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The psychological roots of chemsex and how understanding the full picture can help us create meaningful support

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to explore the larger picture of chemsex in a hope to understand how to best work with clients therapeutically. The paper's aim is to acknowledge not just the risk and "negative" aspects but also what might be gained by men engaging in chems use. How can the chemsex space act as a container for emotions and experiences?*

Design/methodology/approach – *This is a paper based upon cases from within the author's private practice plus anonymous interviews with men. It comes from a sex positive therapy approach and explores ideas formed within the author's work as a practitioner.*

Findings – *The findings within this paper showed just how complex an issue chemsex is with many layers to it. The author also found that the most important aspect to bear in mind is that this is a very human issue, with aspects many can relate to such as intimacy, self-esteem, desire for connection and dealing with difficult emotions. By seeing what part it plays in the life of men involved then it is possible to understand how seductive it could be.*

Originality/value – *This paper takes a more in-depth look at the psychological roots of chemsex and how these play a part. As this field is explored more, this paper aims to look at chemsex from the idea of pleasure, community and connection so that it is possible to provide the support that is best suited.*

Keywords *Psychodynamic, Therapy, Trauma, Sexuality, Chems, Chemsex*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Often when we look at the issue of chemsex, we are drawn to what we perceive as the risk and the danger. This is, of course, important as we can use information and harm reduction to help protect men and provide support. However, if chemsex was only about the danger then how do we fully understand why men keep returning to it? Around the world, men who have sex with men (MSM) are going to chillouts[1] and parties to engage in sex and drugs, to meet with others and lose themselves into the moment. These are men from different age groups and backgrounds, and often do not identify as drug users or relate to other drug users, regardless of the frequency of their use. Is this about drugs, sex or does it go deeper than that? To understand what drives men it is important to see the whole picture, the psychological roots and, most importantly, the aspects of pleasure.

It is important to note that as a Therapist, I will generally only encounter men who feel they have difficulties with chems and who are looking for help to stop or reduce their use of them. While this perspective is often the only lens under which chemsex is viewed, it is important to understand that there are men who manage their use of "chems" and derive pleasure from it with few negative consequences. It is essential to look at all aspects, those perceived to be "positive" and "negative", so that a full, holistic approach can be used.

As a Private Therapist, I get to sit with men who are struggling with their chems use for ongoing periods of time. Because of this we can often build a strong relationship and achieve depth in our conversations. I have been working with chemsex as a Therapist for over five years now, originally working at a chemsex-specific service working on a short-term basis (each man was offered

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12–20 weekly sessions), and I will now work privately with men on a long-term basis meaning that I have been working with some clients for almost two years. This along with speaking with the community, both in one-to-one settings and at events, has given me insight into this complex issue and the many levels on which it can be explored. In this paper, I hope to combine aspects of this learning to start to look at how best to approach chemsex support in therapy.

It could be beneficial to explain my own personal model that I use as a Therapist, to put this work in context. I am an integrative Therapist focussing mainly on a psychodynamic approach with elements of person-centred theory. I take a modern and sex positive[2] approach, and I do not require abstinence from my clients. However, regardless of how I work I hope that anyone in a helping role can use the information in this paper, as the most important parts are understanding, hearing and relationship. During my time at the charity-based chemsex support service, I would be referred to men who had entered via our drop-in. We were predominantly a drug service with additional support in sexual health. Each client would not only receive therapy but also be key in working to help with practical interventions. Unfortunately this service is closed and now that I work privately, I most commonly work with men who self-refer and hear of my practice through word of mouth. This means that I have worked with a large variety of MSM all with their own stories. While each client will come with their own issues, with time many themes are revealed that seem to connect them all.

Any examples of cases that are spoken about within this paper have been altered to protect confidentiality.

So what are we finding that is leading men to engage in chemsex? As with any human issue, this varies from person to person but within the community we are hearing several themes that keep being spoken of time and time again. I work with men ranging in age from 20 to 65, from a variety of cultures and backgrounds; yet some aspects tie them all together. For many of the men that I work with drugs themselves are not the main appeal, but rather what drugs can help them do or achieve. So what needs are not being met in the community that chemsex can seem to provide for?

