

HOLIDAY SEASON CAN BE A SEASON OF DESPAIR FOR THOSE STRUGGLING WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Do you have a drug or alcohol problem? Do you know someone who is struggling with a drug or alcohol problem? If you said yes to either of these questions, you are not alone. Substance abuse is a disease that affects millions of people. It can affect anyone, regardless of age, cultural background, or profession.

The holidays may stir up the problem, and associated feelings. Frank Hall, Manager of HSI's Chemical Health Division says, "For many people, the holiday season is joyous and they look forward to spending time with family and loved ones. But for people who struggle with alcohol and drug problems, or for the people who care about those who do, it can be a season of despair, and often, a dreaded time. For some of these people, the mindset is, 'everyone is happy but me.' They don't realize that there are many people like them who are suffering during the holidays and they think they are alone. They may have lost their family due to their alcohol or drug problem. Adult children of alcoholics may have bad memories: embarrassment, disappointments, parents who were passed out, physical fights, arguments, etc. Even a person who goes into adulthood without a drinking or drug problem may despair."

Leah (not her real name) tells her story, in an unsent letter she has written to her father who died of alcohol-related illnesses at the age of 68.

Dear Dad,

I am surprised at how often you are in my thoughts this year at Christmas. I told one close friend that I spent nearly 42 years wishing you were gone at the holidays, and now, even though you have died, you are still very present. Memories of you come often, both good and bad. They are woven together like a piece of wool, difficult to tease apart. I have memories of: you cheerfully whistling tunes around the house; collecting fossils with you along the river; never receiving a Christmas gift from you as a child – ever; you crying easily and openly over sad movies or hurt animals; you frequently yelling and swearing; fishing with you in a rowboat, and watching you row swiftly all the way across the lake; you passed out on the front lawn at home late at night; you quietly reading the newspaper early each morning before you went to work; Mom crying many times alone at night; rolls of Hallmark wrapping paper that you brought home from your job as a printer; and you looking at a color and telling me all of the colors that would have created it.

The finality of your death has released me from the years of hoping and waiting for a consistently loving relationship with you. While it is a kind of relief, occasionally the pain of the absolute loss swells up within me in unexpected places:

- *When my husband lovingly cradles and comforts our daughter in the depth of her fear of being lost in the woods, I wonder how that might have felt with you.*
- *When my neighbor round up his kids and mine, and takes them to see the meteor shower in the middle of the night, I wonder how that might have felt with you.*
- *When my brother-in-law makes plans to help move my nephew to his new apartment, I wonder how that might have felt with you.*

Planfully, with the help of friends, teachers, mentors, counselors, and others in recovery, I have surrounded myself with a community of kind and loving men and women. Each day they give me back pieces of the experiences I have missed over the years. But I still wonder who I might have become, and what we might have shared if I could have had those experiences with you. I also wonder who you might have become if you had shared those experiences with me. This Christmas, the first since your death, reminds me that neither of us will ever know, and the awareness of that carries with it a deep loss.

You have given me a mixed legacy. You have left me with many losses that will require a lifetime of conscious acts of healing, but somehow, you have also given me an appreciation for color, a passion for the printed word, a strong work ethic, a love of animals, and a tenacity about life itself.

Fortunately, there are treatment programs readily available in our community for persons who are struggling with their drug and alcohol use, and for their loved ones. Additionally, every day, there are many recovery groups meeting around the metro area, filled with people who share their stories, fears, losses, joys, strength, and hope. Hall says, "Millions of people are enjoying the holiday season as much, if not more, after getting help. They have learned to feel gratitude, and the many positive feelings of the season."

If you are concerned about your drug or alcohol use, answer the following questions:

- Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- Has anyone ever told you they believe you have an alcohol or drug problem?
- Do you ever feel bad or guilty about your drinking or drug use behavior?
- Does your alcohol or drug use interfere with your work, school, health, or relationships/family?
- Do you ever use alcohol or other drugs to get rid of a hangover?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, you may have a problem with your drug or alcohol use.

Whether you are the person who has the drinking or drug problem, or the person who has a close relationship with them, give yourself and those you care about the gift of recovery this year.

If you think you or someone you care about needs help, call HSI at 651-430-2720 for an appointment, or just to talk it over with a trained counselor. HSI (Human Services, Inc.) a private non-profit corporation with offices in Cottage Grove, Forest Lake, Oakdale and Stillwater annually serve more than 8,500 Washington County residents. HSI provides multi-services for the aging, promotes community awareness and innovative solutions to problems related to emotional disorder, mental illness, chemical dependency, physical or sexual abuse. Call us, you are not alone!