

Recovery is POSSIBLE, IMPORTANT, and a NEW BEGINNING



### ‘All I really need to know (to survive the holidays) I learned at a Twelve Step group’

In the mid-1980s, an essay by Robert Fulghum titled “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” became immensely popular. In it, Fulghum suggests that the world would be a better place if adults still adhered to the lessons they learned as children, like playing fair and sharing.

A Twelve Step group is like kindergarten for recovering people—a safe place where they learn basic life truths and rules that help keep them sane and sober. Much of this wisdom comes in the form of slogans or sayings that can resonate far beyond the walls of a recovery group meeting. Like Fulghum’s list of lessons, Twelve Step teachings can serve as practical reminders to *all of us* about how to be and act in the world.

Some Twelve Step insights can be particularly useful as we approach this holiday season—a time often fraught with stress, family tensions, and unmet expectations. For example, slogans like “Easy does it,” “Keep it simple sweetheart (KISS),” “Practice an attitude of gratitude,” and alliterations like the “Seven Ts: Take time to think the thing through,” remind us to slow down, pare down, and pause before we hurry about, driving ourselves (and no doubt those around us) crazy. Instead of getting caught up in the commercialized version of the holidays, try to recapture the meaning and magic of the season. Make a gift. Better yet, *be* a gift by doing something special for someone. Sing. Dance. Hug. Visit an elderly person. Write letters telling loved ones what you value most about them.

Twelve Step participants are often told, “When you’re home by yourself, you’re behind enemy lines,” or “If you share your pain you cut it in half, if you don’t you double it.” Others may say, “My head is like a bad neighborhood and I shouldn’t go in there alone.” They realize the importance of having a healthy and honest support system—especially during the Holidays. They know to develop strategies for situations that might jeopardize their recovery. Food addicts might eat a healthy meal before going to a holiday party. Alcoholics might ask an AA buddy to accompany them to a place where liquor will be served. Others may opt out of going to a stressful gathering with a dysfunctional family and choose instead to go to a Twelve Step meeting.

Recovering folks are also cautious about making New Year’s resolutions because they can be recipes for disappointment. As one recovering person put it, “For me, resolutions are about willpower, but AA has shown me that I can’t control everything. Resolutions set you up for ‘if only’ thinking. You will yourself to lose weight, for example, thinking that if you do, you will be happy. But I’ve already spent too many years trying to meet impossible standards of what I thought I was expected to be instead of celebrating and building on who I am.”

When we learn not to obsess about a goal but instead celebrate the journey, we can better embrace the Twelve Step philosophy of “progress, not perfection.” We recognize that we are imperfect beings who move forward one day, one experience, and even one mistake at a time.

Twelve Steppers are sometimes reminded to “Take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth” or that “Anger is only one letter away from danger”—wise cautions for those of us who might have trouble holding our tongues at a holiday dinner when an irksome relative gets under our skin. Unsettling scenes can often be averted if we embrace another AA saying, “If you can’t love everybody today, at least try not to hurt anybody.”

Ultimately, happy holidays are about making healthy choices, a truism exemplified in a parable sometimes shared at Twelve Step meetings. A Native American grandfather told his grandchild, “Sometimes I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, angry, and violent. The other is loving and compassionate.” When the grandchild asked which wolf would win the fight, the wise grandfather replied, “The one I feed.”

Holidays can be laden with chaos, anxiety and anger, or they can be opportunities for authentic connections, spiritual reflection, and joy. Which wolf will you feed this holiday season? The choice is yours.

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