

Is Romance Dead?: Crystal Methamphetamine and

the Social Interactions of Gay Men in San Francisco

By Aaron J. Cohen, MPH, CHES

There's been a lot of talk about methamphetamine use among gay men in San Francisco over the past year. Many people have labeled crystal the "new gay epidemic." Most men either strongly agree or strongly disagree with this belief, and it seems that there's a real split between them by age. Even though methamphetamine use has only recently achieved so much notoriety, it's been around the gay community for decades. Maybe the men who have been around for a long time see it for what it is—a long-standing problem.

I'm not going to talk about the physical dangers of using meth; that's been done in numerous public campaigns. And most of us know someone who has totally screwed up his life because of crystal. Even though some people can actually use meth occasionally without causing massive turmoil in their lives (a view I share with many other men I know), we all know that for those among us with even a slightly addictive nature, this drug is the worst. And it's also pretty much impossible to know in advance who's going to be one of the lucky few who can get away with it.

My issues with crystal are more global and much more subtle. Meth's ability to promote and heighten sex makes it particularly attractive to us gay men who have always identified our sexuality as one of the pivotal factors in our identity. In many ways, crystal has leveled the playing field, bringing together gay men from very different social scenes with a wide range of cultural, educational and financial status. Although on the surface the "meth culture" appears to be a uniting force for many among us, I believe that it actually exacerbates the loneliness and social detachment so many of us are experiencing. The drug promotes a kind of sex that is deeply rooted in pure physicality. Among the men I know who are part of

the PNP scene, emotional connections are not commonplace and are in fact often viewed as almost embarrassing when the focus is on hooking up to PNP. I've seen many of the men I know become further and further isolated from other gay men. And it's worse for men who are injecting; those who slam prefer to associate primarily with other slammers. It seems that even among regular crystal users, injecting seems to carry its own social taboo. Just as the use of methamphetamine has created its own disconnected subculture within our community, a sub-subculture that's even further marginalized exists.

Online sex and chat sites have noticeably replaced bars and clubs as a primary meeting spot for gay men. People rarely take the time to get to know one another online. After all, online you can be anyone—and anything, safe at home behind your own computer. Where else within five minutes can you get someone's exact sexual preferences, choose between positive and negative partners (with varying degrees of accuracy), and determine if and how they like to "party?" Especially for guys on speed, there's a great sense of immediacy here, fostered by testosterone and by the drug itself.

Not everyone uses meth, but the ways we are meeting each other and the ways we hook up have contributed to the growing sense of isolation among us. We as gay men already feel like a fringe part of the population. After all, most of us who moved to San Francisco moved here precisely to be comfortable and safe in the company of other gay men. The problem is that we simply can't afford to have some individuals be a fringe of a fringe.

So I challenge us to start questioning where and how are we making our new friends. It could be that I'm a hopeless romantic

and unique in my own perspectives, but I'd much rather go on an actual date than hook up. I really can't be the only one that feels this way.

It's true that many people online are already involved in a relationship and are simply looking for some fun on the side. But I propose that even in those situations, crystal meth usually creates transitory connections at best.

I'd like to believe that things are getting better. It seems that more and more people are comfortable putting "No PNP" in their online profiles without fear of rejection or missing out on a really hot guy. And according to surveys done by the STOP AIDS Project, use of crystal meth is on the decline. Maybe all of our education and prevention efforts in San Francisco are paying off. And maybe as the initial thrill wears off, people are simply getting burned out on speed. True, something always seems to fill the gap and data indicate that cocaine has increased in popularity. Regardless, it's the optimist in me that believes people are slowly getting tired of superficial encounters and are ready once again to make more meaningful connections.

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