

Crystal Clear

by Yee Jee Tso

Crystal methamphetamine, also known as: “crystal,” “crissy,” “jib-jab,” “ice,” “crank,” “go-fast,” “meth,” “glass,” or a hundred other terms of endearment is one of the most powerful and dangerous psychoactive drugs around. In layman’s terms, it is a turbocharged form of amphetamine or “speed.”

Amphetamine was marketed in the 1930s as Benzedrine, an over-the-counter treatment for nasal congestion. Amphetamines were used during World War II and subsequent wars to increase alertness and confidence, and decrease anxiety, appetite and fatigue in soldiers. By the 1950s, legally manufactured analogues of amphetamine and meth were readily available and used by college students, truck drivers and athletes, among others, as magic pills for everything from weight control to treatment of depression.

It wasn’t until 1970 that the drug’s extreme abuse potential and side effects caused it to be restricted under the Controlled Substances Act, but it is still available as the prescription drug Desoxyn. In the last decade it has gained a massive resurgence with club-goers, ravers and some people who want to stay awake for hours on end.

According to the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, 9.4 million Americans have tried methamphetamine in their lifetime, more than double that of Ecstasy (MDMA), a drug given far more media attention. Also, the perceived harmfulness of methamphetamine among young people has actually declined in the last 10 years.

But the facts are: this drug is putting people in hospitals, destroying families and causing irreversible mental and physical damage to those who become addicted. There is no better information than first hand. The following are excerpts from an interview with Elaine, a 22-year-old recovering crystal addict.

WO: How old were you when you first tried crystal meth and what was the situation surrounding it?

Elaine: I was 18. My friends had just gotten into it and they gave me my first line before we went clubbing one night.

WO: How long was it from your first time to it becoming an addiction?

Elaine: From that night on I didn’t stop doing it for a year and a half.

WO: Where did you buy it?

Elaine: I got involved with a guy who dealt crystal; hence I did it every day without dealing with the money issue. Like any drug, as you get more addicted you do it more often, and at \$10 a point [$\frac{1}{10}$ of a gram] it can be a \$300/day addiction, more if you smoke it.

WO: Describe how it feels, from the second you put it up your nose.

Elaine: Painful. Someone taught me the trick of snorting water after you do it so it’s not as painful. I thought it calmed me down, maybe because I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and crystal can calm someone down with ADD, just like Ritalin. Um, I was really happy when I did it, my whole body felt really good, everything was okay, nothing could really bother me...it just made everything better.

But the comedown of crystal is a lot longer than the high. If you just did one line you’d have an eight-hour high with a 14-hour comedown that hurts. But I didn’t want to leave that world I was in so I kept doing it. I stopped eating. When I did eat I’d get sick. About six months into the addiction my throat was bleeding so I started drinking crystal [mixed with water, juice or alcohol] and that screwed up my stomach even more.

WO: So you noticed health problems?

Elaine: Yeah, I was sick. I was sick. I ended up being a very withdrawn person, didn’t like people, didn’t do anything productive, didn’t work –

WO: Don’t some people claim that crystal makes them productive?

Elaine: I thought I was being more productive too, but I wasn’t getting anything accomplished in life. I wasn’t making rent, I lost my apartment, I was living through the party scene sleeping on other people’s couches. I was jumping from relationship to relationship. I couldn’t talk to my parents; they couldn’t find me. It was my way of escaping reality. I didn’t realize where I was until a year later when I woke up.

WO: What made you decide to get off it?

Elaine: A couple of incidents where I thought I was going to die. One time I was at a rave and my boyfriend at the time nearly got murdered by another group of drug dealers. I was so high I didn't know what to do and it scared me – not knowing if they were going to hit me too. I never would have let myself get into that situation if I wasn't doing crystal.

Another night, I'd mixed crystal with ecstasy, GHB, mushrooms, cocaine, and – oh, alcohol, we can't forget the alcohol. I passed out and when I woke up my heart was palpitating so badly I didn't think I'd live through the day. I kept drinking and doing crystal hoping the feelings would go away.

WO: Was that the first time something like that had happened?

Elaine: The heart palpitations were there from the first week; they just got worse. My body was shutting down on me, and I didn't even know who I was any more. Sometimes I would cut myself because it would make me feel better, but I wouldn't realize how badly I was hurting myself because I was so high.

I was always paranoid and going to the hospital because my body was so messed up, and they don't do much for you when they know that you're high. They give you Gravol or something and send you home to bed.

WO: How did you finally quit?

Elaine: I left and went to another city. When I came back I relapsed, and the comedown from that was so harsh I went into a spiral of depression. I left again and had a really bad panic attack while I was there, and I ended up in the mental ward at the hospital where they put me on other drugs like Paxil.

WO: Did they help at all?

Elaine: No, I quit those too.

WO: So it was in the interest of not dying or going crazy that you finally stopped?

Elaine: That and what I did to my family. I ruined my family. My parents didn't want to have a relationship with me any more because they couldn't help me; they were helpless.

WO: Any advice for those who are doing crystal, besides stopping, obviously?

Elaine: Force yourself to eat. Your body needs it so badly but you won't realize it. Have someone to watch over you. Even just taking a shower have someone check the temperature of the water so you don't fry yourself, because hot and cold mean nothing when you're too high on crystal.

WO: How can friends and family tell when someone's on a crystal bender?

Elaine: They're constantly doing things; they look busy but really they're getting nothing accomplished. When you try to have a conversation with them they're not actually listening, they're just talking lots. When it gets really bad, they won't make any sense. I've known people to lose the ability to speak properly, even after they quit.

Physically, they're fidgety, their eyes are glossed over, their skin is a lot oilier and they pick at it. It's like a film you can't get rid of. Weight loss is a big thing, and teeth. All the enamel gets eaten away just like the joints in your body. Your joints feel like they're not rotating properly cause they're deteriorating.

WO: What advice would you give to those who are trying to quit crystal?

Elaine: For someone totally addicted, check yourself in. Trying to quit on your own is very hard. Some people say they can do it but very few people have ever quit a drug that way and not relapsed. You need to see someone. You need someone to hold your hand, a shoulder to cry on and someone who understands what you're feeling. It hurts. It physically and mentally hurts.

References:

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Yee Jee Tso is a Vancouver-based actor, musician, and freelance writer.