

# The emerging phenomenon of Chemsex: new challenge to health policy

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*Photo: Giulio Maria Corbelli*

# Presentation plan

- What is Chemsex?
- How common is Chemsex?
- Potential harms
- Chemsex causes and possible explanations
- Successful response assumptions
- Useful tools: identification, screening, information & support tools

# What is Chemsex?

The term Chemsex refers to:

- The use of specific drugs
- Before or during sex
- By gay men, bisexual men and other MSM
- Often associated with hook-up apps use

Cathinones

Crystal methamphetamine

GHB/GBL

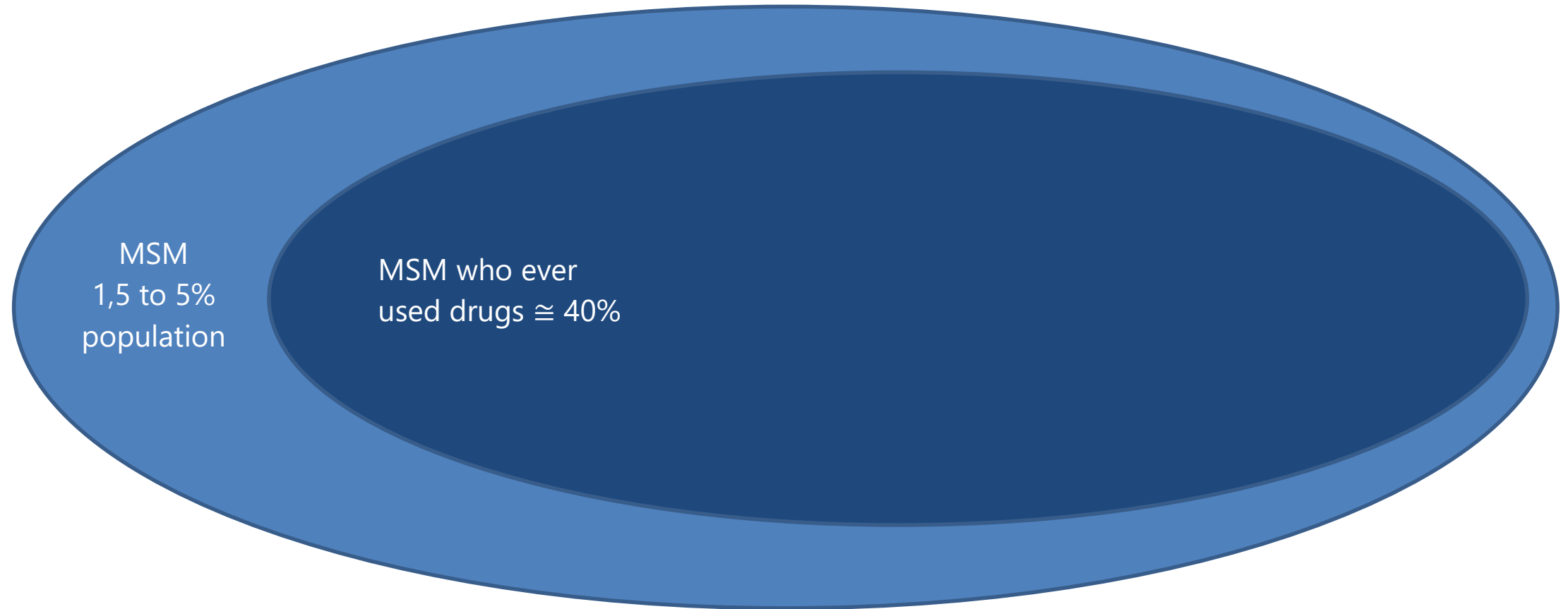
Other: ketamine, cocaine, crack, MDMA

- reduce boundaries
- make sex last longer
- make sex more intense

# Chemsex incidence among MSM in Cyprus

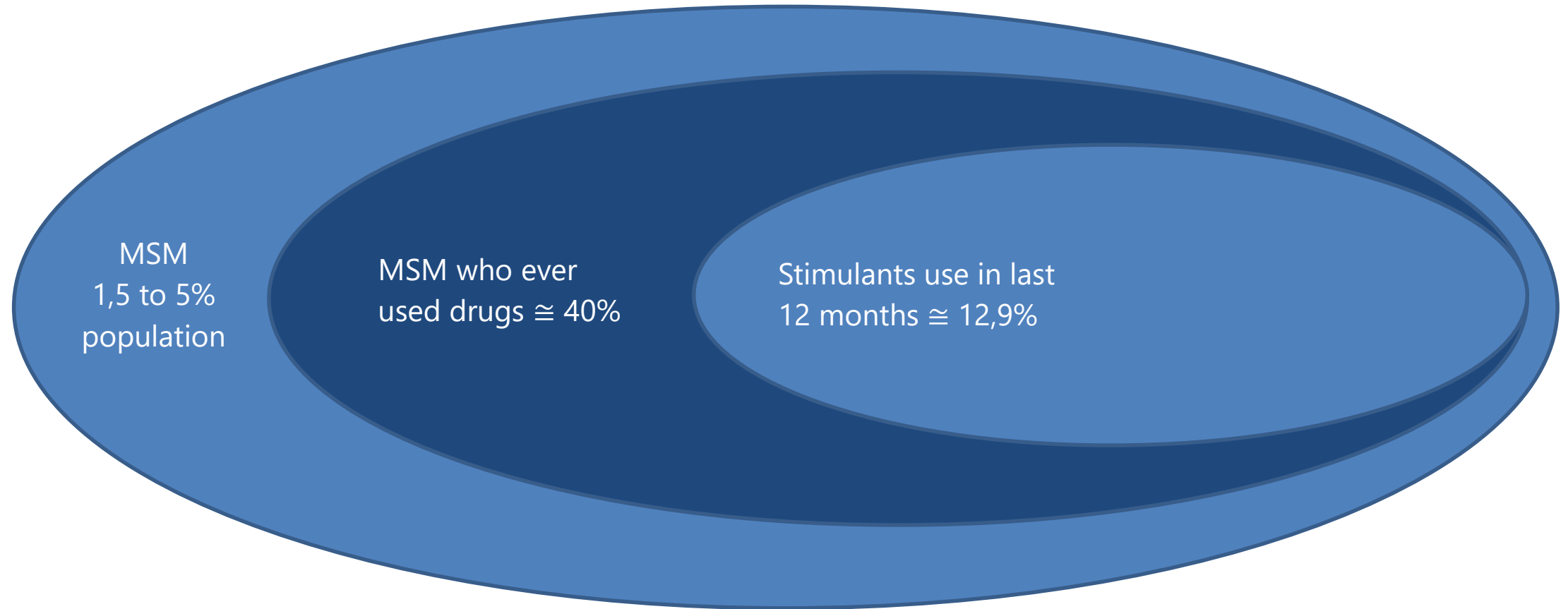
MSM  
1,5 to 5%  
population

# Chemsex incidence among MSM in Cyprus



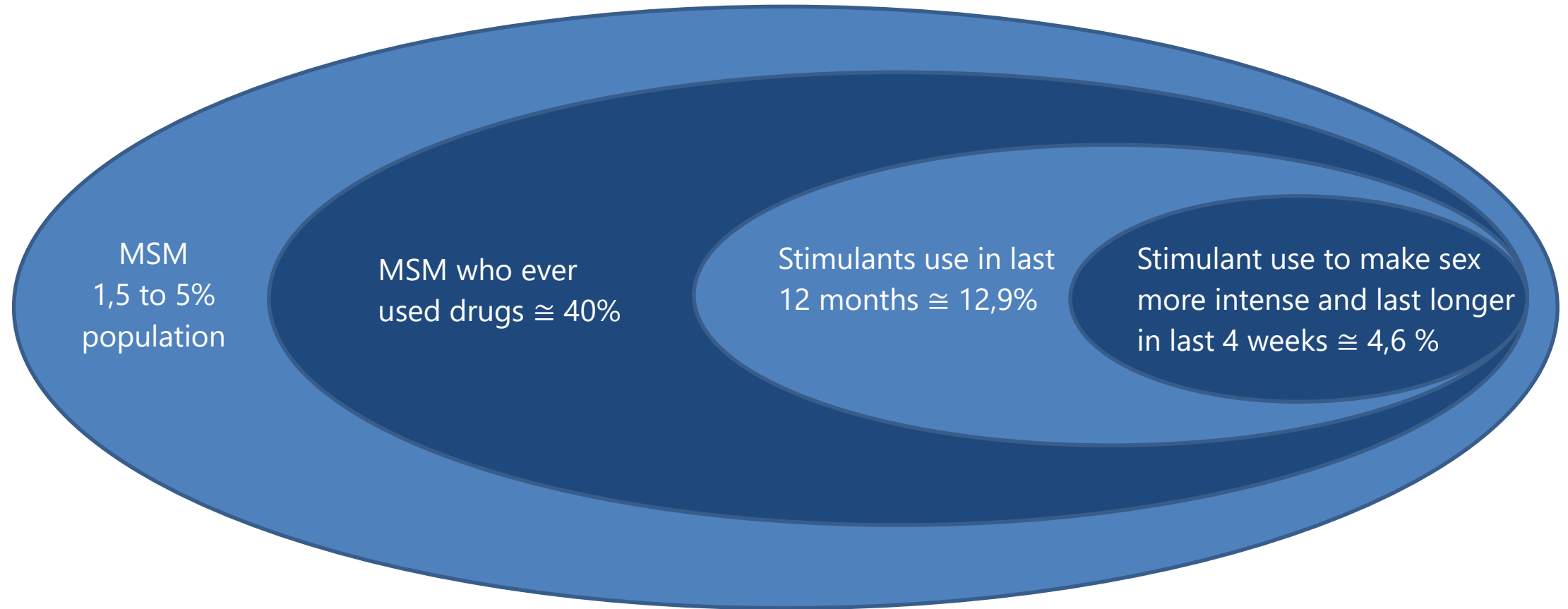
*The EMIS Network. EMIS-2017 – The European Men-Who-Have-Sex-With-Men Internet Survey. Key findings from 50 countries. Stockholm: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), 2019*

