

## **The Sober Holiday De-Stress Plan**

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During the holiday season, more people drink to excess, and often drive impaired, adding up to a dangerous season. There are more social occasions, and more stress as social and financial obligations and deadlines for shopping mount. The holiday season can seem like a minefield for those in recovery from alcohol or chemical dependence.

Those in early recovery may be most at risk for relapse, but holiday stress can trigger anxiety, depression and even relapse for many. How to survive and even thrive through it all takes a little planning.

Not all coping strategies are right for everybody. Some people in recovery will need to ditch the family traditions altogether, while others can bring new traditions to supportive family settings.

Are you worried about going to a party where there is alcohol served and many guests will be drinking? Non-alcoholic beverages are always available, even if it is water, so you can graciously accept the offer of a drink without alcohol.

If alcohol has “taken the edge off” anxiety in past social situations, and you are in recovery, plan to attend the event with someone who is a good psychological support, often someone in successful recovery.

If you know the event will act as a trigger, you don’t have to attend. Both people and environments can be triggers. Old drinking buddies aren’t likely to be supportive of sobriety, so avoid meeting them, especially at an old gathering place. Call your sponsor if temptation haunts you.

### **New Traditions**

When dysfunctional family gatherings threaten your emotional stability and peace of mind, maybe it’s time to make this the year to start new traditions. If holidays of the past revolved around drinking, ask people who support you to help you with this challenge. Introduce new activities, like board games, and outings like skiing, concerts, viewing holiday lights, taking a sleigh ride or horse-drawn carriage ride, a lunch at a festive place, a holiday movie or even a hike.

- Plan social events with others in recovery
- Attend recovery support meetings.

- Meet a friend or friends regularly for coffee and a chance to chat.
  - Holiday gift giving: make a list and carefully choose presents rather than impulsively over-spend.
  - Make cookies with a friend.
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- Give cookies to neighbors or friends.
  - Plan a trip

One of the largest recovery communities in the U.S. is located in South Florida. Hanley Center, West Palm Beach Florida, offers the largest single resource for recovery books, CDs and DVDs in its Serenity bookstore. Visitors can also relax with coffee from the adjoining café. <http://www.hanleycenter.org>.

Does your holiday card list stretch into infinity? Sometimes it feels great to write a note to people you don't ordinarily see, and sometimes card writing is just too much. So don't do it this year if it feels too stressful.

### **Take care of yourself**

- Cravings for sweets often replace cravings for alcohol, so beware of the office holiday treats. This is the time to maintain a routine of healthy eating. How about keeping healthier snacks at work and at home.
- Have a massage, a manicure or a pedicure.
- Join a health club or the YMCA for company and motivation for a healthy exercise routine. If climate is a problem, go to an indoor shopping mall for a brisk walk. Treat yourself to a latte afterwards.

### **Keep up your stamina: exhaustion is emotional**

Have you noticed that when you're really tired, emotions can run high? It is when we easily become frustrated with others, are generally crabby or teary to downright depressed, Get some rest and quality sleep. Take a restorative nap on Sunday afternoon if you need to.

### **Reset your holiday expectations**

Remember the core message of letting go? We cannot control events or other people, even if they create stressful situations. We can control our own actions and responses.

The family dinner with some difficult people may present an event to miss or at least plot your coping strategy (don't engage in a lose-lose argument, for example, or pare down the list of folks to get together with).

Did spending on big parties play a huge part of holidays in the past? Celebrating can be a walk under the stars, snuggling by the fire and cherishing grandchildren.

### **Relax**

Breathe! Meditation has actually been proven to calm anxiety and change emotions. It can launch a more creative approach to the day, calm a bout of anxiety, or help initiate a restful night's sleep. Meditation doesn't require a rigorous skill set. It can be learned with simple techniques beginning with deep breathing. Start with a CD or instruction book, or a class. Relaxation techniques and guided imagery are also useful.

### **What if I'm alone for the holidays?**

- Go to meetings –many AA groups have more meetings than usual during the holidays.
- Volunteer to help out at a local charity like a church or shelter that sponsors Christmas dinners.
- Visit with residents at a senior care center.
- Consider a trip to visit a loved one or good friend

### **Head off the Blues**

- Write out a gratitude list of blessings.
- Carry a list of people to call when you need support.
- Watch a movie you find funny, like Christmas Vacation, or Planes, Trains and Automobiles.
- Attend meetings
- Get professional help if the mood or symptoms like insomnia or listlessness persist

Congratulate yourself on sobriety, day by day.