



# SOBRIETY OVER THE HOLIDAYS

## 5 SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES



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**RIISING TO THE CHALLENGES  
OF THE HOLIDAYS WHILE  
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YOURSELF FOR THEM.**

## Introduction

As the holiday season gets into full swing, people across the country are preparing for feasting, fun and festivities. But the holidays also bring stress, and that stress creates a greater need for skills such as good time management, planning, organizing and remembering details, according to Harvard Medical School's Department of Biology.<sup>1</sup> This high level of demand and stress can send the brain into overdrive.

In 2015, only 10 percent of Americans reported no additional stress during the holidays, while 62 percent described their stress level as very high or somewhat high during the holidays. The most common stressors reported were related to finances, family dysfunction and maintaining good health habits.

The holiday season is particularly difficult for people in early recovery, for a variety of reasons. Maybe you equate holiday cheer with drugs or alcohol, or maybe you'll be facing family members who will test your sobriety to the limit. You may be under particular financial strain after losing a job to drugs or alcohol, or you may be feeling less than joyful these days overall.

Rising to the challenges of the holidays while staying sober is largely a matter of planning ahead and preparing yourself for them. Here, then, is your guide to staying sober over the holidays, filled with tips and strategies for coping with whatever challenges the season brings.





#1: TAKE CARE OF  
YOURSELF



Self-care is one of the most overlooked aspects of recovery, and yet it's one of the most important.<sup>2</sup> If you're not taking care of yourself, you're likely to have more mood swings and negative thoughts that can lead to a lapse. In fact, a lack of self-care is an important early sign of a lapse.

**Self-care means taking care of your body, mind and spirit.**

- ◆ **Eat healthy food.** A healthy diet promotes a stable mood, reduces cravings and helps you stay focused and energized. Eat a mostly plant-based diet rich in fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and seeds. Choose lean proteins like fish, poultry and pork. Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.
- ◆ **Exercise.** Daily exercise improves your mood, reduces cravings and stress and promotes making other healthy lifestyle choices.



- ◆ **Sleep.** Inadequate sleep in recovery can lead to a lapse.<sup>3</sup> A lack of sleep negatively affects your physical, emotional and mental well-being. Unfortunately, sleeping problems are common in early recovery. If you're having any type of sleep trouble, such as insomnia or frequently waking up, talk to your doctor.
- ◆ **Combat isolation and loneliness.** Feelings of isolation and loneliness can quickly lead to a lapse. When you're feeling lonely, reach out to others. Go for coffee with a friend, or attend a support group meeting. Volunteering your time to a cause you feel strongly about can help combat loneliness by shifting your attention away from yourself while also enjoying the opportunity to meet and work with others.
- ◆ **Reduce stressors.** Reducing stressors can help you maintain good mental health over the holidays. Think about the things that cause you stress, and brainstorm ways to reduce or eliminate those stressors. If finances and gift-giving are stressing you out, as they do most of us, consider cutting back. Talk to friends, family and co-workers about skipping gift exchanges, or try a white elephant exchange instead.
- ◆ **Schedule downtime.** If the holidays are going to be keeping you busy, make sure you take time to be alone to relax and reflect.



- ◆ **Set realistic expectations for the holidays.** The media would have us believe that the holidays are a magical time of joy and cheer, but that's hardly the case for many Americans. Setting impossible expectations for the holidays can lead to stress, anxiety and depression. Think realistically about what you hope to get out of the holidays, and try to be flexible if things don't go the way you'd hoped.
- ◆ **Relax and have fun.** Fun and relaxation are extremely important during early recovery. Taking time to relax and rejuvenate helps you stay on an even emotional keel and better cope with stress and other triggers.
- ◆ **Engage in creative pursuits.** Creative endeavors, such as making art or music, dancing or baking, help improve your self-awareness and offer a pathway for self-expression and enjoyment.
- ◆ **Spend time with the people you love.** Deep connections to others are rewarding, and spending quality time with beloved friends and family will improve your motivation, mood and well-being.





**#2: REDUCE YOUR STRESS**





Stress is a powerful trigger for a lapse, and the holidays can create a lot of stress in your life. Coping with stress is essential for getting through the holidays sober. Here are the best ways to cope with stress during the holidays and beyond.