# Chemsex incidence among MSM in Cyprus



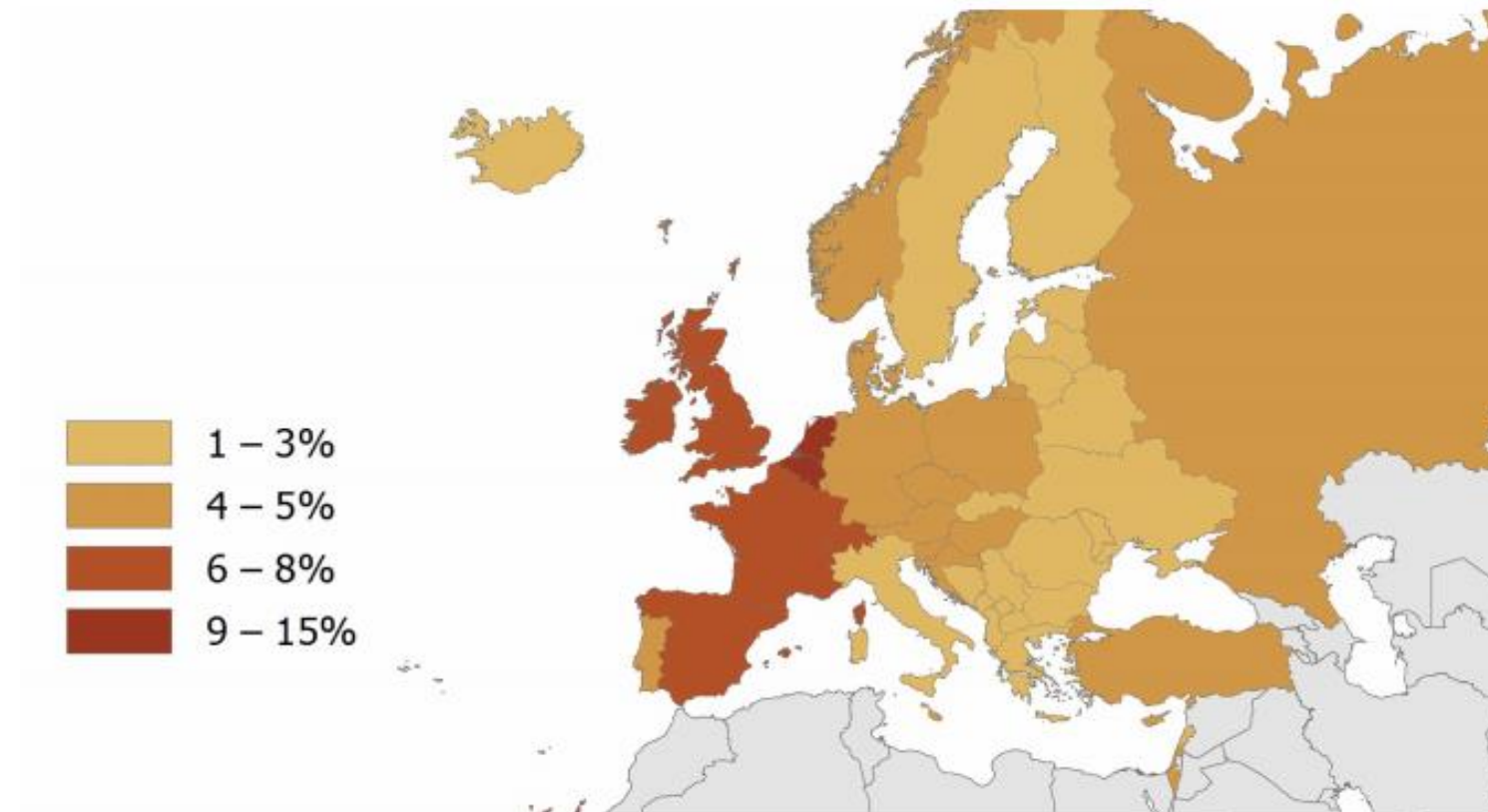
*The EMIS Network. EMIS-2017 – The European Men-Who-Have-Sex-With-Men Internet Survey. Key findings from 50 countries. Stockholm: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), 2019*

