



Sam's OATH

What's Hidden Doesn't Heal.

Navigating Holidays and Triggers as a Family

Practical strategies for families to navigate holidays, gatherings, and seasonal triggers when a loved one is dealing with substance use or mental health challenges.

Why the Calendar Becomes Your Enemy

For most people, holidays mean warmth, family, celebration. For families affected by substance use or mental health conditions, holidays mean something more complicated: anxiety, dread, grief, performance, and the constant negotiation between what you want the day to look like and what it actually is.

Thanksgiving dinner when one chair is empty because your son is in treatment. Christmas morning when your partner is hungover and the kids are trying not to notice. Fourth of July barbecue where your brother is three beers in by noon and everyone is pretending everything is normal. Mother's Day when you can't stop thinking about the phone call from the ER last March.

Holidays concentrate every family dynamic into a single day and then add alcohol, expectations, nostalgia, and an audience. It's a pressure cooker, and families dealing with substance use or mental health challenges feel the pressure more intensely than anyone.

But holidays don't have to be something you just endure. With planning, honesty, and a willingness to redefine what "celebration" looks like for your family, these days can actually become meaningful again - just maybe in different ways than you imagined.

Why Holidays Are Especially Hard

Understanding the specific triggers helps you prepare for them. Here's what makes holidays particularly difficult:

****Alcohol is everywhere.**** The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports that alcohol consumption spikes during the holiday season, with December being the heaviest-drinking month of the year. Holiday parties, family toasts, office events, and cultural traditions all center alcohol. For families with a loved one who has an alcohol use disorder, this saturation creates constant exposure and pressure.

****Expectations create pressure.**** Holidays carry enormous weight: they're supposed to be happy, connected, magical. When your reality doesn't match the Hallmark version, the gap between expectation and reality produces sadness, shame, and frustration. You may feel pressure to perform normalcy for extended family, for children, for yourself.

****Family gatherings concentrate dynamics.**** The uncle who makes comments about your loved one's "choices." The grandmother who doesn't believe in mental health treatment. The cousin who offers drinks without thinking. Family gatherings bring together people with different levels of understanding, different opinions, and different communication styles, all in close quarters.

****Nostalgia triggers grief.**** "Remember when..." can be the most painful phrase during holidays. Photos from better years, traditions that feel hollow now, the memory of who someone used to be versus who they are today - these comparisons are a form of grief, and holidays amplify them.

****Schedule disruption affects mental health.**** Travel, late nights, unfamiliar environments, disrupted sleep and eating patterns, and breaks from therapy or support group routines can destabilize both the person with the condition and the family members supporting them. SAMHSA notes that disruptions to routine are a significant risk factor for relapse and mental health episodes.

****Financial stress compounds everything.**** Gift-giving expectations, travel costs, and hosting expenses create financial pressure that may already be severe if your family's finances have been impacted by your loved one's condition.

****Loneliness in a crowd.**** Perhaps the cruelest part: you can be surrounded by family and feel completely alone. Maintaining a facade of normalcy while carrying the weight of what your family is going through creates a particular kind of isolation that the holiday cheer around you only intensifies.

Planning Ahead: Specific Strategies

The difference between a holiday that breaks you and a holiday that you navigate with grace is almost always planning. Don't wing it. Plan.

Before the Holiday

****Have a family meeting (the inner circle only).**** Gather the family members who know what's going on - the people you trust, who are in the loop. Discuss: - What are our realistic expectations for this holiday? - What are the known triggers, and how will we handle them? - Who is responsible for what? - What's our exit plan if things go sideways? - What boundaries are we holding?

****Decide about alcohol in advance.**** If your loved one is in recovery or currently struggling with alcohol,

decide as a family whether alcohol will be present at your gathering. Options include: no alcohol at all, alcohol in a separate area, alcohol available but not prominently displayed, or alcohol served as usual. There's no universally right answer - it depends on your loved one's input (if they're able to participate in the decision), the stage of recovery, and the practical reality of your gathering. What matters is deciding in advance rather than navigating it in the moment.

****Communicate with extended family.**** This is uncomfortable but necessary. You don't owe anyone your family's full medical history, but you may need to set expectations. "We're keeping things low-key this year." "We'd appreciate it if alcohol isn't the centerpiece." "Please don't ask [Name] about their treatment - they'll share when they're ready." Brief, clear, firm.

****Have a code word.**** Establish a word or phrase that any family member can use to signal "I need to leave" or "I need help" without making a scene. "I think I left the oven on" or "I need to check on the dog" - whatever works for your family. Having a pre-arranged exit signal reduces anxiety because everyone knows there's an escape hatch.

****Prepare for the empty chair.**** If your loved one is in treatment, incarcerated, estranged, or has passed away, the absence will be felt most acutely at the holiday table. Acknowledge it in advance. You might light a candle, say a brief word of acknowledgment, or simply allow a moment of silence. What hurts most is pretending the absence doesn't exist.

