



Serene Scene

Transitional Sober Living Magazine

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TRAVEL, FAMILY, VACATIONS AND FUN

How to Prevent A Relapse
Andrew Martin, MBA, CADCA



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Photo by Dina Marie



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How To Prevent A Relapse

Various times in the life of the recovering addict and codependent require activities that may feel uncomfortable and/or may trigger thoughts of using and acting in unhealthy ways. And since we all cannot live in a bubble for the rest of our lives in order to preserve a perfectionist view of recovery, we sometimes must venture out and test our recovery programs against the stresses of life on life's terms. For many these stresses can conjure up feelings of loneliness, pessimism and unreasonable expectations. An occasion that should be thought of as a time of appreciation, sharing and gratitude can easily be turned into a time of anxiety and isolation if thought processes go unchecked.

There is good news, however; we can participate in travel, family functions, vacations and fun events if we prepare in advance. To better illustrate the methods of preparation, let's look at a typical scenario.

You have been invited to the wedding of your step-sister who lives in Festive, New Foundland. You have been asked to be a part of the wedding party and help with the rehearsal dinner, wedding and reception events. You could not refuse as your step-sister is one of your closest and dearest family members. All you have to do now is figure out how you can interact with the step-brother and immediate sister who are also helping with the wedding plans, and with whom you have a strained relationship for several years, and who aggravate you intensely. Also, you need to figure out how travel on an airplane (a place where you always drank in the past) and navigate an overnight layover in New York where there is plenty of alcohol and drugs. And finally, you must solve the problem of throwing a rehearsal dinner and wedding reception without drinking and using during the festivities. And one last thing, you must create a graceful story to tell when family and friends ask where you have been for so long.

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Taken all together, this scenario may seem impossible to deal with, however; we will take each stressor, one at a time, and develop a plan of action that will keep you from relapsing while having fun and enjoyment throughout the adventure. We will use several techniques in order to manage the stress and anxiety, and you will be able to keep cravings and stress at a minimum as long as you follow through on the plan.

This first thing to remember is that your sobriety comes first, then personal health and wellness, then everything else. This mindset needs to be solid and impenetrable. Write it down on a card and keep it in your pocket to remind yourself to take care of you first.

The second thing to remember is that none of this is all that important. Stop taking things so seriously, and let it go, and have fun with it. Why not try out some of those new techniques on dealing with people that you have been reading about. See how they work with the brother in-law and immediate sister. They will not recognize you, and they will try to get you to react in the same old unhealthy ways, and when you don't react they will not know what to do. Observe how they get frustrated with you and fumble around to attempt to make things all your fault: it can be very amusing. Make your interactions with them a special project and make it fun. You can certainly handle a few days with them if you approach it with a healthy mindset. You can also schedule your interaction with them while planning for the events. Set up specific times and dates when you will all get together on the telephone, and have a list of items that need to be covered. After the business is over, respectfully disengage until the next appointment.

The first serious situation to overcome will be the travelling on the airplane because of your history of drinking on airplanes and in airports. Remember that you are no longer the person you used to be; and your expectations of your behavior should be based in the reality of who you are today, now who you used to be. You will likely feel cravings when arriving at the airport and throughout the flight; and you can deal with them with a carefully laid out plan. Bring items with you that will occupy your mind and make you stay in the present moment rather than drift back to old behaviors and thinking. Perhaps a book, movies, games, computer, journal: something that will keep you in the present throughout the trip. If possible, bring along a sober friend. Perhaps one of your support group friends may be willing to go with you to the wedding? If so, you will be able to chat openly about your stress and turn it over to a higher power. Remember the overnight layover in New York? Plan on going to a meeting when you land, go directly to your hotel room and do not stop until you have the water running for a relaxing bath: focus only on getting to the safety of your room and do not stop in between. Once you have had a relaxing bath, hang out in the room and watch a movie to stay in the present. Call one or two of your support group members to let them know you are there safely and you are following your plan. Expect that you will have cravings and talk with them about your stress and let it go.

When you arrive n Festivale, New Foundland have a schedule of activities already generated for yourself. Know what you need to be doing and when. Be prepared to stay focused on the tasks at hand, and bring reminders to keep you focused all the time. Stay present and know your time limits in each situation. Be ready to politely and respectfully excuse yourself so you can go to a meeting, or do a meditation, or take a walk.

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Remember you are the most important person to yourself, so act that way and keep your sobriety first.

During the festivities there will be drinking and partying; you already know that so you can be prepared. Know who you want to be hanging out with and who to avoid in a polite way. Again, stay present and bring reminders of your sobriety. Be with people who will support your recovery effort, and never be without a soda, fruit juice, or water in your hand. Stay away from the bars and from the people who are drunk. Observe the party and have fun watching the people having fun. Be an ambassador to their fun, and you will also have a terrific time. Remember that you are not the person you used to be, you are someone entirely different and you can choose to act entirely different as long as you remain sober.

During the festivities you may find it necessary to let go of old relationships that simply will not fit into your new lifestyle of healthy recovery. Perhaps it is your cousin with whom you partied like there was no tomorrow only a year ago. Today you are a different person, and your cousin no longer fits well with your ethical and behavioral boundaries. You must be prepared to let your cousin go and grieve that loss of friendship. Be ready to feel the grief rather than shove it down. Do not lock up your emotions or your old behavioral instincts may come back stronger than ever.

At the reception plan on trying something new. Give yourself permission to leave early and go to a meeting or sober event that you looked up before coming on the trip. Maybe go out to a tourist attraction or the shopping mall. Perhaps volunteer at a shelter or be of service in some other way. Take care of yourself in a way that is different from your old behavior and be sure to stay in the present.

Throughout your trip be sure to eat healthy to help the body systems function well and reduce physical strain and stress. Schedule time to exercise regularly to keep the endorphins flowing in the body and reduce feeling of physical craving. Try to be with a support person at all times, someone you can speak with honestly and openly, who will support for recovery efforts. And do those things that you have experienced that reduce your stress. Plan them out, and carry out the plan. Stay focused on your recovery plan and do not be tempted by old habits and old behaviors. Most importantly, ask for help when you need it. Have the phone numbers of your support friends ready so you can call them and get help at a moment's notice. Remember that you are not in your recovery effort alone. Finally, schedule the time to reflect on your day, what's truly important in your life, and how your new behaviors are making your life a blessed and joyous experience.

By developing and following a plan, you will be able to prevent relapse. **SS**