As we approach the holiday season—the time of year from Thanksgiving through New Years when "joy" is the word but not necessarily the reality—it's worth reflecting on ways we can protect ourselves and those we care about from inconvenience and tragedy due to use of alcohol or other mood-changing substances. Start by believing that some measure of holiday joy and fulfillment, provided we are open to it, is available to us all. But stay mindful that if we are not cautious about the use of mood-changing substances, we leave ourselves open to indelible regret.

Caution is needed. But the holidays evoke strong feelings, and strong feelings often override caution. Strong feelings could include the stress of keeping up with the seasonal parade of expectations and events such as shopping, travel, cooking, social gatherings, and so forth—or the stress of not having any of those to keep up with. Strong feelings also arise from our past. And our past is more present at the holidays, especially past family life. Cherished holiday memories hurt when special people are no longer with us. Painful holiday memories hurt even more when the holidays arrive, whether the people involved are still with us or not.

As a general precaution, reduce holiday stress by talking about your feelings with an empathic person and by letting go of unrealistic expectations. Specific precautions against hazardous holiday substance use depend partly on whether a person is in recovery or not. Individuals in recovery want to abstain from all mood-changing substances. But an occasional drinker may simply wish to limit her or his alcohol consumption enough to avoid disinhibited behavior (at an office party, for instance) or driving under the influence.

Motor vehicle crashes caused by drunk or drugged-driving end too many lives and damage countless others. For that matter, even DUI offenses can have life-changing consequences. The statistics are hard to ignore.

If you are in recovery, watch out for a strong feeling that you are entitled to celebrate with a mood-changing substance. One February, a man in his forties required hospitalization to treat complications of his alcoholic cirrhosis. After he stabilized and was discharged, he realized his health was fragile and, even though he did not engage in any kind of recovery program, he did not drink for the rest of the year. The man's birthday fell in the week between Christmas and New Years. He celebrated with a drink, could not stop drinking, and was dead by the following February.

Throughout the holidays, as people gather and share food and beverages, make choices in your best interest. It may be prudent to attend only gatherings you know will be free of alcohol and other drugs and to avoid groups with traditions of getting drunk or high. If you drink alcohol, know your limits. If you do not drink alcohol—or switch to another beverage after one or two—don't apologize or feel self-conscious about it. If someone judges you by what you drink, one of you is at the wrong gathering.

If you are the host, make nonalcoholic beverages equally available and just as attractive as alcoholic ones. For example, offer a variety of juices, lots of seltzer, and plentiful wedges of lemon and lime. Place obvious labels (that are not easily switched or altered) on bowls of beverages such as eggnog or punch so guests will know which CONTAINS ALCOHOL and which is ALCOHOL FREE. If you are a guest and unsure what choices will be offered, bring your own beverage.

*May your holidays be full of meaning and enjoyment—and sufficient caution that you also enjoy the many days that follow.*

For more information on drugged driving, click here.

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