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Christmas in rehab: a welcome relief for addicts

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Lorinda Strang knows it's December when she is repeatedly asked the same question: Will I have to stay in rehab on Christmas Day?

Ms. Strang, who runs a drug and alcohol treatment program in Bowen Island, B.C., doesn't sugarcoat her answer to those inquiring about her 21- and 42-day residential programs.

Some day passes are granted on a case-by-case basis, she says. But every Christmas Eve, most of the beds at The Orchard Recovery Center are full.

"They're fearful," she says of her holiday clients. "But people that come in over Christmas are amazed. They're getting well. They're clean and sober. They've got hope. They're learning."

Rehab may sound like the last place anyone would want to spend the holidays, but some treatment facilities are busiest around this time of year.

"I really think it is to alleviate the stress," said Sara Brown, admissions co-ordinator for the Sunshine Coast Health Centre in Powell River, B.C., who says she sees a spike in admissions every December.

Treatment centre operators such as Ms. Brown list a number of reasons for the increase. Often, the holidays provide extra incentive for families to band together and seek professional intervention services for their loved ones. For addicts, rehab can provide relief from the negative emotions, guilt and loneliness associated with the holidays.

"The myth is that it's a wonderful family time when everyone gets together and bygones are bygones," said Gerald Sidel, executive director at Addington Addiction Treatment Center in Montreal. "In many cases it's not."

Rehab also shields people from the temptations that accompany December's long list of parties and celebrations, Mr. Sidel said.

"We're saying to people: Look, you're going to celebrate the Christmas season and the New Years season and you're not going to have any booze or drugs. For someone who's been used to that as a time to really let loose, now they're really stuck."

Most addiction support services, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, host dry celebrations as an alternative for people who have emerged from their addiction and want to avoid the open bar at the office Christmas party. The Addington facility holds an alcohol-free Christmas party, which is attended by about 200 staff, in-patients and graduates of the program.

And for those who want to attend regular events, Mr. Sidel recommends that they bring along a friend or someone they've met through a supportive network such as Narcotics Anonymous to help them stay on track.

At the Orchard Recovery centre, Christmas Eve is spent playing board games and enjoying a turkey dinner. No matter what day of the week Christmas Day falls on, it's treated like a Sunday - visiting day - so friends and family can stop by.

There's no better time to seek treatment than now, Ms. Strang says.

"It provides hope to the family," she said. "What bigger gift can you give to the family than hope that things will get better?"

In their own words: First-person accounts from former Orchard Recovery Center patients

'I wanted to get my hands on booze, and a lot of it, on that day'

I arrived on Dec. 18. The very last thing I wanted to do was to be away from my family at Christmas time. But it was the only time I could get away from work for long enough without people noticing.

December was always a time for lots of drinking. I would embarrass my husband and kids. I could no longer enjoy wine occasionally. It had become a numbing agent, and I did not stop till I passed out. For some time, I tried to tell myself that I was simply a gourmet cook, enjoying pairing wine and food. Ha! Everyone else had half a glass of wine. I had to have five, and a cocktail to start. Even in smaller amounts, alcohol altered my personality. I would become harsh and unkind. I also began to black out. At times I became violent toward my family members if they tried to stop me from driving or hurting myself, with no recollection later of what happened.

That first sober Christmas was strange. My husband and kids were allowed to take me home from the Orchard Recovery Center for Christmas Day. The kids were shell-shocked. My spouse was dealing with the fact that this was where our lives had ended up: me in treatment, my kids traumatized.

I wanted to get my hands on booze, and a lot of it, on that day. I barely hung on by a thread. But I did not drink - only because I did not want to start counting sober days all over again. It was almost safer returning to the O on Boxing Day, where people understood my language, where I was not the freak who could not hold it together, the mother who could not drink like normal people. I started making sense of my inner turmoil as the withdrawal became easier. I painted and wrote a lot. I slept more than I had in years.

I started doing the 12 steps and worked my way up to Step 5 in my 28 days at the O. I diligently attended 125 AA/NA meetings in 90 days post-treatment (I was always an overachiever) but my life started normalizing, slowly but surely. We threw out all alcohol in our home when I returned. We started rebuilding our family.

