

Navigating Holiday Stress



It's no secret the holidays are stressful. The events intended to bring us joy during the season – parties, family reunions, work get-togethers — instead become minefields as we try to deal with intoxicated loved ones, or the uncertainty of how to act around someone in treatment and recovery, or for those of us in recovery, maintaining our own sobriety.

For some, the holidays are the "happiest time of the year," but as chief medical officer of Hazelden, I talk to patients and alums every day worried about relapse during what for most people is actually the most difficult time of the year.

A host of challenges present themselves at this time of year:

- Families can be a strong trigger, especially during the holidays.
- Painful memories of holidays past come to the forefront.
- Social situations offer an abundance of alcohol and days with opportunities to relapse.
- Travel and busy schedules increase overall stress and fatigue and can lead to emotional swings.
- We are often away from our support network and our routines, enhancing a feeling of aloneness and making it harder to "work our program." We also often "beat ourselves up" because we believe we should be happy now that we are sober, but we often actually feel more isolated.

In order to combat these challenging situations, here are some tips for dealing with holiday stress:

- Develop a plan ahead of time, before you get to the party, meal or celebration, always have a way out in case you need it.
- Come up with specific alternatives for the triggers you will inevitably encounter.
- Set clear boundaries for yourself. Learn to say "no" in a way that is comfortable for you. Remember the acronym "HALT" – Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired? This time of year, it is more important than ever that we be in a good place before putting ourselves in trying circumstances and not overextend ourselves.
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Maintain your spirituality. It is critical to take some quiet time each day for relaxation and meditation, even for a few minutes, no matter how busy you are. Holidays may also be a time to evaluate your spirituality and find a personal way to draw support from the spirit of the season. Return the holidays to a spiritual base, and stress the power of unselfish giving.

- Enhance your support system. You need to know and feel that you are not alone. Let others help you realize your personal limits. You might also consider "bringing a buddy" to gatherings. If you are going to a party where alcohol will be present, bring someone along who is in recovery or you feel safe with and will support you.
- Find new ways to celebrate. Create new symbols and rituals that will help redefine a joyful holiday season. You might host a holiday gathering for recovering friends and/or attend celebrations of your Twelve-Step group. Avoid isolation and plan time with people who are not substance users. Don't expose yourself to unnecessary temptations such as gatherings where alcohol is the center of entertainment.
- Release resentments. Resentment has been described as allowing a person you dislike to live in your head, rent free. Resentments that gain steam during the holidays can be disastrous for anyone, especially recovering people.
- "Bookends" are important. Talk with your support system before you go to a holiday party and then have a plan to connect with your support system after the event.

Source: Marvin D. Seppala, MD, is Chief Medical Officer at Hazelden, and an adjunct Assistant Professor at the Hazelden Graduate School of Addiction Studies.

As we approach the holiday season—the time of year from Thanksgiving through New Years when "joy" is the word but not necessarily the reality—it's worth reflecting on ways we can protect ourselves and those we care about from inconvenience and tragedy due to use of alcohol or other mood-changing substances. Start by believing that some measure of holiday joy and fulfillment, provided we are open to it, is available to us all. But stay mindful that if we are not cautious about the use of mood-changing substances, we leave ourselves open to indelible regret. For additional information on *Hope & Caution – for Happy Holidays*, [click here](#).

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