## Meditate

Research shows that daily meditation is highly effective for reducing stress. According to Harvard University, meditation can reverse the body's stress response, which includes elevated blood pressure, heart rate and body temperature.<sup>4</sup> Regular meditation has also been found to improve the way your body and mind respond to stress moving forward.

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**Meditation isn't complicated, and you don't have to be a guru to do it right. Just follow these steps:**

- ◆ Find a quiet place, and sit comfortably. Close your eyes.
- ◆ Breathe slowly and deeply. Focus on your breath as it moves in and out of your body.
- ◆ Allow your mind to go blank as you continue to focus on your breathing. Find yourself in the present moment, where thoughts of the past and worries about the future cease to exist.
- ◆ When a conscious thought enters your mind, simply acknowledge it without judgement, and send it away on your exhale.
- ◆ Start with just five or 10 minutes a day, and work your way up to 20 minutes or more.

Meditation can be tough at first. Clearing your mind of conscious thought isn't easy, and in the beginning, you'll find thoughts forming quite frequently. It's okay. Just send them away, and bring your attention back to the present moment and back to your breath. After a week or two of daily practice, meditation will become much easier, and you'll start noticing the benefits.







## Breathe Deeply

Deep breathing exercises reduce your stress on the spot. Deep breathing lowers the level of stress hormones, which reduces your blood pressure, muscle tension and breathing rate.

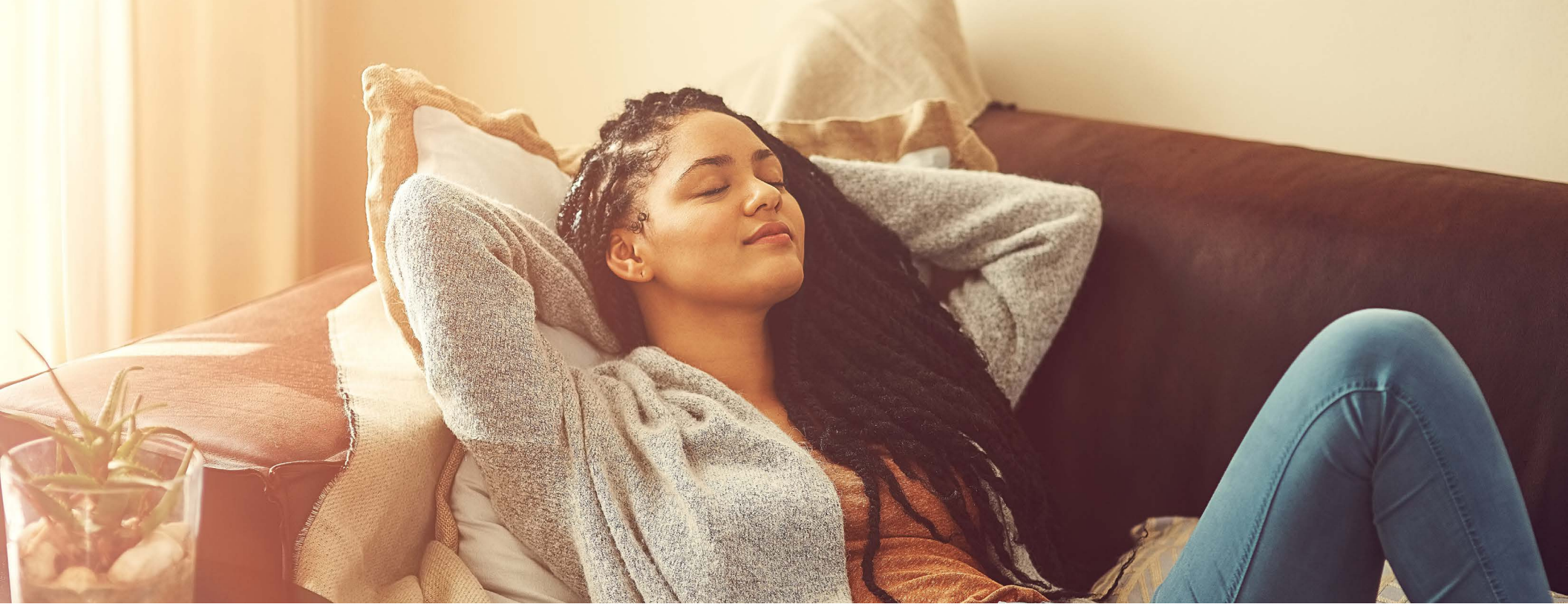
**Whenever you're feeling stressed this holiday season:**

- ◆ Breathe in slowly and deeply, letting your abdomen expand fully.
- ◆ Hold the breath for five seconds.
- ◆ Exhale slowly. Visualize your stress leaving your body with the exhale.
- ◆ Repeat until you feel calmer and more relaxed.

