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## The Changing Face of Meth

Through my many years as a clinician in behavioral health, I have met many people of all races, socioeconomic status and gender who have experienced a methamphetamine (meth) addiction. When I first learned about meth, I thought it was a poor person's disease, reserved only for street people or the homeless. However, the people I have met look like you and me. The exception is that their substance abuse and co-occurring mental health disorders (i.e. anxiety and depression) have led them down a spiral staircase of street drugs, lost values, and money to a lonely existence fueled by meth to keep them up and going.

As the lyrics from Third Eye Blind's seminal hit song *Semi-Charmed Life* says, "smiling in the pictures you would take, doing crystal meth will lift you up until you break." In other words, what starts out as an incredible pleasure ends like a shattered glass, broken and scattered.

Today, methamphetamine is a multibillion dollar drug that, like cocaine, has made its way from rural and poor segments of the country to become the drug of choice for white collar folks. Meth has reached across socio-economic status, race and gender. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), an online resource for substance abuse and addiction treatment, reports that 1.2 million Americans used meth in 2012. And as of 2013, 12.3 million Americans reported using meth in their lifetime.

The use of the drug has developed over time. NIDA outlines the history of meth, starting with an earlier form of the drug - *amphetamine* - first synthesized by German pharmacologist L. Edeleono at the turn of the 20th century. Years later, Japan created a chemically altered form of the drug - more potent and powerful - called *methamphetamine*. The United States government, which has labeled meth a schedule 2 drug because it has little medical use and a high potential for abuse, explains that meth acts as a

powerful central nervous system stimulant. It floods the brain and spinal cord with a natural chemical in your body called dopamine, a neurotransmitter that interacts in the synapses between neurons, giving the user immense pleasure.

It didn't take long for the drug's powerful stimulating effects - sustained energy lasting 6-12 hours and positive sense of well-being - to be used in questionable ways. During WWII, Germany, Japan and the U.S. distributed meth to their soldiers because the drug's energizing and antidepressant properties treated battle fatigue. In fact, reports revealed that Japanese kamikaze pilots - essentially suicide bombers - used the drug to complete their fatal missions.

Once meth got into the hands of the drug trade in America, it took root in rural and poor areas. Abusers of the drug often experiment with alcohol, cocaine or opioids, and progress to meth because it is widely available and cheap to produce and purchase. And meth's highly addictive qualities - 99% of users get hooked according to the *Drugs, Inc.* documentary on meth - make it difficult to break the habit. The drug slowly spread beyond rural areas, reports NIDA, catching wind with the Hippie movement and psychedelic drug craze of the 1960s before becoming officially criminalized by the U.S. Congress in 1971.

In recent years, meth has found itself in the company of tech giants like Facebook, Google and Apple. Now a resident of Silicon Valley, meth has eclipsed cocaine in distribution and revenue. In *Drugs, Inc.*, a documentary-style show about the drug trade (produced by National Geographic and streaming on Netflix), a recent episode shows how cocaine, once the stalwart of white collar professionals, lost its foothold because of DEA crackdowns and Latin American drug cartels' control of the drug. The drug cartels, situated in Mexico, Columbia, and other Latin countries, must smuggle cocaine across the U.S. border and transport it nearly 500 miles up the California coast. With border control and transportation difficulties, costs have gone up, making way for a cheaper and more readily available drug: meth.

Meth boasts cheap prices, local distribution, highly addictive qualities, and energizing effects. The drug has bargain basement prices because of its split into two markets: one by cartels in “super labs” out of Mexico and the other by average Joes in small makeshift meth labs. Walter White’s RV meth lab in the first season of the hit TV series *Breaking Bad* mirrors the local meth labs that have sprouted up in Silicon Valley.

Dylan Matthews writes in the *Washington Post* how these local meth labs keep costs low because they have easy access to the chemicals needed to produce the drug, it is made in small batches, and they can set up shop pretty much anywhere. This makes it difficult for law enforcement to track portable and elusive meth cookers. And because the localized market stays out of the way of the large drug cartels, they dodge the violence that comes with it.

Finally, the meth market appeals to its customer base in the tech bubble. Computer programmers, software engineers and other white collar IT professionals accustomed to long work hours and juggling multiple projects turn to meth to keep them focused and awake. In essence, meth has become the occupational necessity of the digital work age.

