

HOLIDAY SOBRIETY SURVIVAL GUIDE

Stay On Track This Holiday Season:
...With Confidence, Peace, and a Plan



A simple 8-step strategy guide from
a certified addiction counselor.

Holiday Sobriety Survival Guide

*Stay Sober This Holiday Season With Confidence,
Peace, and a Plan*

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Published by

Brett Lowrey Coaching, LLC

www.BrettLowreyCoaching.net

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INTRODUCTION

Stay Sober This Holiday Season With Confidence, Peace, and a Plan

A practical survival guide for real-life recovery.

The holidays are not a neutral season—they pull on every emotional thread at once. Family dynamics, financial pressure, packed schedules, crowded rooms, overeating, loneliness, old memories, unresolved tension, year-end deadlines, travel fatigue... everything hits at the same time. And everywhere you turn, alcohol or other substances are part of the background like wallpaper.

Finding this season difficult isn't a sign of weakness. It's a sign you're human.

This guide gives you the exact tools to stay sober, steady, and in control through the most triggering stretch of the year. Not by being perfect. Not by relying on willpower. But by having a plan, a strategy, and a steady internal stance before you ever walk into a holiday environment.

Everything here comes from Brett Lowrey's real work with professionals navigating early and mid-stage recovery. Brett is a certified addiction counselor and recovery coach who teaches clients tools—not dependency. You stay responsible for your choices and your progress, and that's why you grow strong. These strategies reflect that same philosophy.

This guide was written for someone like you:

A high-functioning professional who carries a lot. Someone who's already done the deeper therapeutic or medical work with a clinician, but who still needs practical, private support for daily life. Someone who values subtle Christian grounding without preachy

tones or clichés. Someone who wants to show up with integrity—for your career, your health, your family, and the future version of yourself.

This is your plan. Let's begin.

STRATEGY 1 : Know Your Personal Holiday Triggers Before They Blindside You

Holidays magnify whatever is already sitting under the surface. Old family roles. Stress from year-end work demands. Loneliness. Grief. Childhood memories. The expectation to “perform” or “be fine.” You don’t need to fix all of this—you just need to stop getting caught off guard by it.

Think of your triggers like weather patterns:

You can’t control them, but you can forecast them. A storm is far less dangerous when you see it coming.

Start by identifying three triggers that reliably show up for you during the holidays. Be brutally honest. Examples from real clients:

- “The second I walk into my parents’ house, I feel 14 again.”
- “My siblings drink heavily and hand me drinks without asking.”
- “When work piles up before year-end, I stop eating and get snappy.”
- “A full house overwhelms me—noise, kids, expectations—no escape.”
- “I feel pressure to pretend I’m fine even when I’m not.”

Once you name a trigger, you can plan around it like an adult—not react to it like a younger version of yourself.

Tool: Trigger Forecasting Worksheet

(Include visually later—text below is final)

1. What environment consistently activates you?

(Examples: childhood home, office parties, airports, crowded rooms)

2. What internal state makes you vulnerable?

(Examples: hunger, exhaustion, sensory overload, feeling judged, loneliness)

3. What specific moment is the danger point?

(Examples: walking in the door, that one uncle's comments, 9–11 PM at events)

4. What is your pre-planned response?

Examples:

- Step outside for five minutes
- Text someone
- Move to a quieter room
- Eat something grounding
- Short walk
- Simple breathing reset

This worksheet turns vague stress into predictable patterns.

Real-World Example

A client who always felt “emotionally trapped” at her family’s Christmas Eve dinner realized her danger point wasn’t the whole night—it was the first 20 minutes when everyone asked personal questions at once. Once she knew that, she created a buffer plan: walk in with her partner, sit on the end of the couch near the hallway, and step outside after 15–20 minutes. That small adjustment changed the entire evening.

Why This Strategy Matters

Awareness isn’t therapy—it’s preparation.

When you can say, “A trigger has been pulled,” you gain distance. You shift from reactive to intentional. You don’t collapse into old patterns—you respond from who you are now.

