

Holiday Relapse Prevention

A challenge that often appears this time of the year is increased substance use during the holiday season. For some, the holidays may bring the emotional stress of family conflict, trauma, financial concerns, and loneliness. If you are not well equipped to manage these stressors, you may resort back to poor coping strategies, like substance use. It is very important to be prepared.

- 1. Identify triggers and warning signs. Limit triggers.** – Recognize your triggers, i.e. stress, environment, or certain people. Do this for your substance use and distressful emotional states such as anxiety, depression etc. Complete a Relapse Prevention Plan.
- 2. Address basis needs.** It is important to take care of food, sleep, and mood first in order to manage your triggers.
- 3. Set boundaries.** If you anticipate boundaries being tested during this holiday season, you should consider rehearsing responses. Rehearse how you will decline alcoholic beverages or substances and practice how you will respond to questions about your recovery that you are not ready to answer.
- 4. Be intentional about the invitations you accept.** During the holidays people celebrate in a variety of ways. It is acceptable for you to say “No, thank you” to invitations, customs, or practices that are unhealthy for you. Your peace of mind is important and can be maintained by saying yes to celebrating in ways, and with people, that are supportive of your sobriety or recovery.
- 5. Create a plan.** It is important to plan ahead if you plan to be around family, friends, or colleagues that may encourage you to drink or misuse drugs or create stressful situations for you. Start each day with a plan to prevent relapse. This could include bringing an accountability person to holiday events, bringing your own safe foods or drinks to gatherings, or creating an exit plan should you find yourself in an unhealthy situation.
- 6. Engage in healthy self-care.** Pick up a new, healthy activity this holiday season so you do not revert back to old patterns. Being intentional helps to make your self-care a priority.
- 7. Seek a support system.** If you are part of a support group, make the time to engage in more meetings during the holiday season! It is important to build and regularly engage in healthy relationships. Attend groups, AA/NA meetings. Visit online meetings and identify the ones you feel comfortable with.
- 8. Marathon meetings.** If you are a 12-step member – find out what 12-step clubhouses in your area are providing marathon meetings or get-togethers during holiday season.
- 9. Try something new!** You may be accustomed to spending holidays engaging in addictive behaviors or isolating. As a result, there may be many novel events that can become annual traditions. While avoiding triggers is a good beginning, perhaps more context can be added to create a more rich and meaningful season that could weaken the desire to use substances. For

example, framing holidays as ways to experience novel situations and engage in activities with sober friends – such as – cooking meals together, watching holiday movies or sporting events, and experiencing nature etc., could be incredibly helpful during this stressful time. And, if family is not conducive to your recovery, remember your spiritual family can be whoever you want.

- 10. Connect with sober contacts.** During these very stressful times, it is important to maintain connections to others in sobriety. It may be helpful to remember that reaching out for help is not only an act of vulnerability that benefits you directly, but also can be viewed as an act of service to those you are contacting. Don't be afraid to reach out! Attend groups, attend meetings.
- 11. Practice mindfulness, relaxation techniques and meditation.** Numerous studies have shown that mindfulness practice can be a protective factor against drug craving and problematic behaviors. Mindfulness aids in remaining in the present moment and allows you to calm your mind from the thoughts of the stressors associated with the holiday season.
- 12. Be prepared to express and deal with grief.** Identify troubling thoughts of grief and loss and proactively discuss with someone and plan an activity to express the remembrance.
- 13. Identify troubling thoughts.** Be aware of thoughts that center on negative emotions such as loneliness, rejection, loss, fear, anger etc. and work on positive thinking.
- 14. Do something charitable.** Volunteer, reach out to elderly or ill. You will both be rewarded.
- 15. Be aware of your finances.** Assure rent is paid, money is available for needs etc. Be proactive.
- 16. Write a gratitude list and offer thanks.** List what you are grateful for daily and place them on your list.