

# Avoiding Code *Red*

5 Ways to Stop  
Intoxicated Family  
Members from  
Ruining the Holidays  
and Special Events



**Sunshine Coast  
Health Center**

**Drug and Alcohol Treatment  
and Recovery Services**

[www.sunshinecoasthealthcentre.ca](http://www.sunshinecoasthealthcentre.ca)

# When Family Functions Become Homeland Security Events

## INTRODUCTION

Few, if any, Canadian families live in the idealized world depicted in the media. The holiday season reminds us constantly of this “fiction.” We are supposed to be excited and looking forward to spending time together. Commercials tell us that happiness is possible if we can just get that perfect gift. TV sitcoms tell us that, with a little work and light-hearted banter, the modern-day family can resolve any conflict.

The reality for many of us, however, tells a different story. Anticipation can easily give way to anxiety: we worry about running out of shopping days, putting up the tree, and stocking up on holiday treats.

To make matters worse, the anxiety of deadlines is elevated when the family eventually arrives “home for the holidays.” For most of the year, distance and busy schedules keep us insulated from our extended family: uncles, aunts, cousins, parents and family friends. If we have problems with a spouse or a child, distance may help us keep the situation private. However, once we gather for the holidays, the ability to hide behind ‘busyness’ becomes more difficult.



## WHEN ALCOHOL IS THROWN INTO THE MIX

Contrary to popular belief, alcohol only serves to complicate family gatherings. While many believe that alcohol can lift spirits, it is actually a depressant. However, alcohol does manage to affect the parts of the brain responsible for inhibition.

When you combine the three factors of anxiety, family dysfunction, and alcohol it's little wonder why some families come to dread the holidays. Intoxicated individuals often create embarrassing scenes and play the leading roles in the resulting chaos. The unpredictable nature of people who are under the influence of drugs and alcohol makes taking decisive action difficult.

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Fortunately, there are things you can do to help make it through the holidays.

## THIS GUIDE IS HERE TO HELP

If you have a ‘problem’ relative or family member who has become the bane of weddings, barbecues and holidays, then this short guide is designed for you. This guide will offer options so that you do not have to be held hostage by the unruly behaviour of others during family gatherings.

You may not be able to permanently change the behaviour of the relatives you are concerned about, but there are several tips you can follow so that you can gain some peace of mind when you gather as a family.

## **THE HOLIDAY THREAT ADVISORY: Avoiding Code RED**

The following is a scenario that illustrates how family members often react to chaos-creating relatives. Families will often attempt to deal with negative behaviour without ever addressing the underlying problem.

**Low (Code Green)** = Translation: it's March and you are booking your holidays for the year. You are hoping to take a week off and stay at home for Christmas this year. Just you and your kids having a nice quiet time with no one coming to stay. Hopefully, your mom and dad will go to your brother's house this year – it's his turn. Your sister and her kids want to come for dinner, which could be fun.

**Guarded (Code Blue)** = Translation: your mom has called on your birthday, says she misses you and wants to get together soon. You agree but are secretly worried about the way your dad behaved the last time you were with them. He never apologized for telling your husband he wasn't good enough for you. You have just heard from your brother that your dad, after drinking too much, insulted his wife at dinner. You have a growing unease about your Christmas plan.

**Elevated (Code Yellow)** = Translation: during a conversation about buying gifts for your kids, your mom asks what you are doing for Christmas. You tell her you just want a quiet time spent at home and hope she gets the hint. You tell her that you thought she would be going to your brother's house this year anyway. She seems unsure about this and asks what your sister is doing. You and your sister have already talked for hours about how awful and embarrassing your dad was last Christmas. You tried to discuss this with mom before but she just doesn't understand.

**High (Code Orange)** = Translation: your brother calls and says that no way are mom and dad going to be with him over Christmas. His wife wants to spend Christmas with her family so that she doesn't have to deal with your dad's drinking. Everybody loves your mom – she's a wonderful grandmother and has always been so good to you all. When she calls and asks to come for the holidays you agree because you just can't say no. Your spouse is now mad at you and your sister is threatening to really give dad a piece of her mind if he gets drunk when she is there. Your youngest child is excitedly making a house out of macaroni for Grandpa.

**Severe (Code Red)** = Translation: your parents are in your guest room and it's Christmas Day. Things went okay this morning but your dad got into the wine after lunch and started to tell rude stories while holding your daughter in his lap. He called your sister "stuck-up" and when they started to argue your mom took off to the kitchen to clean up. Your spouse is giving you 'the look' and you are begging everyone to calm down. Hiding the wine bottle when your dad is not looking does not seem to be working: he finds it anyway. Somehow the macaroni house gets knocked over and your daughter is crying. Grandpa tries to make her laugh by eating the raw macaroni off the floor. You can't wait for Christmas to be over.

