

Framing the concepts: Agency, pleasure, and choices

Ben Collins, ReShape, London, UK
Agency, pleasure, and choices in chemsex workshop
2024 Asia Pacific Chemsex Symposium
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Possibilities

HIV Partnerships IHP



Scan me!

Our purpose in the workshop

To work with you to ensure people impacted by chemsex experience more pleasure in their lives. We'll look at peoples' experiences in chemsex and ask you to encourage their agency-choice-making as essential elements in the pursuit of pleasure.

My purpose in the workshop

To frame the concepts of agency-choice-making as they relate to pleasure

How do we want to look at them?

Asia-Pacific
Chemsex
Symposium

How do we talk about agency and choice-making to enhance pleasure?

As harm reductionists? As preventionists? As clinicians or service providers? From a drugs perspective or an HIV perspective? As therapists or service workers? As people engaging in chemsex? From a sexual health point of view? From a global perspective as fellow humans?

“Integrating the *strengths* of social determinants of health, harm reduction, and trauma-informed care approaches can address their *limitations*.”

– Austin O’Carroll, clinical lead for the Dublin Covid-19 homeless response

Syndemics

Syndemics refer to the interconnection of two or more health-related issues that cluster within a population and interact in ways that intensify the overall disease burden. The term combines "synergy" and "epidemics," highlighting how these health problems are not merely co-occurring but are influenced by shared social, economic, and environmental factors.

- SAVA – substance (ab)use, violence, AIDS
- Chemsex and mental health
- Chemsex, anti-gay and HIV stigma, minority stress, intraminority stress

Is there an association between chemsex and neurodivergence?

- Neurodivergence (or neurodiversity) is a non-medical umbrella term describing individuals whose brains function differently from the majority. This includes conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, and Dyspraxia. Diverse expressions but often characterised by hyperfocus, detail orientation, sensory sensitivity, nonlinear thinking, fixations, and challenges to social interaction.
- There is an association between neurodivergence and LGBTQ+ identities that is stronger than the general population.
- There seems to be an even stronger association between neurodivergence and chemsex use

HIV, HCV, STIs and mental health

Mental health and HIV/AIDS The need for an integrated response

AIDS editorial review, 15 July 2019

“Tremendous biomedical advancements in HIV prevention and treatment have led to aspirational efforts to end the HIV epidemic. However, this goal will not be achieved without addressing the significant mental health and substance use problems among people living with HIV (PLWH) and people vulnerable to acquiring HIV.

These problems exacerbate the many social and economic barriers to accessing adequate and sustained healthcare and are among the most challenging barriers to achieving the end of the HIV epidemic. Rates of mental health problems are higher among both people vulnerable to acquiring HIV and PLWH, compared with the general population.”

Beliefs among some people living with HIV and people vulnerable to acquiring HIV

“I was fine until I became HIV+” or “I’ll be fine unless I catch HIV”

However, there is ample evidence that marginalised populations, including people living with HIV and people vulnerable to acquiring HIV, experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, problematic substance use, neurodivergence, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

My own experience in the 1980’s

An HIV diagnosis is, too often, an underdiagnosis.

Living in syndemics

Much of what I've shared – about syndemics, neurodivergence, adverse childhood experiences, the mental health issues that make us “available” to HIV infection – is not openly discussed in our communities and our community organisations.

I understand why. I've found it very difficult to access agency-choice-making in pursuit of pleasure. I've found it quite challenging to describe what it's like living inside these syndemics. However, that knowledge is power.

In a confusing world, there's a logic to being confused and an important logic to striving to understand our shared situations better.

As we approach pleasure, policies, and possibilities, let's try to develop an open, collaborative point of view, building upon each other's experience and knowledge, being mindful that we're not talking, in general, about these issues but in the context of syndemic situations which, if not addressed, can increase harm.

Pleasures

Thank you for your engagement!

Thanks to the APCS 2024 Team

Thanks to all those who have moved chemsex response forward.

Special thanks to David Stuart, a former ReShape partner, and my ReShape colleagues Nia Dunbar, Charlie Dunbar–Aldred, Yasir Ali Khan, Georges Azzi and our Partners, many of whom are in the room and attending the symposium.

Possibilities

