
Home for the Holidays

The Dorm Parent Collective

The Stress of Returning Home

Welcoming your child home (or not inviting them home) for the weekend, a vacation, or the whole holiday season can be a number of things: exciting, daunting, anxiety-provoking, & more.

The holiday season can be especially difficult and triggering. Spending time preparing for these “big” holidays is important as we do our best to support our love ones.

First: be aware of how difficult returns home can be, for everyone. If your child is not returning home, be aware of how difficult that might be.

Next: Connect with empathy, compassion and patience during this time. ***This means not only for your young adult, but also for yourselves.***

The Stress of Returning Home

Specifically, some of the challenges we see during this time are:

- **High expectations** (“show us all the work you’ve done”)
- **Conversation topic stressors** (clients not being comfortable sharing about their treatment with various family members, for example)
- **Regression into old patterns** or family dynamics due to being back in the childhood environment
- **Increased anxiety** due to being farther from their treatment supports, exposure to relationships (at home friends, for example) that may be unhealthy or have painful histories

Unhealthy Coping

A focus on drinking, food and parties can also be problematic, especially for clients struggling with substance use and disordered eating.

- **Planning ahead and agreeing to a plan is important to help support your child's treatment.**
 - For example, if your child is struggling with disordered eating, you might agree with them to not make comments about what they're eating, or not to make your own feelings of guilt around eating "unhealthy" foods a topic of discussion
 - For clients struggling with substance use - particularly alcohol - discuss whether alcohol will be part of the picture at home AND if so how you can support your young adult's sobriety, and how they can help themselves (AA, sponsors)

Unhealthy Coping

Given the proximity to them, the urge to influence and even “fix” your young adult’s behavior is likely to come up during this time. If you notice your loved one engaging in a behavior that concerns you, rather than asking “why are you doing that” or coming to the situation with judgement, try:

- “Hey, are you okay?”
- “It seems like you might be having a hard time. How can I support you right now?”
- “Are you open to my support right now?”

Remember - your loved one may be in your home, but their use of negative coping skills is not within your control. You may be able to give support, but are not responsible for your young adult’s recovery! If needed, reach out to your parent coach to get feedback on how to navigate challenges.

Create a Plan – Together!

Returning to family activities can be an opportunity for everyone to practice newly learned skills and behaviors that support recovery and healing. **Returning home is *not* a free pass to negate the hard work your young adult (and you!) have been doing.**

- What are everyone's expectations?
- Planning for uncomfortable feelings and stressors
 - Managing triggering situations (people, places, things)
 - Avoid, Adjust, or Support
 - Managing access to others' medications, money, vehicles, unrestricted internet/gaming
 - Remove, Secure or Limit

Remember this is temporary

- Make time for each other – what does this look like?
- Make time for yourselves

Disordered Eating Roadmap

As a holiday that is focused almost entirely on eating, Thanksgiving emphasizes our (challenging) relationships with food. **The abundance of food options, food commentary, and pressures to eat, not eat, or feel guilty about eating, make this holiday difficult for many.**

For our clients with ED concerns, “Coping ahead” is vital and may involve:

- Planning a response to unhelpful food/body comments
- Directing loved ones about what topics of conversation to avoid
- Creating a list of coping skills and helpful phrases to use in the moment

When it comes to eating, those with eating disorders are often encouraged to **approach any holiday day like any other, with balanced and consistent meals throughout the day.** Ideally, those struggling can come up with a specific meal plan for the day with an eating-disorder informed dietitian. It is your job to support what your child has worked on with their team, not solve this for them!

When Conflict Arises

REMEMBER:

- We can't control the behaviors of others
- We are responsible for our own emotional experience

Always go back to the plan!

- Choose active listening
- Allow for emotional space
- Know where boundaries need to be firm

Be open to different perspectives – know when to compromise and when boundaries need to be firm (when in doubt – go back to the plan)

If not returning home

It's important to discuss and plan for a non return home as well. Check in with your loved one and see if they want to discuss any thoughts and feelings on the matter.

Practice active listening and validation. Remember that validating doesn't mean you are agreeing with them.

Support them in making a plan for how to spend their holiday. **Discuss and plan for communication** and virtual time together.

Practice the use of dialectics! *"It's difficult to be apart this year **AND** I'm glad you are focusing on your healing journey."*

Strategies To Consider

- Normalize that everyone may be struggling with the new normal
- Communicate about your feelings – set the example
- Pick your battles
- Let go of what can't be controlled
- Approach, don't avoid, conflict
- Know when to ask for additional support

Discussion

- Will your loved one come home for any holiday visits this year? What might be the challenges if they do or do not?
- What has the dynamic been during other trips home/as a family?
- What might make this one different and/or similar?
- What do you anticipate will be your biggest challenge?
- Have you and your adult child begun planning for their visit/vacation? What have you come up with? What still needs to be addressed?