



**APCS**

Asia-Pacific **Chemsex** Symposium

*Pleasures, Policies, Possibilities*

# Pleasure-based Chemsex Intervention and Harm Reduction

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6-7 November 2024 | Bangkok, Thailand

#APCS2024

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# What is Chemsex?

- Chemsex was first coined by David Stuart in 2001
  - Chemsex is the intentional use of specific **psychoactive drugs** such as crystal meth, GHB/GHL and/or mephedrone are to **facilitate, sustain and intensify sexual experiences** typically amongst gay, bisexual men who have sex with men (**GBMSM**) (Hawkinson et al., 2024)
- The precise definition and operationalization of Chemsex varies in international literature (Amundsen et al., 2023).
- Arguments to broaden the definition to capture greater diversity of practices, and other populations that participate in Chemsex other than GBMSM (Pardo, 2021).

Amundsen, E., Muller, A. E., Reiherth, E., Skogen, V., & Berg, R. C. (2023). Chemsex Among Men Who Have Sex With Men: A Systematic Scoping Review of Research Methods. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 71(6), 1392–1418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2023.2170757>

Hawkinson, D. E., Witzel, T. C., & Gafos, M. (2024). Exploring practices to enhance benefits and reduce risks of chemsex among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men: A meta-ethnography. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 127, 104398.

Pardo A. HRI expert survey on chemsex response. 2021.

# The Rush to Risk

## Film

### Chemsex exposed

William Fairman and Max Gogarty's documentary *Chemsex* (video) is about the culture of drug-fuelled sex parties on London's gay scene. Group hookups, or chillouts, have been made very easy through smartphone apps such as Grindr and Scruff. They are a form of social relaxation and provide access to the safety of tribe membership in a homophobic world. The drugs used at these parties are chiefly  $\gamma$ -hydroxybutyrate (GHB) and  $\gamma$ -butyrolactone (GBL), or G, crystallised methamphetamine, and mephedrone. But some participants find themselves drawn increasingly into compulsive sexual and self-medicating behaviours, exposing themselves to health risks that are both physical and mental.

As with anti-smoking adverts that are designed to discourage smoking,

London's leading sex clinic 56 Dean Street is heavily in the film. It shows how internalised homophobia that he and other men experience with. "There is no need to be a gay man" is a common refrain. It is about learning to hide one's sexuality and gender minority status early and often. The nature. Until you get used to your feelings, sex and desire, they can make them go away.

"...*Chemsex* is a truly important film"

But submitting to altering chemicals can make the use

## Perspectives

### THE LANCET Infectious Diseases

MEDIA WATCH | FILM | VOLUME 16, ISSUE 4, P419, APRIL 01, 2016

## Chemsex and the city

Andrew Bianchi

Published: April, 2016 • DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(16\)00135-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(16)00135-3)

... fuelling urban HIV epidemics, AIDS experts warn

World

## Gay 'chemsex' is fuelling urban HIV epidemics, AIDS experts warn



# The Rush to Risk

*“While public health has made important contributions to establishing the link between methamphetamine use and sexual risk-taking, the precise nature of the relationship is not well defined. **This creates space for ungrounded assumptions about methamphetamine use to take hold.**”*

Bryant J, Hopwood M, Dowsett GW, Aggleton P, Holt M, Lea T, et al. The rush to risk when interrogating the relationship between methamphetamine use and sexual practice among gay and bisexual men. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2018;55:242-8.

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# The Rush to Risk

Why do people engage in sexualized drug use?

Enhanced and extended sexual gratification and pleasure

Freedom and confidence to explore sexual fantasies

Pride and empowerment

Beauty and social power

Social and sexual lubricant

Community identity and culture

Coping mechanism

Newland, J., and A. Kelly-Hanku. "A qualitative scoping review of sexualised drug use (including Chemsex) of men who have sex with men and transgender women in Asia." Retrieved from <https://www.aidsdatahub.org/sites/default/files/resource/apcom-qualitative-scoping-review-sexualised-drug-use-including-chemsex-2021.pdf> (2021).



