



Wild & Sublime® Podcast, Season 2 Episode 36
"Chemsex is killing us"
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Crystal meth and other “party and play” drugs have dug deep roots into gay sex and beyond. Two guests discuss party culture, addiction, harm reduction, and rediscovering your sexuality in recovery.

Host: Karen Yates

Guests: Tom Pardoe, Jimmy Palmieri

[Wild & Sublime theme music]

Tom Pardoe

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Jimmy Palmieri

It's the "not me" syndrome. "It's not going to be me, I'm not going to be that." I have seen folks, whether they're doing it on Friday or Saturday, or Saturday or Sunday, whatever, but then it turns into Monday, then maybe Tuesday afternoon, and then before you know it, they're hustling for money to do it. Around 89 to 92% of people that do it the first time are going to do it a second, and then it just keeps getting more and more and more.

Karen Yates

Welcome to Wild & Sublime, a sexy spin on infotainment®, no matter your preferences, orientation, or relationship style, based on the popular live Chicago show. Each week, I'll chat about sex and relationships with citizens from the world of sex positivity. You'll hear meaningful conversation, dialogues that go deeper, and information that can help you become more free in your sexual expression. I'm sex educator Karen Yates.

Today we'll be talking with a former crystal meth user and a West Hollywood Commissioner about chemsex — mixing drugs and sex — and how this culture continues to grow, and how it's costing lives. Keep listening.

It's our podcast birthday month. We've been doing this a year! Help support our work bringing sex positive insights, news, and conversations to your earbuds. Join The Afterglow, our membership program on Patreon. Starting at just \$5 a month, you'll get bonus content like Q&A sessions with sexperts, my audio creator notes, special announcements and more. And this birthday month, all subscribers get access to our webinar, Butt Basics, with sex educator Ren Grabert, our intro to posterior play that will have you shaking your booty in no time. If a monthly membership is not your thing — if you like to hit it and run — consider throwing some bucks in the tip jar in appreciation for our work. More info is in the show notes.

[music]

Hey, folks. Today we'll be talking about a disturbing yet very important issue that not many people know about: chemsex, or "party and play" culture, where drugs such as crystal meth, ketamine, and GHB get rolled into sexual activity, primarily among gay men, but also beyond that population. While party and play — or PnP, as it's known — has been around for many years, it's had a marked increase in the past decade due to dating and hookup apps like Grindr, where people can actively seek out potential sexual partners into chemsex, as well as using the dating apps themselves to purchase drugs. Deaths from overdosing are common, as well as a steep decline in quality of life as use increases. And as an aside, this is one part of a much, much greater issue beyond chemsex. In the US, drug use and overdosing, especially through opioids, has become a national crisis.

Today we'll be talking with recurring guest, leather daddy, titleholder, director and dancer Tom Pardoe about his experience and recovery from crystal meth use. We'll also be chatting with Jimmy Palmieri, West Hollywood Human Services Commissioner, producer of the documentary "Tweakers," and the founder of the Tweakers Project, which actively helps people seeking to break their reliance on crystal meth. Jimmy is also the producer of alcohol- and drug-free events in LA. Plus, you'll also hear about my brief encounter with meth while I was in college. Have a listen.

Tom, welcome.

Tom Pardoe

Hi, Karen. Good to see you again. Or, talk to you again.

Karen Yates

It's good to see you. It's good to hear from you. You've been on the show before.

Tom Pardoe

Yes.

Karen Yates

And you discussed, in one of the last episodes you were on, getting sober off of crystal meth. And I'm really so grateful that you are willing to come on today to talk about it again — except a little more in depth, because you have been involved in the sober scene in LA around meth. And I think you have a lot to talk about here, and help folks understand. And then later, we'll be bringing on Jimmy Palmieri to talk more about the big picture within West Hollywood. So Tom...

Tom Pardoe

Yes...? Do we have to talk fast? No. [both laugh]

Karen Yates

Oh, thank you. Tom is one of my oldest friends, so he's just sort of like, he's rolling with it here. He's like, "Karen. Calm down, Karen." So how old were you when you were first — how old were you when you were first introduced to meth, and what were the circumstances? What did the whole scene look like?

Tom Pardoe

Okay, well, first of all, I didn't know there was a scene when I first was introduced. I must have been 26 or 27.

Karen Yates

And this was in, like, the 90s? When was this?

Tom Pardoe

It would have been... yeah, '89 or '90. I had left Chicago, I moved to California. I had gotten cast in "A Chorus Line" in California, and I had a month to get myself into shape, kind of take as many dance classes as possible, and get ready to do that. So the first night I was in LA, I went to a bar called the Apache in the valley. There were like three people in the bar, and one of them was this short little guy. And he was on the dance floor, and I went out on the dance floor with him, and he gave me a hit of ecstasy. And then I moved in with him that night. And it turned out that he was a dealer of this thing called crystal meth. And I had no idea.

Karen Yates

And you had no idea.

Tom Pardoe

And that launched me into a full month of using, exploring, changing clothes often. Staying up for days. That was my introduction to crystal meth.