## Exercise

Exercise is a powerful stress reducer, and it's been clinically proven to reduce depression and anxiety as effectively as medications. Aerobic exercise lowers stress hormone levels and increases the production of endorphins, the brain's feel-good chemicals. Exercise relaxes you, promotes better sleep and improves self-confidence.

Any type of exercise works to reduce stress. Walking, jogging, biking, swimming, yoga and dancing are all excellent exercises for reduced stress and a better mood. Strive for at least 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week.



## Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the act of focusing your attention on your thoughts, emotions and sensations in the present moment, without judgment. Staying in tune with your thought patterns and emotions helps you self-regulate your state of mind. It helps you avoid automatic, self-destructive reactions to triggers and instead choose to react strategically. Awareness and acceptance of your thoughts and emotional state without judgment helps you let go of negative emotions and make better decisions.

### Research shows that mindfulness also:

- ◆ Reduces cravings, even when you're feeling negative emotions
- ◆ Reduces anxiety and stress
- ◆ Promotes self-compassion and self-love
- ◆ Promotes a higher level of self-awareness



A group of five young adults are gathered outdoors at night, celebrating. They are wearing winter clothing and Santa hats. The scene is filled with falling red and white confetti. Warm, glowing string lights are visible in the background. The people are smiling and looking upwards, with some holding their hands out to catch the falling confetti. A dark blue semi-transparent banner is overlaid on the bottom right of the image, containing white text.

### #3: EVALUATE HIGH-RISK GATHERINGS

High-risk situations are those that can quickly lead to lapse. Gatherings during the holidays are potential high-risk situations, such as the party where everyone's drinking, a family event that has a high likelihood of erupting into an argument or a situation where you encounter people you used to use with. Here are some tips for navigating high-risk events during the holidays.

## Know when to say no.

Before accepting an invitation to a gathering that could possibly lead to a lapse, ask yourself these important questions:

- ◆ Do I really need to go?
- ◆ Am I ready to cope with this type of environment?
- ◆ Will anyone be there who might try to interfere with my recovery?

If you feel the event is too risky, don't be afraid to decline the invitation, even if it's a family gathering. You know best what you need and don't need during the holidays, and preserving your sobriety should be your number-one priority this year. If you choose to accept the invitation, the following tips will help you get through it with your sobriety intact.





## **Visualize.**

Walk yourself through the situation. Think about the specific triggers at the event that could lead you closer to a lapse, such as encountering a friend who will try to get you to have "just one" drink or a family member who knows how to push your buttons. Imagine how you will handle each situation.

## **Bring someone along for support.**

If you can, bring a sober, supportive friend or family member to the event. Having someone there who supports your recovery will make it much easier to resist using, and it can help you stay on an even emotional keel.

## **Define and enforce your boundaries.**

Boundaries establish the kind of treatment from others that you deem acceptable. Boundaries are different for each situation.<sup>5</sup> Define your boundaries before you go, and enforce them while you're there. For example, if a family member tries to engage you in an argument, don't allow it. Say, "I'm not going to discuss this right now," and walk away. Enforce your boundaries without guilt. It's important to be okay with doing what you need to do to stay sober.

## Get support.

If you can, attend a meeting right before you go to the event. Getting some support, tips and encouragement in advance can go a long way toward helping you cope with the situation. Have your sponsor or a supportive friend or family member on speed dial, and if you feel like your sobriety is at risk, make the call.

## Have an out.

Have a plan in place for making a quick exit if necessary. Make excuses if you must, or simply leave, if you can. If you don't have transportation, ask someone ahead of time if they can give you a ride if it comes to that. Don't worry about appearing rude or anti-social. You have to do what's best for your sobriety.







## #4: COPE WITH CRAVINGS

## OVER TIME, THE DURATION AND INTENSITY OF CRAVINGS WILL DIMINISH.

The holidays can trigger powerful cravings, especially if you associate the season with using or you have high-risk obligations where others will be drinking. To get you through intact, brush up on your skills and strategies for coping with cravings.

