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Views: The Tip of the Iceberg

Icebergs are dangerous for ships because only 20 percent of the total mass can be seen above the waterline. The classic example is the Titanic, the supposedly unsinkable ship doomed when an iceberg's sub-surface bulk ripped through its side.

In the same way, most people know of at least one other person who has developed a drug or alcohol problem and the symptoms that slowly crept to the surface over time. Drug and alcohol use can be a symptom of multiple problems underneath the visible surface, including a variety of emotional symptoms the person may be self-medicating. A person's substance use can be floating above problems that are 80 percent submerged.

Drug and alcohol use by members of the gay community is staggering as so many people attempt to numb themselves to the myriad psychological attacks against our sense of wellbeing: job discrimination, family pressure to conform, attempts to remain hidden, sexual frustration, lack of social support, and the unattainable 'perfect' gay body.

Initially researchers were finding rampant drug and alcohol abuse among young gay men who were trying to achieve some kind of peaceful, yet fun level while hitting the dance bars. They combated their fear of HIV and AIDS with the numbing effects of club drugs and alcohol. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we find older gay men who feel themselves evolving into complete invisibility within the gay community by middle age. Add to this all those who have lost friends and lovers to AIDS re-entering the social scene, and you have a maelstrom of anxiety and approach-avoidance.

One of the most popular drugs in the gay community is methylene dioxymethamphetamine, otherwise known as Ecstasy. People who use large doses of this drug are often seen carrying water bottles to combat dehydration or pacifiers to ease the strong tremors and jaw grinding that go along with amphetamine abuse. Dehydration makes you extremely ill, and can lead to death.

Ecstasy also depletes the brain of an important neurotransmitter, serotonin. This brain chemical affects mood, appetite, temperature regulation, and sex drive. It is the

alexander renault

primary chemical targeted by prescription antidepressants including Prozac, Celexa, Wellbutrin, Zoloft, and Paxil.

The drug referred to as "Special K" is ketamine, an animal tranquilizer. It has some hallucinatory effects and can induce feelings of euphoria and floating, or feelings of being emotionally disconnected, or stuck in a "K-hole." The latter effect is preferred by some users who wish to avoid painful feelings or who otherwise have an intense desire to escape reality, if only for a few hours.

Heroin use has dramatically increased over the past decade and has become the drug of choice among high school and college students in many parts of the U.S. It is cheaper than ever before and much stronger. Most heroin users begin using the drug intra-nasally ("snorting") but opiate tolerance increases incredibly quickly. Eventually most users turn to an IV method, or "shooting" the heroin directly into the bloodstream (the needle marks are referred to as "tracks.")

Oxycontin is the prescription name for a time-released morphine-based opiate painkiller that is increasing in popularity. Some refer to it as "Beverly Hills heroin," and it is often used intra-nasally, by mouth, or liquefied and injected directly into the bloodstream.

The line between alcohol abuse and dependence is found in a person's ability to control the amount of drinking in which they engage. College students who drink themselves into acute intoxication every weekend are not necessarily alcoholics, but they are certainly abusing alcohol.

The criteria for alcoholism are the inability to control the amounts used, an increase in tolerance (how much you have to drink to reach the desired effects), and the appearance of symptoms of detoxi-

fication when use is discontinued. An expression often heard in rehab circles; "one drink is too many and a thousand isn't enough," refers to the fact that alcoholics cannot drink alcohol and remain sober, or "on the wagon." This is because the trigger of a single sip of alcohol will bring on a full-blown relapse into alcoholism.

Alcoholism within the gay community has been steadily increasing for the past several decades. No one is sure exactly why this is happening but researchers and addictions specialists speculate upon the effects of socio-economic changes, fears revolving around HIV transmission (from barhopping to dating), and the propensity for members of the gay community to structure their social events around alcohol, e.g. bars, dance clubs, and

**A person's
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use can be
floating above
problems
that are 80
percent
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private parties. An important future task will be developing a better understanding of why drug and alcohol addictions remain so prevalent in the gay community, and the development of better strategies to cope with these problems.

The most successful treatment for addictions is the twelve-step method of Alcoholics Anonymous, which has spawned a number of recovery movements such as Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and twelve-step programs for sexual addictions and compulsive eating.

An important word of caution: alcohol detoxification should never be attempted without professional help. Alcohol withdrawal is extremely danger- >>