



## UnhappyHour

**Vadim Liberman** worries that gay people's concerns about crystal meth abuse ignore an even bigger public-health abuse: heavy social drinking.

**H**ello. My name is Vadim, and I'm a social alcoholic. My last drink was last night. In less than 60 minutes I knocked back seven vodka shots. Clearly, I was buzzed. Not drunk. *Never* drunk. Alcoholics get drunk, whereas I just get social. Sometimes too social. I've sucked guys while drunk—I mean *buzzed*—that I never would have while sober, only to realize later that what truly sucked was my poor judgment. "Oh, we've all been there," says a friend. And that's the trouble. Going "there" poses more risk than ever. A recent lab study by the University of California, Los Angeles, found that

contact with the amount of alcohol typically found in beer makes cells in the mouth up to six times more susceptible to HIV infection (and while stronger drinks can kill the virus, they'll also intoxicate you faster, facilitating unwise sexual decisions). If you also consider the recent focus on the HIV-positive gay man who progressed rapidly to an AIDS diagnosis, you may need a lot more than a cold shower and coffee to treat your next hangover.

Still, despite research linking alcohol overconsumption to unsafe sexual encounters, gay people are failing to see social alcoholism as a social ill. According to an alert issued by the

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism some years back, men who combined alcohol and sex were three times more likely to be at sexual risk than their sober counterparts. And based on my own informal research, people in the sober group are also three times *less* likely to get laid because, as my friend proclaims, "They're boring."

See, alcohol isn't the drug of choice just for alcoholics. It's an everyman's drug that "makes it a lot easier to let your body do what it wants to do," explains one 25-year-old television producer. It takes the edge off, encourages silliness, calms anxieties, imparts confidence, and "makes you more interesting," remarks a Mississippi architect I know who is capable of outbingeing any frat boy. Indeed, shooting up with vodka makes me feel more energetic, more outgoing, more everything.

And I'm not alone. We are a community plagued with social alcoholics like myself. Unlike a stereotypical alcoholic, I don't get hammered because I hate myself for being gay or because my uncle molested me or because my life is a country music song. In fact, I despise the taste of alcohol. Yet, just as with other things in life that I hate—like exercising—I tolerate it because I enjoy its effects. I, like many people I know, will say I don't need alcohol to have a good time, but four drinks later I'm...well...having a good time. Nondrinkers are, obviously, nonfun—which is why, rather than worry whether those I'm with are consuming too much, I often wonder if we're downing too little. Drinking spirits arouses *my* spirits.

And since many of us abuse alcohol as a social lubricant, that's not all it arouses. Unfortunately, too much of it can ease the way into potentially dangerous sexual behavior. Nonetheless, we'd rather obsess over the effects of drugs like crystal meth. The stimulant has given AIDS organizations a fresh issue on which to attach their messages, provided mainstream and gay media with fodder for new headlines proclaiming how promiscuous gays continue to spread HIV, and produced a new explanation for why gay men still bareback. Blaming this faddish drug for spreading disease has itself become a fad. And even though I know more people, including myself, who've found themselves in questionable situations while intoxicated than while high on any other drug, I guess it's simpler to target the new drug on the block than to tackle our issues with drinking.

It's also easier to demonize an illegal stimulant than to proselytize about a legal substance that we've accepted as

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a normal part of socializing. Indeed, although 90% of gay men believe "party drugs" are a threat to gay people, according to a health study done at the Millennium March, only 30% feel similarly about alcohol. That shouldn't come as a surprise: There are more drinkers than drug users, and society has generally legitimized alcohol as the escape substance of choice. I don't do illegal drugs, but I'm surely sober enough to understand that getting trashed on alcohol isn't necessarily any safer. Even so, confess to people you're a cokehead, and they'll begin planning an intervention. But tell them you gulped seven shots last night, and many will be impressed. I never viewed my high capacity to drink and stand at the same time as a talent until those around me began glamorizing it. But when the talent show ends, there's nothing glamorous about risky sexual encounters, vomiting, and hangovers.

Addressing social alcoholism, however, is certainly not easy, considering that gay bars have historically served and continue to function as one of our primary social spots. Sure, there are bookstores and coffeehouses, but I much prefer a Tom Collins to *Tom Sawyer* or a tall latte. And so do plenty

of others. While gallery-hopping recently in Chelsea, a friend asked me, "Wouldn't it be great if they turned some of these places into bars?" Call him superficial or call me shallow or just acknowledge the paradox we've created for ourselves: Bars still remain our true "community centers." Drinking, it seems, is a means of supporting our community—even if doing so creates an unhealthier one. Not that I blame bars for corroding my liver. I fault my unquenchable thirst to meet guys—whether for sex, friendship, or boyfriendship. Yes, gay people are everywhere, but when they're not everywhere, they're usually at a drinkery. Until galleries, clothing stores, and coffeehouses regularly serve liquor, the mathematical odds of meeting someone will be best at a bar.

Now, having admitted my social alcoholism, I suppose I should find a program to help me get through my next 11 steps. In truth, I'd rather grab a cosmopolitan. Social alcoholics don't need to drink more responsibly, we need to *act* more responsibly by knowing our tolerance and being more cognizant of our behavior. Alcohol doesn't so much cloud judgment as provide an excuse for exercising it badly. So here's to no more excuses! ●