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Enjoying the Holidays without Relapsing Tips from START Treatment & Recovery Centers

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For people with substance use disorders, navigating the holidays without relapsing can feel like a minefield. Regardless of whether you are newly sober or years into recovery, holiday parties, dinners, or gatherings with family and friends can trigger emotions and behaviors that can derail sobriety.

“The proximity of alcohol and other substances combined with emotions that may include stress, anxiety, anger, loneliness and guilt, sometimes leads people to self-medicate and return to old patterns,” says, **Lawrence S. Brown, Jr., MD, MPH, FACP, DFASAM**, CEO of [START](#) Treatment & Recovery Centers, a non-profit that is the largest independent drug treatment agency in New York and has treated over 50,000 New Yorkers since it was founded in 1969.

“Staying sober through the holidays requires planning,” he adds. “It's important to consider environment, family history, and whether the people around you are enablers or will assist in your recovery. The best intentions can be derailed by poor planning.”

Here are Dr. Brown’s tips for staying drug and alcohol free during the holidays:

- **Identify potential triggers:** Being with friends or family who are associated with past drug or alcohol use can trigger powerful cravings. Cravings can also be triggered by emotions, places or even objects. Consider whether the attendees at a gathering will support or jeopardize your recovery efforts. If the challenge is too much, don’t go. If you must attend, consider arriving late and leaving early.

- **Enlist the help of someone you trust:** Bring a companion who knows you are in recovery and can assist if things get difficult.
- **Bring your own:** When people around you are drinking, bring your own beverage so you can have something in your hand. That way, you have a ready-made excuse if someone offers you a drink, and you can avoid accidentally drinking something alcoholic.
- **Have an excuse:** Be ready with an excuse if family or friends pressure you into joining the festivities. If you don't want to tell people you're in recovery, you can say you are taking medication or are the designated driver.
- **Stay with the program:** During holidays you may need to attend more support sessions than usual. Consider attending a meeting before or after attending a party or family event.
- **Find alternatives:** Consider spending time with others in recovery or find a sober event. Try to keep busy with healthy activities like going to the gym or taking a walk.
- **Think about the benefits of sobriety:** Compiling a list of the ways your life has improved in recovery can help you fight temptation. Volunteering or helping others during the holidays will also help you remember what you gained by becoming sober.
- **Recovery is for a lifetime:** For anyone who struggles with addiction and substance abuse, every day in recovery is a success. If you falter during the holidays, prevent a long-term relapse by immediately getting back on track.

About START Treatment and Recovery Centers:

START has treated over 50,000 New Yorkers throughout New York City since it was founded in 1969. Its goal is to provide the highest quality of compassionate, comprehensive, evidence-based healthcare and social services; education of the public concerning maintenance of healthy lifestyles; and cutting-edge behavioral, biomedical and healthcare services research. Its community-based treatment programs for adults and adolescents use individual and group counseling with medical and behavioral health professionals to treat patients; some of its clinics offer short-term, outpatient detoxification and a drug-free chemical dependency program for other non-opiate addictions. Its outpatient services and programs for people seeking quality treatment for drug addiction and rehabilitation include comprehensive medical care and specialized HIV services; behavioral health and vocational services; and medical case management. For more information, visit www.startny.org.