Karen Yates

Did you have any idea at that point that it was — did it feel to you like you had just stumbled into something? Because now it is so woven into pickup culture. At that point, did you feel like you were an outlier? Or was it already starting to get its hooks into gay culture?

Tom Pardoe

No, I think it had already been — had its hooks into it. I was just maybe behind the curve a little bit, perhaps. Or, you know, I mean, coke was really big earlier. And I was doing every other drug except heroin at the time, so I just felt like it was another cool party drug that was... The first moments, and the first week on it were incredible. Super powers were implanted into my body. And I could just stay up forever. It changed my mood completely. And I just felt somebody — I was filled with so much power. And it was, you know, it didn't take long for it to turn crazy. But the very beginning parts of it were — I think this is true for a lot of meth users, that you're constantly going to chase that first time you use for the rest of the time that you're on meth. And it's never quite the same as the first time you use it. At least it wasn't for me.

Karen Yates

I think that's true of a lot of addictive substances, that you're always chasing the original high.

Tom Pardoe

Yeah. I actually ended up going to one dance class that whole month that I was there. I was a little distracted with the meth use, and this guy I had met. So I had to go off and do "A Chorus Line," and I remember taking it with me. I always had a little bag of it, and I would sprinkle it into my Mountain Dew before I went on. Before I went onstage. So I would have this can of Mountain Dew that had meth laced in it. And all through the rehearsal process and everything, the director would keep saying, "Tom, what's going on with your eyes? What's happening?" He goes, "You have crazy eyes." And I said, "No, no, no, it's a choice I'm using for my character." But it was funny — like, during the ballet combination, [hums music] dun-du-dun-dun-da!, for the men at the very

beginning of the show, I would jump so high, because I was on meth, that I would be, like, a beat behind by the time I came down. Which was tricky to deal with, you know — and I joke about it, but it turned tragic pretty quickly. For sure.

Karen Yates

So when you said "turned tragic," what did you mean?

Tom Pardoe

First of all, it started to take over as my primary relationship. I mean, even when I was doing eight shows a week for a few months, it became like, I can't wait till Sunday night, and to finish that last show. And then I got in the car and I drove to LA. And I would lose my car almost every weekend. I forgot where I put my car, left my car. I had people, they had to drive down from Santa Maria to help me find it. And really, you know, I just never stopped thinking about it. After a short period of time, it's like, when do I get to do that again? When am I gonna [?]. And then just trying to keep it in my system as often as I could, and try to maintain some level of normal life, which doesn't really exist once you get on meth.

Karen Yates

Yeah. So back in the early '90s, were you just scoring, or was it very much tied up with hooking up, meeting guys?

Tom Pardoe

It was completely connected to — I just wanted to have sex all the time. And I also liked changing clothes a lot when I was on it. And other people's clothing — I took it. You know, I would take their clothes. Clothes that were smaller than the size of my body were appropriate for me. But I did just want to have a lot of sex. I would wander the streets at all hours of the morning, and have in my head this knowledge that all the cars that were driving by, the people that were out, were also on meth. It became just a whole different reality, where it just consumed me. It consumed me, and I just went with it. But you know, in terms of picking up, or hookups and all of that — that came along with it, but it certainly didn't become... It wasn't my everything. Because then your junk stops working after a while, you know? So it becomes, like, you're on this hunt that is never ending, and you're just getting a raw dick, and nothing's working. It's pretty brutal.

Karen Yates

Yeah. What did you mean by changing clothes?

Tom Pardoe

That was just — I don't know how many people will have that in common with me. But I just liked tighter clothing, and stuff that wasn't mine. You become like a thief, really.

Karen Yates

Okay. So that's what you mean. You became, like, a thief. [laughing]

Tom Pardoe

Yeah. I'm a hooker thief. I like stealing people's stuff and wearing it, I guess. And the tighter, the better.

Karen Yates

Right. I think what you're kind of getting at here, at least how I'm hearing it is, when the meth took over, you were catapulted into a different world, a different way of relating to the world.

Tom Pardoe

Absolutely.

Karen Yates

And so, you were on a drug-fueled high, and everything was getting mirrored back to you, where the rest of the world was on meth. And it was great, because you were part of a meth world. And wearing tight clothes was a part of it.

Tom Pardoe

Right. That was in the early stages, and then it turned into shadows, and the people, and the trees, and the weird, psychotic stuff that just crept in. And—

Karen Yates

Well, yeah, I want to hear about that. Talk a little bit about that, because I want to hear what kind of drove you to your bottom.

Tom Pardoe

Well, after that show had finished, I moved to Phoenix, and met a nurse who was my crystal connection. And he introduced me to an escort service, where they asked me to — or he said, "You should go meet this guy." And I said, "Uh, okay." But he goes, "Be careful, because he's got HIV." And I said, "Oh, okay." And when I was on meth — well, all through my 20s, when I was using anyway, and when AIDS hit, I didn't have any concern ever that I would become HIV positive. And I truly felt like I didn't give a

shit. And that's kind of how I operated. I never had protected sex. I went and I met this guy. And we started — I had to do an interview, right, to work at the escort service. And so, I guess all interviews for that kind of thing is where you actually just have to have sex with them. So we were playing around, and at one point — I won't get too graphic here — but he was on his knees, I was standing in front of him, and he looked up at me at one point, and my junk and his mouth were all bloody. Blood, blood, blood everywhere. And we stopped for a brief second, and we burst into laughter and ran to the bathroom and cleaned up, and kept going.