# Chemsex incidence among MSM in Cyprus



*The EMIS Network. EMIS-2017 – The European Men-Who-Have-Sex-With-Men Internet Survey. Key findings from 50 countries.  
Stockholm: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC); 2019*

# Stimulant drugs use to make sex more intense or last longer among MSM in last four weeks (N=126 258)



*The EMIS Network. EMIS-2017 – The European Men-Who-Have-Sex-With-Men Internet Survey. Key findings from 50 countries. Stockholm: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC); 2019*





Mephedrone is a stimulant drug in the form of a white powder that can be snorted, swallowed, injected (slammed) and injected in the arse with a syringe with the needle taken off (booty bump)



Crystal meth is a very powerful stimulant that can be smoked through a glass pipe and snorted. It can also be injected (slammed) and injected in the arse with a syringe with the needle taken off (booty bump).

## GHB/GBL



GBL (Gamma hydroxybutyrate) is an anaesthetic; GBL (Gamma butyrolactone) is closely related to GHB (pro-drug). GHB/GBL are water-like liquids, to be drunk with water or other soft drinks.

## Ketamine



Ketamine is a powder which is usually snorted, the effects usually last around 45-90 minutes. If injected or swallowed, effects can last for up to three hours.

# Potential harms related to Chemsex

- **Physical health:** overdose, sleeping problems, injecting sites injuries, sexual consent concerns, sexually transmitted infections, dependency
- **Mental health:** anxiety, paranoia, sexual and drug dependency, intimacy loss
- **Lost time:** long sessions (even for up to 4 days), difficulties in regulation how much time spent for partner search and chemsex, time for recovery
- **Employment and finance:** drug costs, missing work because of time needed for recovery, poor work productivity
- **Social life and relations:** focus on sexual activities, hobby, friends loss,
- **Gay community:** lack of care from community, isolation.

*A Bourne et al. The Chemsex Study: drug use in sexual settings among gay and bisexual men in Lambeth, Southwark & Lewisham.*

*D. Stuart, S. Collins, Methmephangee - ChemSex vs recreational drug use: a proposed definition for health workers. HIV Treatment Bulletin, Volume 16 Number 5/6, May/June 2015*

# Syndemic of Inequalities in gay, bisexual and other MSM (GBMSM) - explanations

## Lack of Limiting Factors Hypothesis

- LGBT people less likely to have children and therefore more likely to drink/take drugs into later life

## The Minority Stress Effect

- People from marginalised populations experience daily life stressors more commonly than those in dominant, majority groups

