

Tips for a Sober Holiday

compiled by Eileen Grady, November, 2021

In all the commotion of the holiday season, it can be easy for those of us in recovery to feel alone in our journeys. If you too feel like you are the only one not drinking at a party, the only one not bringing in a boozy new year, the only one trying to figure out how to stay sober during the holidays, we want you to know that you are not alone. Today, about one in every 12 American adults is battling a substance addiction. Whether you can see it or not, there are millions of people in recovery facing very similar challenges: to pass up that glass of wine, to stay sane amidst the stresses of the holiday season, and to keep their commitment to sobriety while old friends and family members return home. And with the right steps taken, you too can keep sober during the holidays.

You'll just need a bit of preparation and a good dose of dedication to get through until January. Here are some tips.

Increase support

We can get overwhelmed with so much going on, so as you plan each day in November and December, start with 12-step support as your first priority. This could mean bookending a holiday event: make a phone call to someone in recovery before and after the event. Or during! You can call your sponsor from the bathroom, if necessary. Commit to attending a 12-step meeting—or two—each day and inviting a friend to attend with you. If you're traveling to another city, identify meetings there ahead of time, and/or pick up a phone or video chat meeting.

Ask your sponsor: Is this event a good idea?

Some families are abusive or otherwise toxic. Early in sobriety may not be the time to spend a week with alcoholic relatives.

It's possible to put in an appearance at many celebrations, but just stay for a little while, and that may be what you need. Have your own transportation, or an agreement with someone

else to get a ride home whenever you decide to leave.

Know your triggers; respect your limits

As a part of your recovery plan, it is important to know how to cope with those relapse triggers that the holidays so often bring. Manage them as they arise, so that you do not find yourself face-to-face with relapse. If you encounter a familiar, dangerous situation, walk away. If you feel yourself getting frustrated or lonely in your sobriety, talk to someone you trust. If you feel physically or mentally exhausted, get some rest to try and quiet any uneasiness. Properly taking care of yourself—physically, mentally, and emotionally—can help you avoid a relapse.

Take a break

You may need to step outside, take a walk by yourself, or duck into the bathroom to call your sponsor. Do whatever it takes to maintain your sobriety.

Bring a friend who also doesn't drink

You may want to join in on the holiday festivities, but at the same time feel concerned about getting carried away. Being surrounded by others who are drinking, and possibly encouraging you to drink as well, can be immensely triggering and dangerous to your sobriety.

A supportive friend or family member who is also celebrating sober can help you have fun and finish out the night without a drink. If things become overly challenging or stressful, a good friend can help you know when it's time to walk away—and be there with you when you do.

Keep a non-alcoholic drink in your hand

If it's one of your first sober holiday parties, you may be a bit anxious about having to decline drinks or talk about your recovery. To avoid excessive explanations or denials, simply carry a drink of choice in your hand—virgin eggnog, water, coffee, whatever you prefer. This way you will most often avoid the question altogether. And if someone does offer you a glass of wine, you can easily turn it down by saying, “No, thank you, I'm all set.”

If you accidentally pick up the wrong drink and swallow some alcohol, this doesn't mean

you will automatically relapse. But watch for any rationalizations that could creep in: “Hmm, I guess I can handle alcohol in social situations after all. Perhaps my period of abstinence taught me how to control my drinking.” Do not go down that road! Instead, tell someone who understands recovery about your experience as soon as possible. A mistake is not a relapse—but it can lead to one if kept secret.

Practice self-care

Celebrate the holiday season and the fullness of your sober life by taking time for yourself. Proper nutrition, gentle exercise, and restorative sleep can do wonders for your well-being. The better you feel physically, the stronger you will be emotionally. Nourish your spirit, too, through personal reflection and connection with those you love. Find some quiet time each day for relaxation and meditation—if only for a few minutes, no matter how busy you are. Let your spirit be your guide.

Be of service

The holidays offer powerful opportunities for spiritual growth by sharing your gratitude and joy with others. Connecting with others in this way can be a new experience that takes courage. But because you're in recovery from active addiction, you've already demonstrated the capacity for tremendous courage and change. Keep strengthening your recovery. Look for ways to be of service to others: reach out with hospitality to a newcomer at a meeting, spend time with a neighbor who is confined, serve a meal at a homeless shelter. There are a million different ways to give back, pay it forward, and be of service. Doing so will take you out of yourself, and keep self-pity at bay.

Don't be afraid to talk about your recovery

Sobriety and recovery are losing the stigma they once carried. Most people know someone who has battled addiction. Of course, it is your choice whether you want to talk about your journey: just know that you do not have to be afraid of doing so. By being open about it, you will likely gain more support and encouragement from family and friends than you ever imagined. You may even inspire others to take the leap in their own efforts to get

sober. If you want to tell just a selected, trusted number of people about your sobriety, that can be beneficial too. By doing so, you will gain some accountability, as well as a small support system for your sober holidays.

If you relapse, reach out

Despite your best efforts, you may experience a relapse over the holiday season. It can be incredibly difficult to be open about this, and you might feel disappointed, ashamed, or even hopeless about your recovery. As painful as it is, relapse is a common aspect of recovery. The key to getting back on track is not trying to hide it, but being honest about it and reaching out for additional support.

Connect as soon as you can with your addiction counselor or sponsor and let them know what happened. They will know how to help you process the relapse, and how to guide you through the next steps. You may also want to reach out to trusted friends or family to talk to them and gain support. Dependency thrives in secrecy. Stay on the path to recovery by opening up and getting help.

If you're feeling as though you are on the brink of relapsing, or you have already experienced a relapse, you may want to consider checking yourself into an inpatient rehab facility for some comprehensive and professional support while you regain your recovery. Many people find that the specialized attention and care they get during an inpatient experience strengthen their recovery, giving them new tools for coping with challenging situations and building healthy habits.