Karen Yates
And this was—

Tom Pardoe
A normal...

Karen Yates
A normal, everyday—

Tom Pardoe
Everyday occurrence.

Karen Yates
On methamphetamines.

Tom Pardoe
Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I was doing that line of work, and teaching 11 step aerobics classes a week on crystal meth.

Karen Yates
How did everything devolve? I mean, because of course, that sounds very intense. But I also know it got worse.

Tom Pardoe
Yeah, I would spend hours and sometimes days, in — I had rented a room at someone's home. And I remember, I got stuck in the corner. I was just trapped in the corner of the bedroom, on the floor. And I couldn't move, and yet — I would say that my insides were moving really fast, and I was trying to orchestrate how I needed to stop this. Like, I need to do something to myself to stop this. It has to stop. And that lasted several hours. It makes me shake when I talk about it, even today. That's, like,

28 years later. My body goes into like, [shudders]. Like that. Anyway, I ended up taking myself to the doctor. And I went there because I needed to know if I was HIV positive. And back then, it was like, you had to wait a few days. And you had a number. And it was very anonymous. So I get the phone call — and there's a lot of sweating going on between those two times — and I get the call, and they said I was HIV negative. And I didn't believe them. I asked him if we could do that again. They said yes, we did it again. And it came back negative again. And at that point, I just dropped everything and I moved back to the parents' house in the Midwest. And that's where I started to get sober.

Karen Yates

Wow. So, you live in LA now. I think I'd like to bring on Jimmy, to continue the conversation. We can talk about the scene now in West Hollywood. So, welcome, Jimmy Palmieri.

Jimmy Palmieri

Hi.

Karen Yates

Hi. Jimmy, you are the Human Services Commissioner in West Hollywood, founder of the Tweakers Project, which we're going to talk about in a moment. As well as your work as a party organizer, sober party organizer. I'd also like to talk about that with you. Wow, okay, Jimmy. The first thing I learned about you is that you had helped produce a documentary — I think, now 14 years ago — called "Tweakers," which is a slang name for someone on crystal meth. Fourteen years ago. So, Tom is talking about his experience in the early '90s, where crystal meth is beginning to be a thing. I mean, who knows how long it has been in the scene prior to that. Now, you felt called 14 years ago to do a documentary called "Tweakers." Had the Tweakers Project — which you also founded to help folks find sobriety — had that even happened yet, or was the documentary the first thing? And what made you get interested in this subject?

Jimmy Palmieri

So, thanks for having me on, first of all. It's great to meet you — and Tom, great to see you and hear your story. I got out here in '94, and I had never seen crystal meth. I did every drug possible in New York. Luckily, I don't have the disease of addiction, but, you know, I can remember shooting heroin up in the balcony of Studio 54 with someone's dirty needle. Not even thinking. So I got out here, left a 14-year relationship, started to date, and everyone was doing this magic powder. And I thought it was coke. I honestly thought it was coke, and I'm like, you know what, I've played this game

before, but I'm hanging out with you folks — do what you need to do. And the one guy that I was very interested in, that I was dating actually, he started to smoke it. And I started to notice a really bad change in how he acted when that happened. And come to realize it was meth. I probably wasn't in a crowd that was anywhere near interested in sobriety or any of that. So, meth for me goes back as far as, I had someone that I cared about very much just go off the deep end. And I thought, you know what, I'm playing around enough. And I'm watching so many of my brothers get in trouble. And I'm just not. So maybe, just maybe, I can be — not a catalyst, but sort of be someone that might be able to get something out to the public. And there became "Tweakers." I had a cable TV show, and it was fairly popular, and I did a lot of interviewing with authors. And one of the books that was sent to me was "Tweakers." And I read it. And so much of this was resonating. You know, I'd seen it, I saw it firsthand. And I asked if I could buy the rights. And they gave it to me for \$1, literally \$1, and said, "Do what you can to help people." And that was from Ellison Publications. And I worked on it for a long time with the two women that I was doing my show with. And so, they produced it, and I directed it, and it wound up — you know, we were hoping, I don't know, maybe 100 people would see it. But the city gave it a premiere at the Silver Screen Theater. And I think that holds like 300 people, 400 maybe. And the response was like, a thousand. So we had to actually set up a plasma in the lobby for the overflow, which was incredible for me. We wound up going all around the country with it. And you know, at gay and lesbian centers, even police departments were showing it to crowds. And I thought, all right, some well known gay actor came up to me during one of the screenings and said, "You can't just let this be a documentary, you have to move on." And I thought, all right, let me think. And that's how the Tweakers Project started to work. Maybe we can navigate folks that can't find their way through to services. Because it's really a tangled web. And that's what we do. No one's ever been paid. Everyone is a volunteer. And we've put, I think it's like, 374 people, into rehab. And we only are on Facebook, but at this point have, I don't know, six or 7000 members. I've had four marriages in that group, by the way — they met in the group and married, and long-term marriages. But you know, I don't have kids. And I look at this as, alright, these are all my family. They're all from all over the world. But at some point or another, I've had contact with each and every one of them, and they're trying to do it. You know, they're trying to do it.

