



Issue #012:

SUPPORTING THOSE IN RECOVERY DURING THE HOLIDAYS



It's the time of year where invitations to gather with family, friends and co-workers are often plentiful. Seasonal celebrations and holidays can be wonderful times for people to come together. Families, workplaces and community organizations often host events that can be fun to attend, but they can also be sources of stress for many people. For someone in recovery, the memories and celebrations attached to the season can be particularly challenging as they often include tempting environments and social scenarios that may create conditions that increase the risk of relapse. Here, we offer advice on supporting those in recovery during this time and making them feel safe, secure and well connected to family and people within their communities.

How to support someone in recovery?

Being in recovery is a permanent state for the individual and the people who are supporting them. If you are involved with someone who is recovering from an addiction, here are some principles to live by: ¹

- **Addiction is a disease.** This is important to understand as someone who is supporting an addict. It means knowing you are not supporting someone with a character flaw or who is morally impaired. Addiction is both a medical and psychological disorder, and long-term use of drugs and/or alcohol can physically change the size and structure of brain cells. This in-turn changes the individual's ability to manage their impulses related to substance use and abuse. Being angry at the disease itself is understandable, but anger or blaming the individual is not helpful in supporting their continued recovery.
- **Learn to recognize the signs of relapse.** Depending on their drug of choice, or addictive behaviour, relapse signs may vary. Notice when the individual may seem off, especially if that off feeling persists. Educate yourself about their addiction, and do not be afraid to speak up.



- **Listen.** Be there to support and listen when needed. This can mean picking up the phone no matter what time of day, answering all texts, or just hearing what they have to say when they need to talk. You do not have to “fix” anything. The simple act of listening is often well received and a big help.
- **Engage in healthy habits with them.** Being there to show positive lifestyle changes can help those in recovery feel better. Small things like making better meal choices, or becoming active through physical or leisure activities are all positive lifestyle choices. Be sure to avoid places or actions that could cause relapse.
- **Be supportive.** Helping an individual to get to their recovery meetings and/or support groups, or attending with them, can help to show that you are there for them. This can help to keep individuals accountable for showing up and provides an opportunity to demonstrate support for recovery.
- **Be patient.** Recovery isn't easy. Changes won't happen overnight. Relapse can occur and an individual in recovery may not always be wholly focused or happy about living in sobriety. This is normal! Sticking through the ups and downs can help to get through whatever distractions or obstacles may occur as the individual grows into their new life in recovery. Remind them to take care of themselves throughout recovery.

Treatment and therapy are key components of the critical support needed to re-establish the baseline of feeling well, which leads to healing, but there are also actions individuals can undertake to complement and encourage sustainable recovery.

The process of recovering helps individuals find the parts of themselves that were lost; helps them learn about what makes them strong and where they are most vulnerable; encourages them to accept support from the people they care about; and shows them ways they can create a life focused on positive interactions.

Especially around the holidays, there is often added pressure to attend many, if not all, of the events we've been asked to attend. But, sometimes there are simply too many things going on. It's totally fine for someone in recovery to pick some, or even no events to attend, based on how they feel and where they are in their recovery journey. Their number one responsibility is to their health and well-being.

So, you need to keep in mind, the main principle guiding their social calendar is: What is healthiest for them, and what's best for their sobriety.

It would be great if people treated addictions the way they treat allergies – with sensitivity, understanding and extra effort to make sure that the person you care about is in a safe and supportive environment. Small steps can lead to big changes. The first step they need to take is focusing on themselves.

Create an action plan.

The next few steps that someone you care about takes are about acknowledging their feelings and addressing their anticipation. You need to spend time thinking about what could happen to them at these events and what is going to help them feel good and be confident so that they can keep their promise to stay sober.

Here are four strategies you can use to think this through with the individual:

- **Remind them to be honest with themselves.**

Take a few minutes to consider how they are feeling about their recovery at this point in time. What words come to mind? Are they feeling strong? Would you say they are vulnerable? Perhaps they're excited? Or anxious? Or maybe they're nervous? What are the strengths and tools that can aide someone you care about, during this period?

