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SUFFERING WITH LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS & MANAGING ADDICTION RECOVERY

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STRESS AND THE HOLIDAY SEASON

The grief of losing a loved one is often accentuated during the holidays. Healthy coping mechanisms and support from family and friends can help people recovering from addiction handle stress and grief around the holidays to prevent relapse.

For people recovering from alcohol or drug abuse who have lost a loved one, the holidays can be a particularly challenging time.

Words like festive, joyful, and grateful which are typically associated with this time of year can seem unrealistic or empty in the face of grief and stress.

People who are in addiction recovery may have gained some tools to help them deal with difficult experiences and emotions that they can use over the holidays.

If not, it's never too late to discover new ways to cope. Family, close friends, mental health professionals, or grief or recovery groups are also great options for support.



THE IMPACT OF LOSING A LOVED ONE

For people recovering from alcohol or drug abuse, it's especially important to recognize that these effects are normal and that most people feel ill-prepared to handle them.

This is even more important during the holidays when outside pressure from well-intentioned family, friends, and coworkers can lead to added stress.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Losing a loved one can take a big toll on our mental and emotional health as we relive memories and let go of our plans for a future together with that person.

Strong emotions can surface that seem to overtake us at times, including anger, anxiety, depression, and bitterness.

This can affect our eating and sleeping habits, leading to eating or sleeping a lot less or more than usual, which over time can have a negative effect on our mental health.



UNEXPECTED DEATH

When a loved one's death is unexpected, the effects can be even more severe. The lifetime risk of developing many mental disorders increases for people who have lost a loved one unexpectedly.

In a recent survey of adults in the general U.S. population, the unexpected death of a loved one was the top cause of trauma and was most often rated the worst traumatic experience.

The same study showed that PTSD, major depressive episodes, and panic disorder developed more often across the lifetime of those with an unexpected death of a loved one.

Adults were also more prone to alcohol disorders, generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, and manic episodes.

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ADDICTION TRIGGERS

Some of the emotions discussed in the section above that tend to occur with the loss of a loved one, like anxiety and anger, might also serve as addiction triggers.

Addiction triggers are anything that may cause a person to use drugs or alcohol. Triggers may include past or present behaviors, known or unknown.

EXAMPLES OF TRIGGERS INCLUDE:

- Financial stress
- Difficult or unwanted emotions
- Stress
- Seeing people or places associated with past drug use
- Losing your job
- Living in an environment that is not conducive to sobriety
- Being in situations where social anxiety is triggered
- Ending a relationship with a romantic partner
- Changes in regular routine

Knowing and recognizing these triggers can be empowering and contribute to making behavioral changes. If something triggers a craving or relapse, make note of it and create an action plan to better address the trigger when and if it arises again.

For known triggers, it's best to mentally or physically take note of all people, places, situations, or emotions that may ignite a relapse so you can be prepared.

For example, feeling anxious around the holidays could be a trigger. If alcohol helped lessen your feelings of anxiety in the past, your brain might think it "worked."

People in recovery who now understand alcohol's full role in their life, including that it doesn't solve problems but adds to them, can use this knowledge to help override triggers.

A healthy coping mechanism, such as breathing through the anxiety, knowing it will pass, can be used instead.

STRESS AND THE HOLIDAY SEASON

On the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory scale, the death of a spouse is the top cause of stress in life. The death of a close family member is ranked fifth.

Unexpected deaths can be even more stressful and traumatic. Loss and stress go hand-in-hand, which might not be noticeable during the grieving process.

Stress has been linked with poor mental health and mental health disorders, including substance use disorders.

This is important for people in recovery to know, especially around the holidays, so that they can know that what they're experiencing is normal.

Some people who are struggling with the loss of a loved one during the holiday season might feel like canceling the holidays to avoid certain stressors.

HOLIDAY-TIME STRESS MIGHT INVOLVE:

- Family get-togethers
- Financial stressors, such as overcommercialization
- Packed calendars
- Seasonal affective disorder (a mood disorder that typically occurs in the winter, when the daylight hours are shorter)

However, social isolation can perpetuate feelings of loneliness and has been shown to cause risks to our health, such as depression and cognitive decline.

Being with family and friends can help build and strengthen your support system. Recent studies show that a strong support system is key to mental and physical health.