Karen Yates

Wow. That is really extraordinary. And thank you. Thank you for doing that. Would you say, in your estimation, the work that you're doing is primarily in the LGBTQ communities? Who is it reaching, would you say, primarily?

Jimmy Palmieri

So primarily, it's gay men, and I did a female campaign. And everyone said, "You're wasting \$15,000. Why are you doing this? Women are not going to respond." The week that I did the female campaign, we had a 10 to 14% increase in membership in the Tweakers Project Facebook page, and it was women. And some were lesbian, some were were het. And they all said, "No one did this. You know, this is the first time that I see myself." It was a woman, and she was holding up boxing gloves, and she's just like, "I'm winning the fight against meth." And it just clicked with a lot of females. And, you know, I don't want to lie, we don't have an enormous percentage of straight folks, but we do have a percentage. And I would say maybe it's 10%, you know, of the group. But the lion's share is gay men and bisexual men. And this will go back to what Tom was saying. It's a libidinous drug, in that it makes you — you become horny on it. And you can have more sex partners. And you may not even be able to ejaculate, but still, you think you're in the whole process of tribal, you know, tribalness. You're with your folk, you're with your peers. I feel so sexy on it, and yet not on it, I feel like I don't belong. And I've heard that — I've interviewed probably, I would say, 1500 meth users, tweakers, you know, as we call them. And that's a common denominator. And Tom, one of my very dearest friends that's sober now, when he was using, he worked in a dungeon, and he would take his clients' clothes and wear them.

Tom Pardoe

Nice!

Jimmy Palmieri

And I said, "Why? Like, what was this?" And he said, "I don't want to be myself, so I pictured myself as them when I'm wearing their clothing." And that hit me so hard. I remember going to his apartment one day when he was really ill on meth. And he had 2000 pairs of Calvin Klein underwear in boxes. And I said, "What's this?" And he said, "Well, when the aliens come, I need to have a clean pair of underwear."

Karen Yates

Ohhh... I have to tell you, you know, I've been reading a lot as preparation for this. And it is... It's frickin' chilling. It's a chilling drug. As well as the fact that, you know, ultimately, we're talking about meth, but we're also talking about GHB — "G" — and ketamine — "K" — and just how it all rolls together in the party culture, and how it's a swirl, right? And you're gonna trip over all of it if you're in the culture, right?

Jimmy Palmieri

You're going in the rabbit hole. I mean, that's just what it is. Unless you're looking to get well — and I never say "better," because I don't know what is better. I just know that someone can get well.

Karen Yates

I'd like to talk a minute, because you brought up the fact that the drug is libidinous. You know, I see that one of the largest populations, or the one of the populations that's really growing is men, say as they're getting a little older. Like, men in their 40s, as they're maybe losing their ability to stay hard, or, you know, maybe not feeling like they're as fab as they used to be. And so, that's an aspect — I love that you brought up the tribal nature, the community nature. What are some of the other things that you think go into the party and play culture?

Tom Pardoe

Oh, well, it's gay men getting older, period. Gay men getting older is tragedy. So we're in this culture that we still have to look — you know, our bodies have to be tight, we have to look great, we have to blah, blah, blah. I don't know. There's a lot of guys out there that are like, "I'm not gonna grow up. I'm not gonna fade out. I want to keep up." Plus, there's a lot of us, too, who, socially, have had nothing else but the party. The party is everything. It's the big identifier for a lot of gay men. Get to the white party, get to the black party, keep going to those parties. Use meth, and at least you can stay up through the whole thing. But you see these guys burn so quickly. I've been in CMA, Crystal Meth Anonymous, for a long time, and they go out, they come back. They go out, they come back. Which is fine, I guess. The revolving door has allowed some of us to see people lose their souls, just a bit at a time. Just chipped away. And their spirit, and their light. Everything about them just gets sucked out of their bodies. And then you end up with this shell of a person, who had no intention of going there. They certainly didn't want to speed up their mortality rate. I don't think that was intentional. But it's an unfortunate side effect, that keeps taking people over. I think it starts as being like, I feel valid still. I feel seen. I feel like I'm keeping up.

Karen Yates

Do you think it's a choice, though? And what I mean by that is, I remember, I used meth once, in the '80s. It was presented to me at a party. At first I thought it was coke. I was told no, it's not. It's something called methamphetamine. I don't think they said "methamphetamine." I think they just said "it's meth." [they all laugh] I'm like, oh. They're like, "it's like speed." And I'm like, oh, okay. And then I didn't go to sleep for the next 18 hours. And I felt like I was a superhero.

Tom Pardoe

Yep.