### Go urge surfing.

Cravings are like waves. They increase in intensity, peak after 20 or 30 minutes, then subside. Urge surfing is a mindfulness-based technique that involves acknowledging and riding out the craving rather than fighting it.

#### To urge surf:

- ◆ Identify and acknowledge the craving as soon as it starts. Imagine that it's a distant wave slowly approaching the shore.
- ◆ Observe the craving. Rather than fighting it, relax into the craving. Observe it without judgement. What triggered it? Where do you feel it in your body? What thoughts does it produce?
- ◆ Ride the urge. Use your breath as though it's a surfboard. Send your breath to the parts of your body and mind affected by the craving. Focus on breathing in and out as you allow the sensations to peak and then subside.

With a little practice, cravings will become easier to ride out. Over time, the duration and intensity of the cravings will diminish. A 2009 study of smokers published in the journal *Psychology and Addictive Behaviors* found that while urge surfing may not initially reduce cravings, it may change the response to urges, making them easier to cope with.<sup>6</sup>





## **Distract yourself.**

Distractions can get you through a craving quickly and effectively. Make a long list of activities you can do when you have a craving. When the urge strikes, pick something on the list and do it: play the guitar, reorganize the junk drawer in the kitchen, go for a walk around the block, watch an episode of something, call a friend.

## **Get support online.**

Numerous online support groups can help you work through a craving at virtually any time. From Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to SMART Recovery and Secular Organizations for Sobriety, you can find an online support group or forum for support any time you feel the urges building.

## Go to Meetings.

Regularly attending support group meetings is important for successful recovery any time of year, but it's twice as important during the holidays. If the holiday season is particularly difficult for you, or if you expect it to be, it's a good idea to attend more than one meeting a day. Staying connected to your support group offers an added layer of support and personal accountability during the holidays.







**#5: FIND THE SPIRIT OF  
THE SEASON**





Dwelling too heavily on yourself and your sobriety during the holidays can make it hard to relax and enjoy yourself. Putting more of your focus on others will help you see a bigger picture.

## **Find ways to show love and gratitude.**

Supportive friends and family are invaluable in recovery, and the holidays are the perfect time to express your love and gratitude. Take someone you love out for pie or a holiday production. Write letters of thanks, or spend some time making crafts or baked tokens of your appreciation.

## **Reach out to someone who needs your help.**

If you know someone who could use a helping hand during the holidays, reach out and offer your services. Whether it's babysitting for friends while they do their holiday shopping, helping your grandma with her annual baking or giving a ride to someone without transportation, looking for needs and filling them will get you into the holiday spirit.





## Host a sober party.

You're definitely not the only one in recovery struggling with the challenges of the holidays. If you have other sober friends or acquaintances, throw a sober shindig where you can mingle without worrying that someone's going to want to buy you a drink. Hosting a party is a great distraction, and it may make someone else's holiday much brighter than it would otherwise be.

## Volunteer.

Volunteering your time to a cause during the holidays can improve your mood and help you keep things in perspective. Think about your strengths and values, and put them to work for a cause you feel strongly about. Toy drives, food banks, homeless shelters and children's homes are often looking for extra volunteers during the holidays, and you can make a difference.



A woman with blonde hair is shown in profile, looking down. The background is filled with warm, out-of-focus bokeh lights in shades of yellow, orange, and red, suggesting a festive or indoor setting. A dark blue rectangular box is positioned in the lower right, containing the text.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU LAPSE**





Lapse is regarded as part of the recovery process, and it's common around the holidays. If you lapse, don't succumb to guilt, self-hatred or other negative emotions. Instead, consider the progress you've made so far, and have faith that you can get through this setback. Contact your sponsor or aftercare case manager as soon as possible. They'll ensure you get the help you need to determine what went wrong, develop essential missing skills and get back on track quickly—and probably stronger than before.

The holidays can be a time of joy and happiness if you take the time and make the effort to practice your coping skills, maintain good physical and mental health and get help when you need it. Set realistic expectations, but reach for the stars. Use the holiday season as a time to repair relationships, give of yourself and reflect on what's most important to you. That, after all, is the very heart of the holidays.

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