

Common Holiday Stressors for Families in Recovery and How to Manage Them By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Most people and most families experience increased stress around the holidays. For families where there is addiction and/or where there is addiction recovery, holiday get-togethers can be especially difficult. Active addiction carries its own trauma in family holidays, with acting out, self-perpetuating conflicts, and self-imposed or family-imposed exile of the addict from the family.

Family members erroneously believe that once the drinking/drugging stops, that holidays will be smooth sailing from then on. Recovery in the family, especially early recovery, has its own stressors. Below are common examples of stressors that families in early recovery experience:

- When parts of the family know about the recovery of one its members and others do not, it can create an underlying tension and anxiety among some family members.
- While the non-addicted spouse has forgiven the alcoholic/addict, the in-laws perhaps have not. The newly recovering person may not even be welcome in the in-laws' home.
- An addict in early recovery is often faced with the unpleasant decision of whether to attend family gatherings where the rest of the family is still drinking or using.
- People in recovery may operate from an emotional position of guilt and shame, and may want to make up for previous inappropriate behavior through excessive spending.
- The recovering person and his/her family members may feel enough pressure to engage in other seasonal activities which takes them away from routine recovery activities.
- One or both sides of the family may feel more entitled because of what they have been through, while both sides of the family are demanding that the holidays be spent with them.
- Recovering people often find themselves sucked into old interaction patterns in their families of origin, and discover that they are behaving in ways that they have tried hard to change.

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- Many addicted people also have underlying anxiety disorders, especially social anxiety. Large gatherings or travel can be especially difficult for people with anxiety problems.

Generally, the best ways of dealing with these early recovery stressors in your family are listed below:

- Watch your expectations. Recovery does not fix everything. Repairing family relationships take time and effort. And your addicted loved one is not going to be magically changed into the person you always wanted him/her to be.
- Communicate directly and openly. Don't expect people to read your mind and don't try your own hand at mind-reading. Assume that your significant others do not know what you want, expect, need, or feel. Tell them.
- Read up on addiction. Make sure that you don't buy into myths, fallacies, and continued denial in addiction and recovery. "Near beer" usually has alcohol in it. And drug addicts cannot safely drink alcohol. Period.
- Look for dysfunctional interaction patterns. Step back and identify the games that your family plays. Try to keep from engaging in those old games.



- Be patient with each other as you all deal with the changes.

- Discuss with recovering family members, their feelings about alcohol being served during family gatherings. Keep in mind that many people in early recovery are often reluctant to speak up on their own behalf by requesting that alcohol not be served. They may also not know that being around it will be problematic for them.

Reference: 2009, Ferguson, Peggy L., "The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through The Holidays Without Losing Your Sobriety or Your Sanity" E-book, Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater OK 74075.

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*This helpful guide for managing holiday stress covers reasons why we experience extra stress during the holidays, how stress can impact addiction recovery, and makes suggestions not only on how to survive holiday stress, but how to move from anxiety and stress into effective problem solving. **It Includes worksheets.** Although written with the recovering person in mind, it provides helpful information to anyone experiencing "holiday stress".*

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