

Limits at Christmas

For families affected by substance misuse and addiction, Thanksgiving and Christmas can be the hardest times of the year. The holidays often come with high expectations and stress that can magnify family problems, especially when alcohol or other drug use is involved. And if any family member is struggling with addiction, there may be particularly complex layers of unpredictability, guilt and uncertainty about how to interact with them.

The best approach to the holidays for families affected by addiction is the same approach that is recommended year-round. Remember that you didn't cause your loved one's addiction, you can't control it, and you can't cure it. What you can do is detach from the illness while still loving the person who is sick. Set healthy boundaries and encourage any efforts to get help, but let go of the process and the outcomes. Most important—take care of yourself.

Don't try to manage your loved one's substance use. Instead, identify your family's boundaries around holiday gatherings, state them clearly, and stick to them. For example, it's entirely appropriate to say to a loved one who is struggling with substance use: "We've agreed



we want this to be a sober holiday. We hope you can join us, but if you can't, we understand." Sometimes clear boundaries may even turn out to be someone's much-needed wake-up call.

When loved ones show up to a holiday gathering intoxicated, you can ask them to leave, but you can't control the response. What you can control is your own behavior. So express your feelings clearly and be prepared to leave yourself if necessary.

If your loved one is in recovery from a substance use disorder, that's great. Avoid putting the person in an awkward position by asking for permission to serve alcohol. Instead, offer to be supportive in other ways by asking, "What can I do to help you enjoy the holiday safely?" Better yet, especially if it's early in your loved one's recovery process, consider making the get-together a sober holiday for everyone.

Don't expect the holiday spirit to make substance use problems disappear. But you can ensure a happier holiday by setting boundaries, making your expectations clear and supporting those in recovery.

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