

## Methamphetamine and Harm Reduction

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The August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005 edition of Newsweek magazine's front cover depicts a person smoking "ice" (the smokable form of methamphetamine): "The Meth Epidemic: Inside America's New Drug Crisis". The article inside describes a professional working wife and mother who gave up her \$100,000 per year job, her family, and her suburban life style for "something that mattered more: methamphetamine". It goes on to describe "meth" as a drug that: "quickly seduces those who snort, smoke or inject it with a euphoric rush of confidence, hyper alertness and sexiness that lasts for hours on end. And then starts destroying lives".

The rest of the article is about law enforcement efforts to eradicate illegal meth labs (two per day in California). There are pictures of people with faces and bodies burned from meth lab explosions, and the evacuation of entire neighborhoods due to the possibility of Meth lab contamination; there are a plethora of descriptions of destroyed lives. There is never a return to the most interesting introductory comments: "a euphoric rush of confidence, hyper alertness, and sexiness that lasts for hours". In other words there is no extrapolation about what matters most. Why do people use methamphetamine even when it is so stigmatized and even when it destroys their lives? What is it about the Meth experience that keeps them coming back for more?

Understandably the authors of this Newsweek article want to make the point that the use of Meth in America is creating a problem of epidemic proportions. They want to dramatize their point by using a metaphor of seduction: "quickly seduces" those who use it. However, seduction is something that is limited to human beings. It's a human characteristic. In no way is it the chemical property of an inanimate drug. There is no part of the methamphetamine molecule that can be identified as "seductive". Thus talking about a chemical substance as if it were human is the first step in promoting fear and loathing. It gives to the drug magical powers: the power, for example, of seduction. It makes the drug more potent by the words we use when describing it both to ourselves and to others.

What else is Meth purported to do? It creates "confidence", "hyper alertness" (vigilance), and "sexiness". Each of these qualities demands a social definition; one person's confidence is another's "confidence game", someone's hyper alertness is another's paranoia and given the cultural parameters of "sexiness", an entire book could be written about the meaning of "sexy". No, Meth does not make you sexy... but it could... depending on the set and setting.

Each of these descriptions about what it is that Meth does needs further social discussion. One thing that can be said about Meth without the use of metaphors is that it allows one to feel the energy of a marathon racer without raising a finger or lifting a foot. Movement on Meth is effortless and more energy can be put into artistic expression so that a pole dance at the local gentleman's club or at the soccer mom's gym becomes, for the performer, a ballet. Does this translate into sexiness? It could, but that is a matter of social definition. One cannot do Meth on a daily basis without suffering ill effects. Just as one cannot run a marathon on a daily basis. Illegal Meth is a potent but contaminated stimulant that produces a wide range of physiological consequences (partly due to its contamination).

These consequences may be translated into words like confidence, hyper alertness, and sexiness but they are social translations. What chemically clean Meth does is what any psychoactive drug does; it produces chemical changes in our Central Nervous System that provides us with sensations. Whatever else Meth does, we do to ourselves. We provide the interpretation of the sensa-

tions and that interpretation is a social process. This is why what people feel from Meth needs to be openly discussed. One very simple illustration of how increased discussion can foster less harmful use is a discussion on dosage. How much speed should be used and for what purpose? Most Americans who take speed are overdosing, developing tolerance and becoming “addicted”.

How many milligrams of Meth are in a “line” of contaminated speed? What are the sensations? How long will the sensations last? Are there stages to the sensations that the user can anticipate and plan for in advance? How does one titrate Meth? How does one avoid “meth mouth” (tooth loss) and the other negative consequences of doing too much speed? Given the value placed on industriousness in America, why does the government allow caffeine and caffeine products as its one and only legal stimulant? However, such discussions will not come easy when the mantra of Just Say No makes it difficult for anyone to admit to any use. The epidemic of Meth use is perpetuated by the silence engendered by not being able to talk about something that is illegal to do. The epidemic of Meth is a product of censorship about Meth.

If Meth kills, then why are so many people using it and using it at great risk? Why is there an epidemic of Meth abuse? The orthodox answer is that it is the addictive nature of the drug. The occurrence of “craving” supports methamphetamine as an “addictive” drug. And how are people expected to deal with this subjective “craving”? The same way people over 30 years ago were encouraged to stop smoking cigarettes:

“put a rubber band around their wrist, and when they recognize they are thinking about methamphetamine, they snap the rubber band to jog their thinking process and prevent the momentum toward craving and eventual use”. (Methamphetamine Treatment: A Practitioners Reference, California Alcohol and Drug Programs, 2007: 48).

If this “rubber band therapy” seems humorous, it is not intended to be so. The use of the rubber band is considered “state of the art” for Methamphetamine treatment. (One cannot make this stuff up!) What it offers is a simple replay of aversion conditioning where pain becomes the replacement for euphoria... in this case, self-inflicted pain... or as it has more recently been called: self-injurious behavior.

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