

Drug use can have social benefits, and acknowledging this could improve rehabilitation

2 April 2018, by Jennifer Power



Young people have reported cultural gains from drug use, such as strengthening social ties and gaining access to social networks. Credit: www.shutterstock.com

Illicit drug use is [often framed](#) in terms of risk and antisocial or criminal behaviour. But drug use is often a highly social activity. For many people, the pleasure of using drugs is about social connection as much as it is about the physical effects.

[A new study](#) aiming to understanding the social benefits of [drug](#) use may help us to improve responses to risky or harmful drug taking.

Pleasure is not just physical

Pleasure is an obvious part of drug use and the [short-term physical benefits](#) are well known. Drugs can produce a "high", give people energy, make them feel good, reduce stress and aid sleep.

The social benefits of drug use are more complex to quantify. But there are now numerous studies

showing people use [alcohol](#) or [other drugs](#) in social settings such as bars, clubs and parties to enhance their interactions with others through increased confidence, greater sociability and less anxiety. For some people this leads to [longer-term benefits](#) such as stronger bonds with friends.

This was shown in recent Australian studies where young people reported cultural gains from drug use, such as strengthening social ties and gaining access to social networks that offered a form of cultural capital.

The social benefits of drug use

"[Party drugs](#)" are those which, as the name suggests, are generally used in a dance party or nightclub setting. This set of drugs often includes MDMA (ecstasy), cocaine, ketamine, gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB), methamphetamine (speed) or crystal methamphetamine (crystal meth or ice).

[Studies](#) have shown people generally use party drugs to give them energy, help them socialise and have fun.

At La Trobe University, we recently conducted a [study](#) which explored party drug use – including use of crystal meth – among Australian gay and bisexual men who are living with HIV. Consistent with what we know about [party-drug use](#), we found the men in our study almost always used party drugs socially – at nightclubs and dance parties or to facilitate sexual pleasure.

More surprisingly, we also found men who were occasional or regular users of party drugs reported significantly better social outcomes than non-users on a range of measures including a higher level of resilience, less experience of HIV-related stigma, and a greater sense of support from other people

living with HIV as well as from their gay and bisexual friends.

This is important because all of these outcomes are strongly associated with [greater emotional well-being](#) among people living with HIV.

We are not claiming this study shows drug-use (in any form) has a direct impact on longer-term well-being. It's also possible people who are resilient and [socially connected](#) are more likely than others to be part of social circles in which drug use is common.

But this study does encourage us to consider the social losses some people might encounter if they stop drug use. [Friendship, connection, intimacy](#) and sex are fundamental to humanity. If these are strongly tied to the social circles in which a person consumes drugs, their social and emotional well-being may suffer if they cease drug use.

For people living with HIV, who may have experienced [HIV-related stigma](#) or rejection by sexual partners, access to social and sexual networks in which they feel accepted may be part of the appeal of [party](#) drugs.

How this can help responses to drug use

Research that explores people's social experiences of drug use can usefully inform harm minimisation or drug cessation programs.

While the [physical effects](#) of a drug may pose risks, the [social settings](#) in which drugs are consumed are not necessarily damaging or dangerous. In fact, they may be quite the opposite, providing a source of friendship, support and happiness for users.

It might be tempting to denounce this with the assertion that the potential health risks undermine any claims to benefit – or that friendships generated through drug use are not genuine. But sense of community and friendship has been successfully harnessed in drug and alcohol harm minimisation campaigns such as the "[Take Care of Your Mates](#)" campaigns directed toward young people.

Focusing on [the social settings in which drug use](#)

[occurs](#) may also be useful for strategies to reduce other risks. For example, [campaigns](#) to promote safer sex among gay men who use crystal meth have focused on venues and parties where "sex on drugs" is common.

Understanding the potential social benefits of drug use may also enhance drug rehabilitation programs. Strategies to help people rebuild [social ties](#), friendships and support networks could be important in supporting long term cessation of drug use.

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