

# SURVIVE CHRISTMAS

**Christmas, New Year and late January are notorious times of relapse into alcohol and drugs...**

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.

Overwhelmingly, they are surrounded by images of ideal, happy families – like the one on this page – reminding most addicts only too painfully of all they have lost or never had. The gap between the media images and their own lives is never wider or clearer than at this time of year.

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.

**The daycare programme.** “For people in recovery from substance abuse, Christmas can be a time of maximum personal vulnerability coinciding with minimum professional support,” confirm Daphne Thomas and Stan Moorcroft, project manager and clinical team leader respectively of the Drug & Alcohol Foundation in London.

“At Daf, we ensure that our answerphone message includes telephone numbers of drug and alcohol helplines and support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

“We notify our clients well in advance of when our services are closed. In sessions before the Christmas break, our counsellors work with clients to help each of them prepare an action plan which will help them to deal appropriately and effectively with difficult situations and emotional upheavals.

These 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. They should make arrangements to get to meetings, bearing in mind that on Christmas Day there will be no public transport and on other days it will be restricted. If you do not drive, perhaps another member will be able to give you a lift. For everyone:

- 📞 Ensure you have telephone numbers for people who can support you
- 👥 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

**...so Deirdre Boyd asked some leading experts for practical advice**



**“It might be safest to spend as much time as possible with other recovering people”**

- 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
- 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 drinking or 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, and
- Finally, remember that Christmas Day is just another 24-hour period.

**Clouds House residential centre.** “Although it is a christian festival, Christmas has a huge impact on all our society,” points out Kirby Gregory of Clouds House. “Whether you are involved directly or not, there are many implications for a recovering person.

“Alcohol is a major factor in the celebrations and many who do not usually drink to excess find themselves going 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 you 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 are desperate 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 to support you.

And be wary of old haunts – start a new history with others in recovery.

**Broadway Lodge residential centre** for first-stage and extended care gives the following hints and tips to its clients, reveals chief executive Pauline Bissett.

“The first few Christmases and New Years in recovery can feel daunting. It might be years since they passed without a drink or drug,” she confirms.

**“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 realistic expectations of this period
- ✦ 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
- ✦ Gratitude for being clean/sober
- ✦ Mid-January can be a potential relapse time in the lull following the festivities.

**Hebron House residential centre for women with children.**

“Mothers carry overwhelming guilt as they see history repeat itself,” explains co-founder Norma Gordon.

“We have developed a strategy to deal with some of this and to set up ‘building blocks’ for future Christmases.”

■ Counsellors and clients meet at the start of November and talk about fears, past excellence, family expectations and traditions. We 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.

■ We make a six-week plan of preparation of food – and activities if wanted – and break the whole thing into manageable bits involving everyone. Everyone makes something week by week, so we can build up gradual, but pleasant, anticipation in the midst of the daily programme. Stress is kept to a minimum, and achievement satisfied as unusual treats are prepared. It is a sharing time.

■ Christmas itself is kept informal and low-key, with emphasis on enjoying other people’s company around the fire with good things to eat and do together. The commercial side is minimised. We hope residents will take away with them memories of toasting marshmallows and chestnuts and feeling at ease, to provide a good building block.

■ Crises are handled as they arise, with full understanding that Christmas brings a lot of emotion to



a head. We need to enable residents to work it all through to a place of personal comfort.

At **Castle Craig's residential centre** in Scotland, six therapists enthusiastically offered suggestions.

- ✦ Avoid volatile family situations. Many people feel pressured to be with family at holidays but that can be a relapse trigger if there is a lot of drinking or there are strained relationships
- ✦ Invite friends and acquaintances from AA/NA for a pot-luck meal or alcohol-free New Year's night
- ✦ Go carolling or visit nursing homes. Take the holiday spirit to others; they really appreciate it.

*Rebecca Dunlap, therapist*

■ Have a vision 'in your mind's eye' of events over the festive season. Let the vision be a positive – then watch it change if you were to drink or use drugs

■ Aim to be in a safe place over the festive season. The fellowships have dinners and dances which can not only protect people but let them discover that they can enjoy themselves without drink or drugs

■ Do have company.

Whatever your budget, set a bit aside for a few presents for others. It's the thought that counts

■ For many years we have neglected thinking of others then, wallowing in pity, reflected on how few cards etc we have received. Be proactive this year: get your cards now, dust off your address book and send some of those cards. Let a few people know you are alive again

■ Make an effort with your surroundings. A Christmas tree and decorations can lift the spirit no end. Make your home as well as your heart a welcoming place.

*Gordon Hogg, senior therapist*

✦ Go to meetings before you go to parties, and take another recovering person with you.

*Francis Beek, trainee*

■ Plan ahead for parties/dances. Have your sponsor's phone number and some coins so you can call him/her if things get difficult. Have money for a taxi

■ Have an escape route. If you are giving a lift to others, discuss the possibility of leaving them to get a taxi home if you feel uncomfortable with other people's drinking; your recovery comes first

■ Ensure your host knows that you do not drink alcohol so s/he can stock non-alcoholic options

■ Rehearse and know exactly what to say should someone say "Go on, have a drink/joint".

*Ian Jones, clinical tutor*

**Tuke's centre for emotional disorders.** Programme coordinator Hilary Wheat lists exactly the same hints and tips to help people with emotional disorders as the other centres do for their clients. "Christmas, like life, brings many feelings both comfortable and uncomfortable. But remember: we have a choice about how we act on them," she summed up.

**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 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 to be well on the way to recovery. They often 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 – and that this does not mean they are "off" the programme. Talk about structure, routine, more 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.

### The addicts' view:

#### 10 top tips from Addaction clients

- Be prepared. Plan your festive season in advance. Who will you spend it with? Where? And when? Should you really risk going to a party where you might be tempted to lapse?
- Plan an environment/people to be around, with whom you can be yourself. But don't set yourself up by being with family or friends who use drugs or who make you feel bad about yourself.
- Identify someone supportive beforehand with whom you might need to talk to help you through.
- Be specific about what you want to achieve in preventing a relapse and have measurable goals.
- If you are tempted to use, think seriously about the consequences – rather than feel guilty later.
- Do not order any 'supplies'. Treat yourself to something instead.
- If you must keep busy, there are loads of voluntary organisations which need a hand over the festive period; call them.
- Keep only enough money for your immediate needs. Otherwise, what else might you spend it on?
- Is alcohol a trigger? If you lose your inhibitions, what happens to your willpower?
- Remember that it's OK to feel miserable! If you don't feel like being cheerful, it's OK not to be.

And if you do lapse... Don't be too hard on yourself. You've got a whole new year in front of you, so don't let shame paralyse your progress.

**"A good Christmas this year can help clients next year or the following year"**

