

STEPS FOR RECOVERY

Holiday cheer; holiday gloom

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As you read this article we have already celebrated Thanksgiving and now we move into the 'religious' holiday season, with particular emphasis upon Hanukkah and Christmas. Incidentally, I really hope you had a great Thanksgiving because it celebrates life, nature, family and the kindness that we express to friends. In this sense it is a *morespiritual* holiday because anybody can enter into the spirit of taking time to offer thanks.

Alcoholics and addicts have a special relationship with the word spirituality because, according to Carl Jung and others, unless there is a spiritual transformation in the life of the alcoholic and addict then long term recovery is unlikely. Some would say that spirituality is essential in healing and maintaining sobriety.

With this in mind, I think that it is particularly important that we have a clear understanding of what is involved in these religious holidays coming upon us. Why? Well, I can't speak for everyone but along with the ritual, gift-giving and feasts we often feel *stress*. The stress is not a part of the religious message; this stress comes along with the increasing commercial aspect of Hanukkah and Christmas. The gift-giving often becomes a duty, along with sending cards to people we rarely see or hear from; the parking at malls that precede crowded and hectic shopping lines; then comes the money spent or added to our credit cards. These situations combines with holidays bring stress. Already I'm hearing from friends and some family members that *they'll be glad when it's all over!*

This is a sad commentary on a religious message that both Hanukkah and Christmas essentially bring: a time of gratitude, love and thanksgiving.

How does all this affect the alcoholic and addict? Well, speaking as a recovering alcoholic it doesn't affect me very much because I don't get caught up in the commercialism; however, I'm a single man with no children to entertain. Also I have some *time* in recovery. I've weathered past storms and learnt from past mistakes. Today I send a few cards, purchase a small number of gifts, avoid drinking parties, never go to malls, spend time with sober friends and appreciate the spiritual message. Oh yes, and I also go to meetings.

But I'm aware that this holiday season will give yet another annual excuse for people to drink more, fight more, spend more, eat more, drive drunk, frighten their children, have legal altercations... and *relapse*.

For those who have problems with alcohol or drugs the coming holidays can act as a healthy intervention; the chaos leads to treatment and recovery. I suppose we could argue that this is a good thing. I know I see more people at recovery meetings on December twenty-seventh and January second!

However, it is the *relapse* that concerns me. People who were sober, enjoying periods of abstinence, during the holiday celebrations, embrace the gloom and darkness of addiction. And the relapse brings also the guilt and shame. It has been said in meetings I attend that the feelings of guilt and shame stop the person asking for help, returning to treatment, frequenting recovery meetings. They give up on themselves. The relapser loses hope.

Well, thank God, that's not everyone. I see relapsers constantly returning for help and I'm sure it will be true this holiday season.

However, in a spiritual sense, can relapse be avoided? Can we celebrate the holidays without the craziness? Yes. But it requires a recovery strategy.

Here are a few suggestions:

1. We all know the holidays are coming. Let's not wait until the last minute to shop. Get everything done by

(say), the fifteenth of December.

1. Only spend what you can afford. A wonderful gift is a sincere letter to a friend or an appropriate card.
1. Don't attend celebrations that focus on drinking. The goal for the spiritual life is always moderation and abstinence.
1. Stay close to your support meetings and sponsor. In this way we actively show gratitude for our recovery.
1. And finally, avoid crowds. In my experience, serenity walks closely behind solitude.

I'm looking forward to the holidays this year. I will enjoy the celebrations in moderation, knowing it is the spiritual message that nurtures me.

I'm embracing the cheer and avoiding any possibility of gloom.

Written by

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