Meth, however, is not new to the gay community. In gay circles, the drug is often used as a “party” drug whereby users partake in the drug’s euphoric properties to engage in prolonged sexual experiences, including risky behaviors like unprotected and group sex. Researchers suspect this behavior has facilitated the spread of HIV. Although there is not a proven direct link between meth use and HIV, the Los Angeles LGBT Center, a health and resource center for the gay community, reports data collected from their patients that gay men who had used meth within the previous 12 months were five times more likely to test positive for HIV than those who did not use meth. Moreover, meth is so pervasive that 71% of gay and bisexual men who were surveyed said they have been asked to try crystal meth.

And with the ubiquity of social media and cellphones, meth has found a new conduit for distribution. Gay men have been reported using hook-up apps (i.e. Grindr, Scruff, Hornet) to sell and purchase “Tina,” the slang word used for meth. The spread of meth through hook-up apps has seen an increase of

users in prominent gay neighborhoods like West Hollywood in Los Angeles. As such, meth's psychological addictive qualities and negative physiological effects on the body (i.e. dry mouth, tooth decay, gum disease) can devastate whole communities like these. The issue reached a boiling point when the mayor of West Hollywood, city manager and three city council members contacted the founder and CEO of hook-up app Grindr about it facilitating the illegal sales of meth and requesting the company look at its policies and procedures, according to an article in WeHoVille in October 2016.

With changes in the way gay men access meth, we are also seeing it cross racial lines to Black and Hispanic gay men. "In the early days, 85 to 90 percent of [group therapy program] participants were white. Now most are Black or Hispanic," says addiction specialist Joseph Ruggiero who founded the first recovery program for gay and bisexual men in NYC, according to the New York Times.

For lower income and rural segments of the country, a turbulent economic climate draws people to meth for its pick-me-up and energizing qualities. The Washington Post cites the Center for Disease Control (CDC), noting that some meth users rely on it to get "increased energy to work multiple jobs." Blue collar workers typically take on many jobs feeling the pinch of strained industries. And the impact of multiple menial jobs can create occupational stressors - long work hours, constant time pressures, harsh work conditions depending on vocation - which can take a toll on the mental health and well-being of working class professionals. For example, according to a study titled "Occupational Stressors and the Mental Health of Truckers," 88.1% of the truckers interviewed for the study reported using drugs to combat fatigue and stress associated with the pressures of their job. "You know, drugs come along with it. I ain't met a trucker yet that don't do drugs," said one trucker interviewed for the study.

With some work drying up altogether and America's economy shifting toward service-based work in the wake of the Great Recession, the Washington Post sums up the issue with a theory that "the rise of meth coincided with the rise of low-paying, low-skilled service work, where people had to work multiple

menial jobs to earn the same amount they used to earn in one manufacturing job, or other good-paying low-skilled position.”

Because of the change in the economic landscape, there’s been a spike in women’s use of meth, too. Working mothers rely on a strong stimulant like meth to juggle their sundry responsibilities. A paper published by the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists writes that pregnant women who use meth are at particularly high risk of passing on developmental problems to their child. Pregnant women who use meth frequently also use tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, further compounding problems that can develop during pregnancy. Additionally, women who find themselves homeless are afraid to sleep because of the dangers of being out on the street. Meth keeps them up and alert throughout the night, acting as their sense of security. This is also true for woman who may have been thrown into the sex trade business.

The behavioral health industry has responded with new programs to curb meth’s deleterious effects on urban and rural communities. In addition to group therapy programs like the one started by Joseph Ruggiero in NYC, the LGBT Center in Los Angeles offers several substance abuse recovery services including 12-step groups, individual therapy, and a free meth recovery program called “Methology.” For gay communities, most major cities offer some sort of health clinic or resource to find help if you or a loved one is experiencing meth addiction. Additionally, treatment centers offer gender-specific treatment programs tailored to the specific population in need of help.

Online resources are a great source of guidance and help. Tweaker.org is a website that removes judgment and shame associated with substance abuse and gives detailed information about crystal meth, the drug’s physiological effects on the body, user stories, and additional resources. Lastly, under the Affordable Care Act, health coverage is available to help meth users find treatment and recovery. Visit your state’s online health coverage exchange to get enrolled if you have not already. Recovery is possible when communities work together to build up our citizens.