The first big factor is one that many men find it difficult to speak about, loneliness. As Matthew Todd (2018) states in his book *Straight Jacket*, there is a stigma to loneliness around gay men. This he puts down to the old homophobic ideas that gay men will not find happiness, or the image of the lonely old guy at the bar. However, the issue of loneliness is very real and often does not link with the number of people that you have around you. This is a complicated feeling which is around a desire to connect, and an ability to achieve the depth of relationship that we need.

So much communication now takes place via apps and technology, and much of what happens around sex and hook ups can be seen as transactional. Men may express what they are looking for or can offer based on physical appearance or sexual preferences, which can feel like the act is more important than the person. Moving out from here we are also seeing more of a distinction between the gay “scene” and the gay “community”. Elements that are important to create a sense of belonging and support which come from community are absent in a scene which revolves more around clubbing and bars. This may feel like a shift to the importance of external appearances, rather than who you are as a whole person. In therapy we talk about easing loneliness by forming real, deep relationships with people; however, this may not feel so straight forward to many of the men engaging in chems. One reason that we often explore is that there may have been a lot of hiding and secrecy during early years when we learn how to socialise and connect with people. This can create a lack of skill, a build-up of defence mechanisms and a fear when it comes to opening up fully to expose vulnerabilities. If you show somebody your flaws, let them in, then will you still be cared for?

Chemsex as an escape

This leads to the next themes which come up in therapy: self-esteem and shame. Self-esteem can be seen to be affected by so many aspects of society and culture. It only takes browsing through a few of the magazines available in gay bars, shops and clubs to see the expectations that can be put on men around body, image and lifestyle. Many of the men walking into the therapy room are discussing the pressure put on them to achieve the perfect appearance

and to be attractive. Being sexually desirable carries worth and to feel that you do not live up to this can feel very painful. This does not just affect younger men, in fact age can bring its own fear. “John” spoke frequently about how approaching 40 was causing him emotional turmoil. Despite working out and using anti-ageing cosmetic treatments, knowing that he was no longer going to feel young enough had caused him to completely isolate himself and the anxiety was preventing him talking with anyone except over apps. In turn the apps added extra pressure to provide pictures and live up to what people wanted. Other clients discuss the pressure to appear masculine enough to pass (in the straight world) which brings its own desirability as well as safety, or to present themselves as a great top or bottom[3].

Shame, then, can take things a step deeper. This can be a difficult topic to approach as it is often so carefully protected. Shame can develop for a number of reasons linked to experiences or even beliefs about who we should be. Even the experience of being a man attracted to men itself can create shame within a person, for example, internalized homophobia[4], plus culture and the reactions received from others all have an impact. This shame can then become what we call “toxic shame”, moving from “that was shameful” to “I am shameful”. While running a workshop I heard a man describe how “my whole experience of living as a gay man has been traumatic”, not meaning large one-off traumatic events but rather a slow-drip of constant traumatic experiences. Mix this with toxic shame and you can start seeing just how deep and overwhelming this could feel.

With all of this pressure on the top of living in a world where you still may not feel fully accepted and hyper-aware to prejudice, it is completely understandable why men may wish to escape into a different world. Chemsex provides a different way of experiencing life for a time, it is letting go and losing yourself into it. “Connor” described what it felt like having no responsibility and the only concern was where to get your next hit of pleasure. Despite all of the risk it felt safer than day-to-day life which only offered a stress which he felt was “unbearable”. On the flip side of the same coin, when a person is living in such a state of hyper-alertness and emotion, any other state of calm can feel boring and uncomfortable. Chemsex can offer a continued state of intense feeling, excitement and risk, which creates a seductive high. Using drugs and sex you can attempt to control your emotions, unwanted feelings as mentioned above can be switched for arousal, pleasure and excitement, even a familiar anxiety. These feelings not only seem more enjoyable but they can also feel more under control or chosen.

Of course we could not finish this section without talking about sex, and the truth is that chems can offer pleasure and great sex. Some describe it as like “fireworks” and that it allows types of sex that would feel impossible when sober. This alone is a very strong driver and often when I experience men starting to lapse, it is the sex and not the drugs themselves that they are triggered by. We will explore sex further later in this paper.

