

TECHNIQUES

Help clients to survive

Prevent relapse during the “festive season”

FOR PEOPLE IN RECOVERY FROM DRUGS, INCLUDING ALCOHOL, CHRISTMAS AND THE START OF THE NEW YEAR ARE THE RISKIEST TIMES FOR POSSIBLE RELAPSE...



Many people trying to recover from alcohol or drug dependency dread Christmas. They tend to have bad memories, particularly if they are only in the early stages of recovery – good memories come later. They remember tension, binges and rows between relatives and unrealistic expectations which brought huge letdowns. As addicts, they have often rejected family celebrations or caused havoc. They have abused substances to block the sadness and longings generated by “christmas”. Overdoses, suicides and violence dominate memories. Mothers carry overwhelming guilt as they see history repeat itself.

Overwhelmingly, they are surrounded by images of ideal, happy families painfully reminding most addicts of all they lost or never had. The gap between the media images and their own lives is never wider or clearer.

And some survivors who get through this testing time become complacent – so relapse in later January. What can we and they do to help avoid this?

Perhaps the first rule is to lay down a strong foundation this year which will not only help people to maintain sobriety but will also give happy memories on which to feel more confident about future festivities.

Counsellors and clients should meet at the start of November and talk about fears, past excellence, family expectations and traditions. They should share both good and bad memories and explore some of the reasons people feel the way they do. If this discussion takes place early enough, it gives time over the next few weeks to deal with feelings and plan a different approach. It can also raise hidden feelings which cannot be handled and lead to a temporary halt. But it usually takes pressure off unvoiced anxieties.

Make a six-week plan of preparation of food – and activities if wanted – and break the whole thing into manageable bits; if in a group setting, involve everyone. Everyone makes something week by week, so they can build up gradual, but pleasant, anticipation in the midst

of their programme. Stress is kept to a minimum, and achievement satisfied as unusual treats are prepared. It is a sharing time. Christmas itself should be kept informal and low-key, with emphasis on enjoying other people’s company with good things to enjoy together. Minimise the commercial side. Clients should be left with them memories of feeling at ease and even happiness, to provide a good building block.

Handle crises as they arise, understanding that christmas brings a lot of emotion to the fore.

“For people in recovery from substance abuse, christmas can be a time of maximum personal vulnerability with minimum professional support,” said Daphne Thomas who used to run the Drug & Alcohol Foundation in London. “As a day service, we ensured that our answerphone message included telephone numbers of drug and alcohol helplines and support groups such as Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous.

“We notified our clients well in advance of when our services would be closed. In sessions before the christmas break, our counsellors worked with clients to help each of them prepare an action plan to help them to deal appropriately and effectively with difficult situations and emotional upheavals.” Plans are specific to each person but there are some common elements.

- People attending 12-step fellowships should find out in advance what meetings are being held, especially on christmas day. They should make arrangements to get to meetings, bearing in mind that on christmas day there is no public transport and on other days it is limited. If you do not drive, ask another member to give you a lift.
- All clients should ensure they have telephone numbers for people who can support them. Arrange to meet people you are comfortable with for a chat, coffee or a meal.
- Stock up with lots of non-alcoholic drinks that you like and food that you particularly enjoy.
- Organise your time so that you have a good balance between socialising and rest and relaxation.
- Give yourself a get-out clause for potentially difficult situations such as family parties – for example, say you must be somewhere else later so that you can leave before it gets too stressful.
- Arrange to speak to someone ‘safe’ before you go to such a gathering and when you return from it.
- Concentrate on what you have gained by not using.
- Be clear and unapologetic in any statements you make about drinking – for example “I am not drinking alcohol, thanks, but I’d love a fresh orange juice and soda water.
- Finally, remember that christmas is only 24 hours.

...BACK TO DANGEROUS HABITS. WE ROUND UP THE BEST ADVICE TO PASS ON TO YOUR CLIENTS — IT APPLIES REGARDLESS OF RELIGIOUS PERSUASION

“Christmas has a huge impact on all our society,” added Kirby Gregory, head of client services at Action on Addiction. “Whether you are christian or not, there are implications for a recovering person.

“Alcohol is a major factor in celebrations, and many who do not usually drink to excess go way beyond their normal limits. Recovering people must recognise that this can place them in a vulnerable position, that it might be safest to avoid environments with alcohol. This might entail choosing to spend as much of the time as possible with other recovering people.”

Gregory recommends that clients plan to attend specific meetings over the holiday period – make a written plan and stick to it, otherwise “the illusion of self-sufficiency can take hold”.

Learn to use the telephone before you need to make a life-saving call – call people for a chat or to see how they are getting on. If you are around alcohol, try to have at least one person around who understands your situation and is available for support. And be wary of old haunts – start a new history with others in recovery.

Pauline Bissett and CEO Brian Dudley of Broadway Lodge residential centre for first-stage and extended care recommend the following.

“DOS”. Use the fellowship, meetings and your sponsor. Avoid “wet” places and parties. Take control of the situation – invite people to you. Be good to yourself, allow yourself some treats. Keep in touch with safe friends/family/support. Keep balance and variety in your activities: TV, exercise, walks in the fresh air. Plan ahead by making a relapse-prevention plan. Take the risk and join in the fun!

“DON’TS”. Don’t hide away and isolate. Don’t stagnate in front of the TV. Don’t project. Don’t become complacent or procrastinate. Don’t go somewhere without a “get out clause”; make it easy to leave a difficult situation.

“REMEMBER”. To have fun – recovery is to be enjoyed. To have company when possible – and maybe even a recovery party. To send yourself a card. The spiritual base to Christmas. To have realistic expectations of this period. To have gratitude for being clean/sober.

JANUARY. Finally, how do you prevent clients becoming complacent and relapsing in the New Year? Counsellors and clients should tackle this when discussing Christmas. It is an unsettling time – often one of “counting the

USE ACUPRESSURE TO HELP CONQUER CRAVING

Seven years ago, *Addiction Today* printed simple steps from Leeds Drug Project on how it taught clients to use acupressure – tapping acupuncture points – to reduce cravings. It was so successful that not only did clients teach it to friends outside treatment but *AT* was thanked by readers who found them so effective that they asked us to reprint them. Here they are:

- Formulate a clear target for treatment – such as fighting the phrase “I’m dying for a drink”
- Rate the level of craving or emotional distress on a scale of 0 to 10
- Tap with one hand on the outside edge of the other while stating the problem as an affirmation three times – for example, “even though I’m dying for a drink/drug, I deeply and completely accept myself”
- Tap 5-10 times with two fingers on the following sequence of points, while repeating the reminder phrase “dying for a drink”:
 - a) just beneath the collarbone about an inch from the central notch
 - b) under the centre of one eye on the socket edge
 - c) about four inches directly below the armpit
 - d) collarbone again
- Rate the distress again; repeat treatment until the rating drops to 0.

cost” about full abstinence. If someone enjoyed christmas, s/he can have a massive mood swing to sadness for all the wasted years. If they were restless, they might want to use or drink. But a good christmas celebration this year can help clients next year or the following year, as they can carry the good memory as a realisable expectation for the future.

Get clients to look at “after the holidays” and their feelings when it is all over and they are broke and deflated – not feeling cheerful does not mean they are “off” programme. Talk about structure, routine, meetings and voluntary work, even on a temporary basis. Encourage clients to record their feelings pre- and post-holiday in a diary or through drawing or a montage and refer back to this. There’s a whole new year and life ahead.

UNDER PRESSURE: mothers in recovery can feel they must provide a perfect christmas, including presents they cannot afford – help them to process those feelings

