

The Dark Side of the Holidays

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The holidays are here which means attending office parties, having dinner with friends, visiting with family and doing lots of shopping. However, with all of these activities comes stress. Financial, social, emotional, and familial stressors can create anxiety and tension in many people's lives. This is especially true for individuals who knowingly or unknowingly suffer from alcohol and drug addiction problems.

The disease of alcoholism and drug addiction does not discriminate by age, gender, race, religion, educational background or financial status. *It has nothing to do with willpower or morality.* The majority of people with substance abuse problems are not the homeless and indigent people that we see living on the streets. They are working professionals, housewives, young adults and adolescents living in our communities and neighborhoods.

According to the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, an estimated 23 million Americans aged 12 or older were illicit drug users. This estimate represents 9% of the population aged 12 or older. Illicit drugs include marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants or prescription-type psychotherapeutics used non-medically. About 23% of persons aged 12 or older participated in binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as having five or more drinks on the same occasion on at least one day in the past 30 days. Heavy drinking was reported by 17 million people. Heavy drinking is defined as binge drinking on at least five days in the past 30 days.

"I used to take 50-60 Vicodin a day and spend a considerable amount of time lining up prescriptions and acquiring the drugs." says Joe M., a 34 year old marketing director and former patient of Memorial Hermann Prevention & Recovery Center (PaRC) "It became a cycle that eventually spiraled out of control."

Joe M. is not alone. A large percentage of drug abuse is due to overuse of powerfully addictive prescription medications often given to address chronic pain, sleep or mood disorders. Opiate painkillers such as Vicodin and Oxycontin, combined with Soma - a prescription muscle relaxer - have become some of the most over-prescribed medications in our country.

Other prescription medications, especially benzodiazepines such as Xanax and Valium, can also quickly turn into drugs of abuse. All of these drugs have become increasingly popular in recent years and are readily available through physicians, internet pharmacies and on the streets.

Withdrawal from prescription drugs can be very serious and detoxification from them should be conducted under medical supervision. "Detox is the first phase of treatment for the person abusing alcohol or drugs." says Dr. Eugene Degner, Chief Physician of PaRC. Patients addressing drug or alcohol addiction typically require continued care in an

Inpatient or Outpatient setting. Effective treatment for drug and alcohol addiction involves customized, intense education and therapy that assists individuals in achieving and maintaining a lifestyle that does not involve turning to drugs or alcohol to cope with life's stressors.

An estimated 22 million persons in 2010 were classified with substance dependence or abuse in the past year based on criteria specified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition (DSMIV).

Almost everyone knows someone who exhibits the symptoms of alcohol or drug abuse. What makes the situation difficult is identifying the problem at its earliest stages and intervening before the problem becomes a crisis. People turn to alcohol and other drugs for a multitude of seemingly innocent reasons: to cope, to feel better, to maintain an appearance or handle an emotional problem. "No one sets out to have a drinking or drug problem; but for millions of people, addiction has become a reality." says Dr. Degner of PaRC.

During the holiday season families and employers should look for the signs and symptoms of drug and alcohol abuse. These include:

- The need to use increased amounts to become intoxicated
- An increase in the time and effort spent in obtaining the substance
- A persistent desire to cut down or control the use of the substance
- Apparent withdrawal symptoms
- Continued use despite physical or psychological problems

The family might notice other signs such as increased mood swings, financial concerns, not spending time with the family, isolation, and increased defensiveness.

If you know someone who might have an alcohol or drug problem, talk to that person about it while they are sober. Be calm, loving and supportive in helping your loved one recover. Call Memorial Hermann Prevention & Recovery Center and learn more about how we can help you.