Drugs, sex and connection

In this section, I will speak briefly about the effects of the drugs which are specific to chemsex, after all GHB/GBL, mephedrone and crystal methamphetamine all offer features which make them perfect for the above-mentioned features. I will not go into huge detail as it is not my field to look too much at the chemical aspects; however, to work with chemsex we need to understand both the effects and the appeal of these substances. What we can see is that chems can become both the relief and the cause of emotional difficulties. Crystal methamphetamine damages the synapses in the brain in a way which leaves the men depleted of serotonin for weeks. It may feel like a fix to anxiety and depression to use again; however, the truth is that it will only make it worse. This becomes a difficult cycle to break. It may feel like it can take away shame and ease trauma but once in the cycle, chems use can add further layers of both.

The drugs themselves create empathic feelings; in that moment you can feel incredibly connected. It is often spoken of as “false intimacy”; however, in that moment it is actually very real. If we think of intimacy in terms of a deep knowing of somebody then at that point in time it can be experienced as exactly that, it just does not always go further or continue beyond the chemsex setting. Sex and intimacy are often assumed to go hand in hand, or get confused. At this point I feel it is important to explore sex and intimacy as two separate parts of the same puzzle.

Sex is something which most of us desire but it can be difficult to know what is expected of us. Many MSM start to explore their sexuality alone and hidden as they fear they may not be accepted otherwise. Without others to compare with and an education from what is around us, sex can be learned through magazines and pornography that give unrealistic views. Here sex is an act and a performance, based on “perfect” sex and “perfect” bodies, which not only affects self-esteem but can separate sex from feelings. If connection and sex are learned as two separate things it may feel risky to bring them together, after all if sex is linked with shame then how can people accept you if you are completely open; how does it fit with emotional bonds?

I believe that it important to not just look at the sex part of chillouts, but when we talk about connection I also hear of moments with care and sharing. “Rob” often spoke of meeting men to play with, but he had one who he liked being around the most. This was because this man looked after him as well. He made sure that he ate and drank, helped measure the drugs correctly and at the end would wrap him up in a blanket. For “Rob” this was the only care that he encountered and it was very powerful. “Rob” was not the only one who experienced this.

For men who feel different or isolated, chemsex can come to be their community and place to connect. Taking out the sex and drugs, the spaces between can actually be seen to offer many of the aspects that were previously available in other spaces. People can talk about their experiences and shame, and this might be the only time they are able to do so. If other connections to people are through technology or in bars it may not feel that there is a place to express difficult aspects of life. Similarly with relationships which are separate from the chems scene, there can be a fear of judgement or not feeling understood. While it may not always be the case, meeting people at chillouts might feel like you can find others going through the same issues. We will often talk about the difference between “fitting” and “belonging”; “fitting” is about presenting yourself in a way so that you can be a part of a group or not stand out, but “belonging” is a feeling like you are truly a part of something where you believe you have found your place. Men may live so much of life trying to fit in the world by altering aspects of themselves, that to find moments of feeling that they belong as themselves would be very attractive.

You can share in your past, and experience the pain of the present all together, then instantly medicate it with drugs and sex.

Sexuality and community trauma

One way that I have started to explore chemsex started after speaking with “Keith”, who was struggling to stop going to parties of a weekend despite everything else in life feeling like a success. “Keith” could only embrace his own sexuality when he was using crystal methamphetamine, despite the fact that he was living as an openly gay man. The aspect of his sexuality he found difficult was the sex itself and connecting with himself as a sexual being. When he had used he was able to go onto apps and engage in the sexualised conversations he desired, meet men and have sex; though the shame he was left with following weekends of sex left him struggling with his mental health. For other men engaging in chemsex, they can finally embrace sides of their sexuality that feel uncomfortable, be it because of self-esteem, stigma or shame.