# A Sense of Peace

*“It just feels like, for that moment, you don't have to think about any other things. And your mind is just clear. I won't be bothered, at that moment, by the things that are bothering me or over things that I need to do.”*

Coping  
mechanism

Tan, R. K. J., Phua, K., Tan, A., Gan, D. C. J., Ho, L. P. P., Ong, E. J., & See, M. Y. (2021). Exploring the role of trauma in underpinning sexualised drug use ('chemsex') among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men in Singapore. *The International journal on drug policy*, 97, 103333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103333>

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# Sexual Enhancement

*“You can go on longer. The experiences are much better. You get to meet more people in shorter amount of time. People tend to get crazier when they are using and crazy was probably the experience that I wanted, that I was searching for [...] the enhancement, the physical sensations, pushing the human physical limits.”*

Enhanced and extended sexual gratification and pleasure

Freedom and confidence to explore sexual fantasies

Tan, R. K. J., Phua, K., Tan, A., Gan, D. C. J., Ho, L. P. P., Ong, E. J., & See, M. Y. (2021). Exploring the role of trauma in underpinning sexualised drug use ('chemsex') among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men in Singapore. *The International journal on drug policy*, 97, 103333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103333>



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**“The only place where I could be myself”**

*“As a chem user, when I got diagnosed [with HIV], it only led me to being much more underground. It was already difficult. It [drug use] does really feel liberating. When I got positive, it became like a... I won't say it's a need, but it [drug use] became the only place where I could be myself.”*

Community  
identity and  
culture

Coping  
mechanism

Tan, R. K. J., Phua, K., Tan, A., Gan, D. C. J., Ho, L. P. P., Ong, E. J., & See, M. Y. (2021). Exploring the role of trauma in underpinning sexualised drug use ('chemsex') among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men in Singapore. *The International journal on drug policy*, 97, 103333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103333>



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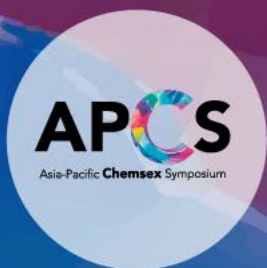


# Love and Intimacy

*“During the session, he was kind of talking about love and everything. And, and so, I think at that moment I thought it was something emotional, some emotional attachment [...] I enjoyed the experience. I think I did enjoy the experience as it was, I can remember now thinking that was the best sex I ever had.”*

Enhanced and extended sexual gratification and pleasure

Tan, R. K. J., Phua, K., Tan, A., Gan, D. C. J., Ho, L. P. P., Ong, E. J., & See, M. Y. (2021). Exploring the role of trauma in underpinning sexualised drug use ('chemsex') among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men in Singapore. *The International journal on drug policy*, 97, 103333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103333>



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# Instead of The Rush to Risk..

We need to acknowledge non-problematic use

Reframing the role of drugs in sexual behaviors

Moving beyond biomedical forms of understanding

# A Pleasure-Centered Approach

“Sexual pleasure is the **physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment** derived from solitary or shared erotic experiences, including thoughts, dreams and autoeroticism.

Self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations are key enabling factors for pleasure to contribute to sexual health and wellbeing.

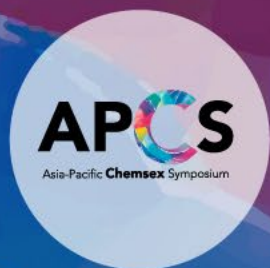
Sexual pleasure should be exercised within the **context of sexual rights**, particularly the rights to equality and non-discrimination, autonomy and bodily integrity, the right to the highest attainable standard of health and freedom of expression.

The experiences of human sexual pleasure are **diverse** and sexual rights ensure that pleasure is a positive experience for all concerned and not obtained by violating other people’s human rights and wellbeing.”

