

## TECHNIQUES

# How to survive the festive timebomb

Awareness and planning are vital

**FOR PEOPLE IN RECOVERY FROM ALCOHOL AND DRUGS, HOLIDAYS CAN BE A THREAT, WITH CHRISTMAS AND THE NEW YEAR BEING THE RISKIEST TIMES FOR POSSIBLE RELAPSE...**

For even the healthiest of people, the pressures of forced conviviality at parties and family reunions can trigger mood swings. TV in December shows scene after scene of domestic bliss: families gathered around glittering trees, enjoying gentle conversation and a warm fire. Before 'Bob N' stopped drinking, he measured his own experiences against that ideal and found them wanting. He felt a sense of loss, medicating his grief with alcohol.

Today, the holidays have a different flavour for him. He still experiences tension in his family, but uses the holiday season to practice new tools for managing conflict. Two of those tools are awareness and planning: principles which help let go of unrealistic expectations, acknowledge spiritual traditions, and identify safe holiday customs.

THE TOP 10 SUGGESTIONS ARE BELOW.

- Clients should start sharing in November their fears about Christmas and the new year, so that there is time to work through emotions and make safe plans.
- Seek sober people. Your clients should plan to connect with an AA sponsor, if applicable, or sober friend(s).
- Start a new holiday tradition by throwing an alcohol-free party for friends, or attend a special AA/NA/sober holiday event. Rather than bad memories triggering relapse on their anniversaries, create wonderful times which will be a foundation for future memories.
- Bring your own. You might feel awkward arriving at a party where alcohol dominates the beverages. Avoid this by bringing your own non-alcoholic drinks.
- Non-alcoholic beers or wines are not recommended, however: the drinking ritual paired with the smell and taste of alcohol can trigger a desire to drink.
- Identify in advance who is safe. Responsible party hosts recognise that that good cheer can be achieved by offering a range of attractive non-alcoholic beverages.
- Take holidays one day at a time. Most officially last only 24 hours. If the thought of abstaining for the whole season seems unbearable, take it by the day.
- Reconsider family gatherings. People in early recovery might have to opt out of them, especially when they centre on drinking. An alternative is to attend but take breaks to call a sponsor or sober friend. Plan to drive your own car or make other travel arrangements so you can leave at any time you choose.
- Release resentments. If they gain steam during the holidays, it can be disastrous – especially those at risk of relapse.
- Return the holidays to a spiritual base. Drinking and drugging derive their power by delivering a counterfeit

spirituality, creating an illusion of intimacy with others. We can taste the real thing by reminding ourselves of the spiritual basis of the holidays: unselfish giving this does not mean expensive presents, but sobriety.

**THE NEW YEAR.** We begin the season of resolutions but the challenge is how to act on our intentions after the first few days of January. Popular author, speaker and workshop leader Ernie Larsen sees recovery from addiction happening in two major stages – and long-term sobriety hinging on three keys to habit change.

Stage I focuses on abstinence from alcohol and other drugs. This can include treatment for chemical dependency and membership in a support group, such as a 12-step one. But there is more to recovery than getting sober. "Define yourself first as a person – who happens to have an addiction – then you can grow and move on as a human being. That is Stage II recovery," Larsen explains. Defined in this way, Stage II applies to anyone who wants to experience lasting personal change, including people who are not in recovery from addiction.

It depends on readiness, insight and practice. Readiness cannot be forced or predicted: as we all know, some people experience traumatic consequences before they are ready to change. Insight begins with a distinction between the past and the present. In the past, we dealt with pain by adopting certain beliefs and behaviours – but these became self-defeating habits. Change hinges on becoming aware of those habits. Practice means using that awareness to consciously choose and practice healthier habits.

The key is responding to events with an intensity that is appropriate to events in the present, not with our old automatic and destructive reactions. Insight is using each day as a fresh opportunity to practice. Then we can experience a life-long miracle of personal change.

**HINTS FOR HOSTS.** The best parties are well planned and take into account who's on the guest list. The best parties let guests know that "a drink" does not necessarily mean an alcoholic drink. Especially with children and nondrinkers present, it is important to offer an attractive variety of nonalcoholic beverages. In fact, with children on hand, consider an alcohol-free party.