This Christmas, three years later, we are taking our whole family to Mexico. I have accepted that my brain cannot interact with alcohol. There is no other way but complete abstinence to stay well. I even monitor cold medications for whether they contain alcohol.

I thank Orchard, even for that first dismal Christmas there, for continuing to be a safe haven for me and my family. They saved my life and my marriage. We go around now, fully educated about addiction, and trying to help others to find their way out of this predicament so much of society still deems a weakness. I wish everyone in the O during this time a new beginning - and the first of many Christmases sober.

Allison, 46

'I missed Christmas with my family before my drinking and using took me'

I remember avoiding my family on Christmas; I didn't want to see anyone. All I wanted was to get high. I remember forgetting to get enough dope to last through Christmas Eve. I couldn't get any more because my dealer was off early. I searched through my numbers calling anyone who might be carrying. Christmas came and went, while I looked to get a fix. I remember begging for an extra half, "It's Christmas, give me a front, I swear I'll pay you back." The dealer produced and finally I got high. Calls from family and friends went unanswered. When I came down from the high I was sick, so sick and ashamed. I needed to forget, I needed to get high.

I remember being sober and clean on Christmas Eve at the Orchard Rehab Center. I wasn't trying to find any drugs and I wasn't trying to get high. In many ways nothing happened, it was anticlimactic, stress free, comfortable and peaceful. I talked to my family on the phone. They told me how much they missed me and I told them how much I missed them; and I really did. I missed Christmas with my family before my drinking and using took me. This year it will be my fourth Christmas clean and sober. December 16th, 2005 is my sobriety date. I will be spending this Christmas with my girlfriend and her son, who we live with full time now. We will all be visiting, both my girlfriend's family and my family over the holidays. We have been fortunate enough to have this privilege the past three years. We will see my parents and sisters, as well as my nephew and new niece, who have only known their uncle to be clean and sober.

Richard, 36

'I was filled with shame and my family with anger and sadness'

When I was still using, Christmas was an especially hard time for my family and myself. I remember one Christmas Eve in particular. I waited until my son went to bed before I proceeded to get "really" drunk with ("with" meaning I got drunk around) family members. Then I danced with the Christmas tree and at some point tried to wrap Christmas gifts. In the morning, my son and the rest of my family woke up to a "drunk" still wrought with the stench of tequila and stale cigarettes, passed out under a Christmas tree scattered with pre-opened presents. My family managed to make my son feel better; however, everyone felt awful on Christmas morning. I was filled with shame and my family with anger and sadness. This was the last of many awful Christmases.

The following year, I checked into the Orchard Rehab Center during the Christmas season. One may think that this might have been an awful time to part from my family and go to rehab, but in retrospect it was one of the best Christmases ever. It was the first Christmas of my new sober life! At the Orchard, I found myself surrounded by people I could relate to with my problems involving drugs and alcohol. The fire in the fireplace and the Christmas gifts provided under the tree warmed the atmosphere. I received the gift of hope, as I learned that it was possible to live a happy sober life. The staff and the other clients helped me to gain perspective and get through the struggles of staying sober over the holidays. Being sober and apart from my son, painful as these circumstances were, helped me to realize I was losing everyone and everything because of my addiction. I connected with my family on the phone where we told each other how much we loved one another and missed each other. During this time my son and the rest of my family could take comfort that I was in a safe place and getting the help I needed to recover.

This year it will be my fourth Christmas clean and sober. December 21st, 2005 is my sobriety date. I will be spending this Christmas with my nine-year-old son, who now lives with me full time and my long-term boyfriend. We will all be visiting both my family and my boyfriend's family over the holidays. We have been fortunate enough to have this privilege of celebrating Christmas sober for the past three years. I would like to take this time to acknowledge and express the love I have for my father, who most regrettably lost the battle of his own addiction on November 27th, 2004. I wish everyone a Merry Christmas filled with love and hope.

Anne, 27