

# Social Life and Mental Health of People Who Use Synthetic and New Psychoactive Substances in Central Asia

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# Community-Led Assessment

The purpose of the **community-led assessment “HIV infection risks, use of health services, and unmet needs of people who use synthetic and new psychoactive substances (SNPS) in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan”** is to improve understanding of synthetic substance users’ behaviors, associated HIV risks, interactions with health services and unmet needs.

A situation and needs assessment conducted among people who use SNPS in Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek and Osh), Kazakhstan (Eastern Kazakhstan and Pavlodar Oblast) and Tajikistan (Dushanbe).

## Objectives:

- Better understand the spectrum of available substances and methods of ingestion of SNPS in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.
- Describe how the use of psychoactive substances fits into the audiences’ daily lives.
- Describe the “journey” that synthetic substance users experience with health care and social services (including but not limited to HIV services).
- Identify and describe contextually specific HIV risks associated with local synthetic drug use practices (both injection and non-injection) to develop targeted interventions and messages addressing the risks.



# Organizers of the Assessment

This community-led qualitative assessment was conducted by the Eurasian Women's Network on AIDS (EWNA, Georgia) in partnership with the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA, Lithuania) and community leaders representing NGO "Spin Plus", Tajikistan; "Forum of People Who Use Drugs in Kazakhstan", Kazakhstan; Women's Network of Key Communities and Public Foundation "Attika", Kyrgyzstan.

# Psychoactive substances and daily life

- The participants reported difficulties in maintaining social skills and connections, and the inability to maintain a social life (planning, working, studying, doing household chores, going to the store, communicating with friends). This is usually caused by mental health issues resulting from substance use.
- In such states, they avoid communication and prefer to be alone, which complicates the process of asking for help, and the possibility of providing and accepting it.
- In order to hide their use of psychoactive substances from their family members, some respondents leave home, sometimes for several days, and spend their nights simply in the entrance of their houses.
  - *"I'm even afraid to go to the store. It seems that everyone around me sees that I am a drug addict." Woman, 23 y. o, Ust-Kamenogorsk*
  - *"I simply stop going to school. I just don't leave the house; I'm lying around at home feeling no meaning in life. It happens that I don't go to school for a month." Woman, 30 y.o, Osh*
  - *"I've been walking around in these clothes for two days, basically, I wash my face, I wash my hands, but I still sweat. When I got on the minibus this morning and you know it was embarrassing! I'm begging for 750 tenge at the station, so that I can buy a ticket. I bought belyash, though I had food at home, I got into a taxi, and these drugs, they stink, as if I hadn't washed for three days. I sat in the entrance all night." Woman, 24 y.o., Pavlodar*
  - *"I don't watch movies and TV, don't listen to music, I stopped communicating with my friends, I fence myself off. Not they fence me off, but I shut them out." Woman, 33 y.o, Ust-Kamenogorsk*

# SNPS and Mental Health

Mental health issues of people who use SNPS certainly require special attention. The vast majority of respondents reported that they had experienced psychosis, sleep disturbances, depression, and suicidal thoughts:

- *“I was depressed. I cried for hours every day. I was leaving the house, smoking salts, coming home and I couldn’t sleep. I could not sleep for three or four days. And at the same time, I was crying, and in general I was very exhausted. I had suicidal thoughts.” Woman, 21 y.o, Bishkek*
- *“It’s not just psychosis, simply no sleep.” Man, 24 y.o, Bishkek*
- *“Aggression. Anger, such a mixture of emotions happens. I've had [suicidal thoughts] once or twice. I sit down, think carefully and then, it turns out, I still need to stay here.” Man, 38 y.o, Osh*
- *“Afraid of my own shadow, they’re standing in the corners everywhere, crawling, that’s all it is. The “speed” is no longer the same. Sleep disturbances, abscesses, psychoses, and all other things.” Man, 39 y.o, Ust-Kamenogorsk*