****Scale down if you need to.**** There's no rule that says holidays have to be big. A quiet Thanksgiving with just your household is not a failure. A Christmas where you skip the extended family gathering is not giving up. Protect your energy. Do what you can sustain.

During the Holiday

****Assign a point person.**** Designate one family member (not the person most affected) to be the "temperature check" person - someone who discreetly monitors how things are going, notices when someone is struggling, and can redirect or intervene calmly.

****Build in breaks.**** No one needs to be "on" for eight straight hours. Build in natural break points: a walk after dinner, a quiet room for decompression, a planned activity that gives people something to do besides sit around and drink.

****Eat real food at real times.**** Holiday eating patterns (skipping meals, heavy drinking, sugar crashes) wreak

havoc on everyone's emotional regulation. Keep meals on a somewhat normal schedule. Make sure there are substantial food options, not just appetizers and desserts.

****Be ready to redirect conversations.**** When Uncle Tom starts with "What [Name] really needs to do is..." have a response ready. "Thanks, Tom. We're working with professionals on that. Hey, did you see the game last night?" Redirect, don't engage. You will not change Uncle Tom's mind at the holiday table, and the attempt will drain you.

****Monitor your own state.**** Check in with yourself every hour or two. How's your body? How's your mood? Do you need water, food, air, a break? You're monitoring everyone else by default - add yourself to the list.

****Let go of the script.**** The holiday may not go as planned. Something may happen. Someone may say the wrong thing. The turkey may burn while you're on the phone with your son's sponsor. Release the expectation that the day will be perfect, and define success differently: "We got through it together" is enough.

After the Holiday

****Debrief with your inner circle.**** What worked? What didn't? What will we do differently next time? Don't skip this step - it makes the next holiday easier.

****Allow the emotional hangover.**** The days after a holiday can be harder than the day itself. The adrenaline drops, the facade drops, and the feelings rush in. Give yourself permission to feel tired, sad, relieved, or all of the above. Cancel plans if you need to. Rest.

****Resume routines quickly.**** If therapy, support group meetings, exercise, or other self-care practices got disrupted during the holiday, restart them immediately. Don't let a holiday break become a permanent disruption.

Creating New Traditions

Sometimes the most healing thing a family can do is let go of old traditions that no longer work and create new ones that fit who you are now.

This isn't about erasing the past. It's about building rituals that honor your current reality instead of forcing yourself into a mold that no longer fits.

****Ideas for new traditions:****

- ****Volunteer together.**** Serving a meal at a shelter, sorting donations, visiting a nursing home. Helping others who are also having a difficult holiday season creates perspective, purpose, and connection.
- ****Create a gratitude ritual.**** Not forced, performative gratitude - real acknowledgment of what's good alongside what's hard. "This year, I'm grateful that [Name] is alive and getting help." "I'm grateful for this family, even when things are messy."
- ****Make it about experience, not consumption.**** Instead of a gift-heavy Christmas, spend the money on an experience: a day trip, a cooking class, a movie marathon with homemade popcorn. This removes financial pressure and replaces stuff with presence.
- ****Start a new holiday.**** Some families create their own tradition on a non-standard date - a "Family Day" in January, a "Summer Thanksgiving" when the pressure is lower. There's no rule that celebration has to happen on the calendar date.
- ****Honor the person who's missing.**** If your loved one is absent, create a tradition that includes them: writing them a letter, lighting a candle, saying what you'd want to tell them if they were here. This is healthier than pretending the absence doesn't exist.
- ****Build in quiet time.**** Make space in the holiday for people to retreat without it being weird. "After dinner, we're doing a quiet hour - read, nap, walk, whatever you need." Normalizing downtime takes the performance pressure off.

Having Hard Conversations During Gatherings

Sometimes hard conversations happen during holidays whether you plan for them or not. Here's how to handle the common ones:

****When your loved one shows up intoxicated:**** Quietly, privately: "I can see you're not sober right now. I love you, and you know our agreement about that. [Designated person] is going to take you home. We'll check on you tomorrow." Keep it brief. Keep it calm. Don't make a scene.

****When someone at the gathering offers your loved one a drink:**** If your loved one is comfortable with it, they can handle it themselves. If not, you can step in casually: "Oh, [Name] is doing a no-drink month. Can I

get you some sparkling water?" Don't make it dramatic.

****When a family member says something ignorant or hurtful:**** Choose your battles. If it's a passing comment, let it go and address it later in private. If it's directed at your loved one or is causing visible harm, address it calmly: "That's not how this works, and I'd appreciate it if we could change the subject." Then change the subject yourself.

****When your loved one wants to skip the gathering:**** Respect it. If they're in early recovery, a holiday party may genuinely be too much. "I understand. I'm proud of you for knowing your limits. I'll bring you leftovers." Don't guilt them.

