



How to be Sensitive to Loved Ones In Recovery This Holiday

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How, and with whom, will you spend the holidays?

If you're like most, the holidays mean gathering with family members from near and far for annual celebrations and cherished traditions. Alas, if you're like a growing number of American families, it may also mean you are welcoming home a person in addiction treatment or recovery, too, a happy occasion to be sure, yet one that can stir up anxiety and uncertainty among every attendee — not least of all the one suffering from addiction.

Given my experience treating addiction, I often get asked for advice on how to host a holiday party that is sensitive to a family member in recovery. There are several simple gestures and accommodations that you can do to ensure that your gathering makes everyone feel welcome while mitigating potential conflicts.

1. As a first step, if your family member suffers from addiction but is not yet in recovery, don't tell them that they're unwelcome to attend. This will only serve to isolate him/her further. Rather, set reasonable boundaries, such as requiring sobriety, while assuring them that their presence is valued. The approach demonstrates unconditional support, which in turn may foster engagement at the gathering (but don't be offended if engagement is minimal).
2. Be prepared to hear "no". The holidays can be a stressful time for everyone, particularly for someone battling substance abuse disorder. If they decline your invitation, accept

their decision and do not take it personally. Holiday stress could be a trigger for their addiction that they want to avoid.

3. If your family member is already in treatment or recovery, don't ignore the elephant in the room. It's perfectly reasonable to acknowledge that they are likely experiencing a range of emotions at the prospect of seeing family members. During a private moment, ask them to share those feelings with open-ended, non-judgement questions. If they don't seem ready to talk, give them some space.
4. Explore accommodations to lessen anxieties. For instance, invite them to bring a sober friend for support and design a plan to avoid confrontations with family members who you believe might instigate conflict (you know the relative I'm talking about, the one who insists on always providing unsolicited advice).
5. While it may seem logical to make a patient in recovery a designated driver, such a plan "shackles" them to remain at the party until its conclusion, an unwelcome constriction. In fact, it's more helpful to design an "escape" plan, providing them with an easy out to leave the party when they see fit.
6. It's important to maintain family traditions, yet not in a way that bombards the person suffering from addiction with temptations. For instance, if your family typically celebrates with alcohol, there's no need to ban liquor from your party, but you should take care to make sure it is not the focal point of the celebration. Ensure there are other "activities" available and make an effort to provide the food and drinks that are part of your family member's recovery effort.
7. I often get asked about the best way to talk to a person suffering from addiction. For that, I believe intent, not eloquence, is best. "Are you having trouble? How can I help?" are sufficient initiators that convey empathy and support. If you're curious, ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions, along with reassurance that you're available whenever they want to talk. "I'm thinking of you, please let me know if there is anything I can do for you." If that person expresses the need for professional support at any time, you can contact [Treatment Placement Specialists](#) for support (or if the person is in active treatment, reach out to the facility for assistance).

However you celebrate these coming days, I hope they're warm celebrations that strengthen your family ties. And may you and your loved ones enjoy a New Year filled with much peace and good health.

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Edwin Walker, MD, MSPH • 3rd
Telepsychiatrist at Recovery Services of NWOH

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Except the human condition by its nature is one of addiction. Being addicted to being right, addicted to helping others, addicted to belonging so tenaciously that it puts us out of balance. Serenity is balancing on a very large ball. We can be a little off top dead center, but too far and you fall off. Chances are every family member is an addict. Some are being addicted to judging others. We keep our serenity by loving and loving and loving them, all of them.

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David B Moore LCSW, LMFT • 3rd
Clinical Social Worker at Kentuckiana Neurobehavioral Institute

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Well said, my friend.

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