Karen Yates

And I thank God I never came across it again. I just wasn't in a culture where I saw it ever again. But I had no clue. And I do have a sense that part of the story is, people just are so unaware. I mean, maybe I'm naive. But I think there's a general unawareness of the rabbit hole. Is that true, or not? I mean, do you think people are like, "Hell yeah, give me the meth!"

Tom Pardoe

I don't think you're wrong, in them just not knowing or seeing it — or, I think, believing that it would happen to them, is probably the biggest one. Because oftentimes, people will be on it for three years, and they still are talking like they don't have a problem with it. It's not happening to them. And it is happening to them.

Jimmy Palmieri

I want to respond to that. Because Tom is completely right. It's "not me" syndrome, it's not going to be me, I'm not going to be that, I'm not going to go down there. But I have seen folks, and we call them weekend warriors, whenever they're doing it on a Friday or Saturday, or Saturday or Sunday, whatever. But then it turns into Monday, then maybe a Tuesday afternoon, and then before you know it, they're hustling for money to do it. I've seen it in this city. I have seen folks — you have to remember, gentlemen of a certain age, 45, 55, 65, have lost many of their peers. HIV took 13 of my 14 friends in a group. And so, I think what I've seen is, people want to get into a group, have a group, have a tribe, and this is welcoming. This is a welcoming thing. Unfortunately, it's not something that's a healthy welcoming thing. And I've heard a lot of people say, "Well, I can do it here and there." And you know what? There but for the grace of God go you, because around 89 to 92% of people that do it a first time are going to do it a second, and then it just keeps getting more and more and more and more. And here's my truth: like I said, I had done every drug imaginable — including beauties, which are sort of like a precursor to methamphetamine. They're amphetamines. But when it came to meth — the first time I saw it, I was at a party in Beverly Hills with the dude that I was dating. And I don't know what, but I instinctively said in my brain, "Jimmy, don't do this. Go get a drink." I don't know why. Because everyone I liked was doing it. They were smoking it off of a piece of foil. And something about that smoke coming off the foil, and everyone with a straw sucking in the smoke, was very scary to me for some reason. And I'd seen a lot of young folks think, "It's never going to be me."

Tom Pardoe
Invincible.

Jimmy Palmieri

But I can tell you, I've picked kids up. And I see kids — you know, 20, even 18, 19, 25, 26 — one in particular that I'm so friendly with at this point. And someone called me and said, there's this dude on the street by the AT Center, no shoes, he's in trouble. And I grabbed a deputy, actually, and we zoomed over. And he was, like, six two; I don't know that he could have weighed 80 pounds. And I mean, he was having these hallucinations. And Tom, I think you can probably attest to that, that hallucinations can be a big part of this drug.

Tom Pardoe

Oh, totally. Especially the longer you're on it, the more crazy comes in to play with the whole thing.

Karen Yates

[to podcast listener] We'll return to our interview in a moment. Do you have a friend struggling with chem sex? Or do you know someone who has a loved one involved in the scene? Send them this episode.

Wild & Sublime is also sponsored in part by our Sublime Supporter, Chicago-based Full Color Life Therapy. Therapy for all of you at fullcolorlifetherapy.com. If you would like to be a Sublime Supporter, showcasing you and your business and supporting us at the same time, contact us at info@wildandsublime.com.

Back to my interview with Jimmy Palmieri and Tom Pardoe. In this portion, we discuss hookup apps, the sometimes fatal additive fentanyl, the importance of harm reduction, and Jimmy and Tom's work with sober event-making in West Hollywood. I then ask Jimmy about #Boom and #Sizzle, the West Hollywood, drug- and alcohol-free events he produces with the city. We then go on to discuss how people become comfortable again with sex and kink once they are off meth and other substances.

[to podcast guests] I want to talk a little bit about the culture of hookup apps, dating apps, among LGBTQ folks, primarily gay men, and the predatory nature that's going on here. What are gay men seeing when they're going through the hookup apps around, like tina — which is, of course, a slang for crystal meth. Like, what are people seeing in the descriptors, and how does the cycle sort of begin? The cycle of "I am buying drugs

from the same person I'm having sex with." Or getting drugs from the same person I'm having sex with? I mean, it sounds like it's just a carnival ride.

Tom Pardoe

We got the three letters, the PnP, right? That's like, the big primary one that everybody is wary of. And I think that everything changes after 3am. Right? I mean, there's a lot of shift that happens in terms of who's online, and what's going on. And, you know, these days, there are rooms you can go to, there are apps that you can go to, you can party and play and you'll be filmed while doing it. And there's a lot of crazy stuff out there.

Jimmy Palmieri

So what I can tell you is — and most people know I do this — I create profiles on most of the apps, and maybe for 24 hours, maybe a week, maybe two weeks, whatever, all different profiles, and they all are geared towards a different thing. And I look for words like "clouds," "blowing clouds," or "tina," or "PnP," or "get to the point." "Get to the point" meaning, you know, we're going to be slamming that night.

Karen Yates

Slamming means?