You don't need a perfect childhood or a perfect family to stay sober during the holidays.
You only need a forecast.

Reflection Prompts

- Where do I historically lose my footing during the holidays?
 - Which person triggers me the most and why?
 - What physical signs show up when I'm getting overstimulated?
 - What's one predictable trigger I can eliminate entirely this year?
 - What's one trigger I can't avoid but can prepare for?
-

STRATEGY 2 : Redesign Your Social Plan Instead of Hoping for Willpower

Holiday social pressure is rarely subtle. People talk as if drinking is part of the costume.

You'll hear things like:

- "Relax, it's Christmas."
- "Come on, one won't hurt."
- "You're no fun tonight."

They don't say it to sabotage you, but the effect is the same: pressure, expectation, and a subtle erosion of your resolve.

Willpower is one of the weakest tools in recovery—especially when you're tired, hungry, overstimulated, or emotionally stretched thin. You need structure, not stubbornness.

The good news? Most of the danger disappears when your plan is stronger than the environment you're walking into.

Step 1: Decide Which Events Actually Matter

Professionals often forget that "No" is a complete sentence.

You don't have to attend:

- every office party
- every extended family dinner
- every neighbor gathering
- every social event you're "expected" to show up for

You are not rejecting people—you are protecting your progress.

Ask yourself:

Does this event support or sabotage my peace?

If it sabotages your peace, skip without guilt.

Step 2: Choose Arrival and Exit Times Before You Ever Show Up

This is one of the highest-leverage things anyone in recovery can do during the holidays.

Think of it like putting guardrails on a mountain road. You drive better when there's structure around you.

Examples:

- "I'm staying from 6:00 to 8:30, then I step outside, call my partner, and leave."
- "I'm arriving after the chaotic first hour and leaving before the late-night drinking."
- "I'm doing a 90-minute appearance and then heading home."

When you plan your exit, you eliminate the moment where willpower breaks down—because you're not asking yourself "Should I leave?" all night.

You already decided.

Step 3: Choose Your Drink Strategy Before Anyone Hands You Anything

The moment someone hands you a drink, you lose control of the situation.

Your drink plan should include:

- Arriving with your own nonalcoholic option
- Ordering something immediately
- Keeping a glass in your hand
- Practicing a neutral script like “I’m good, thanks” or “I’ve already got something”

A real client once said the simple act of holding sparkling water in a real glass cut his social pressure in half. When your hands are full, people leave you alone.

Quick Tool: The Event Planning Checklist

Use this for every holiday event:

Before You Go

- ☐ What time am I arriving?
- ☐ What time am I leaving?
- ☐ What is my drink plan?
- ☐ Who can I check in with before and after?
- ☐ What trigger do I expect?
- ☐ What is my exit script?
- ☐ What is my safe space if I get overwhelmed?

During the Event

- ☐ Keep a drink in hand
- ☐ Stay aware of your overstimulation signs
- ☐ Stick to your timeline
- ☐ Step outside if your internal volume rises

After the Event

- ☐ Text or call your accountability person
- ☐ Do a 2-minute reset (breathing, grounding, hydration)
- ☐ Celebrate one thing you did well

This checklist puts you in control of the environment—not the other way around.

Scripts You Can Use (Professional & Neutral)

People stall when they don't know what to say. Use these verbatim:

If someone pushes a drink

- “I’m pacing myself tonight.”
- “I’m all set—really, thank you.”
- “I’ve got an early morning.”
- “I’m driving later.”
- “Just sparkling water for me tonight.”

If someone pries

- “I’m keeping it simple tonight.”
- “I’m focusing on being present, not drinking.”
- “It’s been a long week; I’m taking it easy.”

If someone teases

- “I’m good. You enjoy.”
- “I’m here for the people, not the drinks.”
- “Not tonight.”

Short. Calm. Non-defensive. Undeniably adult.