One study showed that people with high-conflict relationships without a support system were more likely to get sick when exposed to a virus but those who had high-conflict relationships and a solid support system were protected from getting sick.



STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays will be different after losing a loved one. Everyone needs healthy coping mechanisms for handling the difficult emotions that losing a loved one evokes. However, not everyone is taught these methods.

The good news is that they can be learned at any age, and the more they are practiced, the stronger and more helpful they'll become.

This way, the next time a major challenge or upheaval occurs in life, there will be actions that you can take to help heal yourself.

By practicing healthy coping mechanisms during the holidays, you can find support and maybe even create some moments of joy.

RELY ON AND BUILD YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM

The health benefits of having a strong support system are well documented. Dealing with loss during the holidays is a good example of a time when support is needed.

For many, the addiction recovery process involves building such support, such as through various types of group therapy. Recovery meetings can also be a great source of support.

Some can rely on family or close friends for help. Just make sure that the person you're confiding in fully supports your recovery process.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a program dedicated to recovery support, with plentiful free recovery resources.

- Give to charity
- Look through photos and watch videos
- Visit one of their favorite spots
- Create a memory book
- Light a candle or have a candle ceremony

TRY A MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Mindfulness practices such as meditation have proved to have many mental, emotional, and even physical benefits. This is due in large part to their ability to reduce stress.

A recent mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) study showed that MBCT has the ability to help people cope with grief after the loss of a loved one.

It does this by providing practitioners with tools they can use to better regulate their emotions and, in turn, have fewer life interruptions due to them.

ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED

Asking for what you need can feel scary at first, but over time it can be a great practice for building confidence, not to mention for getting more of what you need.

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One of the core principles of 12-step groups like Alcoholics Anonymous is recognizing that you cannot recover on your own.

While it's possible to rely on your own strength at times, at other times it's important to release the need to do it all on your own and fall back on your sturdy support system.

Often in these types of recovery support systems, you'll find others who understand the journey you're currently walking on. You may have a sponsor, peer, or group leader who's also lost someone they love, and may welcome support around this time of year, too.

Asking for what you need can be scary because it involves vulnerability, which some associate with weakness.

Researcher Brené Brown has dedicated her adult life to researching shame and vulnerability and has discovered that the opposite is true: Vulnerability is a strength.

Over the holidays, asking for what you need might look like the following:

- Time to talk with a friend
- Help with holiday shopping or gift wrapping
- Accompaniment to a holiday party
- Self-care time, like a massage, sauna visit, journaling session, or yoga class

SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

People in recovery can be anxious to feel and appear normal, especially after a difficult experience like losing a loved one.

This can lead to overcommitting during the holidays at work, with family and friends, and with personal goals.

Although social isolation isn't a good idea during times of major loss, it is OK to say no so that you can honor your energy levels and emotions.

It's also OK to limit your social engagements to only people you know well, trust, and enjoy spending time with.



GET MOVING

Perhaps even better news than the fact that exercise has stress-reducing qualities is the fact that the form of exercise doesn't matter. Everything from aerobics to yoga provides stress relief.

There are many reasons why, including exercise's ability to produce feel-good endorphins, improve mood, and reduce distractedness.



Finding an activity you enjoy is critical if you want to stick to your exercise goals in the long run. For some, this might require the participation of a friend, like walking together.

You might even spend this time communing with your loved one. Take a walk through your favorite park or go kayaking in a serene spot in nature and take a few minutes or hours to remember your loved one or speak to them.

Use the opportunity to share your frustrations and disappointment over the fact that you'll be spending the holiday without them this year, and invite in any emotions that need to take place.

RELAPSE CUES TO LOOK OUT FOR

Although substance use disorders are treatable, they aren't curable. This means that people in recovery are at risk of relapse, especially during times of emotional unrest.

This usually has nothing to do with will. Drug use can cause changes in the brain that affect a person's self-control and ability to resist drug cravings.

When a person is suffering with the loss of a friend, parent, family member, child, or another loved one during an already-stressful time of year, resisting cravings becomes much more challenging.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) provides cues that the "incubation of craving" has begun, which could lead to relapse.

