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A 10 Point Holiday Strategy To Keep Those in Recovery on Track

By Timothy Cheney and Rita Watson, MPH

Holidays for persons in early recovery and their families can be both tenuous and treacherous. Despite the season “to be jolly” it is also a season that can mean a significant setback for those in recovery. People in early recovery need to be especially vigilant and cannot necessarily rely on their judgment on what constitutes a safe situation. After all, their best thinking led them to their current situation. As such, it is an important to understand the holiday problem, stay connected to positive roots, and plan ahead to prevent backslides.

Here's why.

Addiction, the brain, and the family

Addiction is a chronic and often relapsing brain disease and many of the triggers that prompt substance abuse take years to heal. The brain requires time to rewire. Addiction is also a family disease. The family, in an attempt to deal with the addict or alcoholic over the years, has also developed defensive coping behaviors that are hard wired. Their brains also need time to rewire and heal. Most addicts and alcoholics want what they want when they want it and the concept of patience and T.I.M.E (Things I Must Earn) can be difficult

For the family afflicted with alcoholism or addiction, holidays have often ranged from uncomfortable to traumatic, which makes it extremely difficult to avoid slipping into old behavioral patterns.

As such, for those in recovery the holiday season can be as dangerous as walking through a mine field because many of the switches hardwired into the brain — switches that say ‘reach for your substance of choice’ -- have not been deactivated.

Holiday commercials and decorations tell us it is time to party and get in the festive spirit. But what looks externally appealing has the potential to bring up feelings of sadness and depression internally. People in recovery need to seek support from those who can help them stay on a positive path rather than rely on their own judgment, which is what led them to their current status – a person in recovery.

Here is a ten point plan (suggestions) to have a safe and sober holiday.

10 point holiday strategy

When you go to a party be certain you are with friends who do not drink or use drugs.

Always hold onto your own glass and be careful not to pick up a glass that belongs to someone else who might have alcohol.

Have an escape route and time of departure planned – if the party gets to be too high-pressure and you become uncomfortable, be able to leave on your own.

Go to meetings and more meetings. Make extra appointments with your sponsor or counselor.

Share your holiday apprehension in meetings and discuss your plans with your sponsor and get feedback and reassurance.

Stick with the winners and stay in the middle of the herd where you won't get picked off.

Use the phone and reach out if you are hurting. An addict alone is in a bad neighborhood.

Be aware of H.A.L.T (Hungry. Angry. Lonely. Tired.). The old timers always used to advise keeping a couple of hard candies in your pocket to keep your blood sugar up.

Keep your expectations realistic. Just because you are clean and sober and feeling comfortable with your disease does not mean that everyone else has the same comfort level. It may take years to earn back the trust that your addiction destroyed.

Do not expect a ticker tape parade or a standing ovation for saving your own life. Addiction is self imposed, slow, systematic suicide. Yes, it is a disease, but the reality is that most people do not see it that way.

By following a planned strategy, it is possible to take part in holiday festivities and, when you ring in the New Year clean and sober, give yourself and your higher power a hand (standing ovation).

Timothy Cheney along with Adrian Hooper, Jr. are co-founders of www.choopersguide.com, a site dedicated to provide a comprehensive treatment resource with a goal towards saving lives by making treatment information readily accessible.

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