## Gay Social Geographies Hypothesis

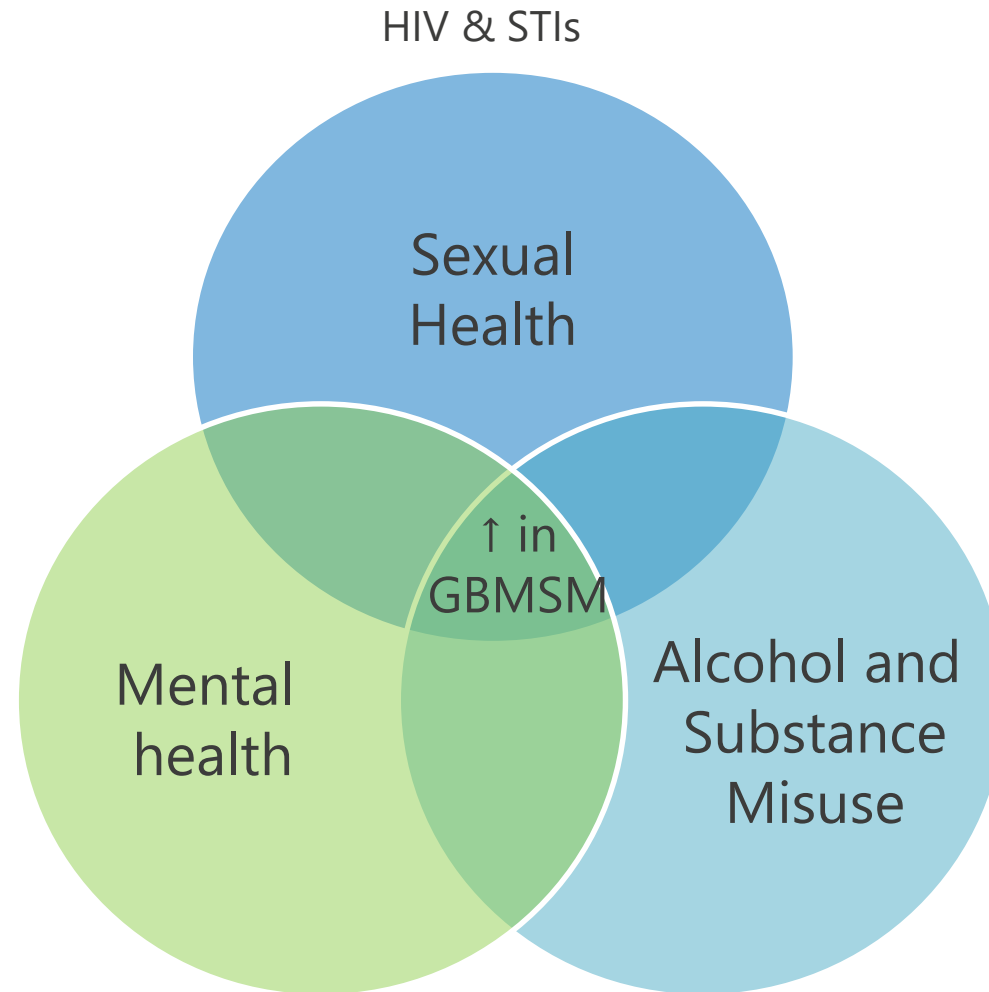
- Gay social and cultural associated with premises where alcohol is served and drugs are available

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*Bourne A. Marginalised and misunderstood? Substance use patterns and harms among LGBT populations, Sigma Research,*

*London: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2016.*

# Syndemic of Inequalities in gay, bisexual and other MSM (GBMSM)



2 x ↑ major depression  
2,5 x ↑ lifetime mental disorder  
6 x ↑ suicide attempt

*Draft Strategic framework GBMSM Public Health  
England, 2014*

2,4 x ↑ smoking  
2 x ↑ problematic alcohol use  
6 x ↑ drug use

*Mercer CH, et al. (Natsal-3), BMC public health*

# Syndemic of Inequalities in gay, bisexual and other MSM (GBMSM)

*"I've never been able to have gay sex sober. I've always been wracked with self hate, hate is the only word I can use about being gay. And then what happened was crystal, and I couldn't escape this cycle of guilt around drugs and then gay sex. It just goes backwards and forwards [...] It's so bound up with everything that's wrong with gay life for me. How can I explain that to someone who simply has no idea?"*

[Matt, 24 years old]

*Bourne A. Marginalised and misunderstood? Substance use patterns and harms among LGBT populations, Sigma Research, London: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2016.*

# Syndemic of Inequalities in gay, bisexual and other MSM (GBMSM)

## Ask yourself – what are your feelings?

- Your client is using drugs during sex
- Your client is having multiple sexual partners
- Your client had sex with 20 or 30 partners during the previous weekend
- Your client was receptive to each of these 20 or 30 partners
- He was fisted and engaged in other S&M activities

*Bourne A. Marginalised and misunderstood? Substance use patterns and harms among LGBT populations, Sigma Research, London: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2016.*