- **Ask that they be realistic about how these events can possibly make them feel.**

Look at all of these occasions and instead of thinking about what's in it for me, think about what and how the person you care about could be impacted. Interacting with family, friends and co-workers can be exhausting and stressful, making them more susceptible to going along with whatever you are doing. They need to stay focused, fed and well rested, so their decision-making is clear and confident. When they're tired, hungry and distracted, it's easier for them to be persuaded to abandon their plan.

- **Be kind to them. Guilt-free.**

Give them permission to bow out when they're not sure how an event will go. Don't ever make them feel pressured or obligated to show up to each and every occasion they might be invited to. Remind them to be kind enough to themselves to figure out what the purpose of the occasion is from their point of view. It's all about perspective. If they are struggling with finding a meaning that feels right, then let them take a pass. Remind them that they don't need to offer a lengthy explanation.

- **Be aware of their triggers and be ready to act.**

Knowing how the individual tends to react when they encounter one of their triggers improves your ability to help them avoid such scenarios. Face it: these could come up when you least expect them and be related to times of day, places, people or situations. Realize that these feelings and temptations are associations and also that they will pass. Remind them cravings are emotions that the brain uses to tell us how to behave. ² Cravings usually only last about 20-30 minutes, and then they diminish. While they're at their most intense during that period, you can help them redirect their thinking. Get a change of scenery and go for a walk with them, try finding a quiet place for them to meditate or focus on deep breathing.

Making Plans for Social Events.

- **Help them set goals and times.**

Arrive early and be prepared to leave early too if you find that the person you care about is having a difficult time being around people who are drinking. As parties go on longer, people tend to drink more and become more relaxed and take things in a different direction. Leaving before things get wilder isn't a bad thing. This can help them gain control so they will not have any next-day regrets.

- **Consider bringing their own beverages (BYOB).**

Sometimes you can bring your own drinks to be sure you have complete control of what you and the people you care about are consuming. You won't have to worry about anyone accidentally making a drink for them that is going to trigger a setback in their recovery.

- **Use the buddy system.**

Be that someone they can trust and can rely upon to recognize a situation that may be developing. Distract them and intervene if something goes wrong. Being their buddy, you should be completely sober: no drinking, smoking or using drugs. You are going to act as their advocate.

- **Let them be the one who others lean on.**

Having responsibility for others can sometimes help reduce the stress they are feeling. Why not suggest they consider offering to be the designated driver for a group of people? It's a role that everyone will understand is essential and not question their motivations or actions. As the driver, they'll also be able to leave whenever they want to.

Creating a Healthy Support System.

Having them surround themselves with positive, supportive people can make a big difference in ensuring they continue moving forward on a sustainable recovery path. Being able to recognize earlier challenges they have overcome, and speaking with others about it, helps develop strength and gives them a chance to reflect upon how far they have come in their recovery.

Here are 3 of the most important things that will help someone you care about through recovery during the holidays:

- Ensuring they take the time to take a break when they need it.
- Remembering how important exercise and proper nutrition are to their strength.
- Staying connected to their social circle for support and encouragement.

Having a greater awareness of what it's like to feel well from positive influences will mean they can develop a sense of the symptoms they may experience if they are feeling unwell. Helping them recognize those symptoms and using these tools is a supportive way to help them stay on course as they recover, and help them learn when they may need to call for targeted, professional care.

What to do if they experience a slip or lapse.

Addiction and relapse are not only about the substances, but also about the emotional voids that someone is trying to fill. Relapse is often a part of the recovery journey, but the emotional responses it can incite can be devastating.

Don't let them get stuck. And don't be too hard on them. If you find they are feeling hopeless, humiliated or guilty, remind them to be open to finding hope again. Help them work through any anger or fear and find the courage to be honest and begin addressing the underlying issues that caused them to slip. Remind them that with determination and a little help, they can find their way again.

When needed, remind them to seek social support from you and other people they trust and seek professional help when they need it.

If you or someone you care about have questions about addiction and/or recovery options, speak to your primary physician or a qualified medical practitioner, local agencies within your community, or contact your Employee Family Assistance Program for the options available to you.

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2. Heshmat, S. Ph.D. Why Cravings Occur. Cravings and Trigger factors. Psychology Today. (January 7, 2015). Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201501/why-cravings-occur>



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