

# Living in Recovery and Avoiding Relapse during the Holidays

The holiday season can be a joyous time, but for those in recovery, it can also be a minefield. High expectations, overcommitment, and fatigue can lead to heightened emotions and mood swings. Travel and busy schedules increase stress. You might be away from your support network and routines, enhancing a feeling of isolation. Holiday customs, memories, and events associated with alcohol or other drug use may tug at you. But there are ways to prepare for this high-risk season and safeguard the greatest gift you ever gave yourself and those you love: your sobriety.

## 1. Plan your support system ahead of time.

Prepare a plan to support and protect your sobriety ahead of key holiday events, whether at work or leisure. This may mean going to a Twelve Step meeting before or after the event, attending the occasion with your sponsor or a friend in recovery, and making sure you can leave at any time and are not dependent on someone else for transportation. It can also include “bookending” the event with planned before-and-after telephone calls to someone in recovery. Limit time in stressful situations or around difficult people and always have an escape plan. Setting up support meetings ahead of time is “money in the bank.” Relapse prevention is about planning . . . recovery planning.

## 2. Understand the emotional complexity of “the holidays.”

Talk with your sponsor, a friend, or a professional counselor about the emotions and expectations you have wrapped up in the holidays. This is called “calculating reality.” The holidays will not be like they were when you were six years old. Everybody will be tired and stressed, possibly depressed, as past holiday disappointments may hang in the air. Know this. Awareness will help you lower expectations and be forgiving of yourself and others. Instead of entering a holiday event on the defensive, orient your thinking to be on the offensive: *What is the next right thing for me to do in this situation?*

It’s also important to be aware that some people are most vulnerable after the holidays. The stress and resentments that may come up over the holidays can lead to rationalization—we can convince ourselves we’re entitled to drink or use—and sometimes as addicts we do better through the crisis than after it. Remember, the disease of addiction is as powerful the day after a holiday as it is the day before.

## 3. Focus on others.

The holidays offer a spiritual opportunity to practice focusing on others with gratitude and joy. Adopting this perspective can take tremendous courage. Because you are in recovery, you have already demonstrated the capacity for tremendous courage and change. Look for ways to think about others. Serve a meal at a homeless shelter. Reach out to a newcomer. Go sledding with children. Spend time with a neighbor who is confined.

### Your gift of sobriety

“The greatest gift you can give yourself, your family, and friends during the holidays is recovery.”

—Heather Burton, MA  
Clinical Director,  
Hazelden

#### 4. Keep track of what you are drinking and steer clear of rationalizations.

At social gatherings, it's generally helpful to have something to drink in your hand so people aren't constantly offering you a drink. Be proactive! Get your own beverage, watch how it is being made, and keep track of it. If you ask someone to get a beverage for you, he or she may forget or not know your situation and bring you an alcoholic drink. If you accidentally pick up the wrong drink and swallow some alcohol, this doesn't mean you will relapse but watch out for rationalizations, which could creep in: *Hmm. I guess I can handle this after all. Perhaps my period of abstinence taught me how to control my drinking.* No. Tell someone who is supportive of recovery about it as soon as possible. A mistake is not a relapse—but it can lead to one if kept a secret.

#### 5. Avoid vulnerable situations.

If you know Aunt Lucy is going to criticize your hair and shoes, avoid her. If Uncle Bob will try to mix you a stiff drink, stay away from him. If you know the office New Year's party is all about alcohol and other drugs, make a brief appearance or don't attend. It is unrealistic to say, "I can soldier through." The lesson of Step One of the Twelve Steps is: You don't have the power. Alone we use. If you have to attend these events, use the helpful tactics covered in this handout. Ask for help.

#### 6. Remember self-care.

Celebrate the holiday season by taking time for yourself. Proper nutrition and physical movement can be extremely helpful. The better you feel physically, the stronger you will be emotionally. Maintain your spirituality. The holidays are a time for reflection and connection with those you love. 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.

#### 7. If you need treatment, consider getting it during the holidays.

Many families mistakenly think the holidays are an inappropriate time for treatment, when actually it's the best time. Their logic is that holidays are a happy time when everyone should be together, even if in reality this is not the case. Addiction generally ramps up over the holidays. The holidays more likely are an emotionally stressful time when use of alcohol or other drugs is prevalent, making it difficult for someone with addiction to avoid use. Treatment initiated during the holidays could be the best gift you give to your family.

Welcome the holiday season with a plan to protect and nurture your sobriety. Your recovery is the true and beautiful gift that keeps on giving.

Addiction is a lifelong disease.  
Make the call of a lifetime.



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800-257-7800

We invite you to call us with questions.  
We are available 24 hours a day.

Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949,  
helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction.

MAT-0632C  
4574-3 (11/13)