# Summary

- Chemsex is part of the gay community, although it affects mostly that minority
- Not every Chemsex is problematic: many gay men can manage to use drugs without big problems, but for a small minority of people it can become problematic
- Information is missing: the gay community can play a big role in promoting harm reduction strategies
- It is crucial to avoid any judgement: Chemsex users should feel welcomed within general services and gay groups, not excluded

# Successful response assumptions

- no stigma & judgment (e.g. related to sexual orientation, appearance, behaviour, HIV status)
- no obligation to maintain **abstinence** – every change appreciation
- focus on drug/NPS use, sexual impulse disorders/ sexual addiction and the use of dating apps **at the same time**
- key recovery factor: to increase control over sexual impulses as well as develop a new approach to sexual contacts/ relations and intimacy (again)

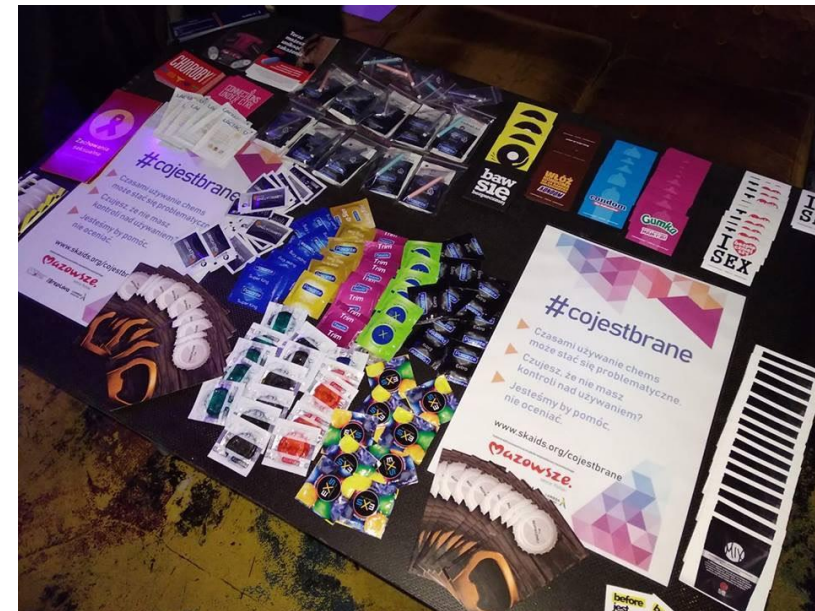


# Harm reduction

- in MSM venues, especially saunas, sex clubs, sex/ fetish events and by hook-up apps
- information on the drug use & sex risk reduction strategies, motivation to change
- injecting equipment, condoms & lubes distribution

## Sample question: What to do if someone overdosed GHB/GBL?

- a) give him a lot of coffee to drink
- b) place him in a recovery position and check his breathing several times an hour
- c) pray



# Chemsex users identification

Suggested screening questions:

- Have you ever used drugs/new drugs (NPS)? Which?
- If used stimulants and GHB: Have you ever had sex on it? Have you ever slam?

If had sex on drugs:

- When you had last sober sex?
- In the last year, what proportion of sober sex and sex on drugs you had?
- Do you like this proportion?
- Do you want to get any information how to use safer or where you can get help?

# Initial intervention

Useful tools:

- Links Su-Sex tool (Links between your Substance Use and your Sexual Health)
- ChemSex Care Plan (by David Stuart)
- DUDIT (Drug Use Disorders Identification Test)
- Friday/Monday service

# Links Su-Sex tool

Links Su-Sex tool (Links between your Substance Use and your Sexual Health), validated screening tool helping to identify links between substance use and sexual health carry risks and chemsex impact on sexual health; consist of 20 to 64 items; available in EN and FR.

## **Influence of your substance use on your ability to have safer sex practices related to HIV/STIs**

2. During the last ten times you had sex while buzzed, how many times did your substance use **influence** your ability to use safer sex practices to protect yourself or your partners against HIV and other STIs?