Real Scenario (Example)

A professional client attended a holiday team dinner every year and always ended up drinking because “staying longer felt polite.” The year he decided on a firm 90-minute

window, he arrived prepared, kept sparkling water in a real glass, and left before the heavy drinking started.

He called his partner on the walk to the car, drove home, watched a movie, and woke up the next morning proud instead of ashamed.

Structure protects your peace. Structure protects your progress.

Why This Strategy Matters

Social environments are where relapse risk spikes—not because you’re weak, but because humans automatically mimic group behavior. You’re managing:

- overstimulation
- sensory overload
- social expectations
- hidden stress
- old identity roles
- decision fatigue
- emotional pressure

Having a plan eliminates 80% of the danger before you ever walk into a room.

You’re not being rigid.

You’re being responsible.

Reflection Prompts

- Which holiday events drained me the most last year?
 - Which ones genuinely matter to me—and which ones simply feel obligatory?
 - Who are the people I need to limit time around?
 - Which script feels most natural for me to use?
 - What would my ideal social season look like if I designed it from scratch?
-

STRATEGY 3 : Build a Pre-Event Reset Ritual That Lowers Stress Before You Walk In

Most people walk into holiday events already overloaded—rushing from work, traffic, errands, kids, travel, family pressure, or emotional residue from the day. They arrive at a holiday gathering at a 7 out of 10 stress level, then add noise, lights, conversations, expectations, and complicated dynamics.

Within minutes, they're at a 10 without understanding how they got there.

You can't walk into chaos *from* chaos.

You need a reset point in between.

This is one of the most powerful strategies in the entire guide because it stabilizes your nervous system before you walk into an environment that demands emotional regulation. A five-minute investment can prevent five hours of overwhelm.

This ritual doesn't need to be deep, spiritual, or poetic. It just needs to pull you back into your body and into the present moment.

What a Reset Ritual Actually Does

A reset ritual:

- lowers your internal pressure
- reduces sensory sensitivity
- slows your breathing
- grounds you before stimulation hits
- gives you a baseline to measure stress against
- separates “your day” from “this event”
- keeps you from reacting emotionally the second you walk inside

You are not trying to be zen. You're trying to arrive steady.

Real Examples from Clients

- Sitting in the car with eyes closed for five minutes
- Listening to one calming song on repeat
- Walking slowly around the block before going inside
- Calling a safe person and saying, "Heading in. I'll check in later."
- Eating something warm and grounding
- Taking 10 deep breaths before opening the door
- Repeating a grounding phrase:
 - "Arrive calm."
 - "Move slow."
 - "I'm in control of myself."
 - "One moment at a time."

These work because they interrupt the momentum of stress.

Reset Ritual Templates (Choose One or Mix & Match)

The 90-Second Reset

- 30 seconds: Deep breathing (4 seconds in, 6 seconds out)
- 30 seconds: Relax your jaw and shoulders
- 30 seconds: Touch something grounding (steering wheel, your coat, your keys) and say your intention ("steady," "present," "calm," "God, help me show up with clarity")

The 5-Minute Reset

- 1 minute slow breathing
- 1 minute body scan
- 1 minute listening to a comforting piece of music
- 1 minute reviewing your exit plan
- 1 minute picturing the most grounded, adult version of yourself walking in

The Faith-Grounded Reset (Subtle Christian version)

- Quiet moment
- "God, give me clarity and peace."
- Breathe deeply

- “Help me to be steady, kind, and self-controlled.”
- Walk in slowly

Spiritual, but not preachy—perfect for your audience.

Tool: Create Your Personal Reset Ritual

Fill in the blanks (this will become a worksheet later):

When I arrive at the event, I will take:

___ minutes in my car / outside / hallway / bathroom
before entering.

My grounding method will be:

- ☐ breathing
- ☐ prayer
- ☐ music
- ☐ short walk
- ☐ calming phrase
- ☐ warm drink
- ☐ call or text check-in
- ☐ other: _____

My intention for how I want to show up:

_____.

My baseline check:

What is my internal volume right now, 1–10?