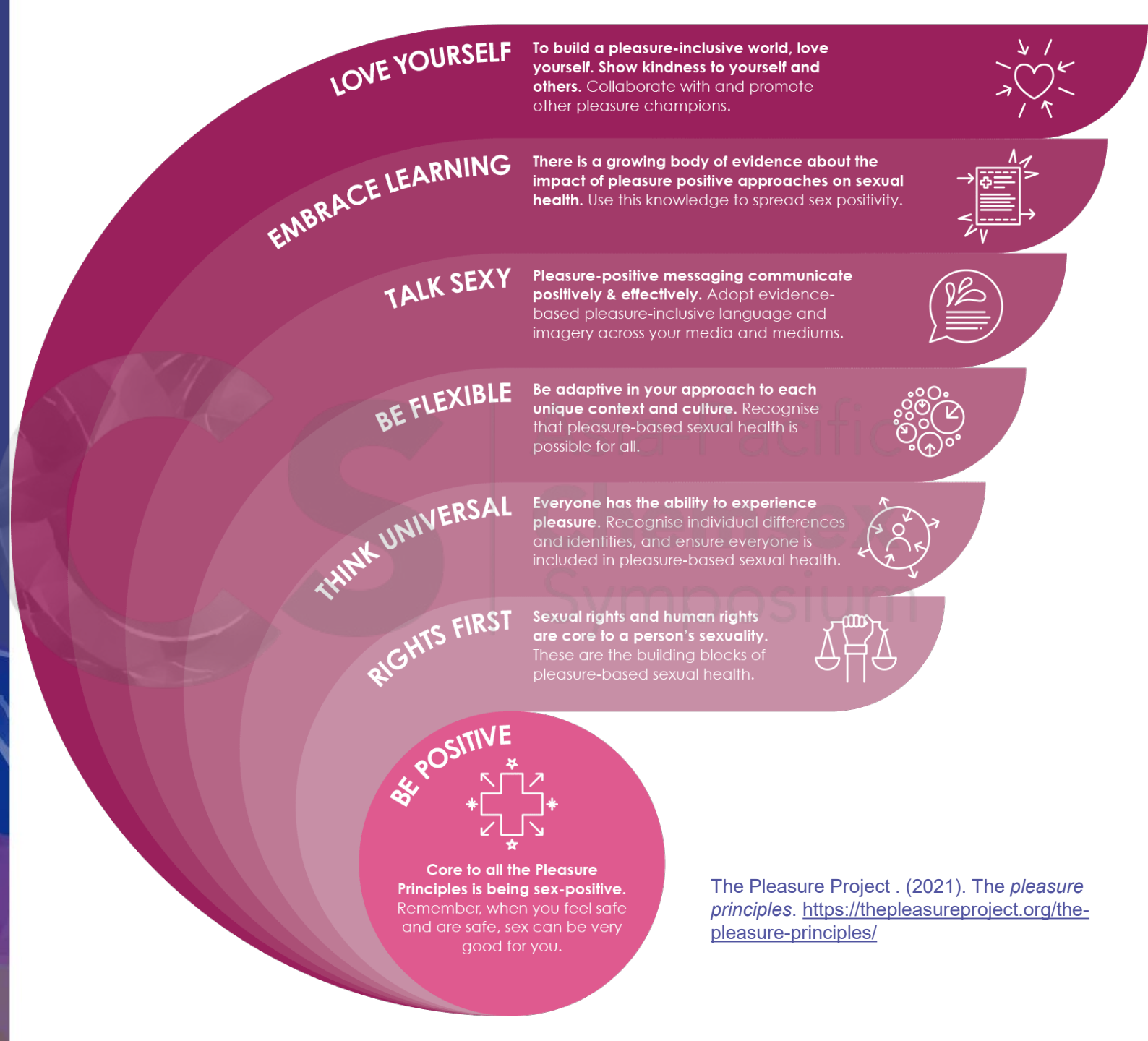
- Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing (2016)

Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing. Working definition of sexual pleasure. [Internet]. 2016. Available from: <http://www.gab-shw.org/our-work/working-definition-of-sexual-pleasure/>

# The Pleasure Project: Pleasure Principles



Pleasures  
Policies  
Possibilities



## LOVE YOURSELF

To build a pleasure-inclusive world, love yourself. Show kindness to yourself and others. Collaborate with and promote other pleasure champions.



## EMBRACE LEARNING

There is a growing body of evidence about the impact of pleasure positive approaches on sexual health. Use this knowledge to spread sex positivity.



## TALK SEXY

Pleasure-positive messaging communicate positively & effectively. Adopt evidence-based pleasure-inclusive language and imagery across your media and mediums.



## BE FLEXIBLE

Be adaptive in your approach to each unique context and culture. Recognise that pleasure-based sexual health is possible for all.



## THINK UNIVERSAL

Everyone has the ability to experience pleasure. Recognise individual differences and identities, and ensure everyone is included in pleasure-based sexual health.



## RIGHTS FIRST

Sexual rights and human rights are core to a person's sexuality. These are the building blocks of pleasure-based sexual health.



## BE POSITIVE



Core to all the Pleasure Principles is being sex-positive. Remember, when you feel safe and are safe, sex can be very good for you.

