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How to Handle the Holidays as a Recovering Addict

The holiday season is upon us, with festive parties and gatherings on the horizon through New Year's Day. But for those dealing with addiction and staying sober, studies show relapses spike during this time of year, making it a stressful time for people in recovery and families with loved ones battling substance abuse.

Board certified Addiction Psychiatrist and leading pioneer in the field of Addiction Medicine, Dr. Indra Cidambi, urges people to think proactively about avoiding relapsing during the holiday season.

Dr. Cidambi offers three tips, below, on how to help yourself, or a loved one, stay sober during the holidays.

3 Tips to Help Stay Sober:

Tip #1: List Warning Signs. Different people may have different warnings signs. These can include obsessively thinking about using drugs or alcohol, not being compliant with your treatment plan, isolating or criticizing yourself, conflicts with others, boredom and/or avoiding dealing with problems. (This list is not all-inclusive.) If you have had a relapse before, think about what led to the relapse and write them down. Watch for these warning signs and keep your sponsor's telephone number handy.

Tip #2: Reduce Stress. Take a closer look at the people, places and things that cause you stress. If you would you rather not run into a certain relative at a family event, ask the event planner to help you avoid the person, or excuse yourself. If you fear going to a friend's party to celebrate the New Year because alcohol/drugs are present, plan to go to an alternative place with other people in recovery. If you are dreading not having enough money to buy presents, remember, it is the thought that counts – items that cost less or you make yourself are as good as any gift.

Tip #3: Celebrate the Holidays with Supportive People. Isolating yourself from the festivities because alcohol may be served or because of the presence of people who may pull you down is likely not an effective strategy. Yes, you have a substance abuse issue, but you are not the only one with it. Plan to celebrate the holidays with like-minded people who want to remain sober. Identify Alcoholic Anonymous (AA)/Narcotics Anonymous (NA) groups that have an activity planned during the holidays and plan to attend. There are also "Alkathons" that you can join or volunteer to help with. These are elongated AA/NA meetings that may run all day on Thanksgiving and 24 hours during Christmas and New Year."

3 Tips to Help Loved Ones Stay Sober:

Tip #1: Help Plan the Holidays in Advance. Help a loved one list relapse triggers and warning signs in order to develop a plan for him/her to remain sober. If you are planning a holiday event, help by not inviting a person identified as a trigger, by not serving alcohol and watching for warning signs listed by the loved one. If you are not planning a holiday event, work with the loved one to help him/her find an alternate place to celebrate the holiday with like-minded people and ensure your loved one can safely get to and from the event.

Tip #2: Don't Be Judgmental. Holidays can be stressful for everyone and there are special stressors faced by the person with substance abuse issues. Remain supportive and take a little time to "check in" on the loved one. Behavior and mood could be "off" at times due to the psychological component to addiction. Try not to explore every change of mood, just be there for the person.

Tip #3: Listen. Your loved one battling substance abuse may want to process thoughts and feelings they are experiencing. Allow them the space to express and process feelings in the safe environment of your home. You really don't have to offer a solution to every problem, all you have to do is listen and let your loved one know that he/she has your support as they work through a problem.

Indra Cidambi, M.D., Medical Director, Center for Network Therapy, is recognized as a leading expert and pioneer in the field of Addiction Medicine. Under her leadership the Center for Network Therapy started New Jersey's first state licensed Ambulatory (Outpatient) Detoxification program for all substances over four years ago. Dr. Cidambi is Board Certified in General Psychiatry and double Board Certified in Addiction Medicine (ABAM, ABPN). She is fluent in five languages, including Russian. She is the Vice President of the New Jersey chapter of ASAM.

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