

Holiday Survival Guide for families with alcoholics & addicts in them **by Steve Danzig LMSW-CC, LADC, CCS**

Despite the holly, jolliness portrayed in all of our favorite holiday songs and movies, the holidays are actually a time of great stress and anxiety, especially if there is a recovering alcoholic or addict in the family. Family members of the person in recovery often feel an overwhelming sense of impending calamity as the holidays approach. There is a constant worry that the recovering alcoholic/addict may give into temptation, get drunk or high, and embarrass themselves and us. There is the concern that if an extended family member visiting pushes the buttons of the person in recovery by making some kind of remark about their past drinking/drugging that there will be World War III. There is the fear that if other family members are drinking it may trigger the recovering alcoholic/addict to want to use too. Consequently, many families often find themselves walking on eggshells trying not to instigate any issues which may contribute to a relapse, binge, or increase in drinking/using behavior by the alcoholic/addict in the family. In doing so, families can spend a great deal of time catering to the users needs, desires, and sometimes demands in an effort to maintain peace at any price. In turn, this may cause anger and resentment in the family members that do not have a problem with drugs or alcohol, perpetuating the “black sheep” persona of the alcoholic/addict.

Now imagine how the alcoholic/addict is feeling. Those in recovery may not see their family members much throughout the year, so there is increased anxiety when they know they are about to spend so much time with them. Some of their anxiety is caused by the increased availability of alcohol at family holiday parties which can be frustrating since they can no longer safely drink without consequence. Some of it is caused by the fear that their family members will second-guess or question their recovery which can be hurtful. And lastly, there is the anxiety that when the whole family gets together, they will fall back into their traditional familial roles. For a person in recovery, they are no longer that person and being forced by their family back into that box can be quite uncomfortable, especially if that box was labeled “black sheep” or “screw-up” of the family. Then there is the guilt at having to face people that may have been hurt during a time when the alcoholic/addict was active in their addictive behaviors. And if traveling away from home, there is the additional anxiety of being away from their recovery support network such as AA meetings they are familiar with and/or their AA sponsor.

Family dynamics are complex in nature to begin with and when an alcoholic/addict is added to the mix it can become even more so. It is no wonder that alcoholism and addiction are issues that affect the entire family in one way or another. And that those issues can be amplified during holidays when there is the added stress of trying to have a “perfect” family holiday get-together. But with a little bit of communication and planning, those worries & anxieties can be minimized.

My advice to the family members of the person in recovery is simple – be yourself and use common sense. Being yourself means enjoying yourself. If that proves to be difficult because you are worried or fearful about the person in recovery, then have a PRIVATE conversation with them about your feelings. Better communication can dramatically

change the tone of the holidays events for when we face our worries and fear, they tend to lose their power of us and we are then free to relax more. Using common sense means either limiting the alcohol available at your holiday parties or simply minimizing its importance. For example, instead of having a full bar set-up, have some alcohol located in one area where people who wish to drink it can find it but where it is not so flamboyantly on display.

My advice to people in recovery is to have an escape plan ready. Being around family, family issues, and alcohol can prove to be too much stress. There is no shame or embarrassment in admitting that to yourself. It is ok to be uncomfortable in these situations because it may be representative of the causes of your addictive behavior. Your recovery, your life, and your health are the most precious thing you have - and you should guard it as such. Therefore, I recommend that you always have your own vehicle so that if you need to leave you can. In addition, have an exit buddy. Prior to going to any family function, have a trusted buddy that will stick with you. Have a code word/phrase with that buddy. And if it gets to be too much, then you and your buddy can both leave together. That way you can avoid the pressure to stay and/or the appearance of looking like the bad guy. Lastly, know where there are AA meetings wherever you will be so that you can get to one if you need one. Add additional AA meetings if you find you need more support than usual. Similarly, bring phone numbers of your AA comrades wherever you go so that you can call them if you need to talk to someone. For many, it helps to “bookend” a family function with some healthy recovery support. “Bookending” means calling an AA friend before you go to the family function to give you some moral support and then after leaving the family function, making another call and/or going to a meeting so that you can process any feelings that came up at the family function.

Wishing you all a very happy (and sober, if applicable) holiday season!

Published in the Windham Head Shed mental health newsletter – December 2005