When party hosts offer drinks, they should begin by listing a range of nonalcoholic beverages followed by drinks with alcohol. But greeting guests should not start by concentrating on drinks. Instead, a host should first welcome guests and 'break the ice' by directing them to people they know or to games or activities which will engage them. Once they are relaxed, they can choose a



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beverage based on taste rather than a need to relieve social anxiety.

Nonalcoholic drinks should be presented as equally appealing as an alcoholic one. For instance, offering wine in long-stemmed crystal glasses appears more attractive than soda pop offered in cans. Balance it out.

A great way to prevent over-served guests is to designate someone to serve drinks. Do not have an open bar: a bartender can limit the amount, frequency and stiffness of the drinks.

Always be on alert for signs of excessive drinking. If necessary, inform the overindulgent guest that he or she has had enough, and do it graciously. Enlist the help of a spouse or friend if necessary to get the message across. Drunks not only flatten a party for other guests, but hosts have a responsibility as regards drink/driving.

Help prevent guests from overdrinking by limiting salty, thirst-inducing appetisers. Good helpings of cheese, meat, vegetables and fruits are nutritious and help absorb alcohol. Remember that as few as two drinks can compromise driving ability for some guests. Medication, body weight, amount of food eaten, fatigue, health, and mental attitude all play a factor in the way a body responds to alcohol.

And again lay foundations for the future. Parties offer adults a chance to serve as role models for children. In homes where alcohol is not the focus of holiday celebrations, children are less likely to grow up thinking that drinking is the key ingredient to having a good time.

**DON'T GET COMPLACENT.** Mid- to late January historically also sees high rates of relapse. It is an anticlimactic time when people get complacent about having survived Christmas and the new year. Plan ahead for this, starting now. Throw a sober party. Book theatre or pantomime trips with sober friends. Be alert. Treat yourself to an extra therapy session or other professional support.

**MORE HINTS AND TIPS**, including what to do immediately if a craving starts, are available in earlier articles published in *Addiction Today*. You can access them free of charge by going to [www.addictiontoday.org](http://www.addictiontoday.org) and clicking on 'Article Archive' on the left side of the home page. Advise includes an acupressure exercise as well as topics for discussion in therapy groups, and making plans about what, when, where and with whom a safe seasonal model can be created.

## 50 years of working with women – and more

Situated on 500 scenic acres of rural Minnesota countryside, Hazelden's Center City campus, 50 miles north of Minneapolis, is the largest facility in the Hazelden system. Over 2,000 people begin their recovery journey here every year.

Programmes and services include assessment and evaluation, adult inpatient and outpatient treatment, women-only treatment, inpatient treatment for healthcare professionals, inpatient extended care, family programme, mental-health services, nicotine-cessation services, a Renewal Center, the Lodge for people already in recovery but at a crossroads or 'stuck', continuing care, alumni services, a Graduate School of Addiction Studies and Teen Intervene.



The latest addition to Center City is the 22-bed state-of-the art Women's Recovery Centre, launched this September on the 50th anniversary of Hazelden's first women-specific programme in 1956. It has since treated over 40,000 women, with 400 women seeking admission each month. The new unit expands its existing women's 22-bed unit, and a women's extended care unit is planned for 2007. Some leading-edge good practices at the new centre, which other organisations could adopt are:

- employing a therapist and a mental-health specialist to co-facilitate all therapy groups, so that unidentified issues requiring extra help can be identified, and
- accommodating three women to each bedroom so they do not isolate but with curved room dividers for privacy; bedrooms have a table and chairs, round which clients can chat and work.

Readers can contact Hazelden Center City at PO Box 11, 15251 Pleasant Valley Road, Center City, MN 55012-0011 (tel: 001-651-213 4200 or browse [www.hazelden.org](http://www.hazelden.org)).



WITNESSING 400 ADMISSION REQUESTS A MONTH: BRENDA ILIFF, CLINICAL DIRECTOR OF THE WOMEN'S RECOVERY CENTER



MENTAL-HEALTH SPECIALISTS ON CALL: IRENE BUGGE, SUE HOISINGTON AND CHERYL BUECHNER (l-r)



VIEWING THE LAKE IN HAZELDEN'S 500 ACRES, FROM A CLIENTS' RELAXATION ROOM: SHELLY DUTCH OF CONNECTIONS