The Pleasure Project . (2021). The *pleasure principles*. <https://thepleasureproject.org/the-pleasure-principles/>

# A Pleasure-Centered Approach

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## What is the added value of incorporating pleasure in sexual health interventions? A systematic review and meta-analysis

Mirela Zaneva<sup>1</sup>, Anne Philpott<sup>2\*</sup>, Arushi Singh<sup>2</sup>, Gerda Larsson<sup>3</sup>, Lianne Gonsalves<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom, <sup>2</sup> The Pleasure Project, United Kingdom and India, <sup>3</sup> The Case for Her, Stockholm, Sweden, <sup>4</sup> UNDP-UNFPA-UNICEF-WHO-World Bank Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (HRP), Department of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Research, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

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Zaneva, M., Philpott, A., Singh, A., Larsson, G., & Gonsalves, L. (2022). What is the added value of incorporating pleasure in sexual health interventions? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS one*, 17(2), e0261034. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261034>

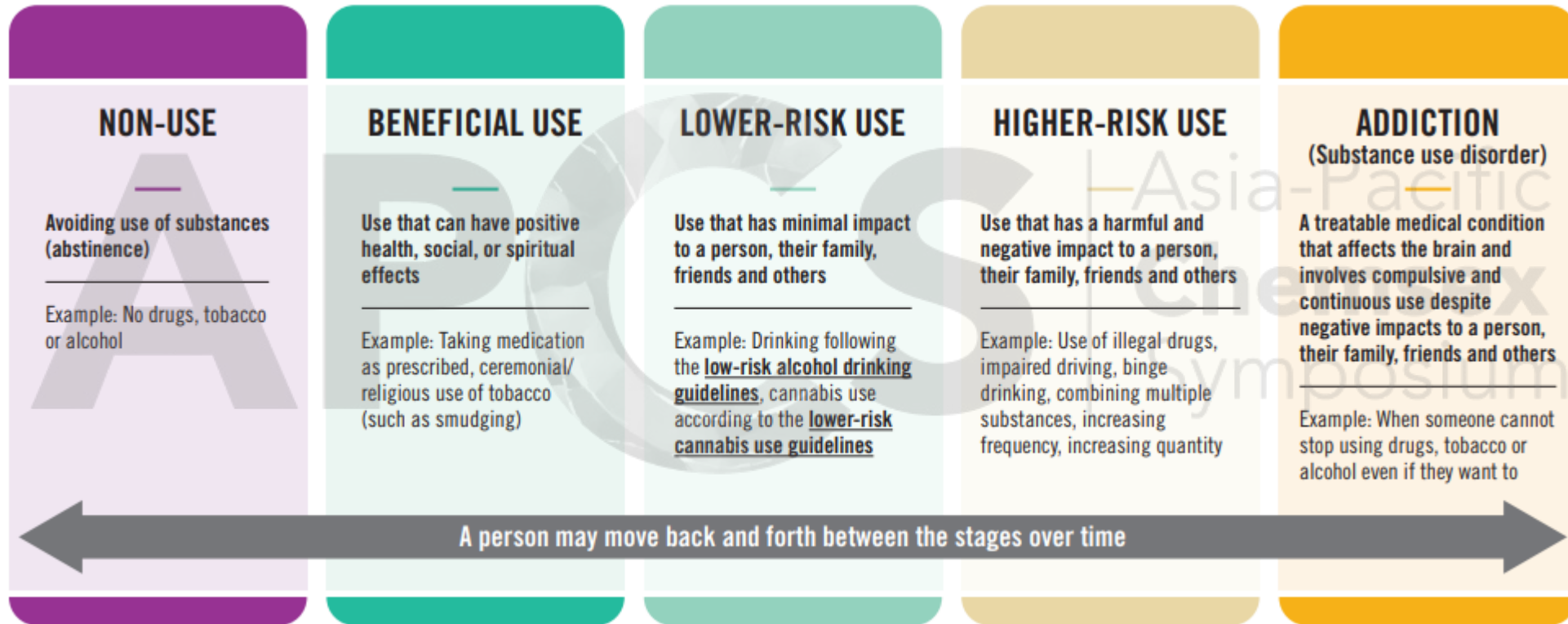
## Quantitative findings

- Interventions that incorporate pleasure show improved condom use outcomes

## Qualitative findings

- Positive effects on informational and knowledge-based attitudes to sexual health