## HOW TO MEASURE THE PROBLEM – The Three C's

One of the first orders of business when dealing with the problems of drugs and alcohol use is determining the seriousness of the problem. Some family members will need proof that the behaviour is serious enough for them to intervene. There are many assessment tools available to quantify the severity of a drug or alcohol problem. A very simple one is the Three C Assessment.

The Three C Assessment measures whether a bad habit has become an unhealthy addiction. You can apply it to any person and any bad habit. Try it yourself – everyone has a bad habit (coffee, fast driving, the internet and gaming, etc). The strength of this assessment tool is that it removes moral judgment from defining whether there is a problem. The following are examples of questions you can ask yourself about a family member's alcohol use.

### The First C – Control

Does your loved one try to set limits on drinking and then fail to abide by them?

Does he drink and drive at all?

Does she promise to come home but ends up at the bar?

Does he set out to have a shot of rye and end up finishing the bottle?

Control problems are early indicators of a growing problem.

### The Second C – Compulsion

Does your loved one spend a lot of their energy around planning and/or engaging in their bad habit? Would your loved one ever go on a vacation without alcohol? Is 2 or 3 drinks a dinner ritual? Is it a big deal if there is no alcohol in the house?

### The Third C – Consequences

Are problems occurring as a result of your loved one's bad habit and does he/she continue to engage in the behaviour despite a growing list of negative consequences?

For example, is she starting to have arguments with loved ones around how much she is drinking? She may begin missing work or making excuses to leave work early. Has he experienced his first DUI or 24 hour roadside suspension? In essence, negative events are starting to occur in relation to the bad habit and your loved one cannot seem to associate these problems with their bad habit. Your loved one may blame stress, problems at work, or even your nagging as the real problem.

If all Three Cs apply, then it could be more than just a bad habit, it could be an addiction.



## REDUCING THE THREAT: 5 Tips to Preserving Peace during the Holiday Season

### Threat Reduction Tip #1: Stop Giving the Alcohol or Drug User All the Power

We do not have to be the victims of dysfunctional behaviour from family and friends. A lot of emotional energy is wasted worrying or in some cases obsessing about the ways in which they can potentially upset us. A special family event or occasion may be several months away and we will still worry about our upcoming encounter with these

individuals. Such worrying steals our happiness during special events and robs us of our day-to-day pleasures.

An important step towards finding peace of mind is to stop giving your alcohol-abusing family member so much power and attention. Creating negative scenarios about what they will or will not be doing at future events is a waste of time. Likewise, listing all the ways in which he/she has disappointed us in the past will only lead to more frustration. We need to empower ourselves by realizing that we have options and that we don't owe anyone our happiness. We can then free our minds to pursue our own happiness.

Remember that we are all landlords controlling how much negative thoughts occupy our minds – we choose our own tenants.

## **Threat Reduction Tip # 2: *Decide on Your Limits and Set Your Boundaries***

An important way of helping a loved one who drinks is to set healthy boundaries and expectations. We do not have to quietly ignore the problem out of fear that we are creating tension in our families. Change in families often begins when one member lovingly sets boundaries directly with the alcohol user and sticks by them without derision and anger. In order to set limits with our loved one, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

- How is the drinking or drug using behaviour impacting me?
- What am I prepared to tolerate and what is my limit?

If you are hosting an event then you might want to talk directly with your family member long before the event and tell him that you are concerned about his drinking and that you think he needs help. You could offer to help find a suitable counselor or treatment program. The main point is to reclaim your peace of mind and not ignore problematic alcohol use. The family may need to break the 'code of silence' in order for your loved one to get the help he/she needs.

Acknowledging the problem and setting personal boundaries are difficult for most people. It helps a great deal not to blame and shame but to calmly and kindly acknowledge what you have observed. Out of love and respect you need to set limits about what you can accept. Sometimes people who abuse alcohol deny the obvious and get angry when the issue is raised. Remember it is not your job to convince them why you need to have personal boundaries.

Establishing personal boundaries can be a gift of self-awareness for the family member struggling with drugs or alcohol. They may be unaware of the pain and suffering they are afflicting on their loved ones. A popular saying is that "We teach people how to treat us." In other words, we cannot complain that people are disrespecting us if we never share with them the effects of their behaviours. We set important boundaries in our relationships by declaring our expectations and outlining consequences if they are not met.

This can be accomplished by saying:

"It is not okay with me for you to \_\_\_\_\_ (describe the behaviour). If you continue to \_\_\_\_\_ then \_\_\_\_\_ (state a consequence)."