If it's above a 6, I will take an extra minute before entering.

This worksheet becomes part of your holiday toolkit.

Why This Strategy Matters

Relapse moments often come from emotional stacking—small stressors built on top of each other until you're overloaded. A reset ritual creates a clean baseline, so when stress begins to rise inside the event, it's easier to recognize and manage.

You deserve to enter rooms steady—not rushed, not depleted, not bracing for impact.

A ritual is not overkill. It is preparation for the version of you that you want leading the rest of the night.

Reflection Prompts

- What do I usually feel right before walking into a holiday event?
 - What physical signs tell me I'm already overloaded?
 - Which reset method feels most natural for me?
 - What intention do I want to bring with me this year?
 - What difference would it make if I arrived grounded instead of frantic?
-

STRATEGY 4 : Create Safe Exits Before You Need Them

A safe exit is not running away—it's the adult version of self-respect.

It is the difference between staying in control and getting swept up in an environment you can't regulate.

You need two types of exits for every major holiday event:

1. A physical exit — how you will leave the location
2. A social exit — what you will say when you leave

People often get stuck because they don't plan either. They stay too long, get overstimulated, and by the time they want to leave, they're emotionally compromised, embarrassed to interrupt, or trapped in a conversation.

A safe exit protects you from the danger zone:

the last 30–60 minutes of an event, when drinking escalates, nerves fray, people get louder, and your stamina is gone.

This isn't overthinking—it's psychological armor.

1. Your Physical Exit: Leave Without Delay or Friction

Plan your physical exit before you step inside.

Checklist for a Clean Physical Exit

- Park in a spot that won't get blocked
- Keep your keys accessible
- 8Bring your coat in with you (never leave it in a bedroom)
- Avoid riding with people who want to stay “until the end”
- Have a rideshare app ready if needed
- Know the exact door you'll leave from

Your goal is simple: zero friction.

If leaving requires permission, negotiation, or waiting, you will hesitate—and that hesitation is where bad decisions happen.

2. Your Social Exit: A Script Prevents Stalling

When you don't know what to say, you stall.

When you stall, you stay longer.

When you stay longer, your emotional fatigue rises.

When your emotional fatigue rises, cravings follow.

A simple, neutral, non-explanatory script solves the entire issue.

Use any of these word-for-word:

Polite + Professional

- “I’m heading out—thanks so much for having me.”
- “Great to see you. I’m calling it a night.”
- “I’ve got an early morning, so I’m heading out.”

Graceful + Non-Explanatory

- “Stepping out for some air. See you later.”
- “It’s been a full day for me, so I’m going to take off.”
- “Time for me to head out. Enjoy the rest of the night.”

If someone pushes you to stay

- “I’m good, but thank you.”
- “Another time—I’m heading out now.”
- “I’m pacing myself tonight.”

Short. Neutral. Confident.

No apologies. No detailed explanations. No room for argument.

Real Scenario (Expanded + Stronger)

A client used to stay at his family’s Christmas dinner far longer than he wanted because he didn’t want to appear rude. By hour four, everyone was drinking heavily, and he eventually caved—not because he wanted to, but because he was overwhelmed, overstimulated, and socially trapped.

The next year, he changed one thing: he planned his exit.

He told himself, “Two hours. No matter what.”

At the two-hour mark, he stood up, smiled, and said:

“Great to see everyone—I’m heading out. Have a good night.”

He went home, watched a movie, slept well, and woke up proud.

It wasn't about escaping.

It was about maintaining dignity.

Tool: The Safe Exit Planner

Use this before every event.

My Physical Exit

- ☐ I parked where I can leave quickly
- ☐ I kept my coat and keys with me
- ☐ I am not depending on anyone else's schedule
- ☐ My backup ride is ready if needed

My Social Exit Script

Write it here:

Choose one backup script:

My Exit Time

I am leaving at:

____ : ____

or after ____ minutes of being there.

