

Holidays

Dear Denise:

I hate the holidays! I dread the holiday season with my relatives who suffer from alcoholism and Substance Use Disorder! I just want to hide. Any suggestions to make this Season less stressful and at least a little enjoyable?

Sarah

Dear Sarah:

You are not alone! Those who have experienced holidays with SUD in our family know the possibilities and cringe just thinking of them. Family gatherings and holidays should be joyous occasions. There are certain steps we can take to make them enjoyable, or at least less stressful.

Let's consider someone we love suffering from SUD or alcohol abuse who either lives with us or who would regularly attend a Holiday family gathering? These loved ones are often unpredictable. But, over years of holidays together we have an idea what is possible unacceptable behavior from them. This year we can plan ahead and decide what we will do. If we have experienced someone showing up high and not very functional (and as is often the case, we have not shared with our other relatives about SUD in the family because we are embarrassed), what will we do?

Hiding alcohol or not serving alcohol is a possibility, but not usually very practical for a large family group. Consider scooping up keys and cell phone of someone who arrives intoxicated. Arrange ahead of time for someone to drive them (and their keys and phone) home. Alcohol does create anger sometimes so this is not the easiest plan but if this is what you plan to do and others are on board with it, you can make it happen. If they are usually disruptive and abusive at gatherings you can choose to give them parameters ahead of time or just not invite them. Remember, you deserve to enjoy the holidays as well as them.

Dealing with someone with Substance Use Disorder can be difficult. Common problems that might occur range from stealing from purses and coats, to falling asleep at the table from being high, to argumentative and abusive behavior. These are difficult issues that cause anxiety for us who love those who suffer but we can do some things to plan ahead.

If you include a suffering loved one at your family gatherings (some people are just not invited) there are some simple things, again things that need to be discussed with others who will agree to help you implement them and stick to the plan. Knowing what you will do in certain instances ahead of time will often alleviate the anxiety about it. For instance, if you will have people leaving purses and coats out, just have them all put in a room where there is a lock on the door. Some of your guests will already know the issue you are dealing with and will understand (and feel relieved about this) and those that don't know will probably not ask why.

If you worry about abusive behavior or falling asleep at the table, or numerous other behaviors you are familiar with that will create major anxiety for you, plan a separate small holiday gathering at a different time. Invite your suffering loved one and make him/her feel

special and loved. Make sure he/she knows that they will not be included in the main gathering and why.

This is how all of this should look:

Get together ahead of time with your close relatives whom you trust and will be concerned as you are. Write down all the things that could possibly go wrong. Make a plan for what you would do if each or any of these things will happen, agree amongst yourselves that this is the best plan, and agree to stick to it and not let emotion take hold.

Another thing to consider is gift giving. Please do not give gifts of money or things that can be sold. Personal gifts like a handmade item with the person's name or a gift certificate for a service usually needed by a person suffering from SUD like to a dentist appointment, doctor appointment, massage, might be appropriate. Or offer a ride to get somewhere. These are just some ideas to ease the "cringing" for the holidays. The key takeaway, "Plan Ahead and Stick to the Plan."

Happy Holidays!
Denise Krochta