Jimmy Palmieri

Slamming means IV drug use. And when I spot that, I'll open with some conversation. It will never be drug-oriented. It will actually never even be sexually oriented. "How are you doing tonight?" And I'll get a response. And I'll usually send a link to the Tweakers Project page and say, "Hey, there's a lot of people waiting for you here. Come and say hi." Something like that. And listen, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But what Tom said — everything after three is negotiable. Listen, two at 10 is a 10 at two. And everybody looks gorgeous after —

Karen Yates

Wait, wait. A two— okay, gotcha. You said it so quick, I'm like...? That's your New York coming at me.

Jimmy Palmieri

It's like, Oh, this looks great. Let me get myself into this mess. How can I hurt myself more tonight?

Tom Pardoe

Right.

Jimmy Palmieri

But you know, also, it is a predatory nature. And there are some folks that are using that, using folks' addictive behavior or nature, in order to entice them over for the purpose of sexual favors, or the purpose of getting them high and using them and... and I've seen that over and over again. And it takes a certain kind of a bad person to want to hurt another gay brother. I don't understand that. I never will. But it exists. It exists in the straight world. It exists in the gay world.

Karen Yates

Yeah. And, you know, I was reading more details about the Ed Buck story. It was so shocking and horrifying to me. I couldn't even believe it. Ed Buck, I think it was last year, maybe the year before, arrested for the homicide — multiple homicides, wasn't that it?

Jimmy Palmieri

Not one, not two, but two and a half, because one escaped. Now I know this gentleman, for many, many—

Karen Yates

And these are young, black — this is a white man of power perpetrating on young, black gay men.

Jimmy Palmieri

Here's how I look at that story — and I know Ed for many years, and I knew him as a good guy. And he would tell me, you know, whenever I think of relapsing, I just look on my shoulder and see you. And I'm like, well, good, if that's what keeps you sober, keep seeing me! I'll give you a picture — post it, tape it to your shoulder. And then, you know, I hadn't seen him in a year or so when all this happened. But it's frightening how a drug could have done this type of damage to so many lives in just that apartment.

Karen Yates

Yeah.

Tom Pardoe

It's really tricky, too, now with G and other things, where it's heartbreaking when you know people who are living a sober life, and then they get enticed, or whatever — they get the call to go use again. Their intention is not to go out that night and die. And that's happened so much. And so often here, where these guys, they just went out to

party one night, and somebody hands them some G, and they mix it with something, they do something stupid, and they just don't get up. You know?

Jimmy Palmieri

Yeah.

Tom Pardoe

And people sometimes look at those guys. And they're like, "Well, they deserved it. They deserve that." And that makes me crazy, to hear that.

Jimmy Palmieri

You know, I always call it the "ick" factor. Addiction and recovery services, that's the ick factor. "Well, that's them. That's who they are. That's not me. Why am I spending my constituent dollars on recovery services?" Well, I'm glad that I live in a city that embraces the idea of recovery and rehabilitation, and understands that this is the way to keep folks alive. This isn't the ick factor. This is , "Let's do it. Let's make sure that everyone gets a fair shake in the city." And we do. We give a significant amount of money to recovery services and rehab services, and wraparound services like sober living. And employment services, with employers knowing that someone has a drug addiction problem, but is looking to live a well life. And I like living here and being a city official because this is an extraordinarily progressive city in that way. We don't know that that's happening everywhere. I believe it probably isn't.

Karen Yates

I just want to bring up a couple of stats, which are really horrifying — that in L.A. County, the number of deaths from 2008 to 2017 — so that's 11 years — for crystal meth, the deaths went up by 700%. And as you both know, New York Times just had an article yesterday that last year, 2020, overdose deaths in America rose by 30%. And that is more than double — so, 93,000 people died last year of overdoses. You know, and that ranges, everything from opioids, to meth to heroin — that is more than double the highest year of HIV deaths. That is, well more than the highest year of automobile accident deaths. Well more — like more than double — the highest year of gun deaths.

Jimmy Palmieri

And the most deaths of overdoses in recorded history. The most deaths of drug overdoses in the last year, than all recorded history. And a lot of it, of course, we know there's fentanyl involved at this point. That's not every death. But fentanyl has, unfortunately, infiltrated this drug, and all drugs.

Karen Yates

Yeah, talk a little bit about fentanyl, if you will.

Jimmy Palmieri

So, you know, fentanyl is like an anesthetic, almost a high-powered anesthetic. And a grain may kill you, or maybe a bump, or whatever. There's no rhyme or reason to what would kill who. But it can kill you quickly. We now give out fentanyl testing strips, and you just put a little tiny bit of your dose in some water, and you dip the stick in it, and it will turn a color if it's pure. It won't turn a color if it's not. And we have those available, readily available, for free. And if you're using, I have zero judgment. I have zero judgment. But if you're using, let's do some damage control. Let's at least — "Okay, well, this \$20 is going to kill me, because there's some fentanyl in it." It's a cheap filler. And there's no control, of course, over it. So somebody was telling me — I don't know who it was — they were telling me yesterday, the day before, that if you get a little bit of, you know, whatever you're picking up, you might get the whole dose of fentanyl that was meant for that batch. There's no mixing, there's no controls put into place. So you may get it all. And you know, then you're a goner.