My Accountability Contact

Before leaving the event, I will:

- ☐ text
- ☐ call
- ☐ voice note

one person to check in.

This worksheet will later become a visual form.

Why This Strategy Matters

People rarely relapse at the beginning of an event.

They relapse:

- when they get overstimulated
- when their social mask gets tired
- when they feel trapped
- when they try to “push through” instead of leaving
- when they ignore their nervous system signals
- when they stay for other people’s comfort over their own wellbeing

A safe exit prevents all of that.

This isn’t dramatic.

This is boundaries in motion.

Reflection Prompts

- What has kept me stuck at events in the past?
 - What time of night do I typically lose emotional control?
 - What does my body feel like when I’ve stayed too long?
 - What is the easiest, most natural exit script for me to use?
 - Who can I check in with after I leave to reinforce the decision?
-

STRATEGY 5 : Protect Your Sleep Like Your Sobriety Depends on It

Sleep is one of the first things to fall apart during the holidays. Late nights, travel, noise, kids, hosting responsibilities, emotional stress, overeating, overstimulation—everything pushes your sleep schedule out of alignment.

Once your sleep goes, your emotional stability follows.

You get more reactive.

Cravings get louder.

Your tolerance drops.

Your mind spins faster.

Your patience thins out.

Think of sleep as the security system of your sobriety.

If it goes offline, everything else gets through the door.

You do not need perfect sleep hygiene—this is not the season for that.

You need anchors: small, realistic habits that prevent your system from crashing.

Why Sleep Matters So Much in Recovery

Sleep influences:

- impulse control
- emotional regulation
- stress tolerance
- energy levels
- clarity of thought
- cravings and urges
- mood stability
- resilience under pressure

Most people underestimate how much poor sleep mimics early relapse warning signs.

A tired brain whispers:

- “I can’t do this.”
- “I deserve a break.”
- “I’ll deal with sobriety tomorrow.”

A rested brain whispers:

- “I’ve got this.”
- “Not worth it.”
- “Stay the course.”

The difference is dramatic.

Choose One or Two Sleep Anchors (That’s Enough)

You do not need a perfect nighttime routine during the holidays. You need a *minimalist* system that keeps your nervous system from collapsing.

Here are simple but powerful anchors:

1. Keep a consistent wake time.

Even if you go to bed late, wake up around the same time.

This single habit stabilizes your entire circadian rhythm.

2. Keep your room dark and cool.

Your brain sleeps deeper in a cave-like environment.

3. Shut down screens 20 minutes before bed.

Your mind needs a short runway, not an iPhone fireworks show.

4. Brain dump before bed.

Write down what’s looping in your mind.

It clears mental bandwidth instantly.

5. Ground your body.

Warm shower.

Warm drink.

Stretching.

Slow breathing.

6. Travel anchors.

If you're staying in a family home or hotel:

- bring your own pillow
- bring a travel fan or white noise
- use a sleep mask
- keep a small bedtime ritual

One client said his pillow and travel fan were “the difference between coping and spiraling.”

Tool: The Minimalist Sleep-Protecting Routine

Complete this template (will become a worksheet later):

My Sleep Anchors (Choose 1–3)

- ☐ consistent wake time
- ☐ calming pre-bed ritual
- ☐ screen-free wind-down
- ☐ brain dump
- ☐ warm shower
- ☐ travel pillow/fan
- ☐ grounding breaths
- ☐ lights low one hour before bed
- ☐ “no heavy conversations after 9 PM” rule

My Emergency Sleep Reset Plan

If I've had a chaotic day, before bed I will:

- ☐ do a 2-minute breathing reset
- ☐ stretch for one minute
- ☐ write down anything causing mental noise
- ☐ drink a warm, non-caffeinated beverage
- ☐ play calming music or white noise

My Morning Stability Ritual

When I wake up, I will:

- ☐ drink water
- ☐ move my body for 1–2 minutes
- ☐ check in with myself emotionally
- ☐ avoid my phone for 5–10 minutes

This stabilizes your day before anyone else's voice enters your world.