If you suspect a loved one has relapsed, look for the following signs:

- Spending time with people who used the substance with you
- Being in places where substance use occurred
- Seeing people selling drugs outside a convenience store (or in any place similar to where you purchased drugs)
- Having cash on hand
- Seeing alcohol or drugs available (such as bottles of wine at a holiday party)

If you suspect a loved one has relapsed, look for the following signs:

- Sudden changes in behavior
- Lying or secrecy
- Changes in physical appearance, such as a lack of personal hygiene
- Physical signs of drug use, such as slurred speech, skin changes, sweating, bloodshot eyes, or drowsiness
- Mental signs of drug use, such as lack of coordination, memory loss, confusion, or hallucinations

WHAT TO DO IF RELAPSE OCCURS

If relapse does occur, one of the most important things you can do is attend a treatment program.

Whether you choose an inpatient rehab center, outpatient program, or regular therapy, create a plan of action that can help you to regain control over your sobriety.

Health professionals can help you turn your relapse into a tool for learning about your continued and changing needs.

Addiction treatment is always evolving. Addiction research is being conducted at a regular rate, and new addiction therapies are being developed, as reported by NIDA.



RESOURCES FOR THOSE DEALING WITH LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Recovery from addiction is often a lifelong process that requires patience and gentleness along with courage and strength.

At times, it will be very easy to stay sober, and at other times, it will seem almost impossible. Help is available every step of the way.

Here are some resources that you or a loved one dealing with recovery and loss this holiday season might find helpful.

GENERAL GRIEF RESOURCES:

- **American Psychological Association.** *“Grief: Coping with the loss of your loved one”*: The leading scientific and professional psychology organization in the U.S., APA offers tips and resources for healing from the loss of a loved one.
- **Hospice Foundation of America.** This nonprofit organization recognizes that grief is a unique experience for each individual and offers a wide range of tools for coping with grief.
- **The Jed Foundatio.:** A nonprofit organization, JED provides numerous mental health resources for helping teens and young adults.
- **Mayo Clinic.** *“Grief and loss throughout the holiday season”*: The nonprofit medical center offers several resources for people dealing with loss during the holidays, including a virtual drop-in grief support group.
- **SAMHSA’s Disaster Behavioral Health Information Series Resource Center.** This branch of the government dealing with mental health offers many resources for healing from addiction and coping with grief and other difficult emotions.

RELAPSE PREVENTION RESOURCES:

- **National Institute on Drug Abuse.** *“Treatment and Recovery”*: NIDA’s treatment and recovery resources include information on preventing relapse and continuing treatment.
- **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.** *“Reducing Relapse Risk”*: The VA offers abundant tools for reducing the risk of relapse that are applicable to anyone living with addiction.
- **West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources.** *“Initial Relapse Prevention Plan” worksheet*: This printable worksheet includes information on the stages of relapse, plus tips and techniques for handling each stage.

GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS:

- **AARP.** “Grief and Loss” online community: Connect with other people who have lost a loved one and search a wide range of resources on grief support.
- **The Compassionate Friends.** This nonprofit group offers resources for finding a local grief support group, plus online communities, private Facebook groups, and resources specific to different types of loss.
- **Grieving.com.** Find forums and support groups for specific losses, such as the loss of a parent, child, infant, friend, partner, sibling, or pet.

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This page does not provide medical advice.

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Willow Wood Solutions

Willow Wood Solutions solves problems and finds solutions for individuals and families trying to navigate probate. Our services relieve the burden so the family can recover from the loss of a loved one. We take on non-legal tasks that deal with logistics and details that involve people, property, and personal belongings. Located in The Woodlands, TX, we are honored to help the people in the Greater Houston area. To learn more, please visit the website, www.WillowWoodSolutions.com

Ohio Recovery Center

Ohio Recovery Center (ORC) uses multiple tools for lasting addiction recovery. They structure their programs around balance and stability during detox and withdrawal. Their mission is to not only monitor withdrawal but also coordinate ongoing support, treatment, and aftercare. ORC is only one part of a treatment network operated by Ark Behavioral Health. Our other rehab facilities include: Bedrock Recovery Center, Northeast Addictions Treatment Center, Recovering Champions, Spring Hill Recovery Center, and Spring Hill 604 (Outpatient) Center. To learn more, please visit the website, www.RecoveryOhio.org