Karen Yates

Wow. Let's talk a little bit now about harm reduction versus abstinence. And really, the idea here is, instead of like, attempting to solve the problem by getting people off of meth, or off of the other various drugs, it's more about, like, let's work with the issue. Jimmy, in your estimation, walk us through that. What does that look like? Is it effective to do harm reduction versus abstinence?

Jimmy Palmieri

First of all, I don't ever — I don't support the idea of abstinence, you just need to go off everything. It just doesn't — it's not realistic. And harm reduction, or as I call it, damage control, you know, to me, is just mitigating the harm, the trouble that's going to happen. And it's going to happen. So you know, the city, my city, does needle exchange programming through some of our providers, and that's to mitigate the possibility of Hep C or HIV. And some people think it's, "Well, no, why would we do that? Why don't we just give out drugs? And let's let everybody be on.." No, that's just not the way it works. If they're going to use, I want them to use a clean needle.

Karen Yates

So, talk a little bit about those events. And why do you think they draw so many people?

Jimmy Palmieri

So I'll start off with #Boom. And that wasn't just an idea, that, let's see what a sober New Year's Eve party would look like in West Hollywood. The city was on board right away, because it's part of our core value system to treat everyone equally. And that includes having some socialization for folks that are in recovery. And we were praying for, I don't know, 200 people, 300 people. We wound up with 500. And it's gone up. And even though we have a 750 max capacity because of the fire marshal laws, throughout the evening, there's usually around 1000 people that are in and out of Boom. It's one of the biggest parties, it's one of the most fun parties, and it's big. I mean, it's like any other professionally produced party with, you know, DJs and light shows and sound systems, and the auditorium is converted into a club. Like, literally, we have a stage. So no one can say, "Well, this is a boring party." It's *the* party. And in fact, somebody in the press told me last year, "It's not 'Are you going to Boom?' It's 'Do you have a ticket to Boom?'" You know, it's sort of like — and everything is free, by the way. Everything is completely paid for. You just need a ticket so that we can have some control of the numbers. We allow folks in if they were using. They just can't use on site. So perhaps that evening they used, and wandered across to this big sober party and asked to come in. As long as they're not using there or causing a scene or trouble, they're welcome. And very possibly a seed might be planted. And then Sizzle is sort of a crazy carnival. Crazy, sober carnival that takes place in Pride.

Tom Pardoe

And it's also about merging the other folks in the community with the people that aren't using drugs or drink for whatever reason. And kind of like, share openly — like, look, we're just like y'all, we're just out loaded.

Jimmy Palmieri

And it's an amazing success, because folks that are sober and their friends, buddies or loved ones, are at Sizzle together. It's like, I don't have to be separated from someone that I really want to be with today because I can't trust myself over at the dance floor. That doesn't work. So, you know, what we've done is, we've incorporated a dance floor and a great DJ. And we have carnival booths with actual carnival games, and enormous amounts of prizes. Everything is free, of course — it's subsidized by the city and other providers. There's cotton candy machines, there's people on stilts; it's a crazy, crazy carnival. And it's where people want to be at this point. Because it's, I guess, a welcome break from the usual. And who expects American Horror Story: Freak Show to be in the middle of Pride, and to be the sober area of Pride, and be at this point, the number one destination?

Karen Yates

I love it. So, Jimmy, in your estimation, what are other cities doing around harm reduction? Or sort of these sober social events? Are you in touch with other commissioners? Are you in touch with other folks around the world?

Jimmy Palmieri

So you know, I'm from New York, and some of my buddies in New York saw us posting on Facebook over and over and over and over again, Boom and Sizzle. And one of my buddies there — you know, he was newly sober, maybe two or three years sober at the time — and he said, "How did you do this?" And I said, "Well, you know, here's the steps." I go, "You don't have to make it as grand as ours your first year." But he was able to pull some funding together. And now, you know, New York is good competition for us with the sober party. And I'm really proud of watching what he did. He also did the same thing at Pride. They had a sober area, and it was enormously successful. Same thing with Boom and Sizzle: the carnival and the party are there, but they're superfluous to me being able to give out the outreach. Like, you know, 10,000 condoms at Boom. Five thousand responses to drug surveys at Sizzle. These are the purpose why they're there. The outreach is always the takeaway. The fun is what draws them in. At the end of the night, when Pride is settling down, and people are leaving Sizzle because the festival's closing in, I'm hanging out at a table having a cigarette. And I'm like, "This is my life. I want to be a carry. I want to be a carry at a sober carnival, because this is a blast!" You know? And I'm covered with tattoos anyway, so I sort of fit in. [laughter]

Tom Pardoe

We also have, you know, like LFK, the leather fetish kink meetings, for the guys that get hooked on meth. They go out and they have this extraordinary, heightened sense of sexual experience, and then they get sober, and they long for that. They long to have that again, and they feel like the only way they can have it again is if they go use again. And we have programs — or meetings, anyway — where we actually sit down and we talk about, like, it's totally possible. And it's a reality for some of us today, to have that kind of sexual experience without the drug. And there's a process that we have to take, and we're gonna help you learn how to do that if you want it.

