

How to Enjoy the Holidays When You or Your Loved One Has an Addiction

Another year has gone by and "The Holidays" are fast approaching - although if you're anything like me, you're still wondering where September went!

The time has come when we are once again seeing commercials on TV and in magazines about how wonderful the Christmas season is, that it is better to give than to receive, and how warm and loving families are, especially at this time of year.

But the reality is that, for many of people, this is not a time of peace and joy...

However, because there is so much shame associated with not having positive holiday times, most people don't talk openly about how difficult this time of year can be for them. This can lead to intense feelings of loneliness and disappointment.

And when any form of addiction is thrown into the mix, this season of the year can be anything but jolly.

If you can relate to any of the following, then this article may be give you some helpful tips for getting through the holidays...

1. If you are still in “active addiction”...

If you are still using your addictive behaviour of choice, I want to congratulate you for reading this article, because it likely means that you are getting closer to reaching out for some help. Please know that all of us who have been in the throes of addiction have felt the same shame, guilt, hopelessness and despair that you are feeling right now. Every year, thousands of people all over the world are able to stop engaging in their addiction - and you can be one of them!

At this time of year, instead of spending time with your family, it may be wiser for you to sign yourself into a detox or a treatment centre, or to call a professional Addictions Counsellor. Although this may feel lonely, it may be easier than facing those same arguments and disappointments that you and your loved ones have experienced during past holidays.

If you are unsure of what to do, you might want to seek help from a trained professional to explore options and to make the best decision for yourself.

2. If you are in “early recovery”...

I generally consider “early recovery” as anywhere between having one day to one year of not engaging in your addictive behaviour of choice.

If you are in early recovery and involved in one of the popular self-help groups, there may be alternatives to “going home” for

the holidays. These can include **potluck dinners, dances, and other social activities, as well as extra meetings** that have been scheduled for this time of year. If you're involved in one of these groups online, there are often chats and meetings that you can join to discuss your feelings, where you can give and receive some extra support.

If you are not involved in a recovery program, spending time with friends who understand where you currently are in your life can be a wise alternative. These friends can provide loving support without the emotional triggers that often accompany your visits home.

If you do decide to spend the holiday with family who live out of town, it is a good idea to have some support lined up for yourself. For example, before you leave, check out whether there are 12-Step or 16-Step meetings where you will be. You can also explore the online availability of these programs, either as your primary source of support or as backup.

In addition, you can line up some people to support you where you currently live. Keep in touch with your friends, if they are either non-users or in recovery themselves. If you have a sponsor, checking in with that person daily, either by phone or online, would be a good idea. If your counsellor or therapist offers phone counselling, book an appointment or two for the time you will be away.

There are also **Crisis Centres** in most urban areas that you can call. Some are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, while others have more limited hours of operation. Finding out when they are open and how to reach them is another wonderful way to be proactive and take care of yourself while you are away.

3. If you are a “loved one” of someone with an addictive behaviour...

If you are a loved one struggling with a family member's addiction, you may find yourself tempted to over-function in order to reduce your anxieties and to make certain that everything goes well. But having an addicted person at your gatherings can make everything much more difficult.

Don't be afraid to openly address your loved one's addiction BEFORE the family get-together. Otherwise, you may find yourself with “an elephant in the living room” that nobody acknowledges, and you will feel as if you have to walk on eggshells and continue your accommodating behaviours just to keep things under control.

For example, when dealing with family members who are alcoholic, you could **let them know beforehand** that you would love to have them there, as long as they understand that the expectation is that they will remain sober. If they choose to drink after being informed of this boundary, inform them that you will be asking them to leave.

If your loved one does not agree to this boundary beforehand, then it is best to not invite him or her to the gathering. Openly discussing these options with other family members and having their support when setting these boundaries can be crucial for the success of the gathering. Let them know your thoughts and feelings, and the specific help you need, whenever possible.

Please know that learning how to set these kinds of boundaries takes time and practice, but you can definitely do it! If you feel that you need help with it, get in touch with a professional counsellor or therapist who can assist you. Many therapists work during the holiday season because they know that their clients need them at this time.

I hope these suggestions will help you have a happier holiday season than you may have had in the past. Deciding on whether to spend time with family over the holidays is not an easy decision. Remember to do the things that will help you achieve greater self-respect, and to let that be your guide during a potentially emotionally perilous time.

Happy Holidays, Everyone!