# SNPS and Mental Health (2)

- Study participants reported phobias associated with open windows – closing the windows so as not to go out the window:
  - *“I definitely need to close the windows. It happened to me, from the 5th floor, I thought about going outside. A friend pulled me out. And recently it also happened, we were sitting, using, we had to close the windows. He got blown up and went towards the window, I pushed him away, closed the windows, there are people like that, they throw themselves out.” Man, 33 y.o, Osh*
  - *“I sit and just understand that when I use, I have such a state of splitting, one voice says: “Go out the window,” another voice says: “Hang yourself.” We were drinking with friends, and I almost went out the window. They stopped me, thank God, but called an ambulance. And the ambulance took me [to drug treatment].” Man, 31 y.o, Osh*
  - *“Some people overuse, others might go out the window. Just a week ago, the young people were renting an apartment there, and a girl jumped from the 3rd floor. She opened the door, went out under speed, under substances. She broke two legs, her collarbone, ribs, in short there was an ambulance, the police.” Man, 41 y.o, Pavlodar*
- In such states, they avoid communication and prefer to be alone, which complicates the process of asking for help, the possibility of providing and accepting it. Social life stops, social connections are cut off:
  - *“There were psychoses. [How did I cope?] Stopped communicating with people when I use.” Man, 23 y.o, Osh*
- They experience a state of despair and hopelessness, a feeling of guilt and self-hatred:
  - *“I don’t remember anything, I don’t understand anything, because my mind is clouded. I can’t even remember my phone number. And my mental health is poor, my physical health is poor. I don’t sleep 24-hour. And also, depression. [suicidal ideation] There was, there was. I think about it every day, because I can’t quit, and I see that in general I’ve already sunk below the baseboard and I just do the damn thing, do it, do it. And I don’t know when all this will end (cries).” Woman, 43 y.o, Dushanbe*
  - *“I’m freaking out, I’m already in trouble... sleep disturbance, depression. I have psychosis, but I’m afraid to kill myself. I want to die than to live like this, that I have psychosis, I’m sick, I’m aggressive.” Woman, 36 y.o, Dushanbe*
  - *“I know this mood. This is a scary thing. I have a feeling of guilt, a feeling of self-hatred.” Woman, 39 y.o, Ust-Kamenogorsk*

# SNPS and Mental Health (3)

- Codependent relationships worsen in couples where both partners use substances:
  - *“When we got hooked on salt, it was like we started going crazy. We fought every day. We fight and break up. I’m sitting at home, and I want salts, but I can’t do it without him. And again, I had to get along with him, put up with him, in order to smoke salts.” Woman, 21 y.o, Bishkek*
  - *“It got to the point where I stripped him completely naked. It seemed to me as if he was hiding from me, he wanted to use it somewhere without me, these were the psychological attacks.” Woman, 33 y.o, Ust-Kamenogorsk*
- Professional help from a narcologist or psychiatrist is rarely sought in the cases of mental health issues; the quality of the assistance provided is assessed differently. This condition is expected to go away on its own:
  - *“I went to our narcologist. [quality of work and attitude of the doctor] As good as possible. She prescribed me medications. I couldn't find these medications anywhere. It turns out they have also become extremely expensive.” Woman, 21 y.o, Bishkek*
  - *“I went to a psychiatrist in narcology. As soon as she found out that I was a user, her attitude literally immediately changed. Raised voice, some disdain...” Woman, 38 y.o, Bishkek*
  - *“I understand that these are consequences of use. I know that in a day it can be removed from the body, that I will feel better. I just have to endure this moment.” Woman, 20 y.o, Osh*

# Assessment follow-up: Example in Kyrgyzstan

The new project, led by the Attika Public Foundation, includes the following integrated mental health services for people who use drugs (along with peer counseling):

- individual consultation with a psychologist (offline and online in Bishkek, online in Osh),
- referral to friendly and SNPS user sensitive psychiatrists and narcologists at the Republican Center for Psychiatry and Narcology (to get a free consultation and prescriptions).



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