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From social drinking to dependency; how the Christmas period poses a risk to problem drinkers

For most people Christmas is a time of celebration but for those who flirt with addiction throughout the year it is a period fraught with danger and difficulty. There is a culture of festive excess which not only makes alcohol and other substances more accessible but also makes society much more likely to condone any sort of antisocial behavior brought on by intoxication.

Acceptance is the worst possible thing which can happen to an addict which is one of the reasons why there is always a dramatic increase in the number of people seeking treatment services after the Christmas period.

Alistair Mordey is a qualified counsellor with over a decade of experience working in drug and alcohol counselling in the UK and Asia. He is currently the Head Counsellor at The Cabin, an international treatment centre in Thailand, where his staff are bracing themselves for a an influx of patients this January;

“Drug and alcohol treatment services all over the western world experience a falling off of clientele from late November. For people who are already thoroughly addicted Christmas is just another excuse to get stuck in, in a way that is sanctioned by wider society. Addicts and alcoholics disappear into normality at Christmas because everyone’s drinking too much. This suits them down to the ground because they can fade into the background, and for once no-one’s pulling them up on it,” he said.

Although the Cabin is based in Chiang Mai its clientele come from all over the world but, according to Mordey, by February there will be a disproportionate number of people from countries such as the UK which traditionally celebrate Christmas. He thinks that the potentially traumatic relationship which an addict has with this period of the year is complicated by a number of external factors;

“Believe it or not the weather also plays a part in places like the US and the UK. Many people suffer from a form of Seasonal Affective Disorder which makes them more prone to bouts of depression during the winter. No-one wants to be responsible for spoiling other people’s party at Christmas by being unhappy, so instead of examining the roots of their problem they choose to drown it in alcohol,” he said.

Christmas is widely advertised as a time to be spent with family which gives it unpleasant connotations for the many people whose family lives are not entirely stable. Addiction can act as a coping mechanism and Mordey believes that this combination of factors creates a ‘perfect storm’ of problems which anyone on the brink of addiction is unlikely to navigate successfully,

“People always associate alcohol with Christmas which obviously presents problems for alcoholics. However the emotions this time of year can trigger and the situations it puts people in are actually difficult for all addicts, whether their problem be with drink, drugs or even sex. Emotions run high and entire nations are gripped by a ‘seize the moment’ mentality which for some people in society can be very dangerous indeed,” he said.

The bad news for addicts deciding to seek help in the New Year is that a lot of treatment centres will be full because of the sheer quantity of people whose problems have been exacerbated by Christmas. Mordey’s message to anyone who fears falling off the wagon during the next month is this,

“They say a dog is for life not just for Christmas and the same applies to addiction. The food and the presents and the festive cheer won’t last until the New Year but addiction will. The best possible present you can give to your friends and family and most importantly yourself is sobriety; don’t let the best bit of the year for everyone else become a personal nightmare for you.”

Editor’s Notes:

Alastair Mordey (BA hons, RDAP, ADAP) is the Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin, an addiction treatment centre in Chiang Mai. He is a certified and accredited addiction counsellor with over 10 years’ experience working in treatment services. Website: www.thecabinchiangmai.com.

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