2.1. Number of times when it increased your ability?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2.2. Number of times when it reduced your ability?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

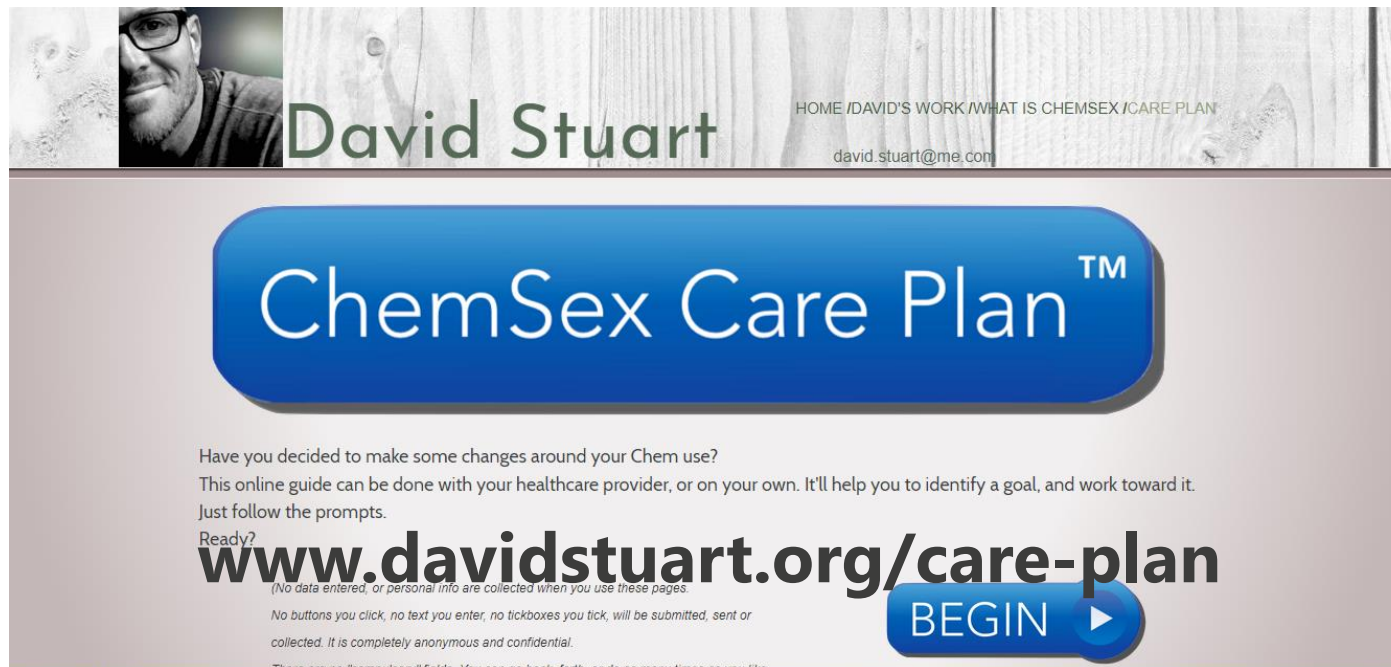
*If you answered to the last two questions with 1 or more, answer the following questions.  
Otherwise, continue to section 3.*

2.3. To what extent do you feel that it improved your sexual experience?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely

# ChemSex Care Plan

ChemSex Care Plan (by David Stuart): online, interactive support tool, created by guys who get chemsex, for guys who have chemsex or healthcare providers supporting them. It helps to identify a goal, and work toward it.



The screenshot shows the landing page for the ChemSex Care Plan. At the top left is a profile picture of David Stuart. To his right, the text reads "David Stuart" and "HOME / DAVID'S WORK / WHAT IS CHEMSEX / CARE PLAN" with the email "david.stuart@me.com". The main heading is "ChemSex Care Plan™" in a blue rounded rectangle. Below this, the text asks: "Have you decided to make some changes around your Chem use? This online guide can be done with your healthcare provider, or on your own. It'll help you to identify a goal, and work toward it. Just follow the prompts. Ready?" followed by the URL "www.davidstuart.org/care-plan". A blue "BEGIN" button with a play icon is positioned to the right of the URL. Small text at the bottom of the page states: "(No data entered, or personal info are collected when you use these pages. No buttons you click, no text you enter, no tickboxes you tick, will be submitted, sent or collected. It is completely anonymous and confidential. There are no 'compulsion' fields. You can go back, forth, or do as many times as you like.)"


# DUDIT

DUDIT (Drug Use Disorders Identification Test): validated parallel instrument to the AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test) for identification psychosocial indicators of drug problems; consist of 11 items

Id. nr.