An example of a boundary-setting conversation with a family member could go like this:

*"John, I love you so much and I can't ignore that your drinking problem is really hurting you and causing grief for the family when we get together. It wasn't okay that you could hardly carry on a conversation and that you slept most of the day on the couch. Unless you are willing to come to the house sober then you shouldn't come at all. If you want help to*

*stop drinking then I will support you and stand by you but if you continue to use I can no longer pretend that it is okay with me."*

When we set boundaries in our relationships, we become empowered and are no longer victims of the chaos that alcohol can create at family functions. There is no guarantee that everyone else in the family will follow suit and set boundaries as well. Some family members may initially choose to stay in an enabling role, protecting their loved one from consequences.

### **Threat Reduction Tip #3: *Pick the Right Time***

An important factor to consider is the timing of setting these boundaries. We do not want to wait to do so in the midst of Christmas dinner or after the family member is already intoxicated. The heat of the moment or the height of the Christmas season often work against us when we are trying to remain calm, focused and loving. Conversations around boundaries are best undertaken well in advance of family events. Try to create a respectful environment and offer privacy in your initial conversations. A family intervention should not be your first attempt at getting help for your alcohol-abusing loved one and should not be done on the spur of the moment at a family gathering. Family Interventions are most effective when led by a trained professional with proper planning in place.

You can also wait too long to acknowledge problems and set boundaries in hopes of your family member "hitting bottom" and changing themselves. The myth of alcoholics and addicts needing to "hit bottom" in order to quit can cause unnecessary pain, suffering and even death. Early intervention or "Creating a High Bottom" can save both the alcohol user and the family from years of pain and sadness as problematic alcohol use is easier to treat the earlier it is identified and addressed.



### **Threat Reduction Tip #4: *Identify the Family Enablers and Support Them***

Part of the reason why people with alcohol problem have so much impact on their families is because their behaviour is tolerated. Many family members follow the "hands-off rule" and prevent the alcohol abuser from having to face the consequences of their actions. Some family members may come to their rescue and make excuses for their alcohol abuse, justifying the problem by recalling past hardships. They would have us feel sorry for chaos-creating family members regardless of how much upset they are creating.

When trying to build consensus in the family it often helps to avoid making moral judgments about the person. Focus on your own experiences and speak plainly and from the heart. Accept that you may not convince people that your decision to break the silence and set boundaries was warranted. Most everyone in your family will get to where you are in their own time and look to your example on how to regain balance and peace of mind. Enabling family members will need to work on their own emotional issues. It is not uncommon for family members to have difficulty separating the past from the present: a difficult childhood is no excuse for creating upset and ruining the holidays.

Consider exercising compassion for family members who continue to make excuses for family dysfunction. Being patient and maintaining your boundaries can set the stage for real change in a family.

### **Threat Reduction Tip #5: *Remember This Is a Process***

One of the reasons why people change or develop a deeper emotional understanding of the world around them is because they are experiencing pain. Very few of us are motivated to make changes when life is good. Usually something has gone wrong, we have learned from it and made changes. When we confront a loved one with an alcohol problem about their behaviours they may experience the pain of criticism but at the same time they gain the opportunity to grow. We accomplish a lot when we “out” people around their behaviours and share with them the impact their actions are having on us. Taking a stand may be intimidating but can be the start of positive change for the entire family.

Confronting family dysfunction can be difficult and may not always go according to plan. By setting realistic expectations you can help minimize disappointment. He/she may need to hear it from a lot of sources before finding inspiration to change. It may take time to see real change in this family dynamic. In the meantime, educate yourself about alcohol and drug problems and consider personal or family counselling. A good counsellor will provide support and insight during difficult times and help you stay focused on your own life and goals.

## **FOR MORE HELP**

This guide is meant to be a simple and useful starting point. You are encouraged to reach out to the services in your area for more in depth expertise.

### **FOR COUNSELLORS**

Look in the Yellow Pages under Counsellors or call Sunshine Coast Health Center toll-free at 1.866.487.9010

### **FOR INTERVENTIONISTS**

[www.canadadrugrehab.ca/Alcohol-Drug-Intervention.html](http://www.canadadrugrehab.ca/Alcohol-Drug-Intervention.html)

### **FOR TREATMENT SERVICES IN CANADA**

[www.canadadrugrehab.ca/](http://www.canadadrugrehab.ca/)

### **FOR SELF-HELP MEETINGS**

Alcoholics Anonymous (help for alcoholics) • [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

Al-Anon (help for families) • [www.al-anon.org/](http://www.al-anon.org/)

Narcotics Anonymous (help for drug users) • [www.na.org](http://www.na.org)

### **FOR DRUG AND ALCOHOL FACTS**

[www.sunshinecoasthealthcentre.ca/drug-info.html](http://www.sunshinecoasthealthcentre.ca/drug-info.html)



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