



Why Are The Holidays So Difficult For Individuals With An Addiction Disease?

Perhaps the biggest cause of relapse during the holidays is stress. Food and alcohol are central to most holiday celebrations as it is, and food and alcohol are among the most common forms of addiction. It is common for people to cope with stress by turning to food, which can more than simply add a few pounds and inches to the waistline for binge eaters. Stress can also be a trigger for drug and alcohol abuse and relapse. Holidays can be overwhelming for recovering addicts, especially those who have newly minted sobriety. Increased use of drugs and alcohol are the main causes for the higher rates of suicide, violence, automobile accidents, and overdoses during holidays as compared to other days in the year.

Christmas and New Years are the holidays most likely to trigger relapse, as they're celebrated during the vaunted "holiday season." Expectations tend to be highest during this time: having friends and family to spend Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Eve with; buying the ideal gifts for loved ones, and those that fit within your sometimes-meager budget; going into debt if those gifts you purchase don't fall within your financial plan; and being surrounded by advertising and other visual and auditory stimuli implicitly and explicitly promoting the expectation of joy and happiness on the general public.

People with a tendency towards isolating might be more prone to do so during the holiday season as a means to escape the daily reminders that they are not "insiders" or "normal." When it seems like the vast majority of the world's population is immersed in the spirit of the season and connecting and reconnecting with those near and dear to their hearts, the isolator may see his life may seem empty and hollow by comparison. Holidays tend to be reminders for those lacking strong familial connections that they are unable to partake in holiday festivities in the ways that are generally expected, bringing copious amounts of depression, anxiety, and sadness in the process.

Not having close family and friends to rely on during the holidays can also be a major factor in relapse, as family can often be the support system addicts turn to in times of stress and vulnerability. It is recommended that those in recovery exercise the utmost caution to avoiding negative stressors that may trigger relapse. Keeping up with hobbies and constructive activities is another good way to avoid holiday relapse, assuming you have any to fall back on. It is hard to imagine anyone sustaining recovery without such interests to occupy his or her time. Whether it is knitting, golf, music, gardening, genealogy, walks on the beach, cycling, flying kites, drawing or painting, reading, or any other activity that stimulates your interest in a non-destructive way, hobbies can be an invaluable distraction from the stressors most likely to cause relapse.

The time from Thanksgiving to New Year's can be an especially stressful time for those in recovery, particularly those who are newly sober. But you don't have to shut yourself off from life and become a hermit for three months for fear of falling into relapse. There are safe and sober alternatives. Knowing the five holiday stressors that lead to relapse is the first step in preparing a holiday action plan to keep you safe and sober in recovery.

Parties

During the holiday season, it seems like everyone is partying, decorating, arranging for guests, sending out invitations, stocking up on food and alcohol. Just knowing that there's an annual office party or the family gets together for a blow-out holiday bash is enough to send stress levels higher. Add to this the knowledge that drugs and alcohol are likely to be present, a party atmosphere serves as a trigger and you associate party attendance with past use and you know that this is a holiday stressor you need to deal with. One study found that stress-related drug craving and associated psychobiological response in the laboratory are predictive of subsequent cocaine relapse in abstinent cocaine-dependent individuals.

Financial

Crowded stores, holiday gift lists, extra bills that you know will come due post-holidays all take a toll on your ability to manage stress during this time. For those new to recovery, having successful coping skills may mean the difference between succumbing to financial stress and relapsing because of it or staying the course and not getting over your head with respect to money. Avoid the tendency to buy expensive gifts or agree to any financial obligations that could come back to haunt

you. Australian researchers found that ex-smokers with more financial stress were more likely to relapse.

Emotional

The holiday season is one of the most stressful times of the year when it comes to emotional turmoil. Feelings of shame, guilt, humiliation, embarrassment, anger and depression may be associated with this period. Many people in recovery report they experience increased anxiety with respect to triggers and cravings during the holidays.

Family Conflict

Being in close contact with family members is another hot-button stressor during the holiday season. Coupled with the likelihood that alcohol will be served during family get-togethers or parties and the outlook is not promising for maintaining your sobriety. Old wounds may be reopened when family members drink, with resulting increase in conflict that may get out of hand — not the least of which is the urge to drink or use just to escape it, likely a coping method used in the past.

Disruption in Schedules, Time Demands

With so many people busy with holiday parties, taking time off from work and schedules taking a backseat to holiday plans, is it any wonder that your normal routine will be disrupted? With work schedules jammed due to deadlines to meet before everyone takes off for a break, therapists or sponsors going out of town, increased demands from your spouse, partner or other family members, and your own inability to say no when asked to do something, schedule disruptions and demands on your time can put serious stress on your sobriety. It is also likely to affect your regular meeting attendance, exercise routine, even healthy eating patterns.