think reaching out to other community organisations is important. Talking to your peers is important. You know, keeping that conversation alive I think has always helped us as a community than ignoring the conversation all together.

There have been some really excellent forums around as well, around sex and drug use that I've gone to as a community member, and have learned a lot. And it's just kind of opened my eyes.

TOBIN

And someone who uses crystal is not always going to have the same experience every time.

JOE

Definitely and you know, it could be something where maybe they smoked one weekend and maybe they injected the next. But like what happens after that can, you know, still be different. And the ways we respond as a carer or a supporter also have to be different.

TOBIN

So Nate, how do you assess the peer knowledge that you get is accurate and reliable?

NATE

That's a really tough question. I'm someone who's quite evidence driven.

So perhaps I might look up maybe some research or maybe I might check in with an organisation like NUAA, who represent people who use illicit drugs in New South Wales. And essentially, like, most of the information that... well, the information they are providing is going to be that really rigorous information. They are not going to be giving out information that is based on myths or falsehoods. I suppose I rely on the experts in peer-educational peer-knowledge to inform my own peer support that I provide others.

* * *

TOBIN

Clearly an ethos of care exists at the broader networked level of community. Gay and bisexual men have the potential to tap into this ethos of risk reduction, and develop collective strategies to reduce harms for themselves and others. And support is available for those who support others.

But we need to acknowledge the challenges in providing ongoing support. For example, it can be a positive choice to disengage. But disengagement doesn't have to be absolute or forever.

If you are currently supporting someone who uses crystal, you are not alone. So please seek assistance when supporting others, and take care of your own needs as a support person. Self-care is important.

There are different types of support available. If the first option isn't appropriate for your unique circumstances, then try another because there are different models that service different needs. This is what we will cover in the next podcast.

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.

This podcast is produced based on data collected between 2017 and 2019 in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. A project funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council and WA Health, and in partnership with the Australian Research Centre for Sex and Society at La Trobe University.

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.

END