

Staying Sober During the Holidays

Objective

To maintain sobriety and avoid relapse during the holiday season.

What to Know

The holiday season is often associated with indulgence and excess. This can lead to problems if you have a substance use disorder. If you are in recovery from alcohol or drug addiction, holiday stress might make it difficult for you to remain sober. In addition to family tension, unfulfilled expectations, overscheduling, and possible financial strain, you might miss support group meeting, or your sponsor might be out of touch. What can you do to maintain your sobriety and avoid relapse? Here are eleven strategies that will help you navigate the holiday season.

1. Plan. Holiday celebrations often involve alcohol, and people will likely offer you a drink—and they might not understand why you prefer to be sober. Prepare yourself for uncomfortable situations and triggering environments. Your plan might include:

- attending a support group meeting before a party
- inviting a sober friend to attend the event with you
- meeting with your sponsor or talking on the phone with a sober friend
- driving your own vehicle to holiday events so you can leave early
- limiting time around stressful situations and difficult people
- paying close attention to relapse triggers (H.A.L.T): Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired
- practicing what you will say to refuse alcohol or other drugs
- having an excuse to leave early, if necessary

2. Examine expectations. Speak with your sponsor or a loved one about the emotions and expectations you have about the holidays—especially if you feel resentful or replay negative memories in your head. If difficult feelings are left unchallenged, the stage is set for relapse.

3. Be of service. Serve a meal at a homeless shelter, volunteer at an animal shelter, or spend time with a homebound elderly neighbor. There are many ways to give back, pay it forward, and be of service.

4. Keep a drink in hand. At family gatherings and social events, hold on to your favorite non-alcoholic drink so people will be less inclined to offer you an alcoholic beverage. Be mindful when you ask someone to get you a drink, because they may misunderstand or forget you are sober. If you accidentally take a sip of an alcoholic beverage, it does not mean you have relapsed.

5. Avoid relapse triggers and traps. During this stressful and overwhelming time of year, if you

know certain people will ask you inappropriate questions or pressure you to drink or use drugs, avoid them. If you know an event will be especially difficult, make a brief appearance or avoid attending altogether. Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful. Saying no is perfectly acceptable and it will protect you.

6. Practice self-care. Care for your body, mind, and soul. Proper nutrition, healthy physical movement, and restorative sleep do wonders for your well-being. The better you feel emotionally and physically, the stronger you will be. Find some quiet time each day for relaxation and meditation.

7. Increase support. Surround yourself with supportive loved ones who will help you remain sober. Commit to attending meetings or support groups, either in-person or online. Schedule appointments with your therapist, counselor, or coach. Add these appointments to your calendar—and keep them. Ask your sponsor and loved ones to regularly check in with you.

8. Establish new traditions. As you affirm your sobriety, you choose to celebrate the new, better, sober life you have created. Perhaps you can host a festive sober gathering with friends in recovery.

9. Focus on the true spirit of the season. Regardless of your faith or spiritual beliefs, the holidays are about giving and gratitude. When you focus on these, resentment, anger, worry, disappointment, guilt, or self-loathing tend to show up less often.

10. Cope with cravings. Write a list of what helps you cope—calling a loved one, reading recovery books, exercising at the gym, praying, taking a hike in nature, and so on. Consider what has worked in the past. If you cannot think of anything, just stay sober for one minute. Then two minutes. Then set an alarm for five minutes and start doing something like folding laundry or baking cookies. When you have managed to get through five minutes, go for ten. Keep increasing the time. Tell yourself you only need to focus on not using right now, this minute, this hour, this day.

11. Consider rehab. If you are struggling and you have relapsed, consider addiction treatment.

Staying clean and sober is possible during the holiday season, and you might actually have an enjoyable holiday season if you focus on the people and activities that strengthen you on your road to recovery.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Who can support you during the holiday season? Write down the names and phone numbers of at least four people.

Write down some ways you can practice self-care. Be specific.

What are some triggers and traps you expect during the holiday season?

What can you do to be of service?

What has helped you cope with cravings in the past?

Next, examine what you have written down and the eleven suggestions above. Create your holiday plan to remain sober.

Share your plan with your sponsor or counselor. Who can hold you accountable?

Next, use the following chart to record what you do to maintain sobriety during the holiday season. Note the date, the event or activity, what you did to maintain your sobriety, and how you felt afterwards. Write down if you followed your holiday plan.

Date	Event or activity	What did you do?	How did you feel after?	Stick with plan? Y / N

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