Karen Yates

I love that you're saying that, Tom, because I think — I can say it's 100% true for myself: that so much of what I wanted or experienced on drugs and alcohol has been — I have found tenfold, twentyfold, not using. And it is — it's simply a process of learning how the body works, how the mind works, without being under the influence,

and then moving it in that direction, allowing the pleasure to happen, to unfold as it needs to, instead of, like, jacking it up with a substance. And I think it's really hard for folks to understand that you're completely capable of having mood-altering experiences without using altering substances.

Jimmy Palmieri

It's true, it's true. And sometimes they're even on a higher plane of spirituality when you're in the middle of that. And I've heard that time and time again.

Tom Pardoe

Of course they are! And you're also — you remember them, hello!

Jimmy Palmieri

And you might even remember some names, you know.

Tom Pardoe

You can actually feel them the next day, you know or two days later, or three days. You know, you can do that. But it requires one to really know oneself. And that takes — that's where the time takes, I think. That's where a lot of the work happens. I got to know myself before I know what gets my dick hard. And then I'll be on my way to find out, like, how to get to those places.

Karen Yates

Absolutely.

Jimmy Palmieri

You know, one of the recovery houses that I like, they will tell their clients to masturbate in bed, because they want them to understand: You're here, you're sober, and start to get used to your body. Start to understand what is turning you on, and you're not using a drug. You're here sober, and you're still going to be able to have a climax. Work on understanding yourself, rather than numbing yourself. And I think that's A, progressive, but B, brilliant.

Karen Yates

Oh, my God, that is absolutely brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. The other thing I want to mention is — and this is getting back to the ick factor — I think it's really, as with the beginning of the AIDS crisis, and, "Oh, this is just a gay thing." I really feel it's important for me to say: Folks who are listening, this is not about one community. This is so spreading out that this is such a fucking problem. And the title of the episode is

about chemsex, but this not — this is just so big. This is such a vast problem. So if you're listening, and you're thinking, "Oh, this does not affect me" — it will soon enough.

Jimmy Palmieri

Tom and I did a panel, and Tom, if you remember, so many people in the audience, they didn't use, but they were affected by someone's use. They knew someone that was using. There wasn't really anyone there that had no idea of what meth was, because they'd been affected by loved one's shrapnel, you know?

Tom Pardoe

True. And I feel bad for the rest of the planet, those who are not identifying as gay, or the crowd that we're talking about primarily. We have posters on the corners that talk about all of this stuff that we're discussing right here. We have the [?] visibility, right? How would you feel if you were a straight person living in the 'burbs, and you had this issue? Where would you go? What would you do? I think that's terrifying.

Karen Yates

As we wrap up, any things you want to talk about that we haven't talked about?

Jimmy Palmieri

To your listeners, if you are having some problems, and you want to join the Tweakers Project Facebook page, just go to facebook.com and look up "the tweakers," T-W-E-A-K-E-R-S project. And all you have to do is answer two questions: why you want to be in there, And one other personal question. No one will see it but me, or one of the other five administrators, and you'll be put in immediately. And you'll have an open forum 24/7. It's a 24/7 meeting, live. And there's another group that I run that's called Crystal Meth Awareness Group. And that's for people that just want some awareness. And either using or not, maybe family members that need to know what's going to happen next. And the same thing: answer two questions, and then you're in. So these are available too. Facebook, most people have it. And there's, like, 7000 in Tweakers Project, six or 7000. And there's like 12 or 14,000 in my Crystal Meth Awareness Group. Just join them.

Karen Yates

Thank you, Jimmy.

Tom Pardoe

Yeah, thanks, Jimmy. I just want to comment on what Jimmy said. Jimmy comes from a place of ego-free. It's not about making you change in any way, shape, or form. It's really about helping you when you need it. I love that. So, follow through. I'd say call me, but nobody has my number. Everybody out there. But call Karen! And then call me, and we can all talk.

[laughter]

I don't know, I always love talking with y'all. And I think this is a really valuable service that you provide, Karen, for everybody. It's about being out of the shame, you know, and into action in a positive way. And I love that

Karen Yates

You're quite welcome.

Jimmy Palmieri

I'm truly grateful for what you're doing, and for including me in on this amazing conversation.

Tom Pardoe

Thanks.

Karen Yates

I appreciate it so much. Thanks, folks. And thank you, Jimmy Palmieri and Tom Pardoe. I hope to talk to you both again soon.

For links to the Tweakers Project, CMA and more, go to our show notes.

The work I do in Biofield Tuning, an energy modality that uses sound waves to help repattern your bioelectric field, can support you in getting out of stuck behaviors and become more aware of different choices. If you're interested in working with me, or learning more about my weekly group Biofield Tuning sessions on Zoom on a variety of topics, including increasing intuition, expanding consciousness, balancing your energy centers and more, go to karen-yates.com. That link is in the show notes.

Well, that's it, folks. Have a delightfully pleasurable week. Thank you for listening. If you know someone who might be interested in this episode, send it to them. Do you like what you heard? Then give us a nice review on your podcast app. You can follow us on

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