# A Pleasure-Centered Approach: Flipping the Script on Chemsex

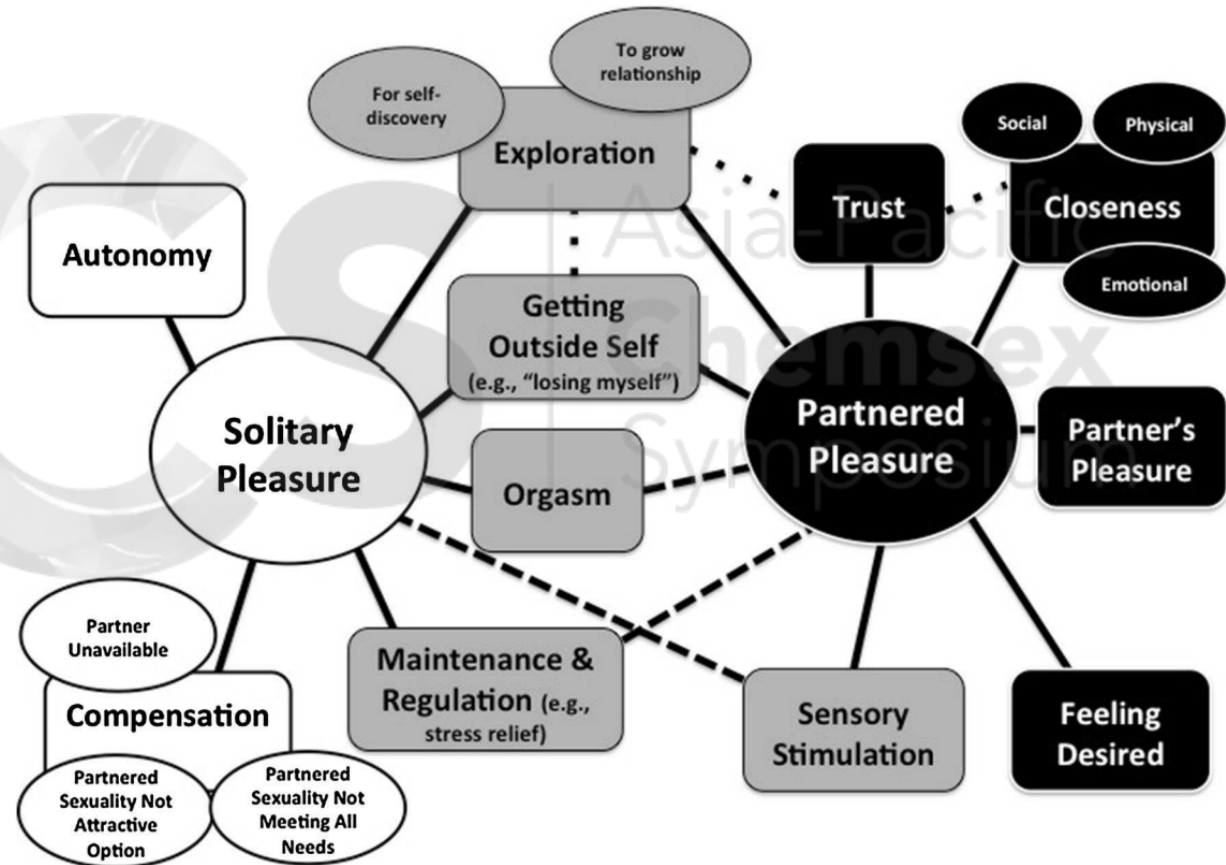


Government of Canada (2022). Substance use spectrum. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/substance-use-spectrum-infographic.html>

# A Pleasure-Centered Approach: Flipping the Script on Chemsex

Sexual pleasure is **highly multifaceted**, encompassing:

- physical experiences
- cognitive experiences
- emotional experiences
- experiences that challenge mind-body dualism



Goldey, K. L., Posh, A. R., Bell, S. N., & van Anders, S. M. (2016). Defining pleasure: A focus group study of solitary and partnered sexual pleasure in queer and heterosexual women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(8), 2137–2154. 10.1007/s10508-016-0704-8

# A Pleasure-Centered Approach: Flipping the Script on Chemsex

Avoid using limiting or deterministic language (e.g. "Addict")

Do not assume that everyone who engages in chemsex needs to stop doing it

Embrace the diversity of consensual sexual practices relating to chemsex

Understanding the nature of consent in the context of chemsex

Understanding the values, motivations, desires that underpin chemsex



# A Pleasure-Centered Approach: Flipping the Script on Chemsex (HOW)

Honesty

Open-  
mindedness

Willingness

# Thank you!

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