

Managing Holiday Stress and Growing In Recovery

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The "Holidays" present unique opportunities to develop and practice new living skills in recovery. Most people experience an increase in stress around the holidays for a variety of reasons. This increase in stress brings about the proverbial blessing of an opportunity for growth. Increased stress leads to increased need and opportunity to practice new stress management skills. This time of year creates a demand for learning how to maintain balance while juggling conflicting life demands, and a pressure to begin to repair damaged relationships. Addiction puts tremendous strain on even the closest families.

Although the holidays have the potential to be hazardous to the health of a recovering alcoholic/addict, they also serve as a golden opportunity for healing the harm caused by addiction. Because most people hold the value that these special days "should" be spent with family, people in early recovery will be seeing some of their relatives for the first time since abstinence.

For many families, last year's festivities still sting from the rampages of addiction. For some people in very early recovery, these first interactions with family members may be best kept superficial and light. For others in later recovery, with new living skills and recovery skills under their belts, it may be an opportunity to delve further into relationship repair. Below are highlights of suggestions on using the season for growth in recovery:

- Keep your expectations realistic and manageable. Take a look at resentments about holidays past. Explore old expectations that have hurt you in the past when they didn't come true. Check to see if you are still harboring those expectations. If so, let them go. Remember that "acceptance is the answer to all my problems today."
- Remember too that life goes on. Holidays now are not what they were when you were growing up. And you have grown up. You are no longer a child. Don't act like a child, expecting your elderly mother to wait on you hand and foot, do all the prep work, cooking, cleaning, and give you money. Lend a hand. Take on some responsibilities according to your ability.
- Develop your own new holiday traditions. A new life in recovery deserves some new holiday traditions. You are an adult with the ability to make decisions about your own life as an adult. Look at your own values and choose holiday activities that match your values and your lifestyle.
- Spend time with the people that you love and that love you. They may or may not be your family. Don't wait for them to contact you. Reach out to them.
- Use this holiday as an opportunity to re-connect. If you are not ready for making amends, and repairing damage, just be present, be sober, and keep things light. Don't get into old grievances.

- If you choose to make amends for your past inappropriate behavior, talk only about your own behavior. Don't take any one else's inventory.
- Take responsibility for your own behavior with your family. You cannot change them, but you can change how you interact with them and how you respond to them. Don't justify your own inappropriate behavior by theirs. Work your program with your family while "home for the holidays". Use your new skills.
- Develop and maintain your priorities thoughtfully. Make pro-active decisions about accepting invitations, visiting relatives, and other holiday activities based on how it will affect your recovery. If a family get together presents a "slippery" environment, don't attend. If you feel that you "must" attend, make sure that you have an escape route and the means to accomplish it.

Reference: Ferguson, Peggy L., 2009, ["The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through The Holidays Without Losing Your Sobriety or Your Sanity" E-book](http://www.peggyferguson.com), www.peggyferguson.com.