

# ! OPINION

## Grindr, chemsex and self-esteem

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**Recently, I was invited to contribute as a featured speaker to the Let's Talk About Gay Sex and Drugs open-mic event at Ku Bar in Soho.** The theme of the event was 'control', which was defined broadly to include all forms of control that we may or may not have over ourselves, others and the events that surround our lives. I decided to focus on self-control and approach this from the perspective of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

By self-esteem I mean your sense of self-worth, that is, feeling good about yourself and feeling that other people value you. Homophobic prejudice, which can lead to internalised homophobia, can severely undermine our sense of self-esteem.

By self-efficacy, I am referring to the feeling that you can do things that matter to you and that you can stop doing the things that you think are bad for you. There are events that can cause you to question your self-efficacy, such as the desire but inability to leave the 'chemsex' scene.

### Addiction and sexual risk-taking

**We can become addicted to many things – some seemingly trivial, others discernibly more serious.** I'd like to focus on just two sources of addiction that some gay men experience: Grindr and 'chemsex'.

There are of course some clear advantages associated with using Grindr. The geospatial element of

Grindr means that gay men can meet other gay men in their geographical vicinity. This way of meeting may be perceived as 'safer' than others, such as cruising. However, in small-scale research that I've conducted on gay men's experiences of using Grindr, I have found that some feel that they are unable to limit their use of Grindr and that their 'excessive' use of the app can induce a poor self-image:

"Sometimes I end up falling asleep with it [Grindr] open on my phone and I wake up thinking I should really get a life. I feel like an idiot." (Mike, 28)

"I do think it's [Grindr] taking over my life a bit... You're watching a film on Netflix and you go 'I'll just check my messages' and then you're on until like 4 in the morning, just chatting

and chatting and trying to hook up. It feels like a massive waste of time sometimes, but I'm hooked." (Peter, 22)

Many individuals outline how their Grindr use has taken over their social lives. One interviewee described a holiday abroad during which he reported spending an entire day in his hotel room connected to the hotel's Wi-Fi so that he could use Grindr:

"I've spent the whole day in my holiday room just looking for a hook-up when I could have been actually talking in a human way and exploring the place and what have you." (Kumar, 30)

Grindr use can encroach on valuable face-to-face social time with friends and family, as some individuals feel that they are constantly glued to their mobile devices in pursuit of a sexual encounter that, in many cases, they never even find. Some individuals reported feeling bad about themselves because they spent so much time on the app, and simply felt unable to limit their use of it despite wanting to. Their self-esteem and self-efficacy were constantly threatened by their excessive use of Grindr.

Chemsex is another addiction for some gay men living in London (and indeed in other UK and European cities). A recent chemsex documentary clearly demonstrated the debilitating effects that this practice can have on people's lives. The Chemsex Study published in 2014 provides some valuable insights into the reasons why some gay men are so drawn to the practice of chemsex. Some gay men felt that the substances used in chemsex sessions could enhance sexual self-confidence and reduce inhibitions, enabling them to engage in practices they may not feel comfortable with in sober settings.

Many of the interviewees felt that chemsex could facilitate sexual desire/libido, intimacy, sexual connection and sense of sexual adventure. When such needs are perceived as being met in the chemsex context, some individuals may essentially 'forget' what it is like to have sex outside of this context. This, coupled with the use of addictive substances, can lead to both a physical and psychological reliance on the practice of chemsex. Clearly, this can encroach upon other

dimensions of one's life, including work responsibilities, relations with other people, and physical and psychological health, as has been described in a previous article in FS.

Of course, many gay men use Grindr and engage in chemsex without showing any signs of addiction. In other words, they have the ability to control their behaviours and do not view them as encroaching on other dimensions of their lives, but this is not the case for everyone.

## Sexual risk-taking and HIV prevention

**HIV disproportionately affects the gay community – according to Public Health England's HIV data, gay and bisexual men made up 43% of people living with HIV and 57% of new diagnoses in 2014.**

Both self-esteem and self-efficacy seem to be key factors in sexual risk-taking. We know that most

gay men use condoms some of the time, but many do not use them consistently. The ability to negotiate condom use with one's sexual partners is key to HIV prevention. However, some gay men lack self-efficacy, that is the sense of control and competence that is required to negotiate

condom use, and they may feel pressured into having condomless sex by their partner. In my research into negotiating condom use, I've had gay men tell me that they often feel disempowered in sexual situations. Why? I would argue that a lack of self-efficacy is a key explanation.

"Sometimes I'm just there waiting for him to pull out a condom and if he doesn't, I can't bring myself to sort of say 'no, we've got to do this'." (Mark, 23)

"I haven't got the confidence to even take a condom out, let alone tell him put it on. It's a confidence thing." (Simon, 26)

Self-esteem is also important. For instance, compulsive sexual behaviours (or 'sex addiction') can stem from decreased self-esteem. A sexual encounter (even with 'no strings attached') can make some people feel attractive, valued or loved, even if for a short period of time:

"Having sex was more than just

having sex for me. I finally felt like guys actually wanted me so I gave in. I felt ugly before that and now guys wanted me." (Richard, 27)

"It sounds stupid but each time I got fucked, I thought this was the start of a love story. How wrong was I?" (Alex, 25)

The transient boosts to self-esteem that casual sexual encounters can sometimes provide could lead some gay men to seek such encounters more frequently and to neglect safer sex practices in the process. Some people may simply go along with their sexual partner's desire not to use condoms. In other words, the priority is to have sex and to derive self-esteem, rather than to think about HIV or to negotiate condom use.

## Possible ways forward

**Not everyone who uses Grindr or who engages in chemsex is necessarily addicted.**

But many gay men are, and for some, this addiction is having a profoundly negative impact on their lives. Similarly, not everyone engages in sexual risk-taking but some gay men do and are therefore at high risk of HIV exposure. Addiction and sexual risk-taking are important issues and ones that I believe we as a community should try to engage with.

We need to build our self-esteem and self-efficacy to ensure that we lead fulfilling lives. We need to discuss these issues in a frank and candid manner. When people acknowledge problems, they are more likely to begin the process of dealing with them.

We need to bring groups and individuals together, which incidentally is one of the reasons that I find events like the Let's Talk About Gay Sex And Drugs so beneficial for the gay community. When people come together and talk, silence and stigma disappear.

Finally, we need to support one another by developing a more cohesive LGBT community that speaks out in favour of the issues that affect us. 🗣️

► For more information about chemsex, visit [www.gmfa.org.uk/saferchems](http://www.gmfa.org.uk/saferchems).

► For more information about mental health, visit [www.nhs.uk/mentalhealth](http://www.nhs.uk/mentalhealth).

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