

Chemsex and Going Wild with Self-Care

Simon Clay, NDARC, UNSW



What is 'chemsex'?

- **Chemsex** is often defined as the integration of synthetic drugs like methamphetamine, GHB, mephedrone, and erectile dysfunction medications into sexual scenarios. While individuals from a range of gender and sexuality backgrounds engage in chemsex, this practice is most closely associated with gay and queer men.

Research Questions

- What is the intersection of chemsex and self-care?
- How might chemsex be used as a wild self-care practice?

Wild Self-Care

- This novel concept emerged from my interviews and was inspired by Halberstam's (2013, 2020) concept of 'the wild'.
- It describes self-care practices which may appear dangerous, unconscionably risk, or antithetical to 'good' health but are used in legitimate ways to care for the mind and body.
- Wild self-care is ultimately about the pursuit of agency and well-being, and finding alternative ways of being that feel emancipatory and enriching.
- This approach understands health as an on-going process and a personal construct we must constantly tend to.
- Wild self-care also demonstrates how self-care is an inherently community-based practice that is carried out through a rhizome of emotional, 'embrained' bodies.
- These 'wild' forms of self-care are incompatible with neoliberal ideas of care and resist coercive medico-state powers.

Findings – Negative Experiences

- Several participants spoke about how taking drugs made them feel 'out of control' and unable to connect with their body, and this was doubly so for sexualised drug use. They were exercising self-care by avoiding drug use and listening to the needs of their body and the shape of their desires.

- Avoiding 'wired' or overly intoxicated guys when looking for someone to hook-up with was a priority for a number of my participants. By using certain screening techniques to avoid these situations from arising, my participants were engaging in self-care by protecting themselves.
- Substance dependency was a significant issue for two of my participants, which made chemsex particularly complex. While their chemsex experiences had given them powerful new ways of looking at the world, new forms of embodiment, and deeper connections with their erotic body, it had also created a host of other socio-health-related problems.

How 'risky' is chemsex?

- Research demonstrates that gay and queer men frequently approach chemsex sessions with safety as a priority by planning out their night, keeping track of their drug use, bringing sterile needles and other equipment, and using a range of HIV-prevention strategies. Many will keep an eye on others' drug use and help them if things go wrong.
- Chemsex parties can also be a place where people find empowering community connections and establish meaningful relationships. A number of scholars have found that some people use chemsex parties to work through difficult periods of their life, come to terms with their gender identity, and pursue exciting new types of sexual pleasure.

Methods

- 16 semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia with individuals who identified as a gay/queer man or a member of the gay community. Interviews were carried out over the entirety of 2018 in Wellington (6), Christchurch (2), Dunedin (1), Sydney (4), Brisbane (2), and an undisclosed city (1).

Findings – Positive Experiences

- For some participants, combining sex and drugs enabled them to try more adventurous practices, like fisting, and expand the erotic potential of sex. Chemsex became a type of emancipatory practice that reinvigorated their sex lives and established new circuits of carnal pleasure.
- Chemsex was a major aspect of some intimate relationships and a sign of trust and connection. It was a way for some participants to deepen their relationships, find new ways of connecting, and experience more intense feelings of intimacy. One participant described how the euphoria of love he felt towards his new partner was almost indistinguishable from the pleasures of their chemsex sessions.
- Another one of my participants managed a gay sauna in Sydney and spoke about how stocking amyl nitrate was a way for him to care for his community and feel like he was doing something meaningful for others because many of his older customers needed amyl in order to have sex.

