The 'Tina' Habit

by Mark Goebel
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Crystal Methamphetamine, known in New York City as tina

To an outsider it might seem as if things couldn't be better for the hundred or so men, mainly in their 30s and 40s, crowded into a fourth floor room at the Gay and Lesbian Center in the West Village. The room rocks with laughter, hugs are easily exchanged, and plans are made for dinner or weekend outings. But this is the Tuesday evening meeting of Crystal Meth Anonymous, and many have not been doing so well.

Peter, one of the city's top real estate brokers, who managed to keep his job despite a serious crystal addiction, recalls being holed up in his Chelsea apartment with the blinds and shades drawn at mid-day so paranoid that he thought the CIA had bugged his apartment. "I was convinced that I was going to be arrested for spying," he says.

This is the harsh reality of crystal, a form of speed (methamphetamine) that stimulates the brain's pleasure neurotransmitters and that experts say is as addictive as crack or heroin.

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It is called crank on the West Coast, where it was popularized by the Hell's Angels in the 1960s. It is a huge problem in rural America, according to the National Institutes of Health .

But in New York, it is called tina, and it is almost exclusively a phenomenon among gay men.

Three years ago, there were two Crystal Meth Anonymous meetings in New York. Today, there are more than 20. All of them are geared toward gay people; there are no "straight" meetings in New York. In a 2002 study by the AIDS Education and Training National Resource Center , 50 percent of gay men in New York who admitted to using drugs said they had tried crystal, up from 10 percent in 1998.

Crystal's popularity in the gay community is tied in part to the explosion of circuit parties, multiple-day dance club affairs like New York's Black Party at which the ability to stay awake and stay high is highly prized. One bump of crystal induces a sense of euphoric power and keeps the user awake for up to a day, though the crash is psychologically and physically debilitating, causing depression, irritability, anxiety and paranoia.

Several studies have linked crystal abuse, risky sexual behavior and HIV transmission, which has been on the rise in the gay community after leveling off in the late 1990s. "The abuse of drugs, particularly crystal, and HIV transmission are undoubtedly linked," says Michael Siever, director of the Stonewall Project, a drug education and counseling program.

For HIV-positive men, crystal's wearing down of the body's immune system caused by missed meals, vitamin depletion, weight loss and lack of sleep can trigger the onset of AIDS. An Ohio State study has shown that methamphetamine stimulates HIV replication in brain cells as much as fifteen-fold.

Crystal's ravages are made worse by activities like binge partying--a fairly common phenomenon among gay addicts--where the user is awake for days at a time, crashes for several more, and then starts over. According to Life or Meth , binge partying is driven by a compulsive desire for sex, which in turn is driven by crystal abuse.

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According to Robin Cato, executive director of the Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity , gay men who often live alone are vulnerable to acting out their feelings of isolation and loneliness by abusing drugs and compulsive sexual behavior.

Bars, clubs or bathhouses become too time-consuming for most crystal abusers, so, while their habit may have been picked up in the clubs, they rely on the Internet to score. It is not difficult to find somebody in the same neighborhood, or even on the same block, looking, in the vernacular of the Internet, to party and play--PNP.

For many addicts, staying off crystal, while the most challenging hurdle, is just the first of many they face. "For years I only had sex when I was high on crystal," says Bill, who has not touched drugs or alcohol in almost two years. "During my first six months of sobriety I was celibate. I had to be. Now it is a struggle to have an emotionally healthy sex life."

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