Parents: How to Support Your Child's Recovery from Addiction during the Holidays

The holiday season can be a minefield for youth in recovery—and for their parents. Everybody is under increased stress because of high expectations, added chores, travel, and busy schedules. Parents can be pulled away from their Al-Anon support network, and the recovering child can be distracted from regular Twelve Step meetings, triggering or enhancing feelings of isolation. Fatigue can lead to emotional mood swings for parent and child. Customs, memories, and events often associated with alcohol or other drug use tug at those in recovery, tempting relapse. But there are ways for everyone to prepare and safeguard the greatest gift your child will ever have: sobriety.

1. Start with your own recovery plan

You may naturally be on heightened alert for a relapse by your child, but the focus needs to be on you. Prepare a plan to support and protect your appropriate detachment and to avoid codependent behaviors. Remember the saying: "You didn't cause your child's addiction. You can't control it. You can't cure it." Prearrange check-ins with your Al-Anon friends. Know ahead of time that you are vulnerable to disappointment. After all, because of the holidays, you may be emotionally and financially spent—the perfect conditions for failed expectations. The biggest gift you can give your child is to take care of yourself.

With a recovering son or daughter, your approach to the holidays needs to change

"Recovery during the holidays is having a plan. It's about openly discussing fears, apprehensions, schedules, expectations, and how we handle certain people."

—Paul Anderson
Program Supervisor
Hazelden's Adolescent and Young Adult Services

2. Before the holidays, establish a contract with your addicted child

Head off a blow-up by establishing mutually agreed upon rules, expectations, and check-ins. Use these check-in times to talk about feelings and communicate how you can support your child. These check-ins should be private and safe times away from holiday guests or relatives. Make sure you have the truth in hand and don't exaggerate. Your child, in terms of moral and ethical development, is finely tuned into what is "fair." This contract will help you avoid picking a fight in the middle of a holiday dinner.

3. Rethink gifting

Your recovering child may not have a part-time job or money to purchase gifts. This can be a source of shame. As the parent, you can help by creating a new family tradition around gifting. When the family is together, you could each share what the gift of recovery has given to you. It's okay for you as the parent to say things such as, "I used to walk on eggshells waiting for your emotional outburst." And it is okay for the child to admit, "I used to manipulate everybody. I stood apart from my family. Now I want to rebuild broken family relationships." These honest admissions are healing gifts.

4. Be thoughtful about what role alcohol plays during holiday events

Your holiday tradition may have been to serve alcohol at family gatherings. The decision to do so now is a difficult one. Your child's addiction does not mean that you should forgo alcohol, but you could shift the focus onto something more meaningful. For example, a new family tradition could be to center the meal on a prayer of thankfulness (with each person contributing) rather than a toast. If extended family is present, and you know that Uncle Jake overindulges (and then wants to pour drinks for everybody), have a plan for both you and your child to deal with (or avoid) this situation.

5. Encourage your addicted child to connect with his or her sponsor and sober friends

Prearranged get-togethers between your child and his or her sponsor can be a source of boundless support during the holidays. You can even be part of a discussion between your child and his or her sponsor about formulating an escape plan if situations deteriorate. During the long holiday recess, give your son or daughter alternatives to parties that young friends are having with alcohol and other drugs. Open your home to your child's sober network of friends and encourage them to spend time together playing games.

6. Look for ways to focus on others

Alcoholics and addicts can be self-focused by nature. The holidays offer a spiritual opportunity to practice focusing on others with gratitude and joy. This change of perspective takes tremendous courage. Look for ways of "focusing on others" as a family. Serve a meal at a homeless shelter. Spend time with a neighbor who is confined. Help distribute gifts to the less fortunate. You could encourage your addicted child to write holiday letters to people who have supported the journey to sobriety. These letters of gratitude help the addicted young person turn the focus away from self to others.

Universally, young people who are in treatment tell us that through sober eyes, the world looks very different. What they most notice is how much of life they have missed—including the true joy of the holidays. These plans and new celebration traditions can't guarantee sobriety, but they will help influence positive outcomes at what tends to be a very stressful time.

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

Hazelden®

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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-0632F
4574-7 (11/13)