****When you want to skip the gathering:**** You can. You're allowed. "We're keeping things small this year" is a complete explanation. You don't need to justify protecting your family's well-being.

Grief During Celebrations

There's a particular pain that comes from grieving during a time when the world is telling you to celebrate. The Compassionate Friends, an organization supporting families who have lost children, calls this "surviving the holidays" - and that language applies whether your loss is death, estrangement, or the ambiguous loss of someone who is present but not fully there.

****Give yourself permission to grieve.**** You don't have to be happy during the holidays just because the calendar says so. Your grief is valid, and it doesn't need to be hidden.

****Grief and joy can coexist.**** You can laugh at your daughter's joke and then cry in the bathroom ten minutes later. You can enjoy the pie and also feel the ache. These are not contradictions - they're the full human experience.

****Name the absence.**** If someone is missing from the table, say so. "I miss [Name]. I wish they were here." That one sentence gives everyone permission to feel what they're feeling instead of dancing around it.

****Create a grief ritual.**** Some families light a candle, visit a meaningful place, or share a memory. Having a specific, brief ritual gives the grief a container so it doesn't flood the entire day.

****Prepare for anniversary reactions.**** If a crisis happened during a previous holiday - an overdose at Thanksgiving, a breakdown at Christmas, a suicide attempt on New Year's - the anniversary of that event can

trigger intense emotional and even physical reactions. Plan for it. Tell your therapist. Have your support network on standby.

Specific Holidays and Their Challenges

Thanksgiving The pressure to perform gratitude when your family is struggling. The alcohol-heavy dinners. The "what are you thankful for?" going around the table when you're barely surviving. **Strategy:** redefine gratitude as honesty. "I'm thankful we're here, even though this year has been incredibly hard."

Christmas / Hanukkah / Winter Holidays Gift-giving pressure, financial strain, religious expectations, children's excitement versus adult exhaustion. The longest, most expectation-laden season. **Strategy:** scale down aggressively. Focus on one or two meaningful elements. Let the rest go.

New Year's Eve The most alcohol-saturated holiday. Pressure to celebrate, reflect, and make plans when you may just want the year to be over. **Strategy:** create an alcohol-free celebration or skip the parties entirely. A quiet night at home is a legitimate way to welcome a new year.

Mother's Day / Father's Day Particularly painful when the relationship being celebrated is the one most affected by the condition. **Strategy:** release the Hallmark expectation. Write yourself a card about what you've survived this year. You've earned it.

Birthdays Your loved one's birthday can trigger intense grief or anxiety. Your own birthday can feel impossible to celebrate. **Strategy:** mark the day, even simply. A candle, a moment of acknowledgment, a small gathering with safe people.

The OATH Framework Through the Holidays

Openness during the holidays means dropping the performance. You don't have to pretend everything is fine. Being honest about your family's situation - at whatever level feels right - is liberating. Even saying "This year is hard" to a trusted friend can break the isolation.

Authenticity means allowing the holiday to be what it actually is, not what it's supposed to be. If it's messy, let it be messy. If it's bittersweet, honor the bitter with the sweet. The most meaningful holidays aren't the perfect ones - they're the real ones.

Togetherness during the holidays means choosing connection over isolation. Show up, even imperfectly. Reach out, even briefly. You don't have to host the perfect gathering - a text to another family member going through this, a call to your sponsor, an hour at a support group meeting - all of these are Togetherness.

Healing doesn't pause for the holidays. Some of the most healing moments happen during them - a hard conversation that finally happens, a new tradition that fills an old wound, a moment of genuine laughter that reminds you life still has good in it.

Resources

- **SAMHSA National Helpline:** 1-800-662-4357 (free, confidential, 24/7, English and Spanish) - **NAMI Helpline:** 1-800-950-6264 or text "HELPLINE" to 62640 - **The Compassionate Friends:** compassionatefriends.org (grief support for families) - **Al-Anon Family Groups:** al-anon.org (including holiday-specific resources) - **NIAAA:** niaaa.nih.gov (resources on alcohol and the holidays) - **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988 (24/7) - **Crisis Text Line:** Text HELLO to 741741 - **Sam's OATH:** samsoath.org - community, resources, and connection for families navigating substance use and mental health

Sources

1. SAMHSA: Holiday Behavioral Health Resources
2. NAMI: Navigating the Holiday Season
3. The Compassionate Friends: Surviving the Holidays
4. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)
5. Al-Anon Family Groups
6. American Psychological Association: Holiday Stress

If You or Someone You Know Needs Help Now

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or Text 988

Free, confidential support 24/7 for anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741

Free, 24/7 crisis support via text message with a trained crisis counselor.

SAMHSA National Helpline

Call 1-800-662-4357

Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral and information service.

Emergency Services

Call 911

If someone is in immediate danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

You are not alone. Help is always available.

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