The relationship between MSM and sex has been a complicated one, and an understanding of history can hugely benefit how we view this. The knowledge that your sex has at points in time been considered illegal, the symptom of a disease or mental health condition, dangerous, unacceptable and different can manifest as toxic shame and a difficulty connecting fully with yourself as a sexual being. This then becomes mixed up with hyper-sexualised imagery and expectations promoted in magazines and can create an internal struggle between what you want, what you should want and how you feel about it. Can chemsex become a container for this? As a container it can hold a space for sex and all that comes with it to be explored alongside trauma and difficult emotions. A container in this sense means a place for it to be held within its own space. There can be so much confusion around sex, identity, self and relating yet many men describe chillouts as a space where this does not matter to them, they can explore their sexuality fully without inhibition. The difficulty is that this particular container may not be as safe as it appears, and it may result in consequences to life, health and even crime as we are beginning to see.

So what we must take from this is a push to create new containers for the men to explore their relationships to sex, relationships and their bodies: non-judgmental and positive conversations about what it is to be them and how they connect to sex.

David Michael Fawcett (2015), amongst others, looks at how drug use can be used to cope with an inability to manage emotions both “negative” or “positive”. As discussed above, for MSM there can be a huge amount of emotion, awareness and slow-drip trauma throughout life and this could take a lot to manage. Times of drug use not only take us out of this but perhaps also provide permission to be in this for a controlled amount of time. Many men I spoke to described how chemsex is a part of compartmentalising in their life so that different parts of them can only exist in the context and time of chemsex. This can both be a container for the difficulty of trauma and emotion, and the pleasure of play and sex. This is where work can be done to help bring all aspects of life together and help each person feel that they can accept the whole of themselves.

From knowledge to practice

So, after covering all of this information and the many reasons that can lead a man to explore the world of chemsex and perhaps develop difficulties in this, how do we put this into a therapeutic model that works?

Traditionally some therapy can take a “blank canvas” approach and try to focus on the analytical side of the work. With chemsex, it may be important to start a little differently. Getting to the root of issues is important but by looking at how men are drawn to chemsex it feels that the most important part could be to create a human connection. Many of the aspects spoken about above ultimately come down to a desire for a connection with others and self, but a difficulty in finding a way. As professionals and supporters, we can help this not just through theory but through modeling this ourselves. We can provide spaces where men are heard and accepted in a non-judgemental way, we can listen and help explore sexuality and all the difficulties that come with it, along with finding sex positive ways to look at sober sex if that is desired. Clients may not be ready to delve deep into trauma, but to sit with them and let them know that we understand how difficult it feels can be just as important. We are all flawed and we all struggle. As professionals we do not have to always pretend that this is not the case, because by allowing a relationship to form we are offering something very powerful. Each client will come in with their own story so while it is important to hold all of the causes at the back of your mind, listening is what is needed.

As you can see from this piece, chemsex is a place where play and pleasure can take place and even perhaps a feeling of community or intimacy. We have to understand this full picture and acknowledge that this can all feel very real-in fact it is experienced as real. We must never forget the danger and risk, because we need to keep men as safe as we can, but we cannot ignore that there are sides which may be viewed as attractive and positive. Without this, we are failing to truly understand what it is like for the men we are working with and offer them the best that we can. By seeing what needs are not being met in the rest of men’s lives we can put together appropriate support and toolkits. The first step may even be helping people speak about their needs and begin to think about them.

At the root of chemsex work are topics that we are all familiar with both in a work capacity and possibly in our own personal lives. If we use this as a point of empathy, we can encourage men to form stronger relationships with themselves as well as signposting ways to re-connect with communities and encourage joy. Pleasure is an important part of life and it is important to hold in therapy too. It is not about creating what we think is best for the client, it’s about helping them live a full and authentic life.

Notes

1. A chillout is the name given to parties and gatherings where chemsex takes place, often within a private setting.
2. “An attitude towards human sexuality that regards all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, encouraging sexual pleasure and experimentation” (Gabosch, 2008). The sex positive movement generally makes no moral distinctions among types of sexual activities.

3. Referring to roles taken during sex, top being the penetrative role.
4. Ideas of being “wrong” or “bad” because of your sexuality that are absorbed from the world and turned inwards. This is held inside.

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