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## SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND THE HOLIDAYS: PLAN NOW TO DEFEND AGAINST STRESS

Stresses associated with the Christmas and New Year's holidays may prove more than some people can handle, but turning to alcohol and drugs is not the answer, says Wynema Ra, substance abuse expert with the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

"Human nature is such that people want to get relief immediately from pain," said Ra, executive director of the state-run Norman Alcohol and Drug Treatment Center. "We live in a culture that says, 'If you feel bad, have a drink, take a pill.' Substance abuse has always been seen as a 'quick fix,' but the opposite often occurs and people lose control.

"Holidays can be tough on a lot of people," she added. "Physicians and psychiatrists have long recognized the stress, depression and increased illness that seem to occur during the holiday season."

Loneliness, lack of time and money, and family conflicts are four stressors that may prompt some to turn to mind-altering substances for relief. Those most at risk of abusing substances during the holidays are people who have lost loved ones within the past year, single mothers, single people, and those newly in recovery from substance abuse.

The challenges of dealing with extended families and family conflicts also create the potential for substance abuse, Ra said.

“Overindulgence during the holidays is common and problems can compound because of it,” Ra noted. “Especially in families where illicit drugs and alcohol are present, levels of family violence are higher.”

Ra said holiday stress can be met and overcome by planning ahead. She gave these tips:

- Share your feelings and establish a support network that includes trustworthy friends, family members or counselors. Be honest about how you feel and what you’re feeling. In some situations, it might help to invite someone to accompany you to a family gathering or party for support.

- Keep your priorities and purposes clear. In any tough situation, keep your goals simple.

- Take up a long-forgotten hobby or develop a new one.

- Exercise, get a massage, meditate, go for a long walk, read or play with your pet.

Participate in an activity that will get your mind off the stress and provide self-fulfillment.

- Call a hotline. At the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, the “Reachout” hotline (1-800-522-9054) is staffed 24 hours a day. Teenagers and children can call Teenline (1-800-522-8336) from noon to midnight.

- If you’re in recovery from substance abuse, attend a 12-step meeting, many of which are open round-the-clock during the holidays.

- And finally, know that some amount of stress occurs for everyone during the holiday season. Decide now how to deal with problems that may arise, and develop a plan of action that will allow you to have a pleasant holiday experience.

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