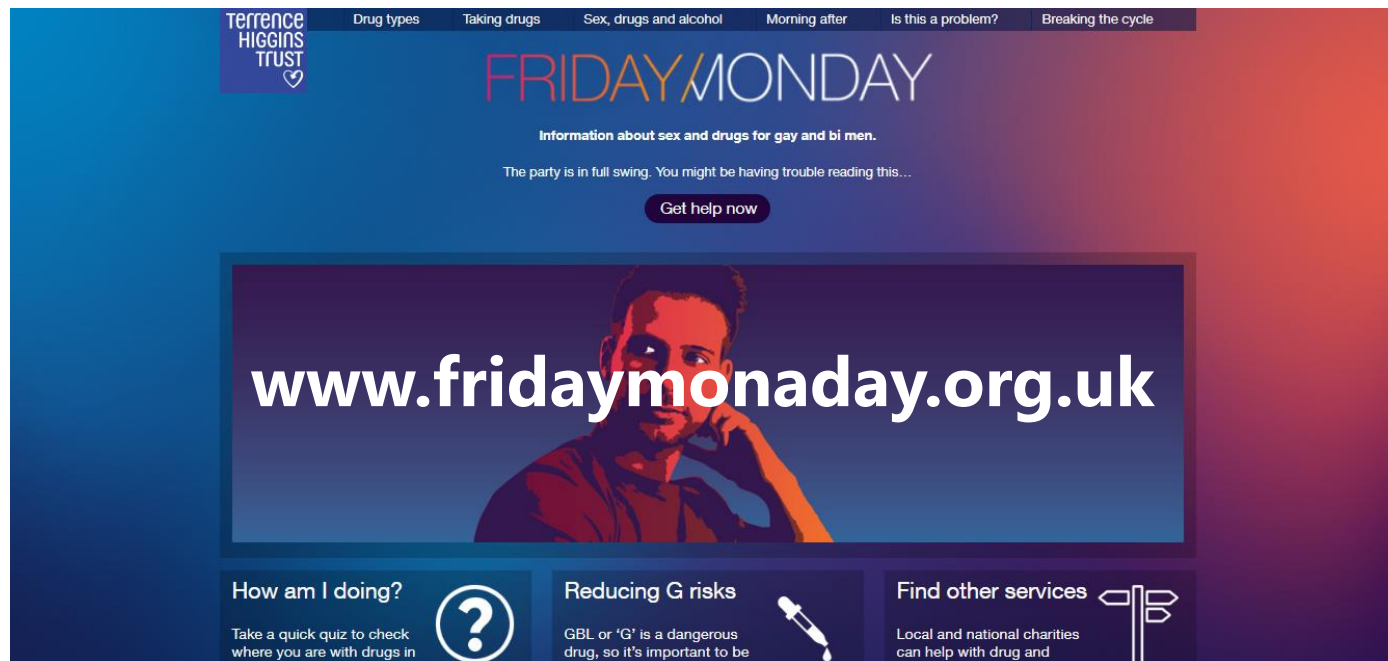
## DUDIT Drug Use Disorders Identification Test

Here are a few questions about drugs. Please answer as correctly and honestly as possible by indicating which answer is right for you.

	<input type="checkbox"/> Man	<input type="checkbox"/> Woman	Age	<input type="text"/>	
1. How often do you use drugs other than alcohol? (See list of drugs on back side.)	Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Once a month or less often <input type="checkbox"/>	2-4 times a month <input type="checkbox"/>	2-3 times a week <input type="checkbox"/>	4 times a week or more often <input type="checkbox"/>
2. Do you use more than one type of drug on the same occasion?	Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Once a month or less often <input type="checkbox"/>	2-4 times a month <input type="checkbox"/>	2-3 times a week <input type="checkbox"/>	4 times a week or more often <input type="checkbox"/>
3. How many times do you take drugs on a typical day when you use drugs?	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	1-2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3-4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5-6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 or more <input type="checkbox"/>
4. How often are you influenced heavily by drugs?	Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Less often than once a month <input type="checkbox"/>	Every month <input type="checkbox"/>	Every week <input type="checkbox"/>	Daily or almost every day <input type="checkbox"/>
5. Over the past year, have you felt that your longing for drugs was so strong that you could not resist it?	Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Less often than once a month <input type="checkbox"/>	Every month <input type="checkbox"/>	Every week <input type="checkbox"/>	Daily or almost every day <input type="checkbox"/>

# Friday/Monday service

Friday/Monday service is a web-page providing information about sex and drugs for gay and bi men, e.g. drugs and how they are in taken, highs and lows, harm reduction and their influence on sexual health and breaking the cycle.



# Thank you!

Michał Pawłęga