Real Scenario (Enhanced Example)

A client who traveled every holiday season used to sleep horribly in relatives' guest rooms—thin pillows, loud HVAC systems, kids running around, constant interruptions. His recovery felt fragile because he was always operating at half-power.

He changed one thing:

He built a tiny sleep-protection kit with a pillow, earplugs, and a travel fan. He paired it with a five-minute ritual before bed.

His sleep didn't become perfect—but it became *consistent enough*.

And consistent enough is the difference between feeling steady and feeling vulnerable.

Why This Strategy Works

You cannot out-reason a tired brain.

You cannot out-willpower an exhausted nervous system.

You cannot out-discipline a dysregulated body.

You keep yourself sober by keeping your system stable.

A little sleep goes a long way.

A little structure goes even farther.

Your goal during the holidays is not perfect sleep.

Your goal is predictable recovery of energy.

That alone can cut cravings, reactivity, and emotional volatility in half.

Reflection Prompts

- What does my body feel like when I'm underslept?
 - Which one sleep anchor would make the biggest difference for me this year?
 - What gets in the way of good sleep during holidays—and how can I neutralize that?
 - What small bedtime ritual actually calms me?
 - What morning ritual helps me start steady, not scattered?
-

STRATEGY 6 : Build Micro-Routines That Keep You Steady During Disrupted Schedules

The holidays destroy normal routines.

Work slows down or becomes chaotic.

Kids are home.

Family arrives.

Meals are irregular.

Travel throws everything off.

Your environment changes every few days.

Most people in recovery make the same mistake:

They think if they can't keep their full routine, there's no point in trying.

Not true.

During the holidays, micro-routines are what keep you stable.

Micro-routines are small, repeatable actions that tell your brain,

"I'm still me. I'm still in control. I'm still driving the car."

They stabilize your identity, not just your schedule.

Why Micro-Routines Work

Your brain depends on predictable cues to regulate:

- mood
- cravings
- stress
- impulse control
- confidence
- emotional balance

When your whole life feels like a moving target, these tiny anchors keep your nervous system from drifting into overwhelm—or shutting down entirely.

Without micro-routines, people drift.

Drifting leads to numbness.

Numbness leads to seeking relief.

Relief-seeking is where cravings come alive.

With micro-routines, you stay oriented—even when the world around you isn't.

Examples of Powerful Micro-Routines

These are intentionally small so they remain doable when life is chaotic.

1. The 5-Minute Morning Check-In

- Sit up
- Put your feet on the floor
- Take three slow breaths
- Name one intention for the day
("steady," "kind," "present," "rooted," "clear")

This grounds you before anything else has a chance to pull on you.

2. The 10-Minute Evening Reset

- Light stretching or slow breathing
- One sentence journal reflection ("Did I stay aligned today?")
- Plan your morning in 60 seconds

This prevents tomorrow from inheriting today's stress.

3. A Short Walk After Dinner

Even 8–10 minutes helps regulate digestion, calm your nervous system, and reduce cravings that come from boredom or overwhelm.

4. A Consistent Wake-Up Ritual

It doesn't matter where you are—parents' house, in-laws', hotel, your own home—do one repeating action:

- make your bed
- drink a full glass of water
- pray
- listen to one grounding song
- step outside for one minute of fresh air

Predictability builds identity.

Identity builds stability.

Stability builds sobriety.

5. The 60-Second Thought Reset

When stress spikes:

- stop
- inhale for 4 seconds
- exhale for 6
- tell yourself: “Slow it down. One thing at a time.”

This prevents emotional spiraling.

6. The Midday Check-In

Ask yourself:

- Am I hungry?
- Am I overstimulated?
- Do I need a 3-minute walk?
- Do I need a moment to breathe?

Most cravings disappear when your body gets what it actually needed.

Tool: Build Your Personal Micro-Routine Map

Fill this out to stabilize your holiday rhythm (will become a worksheet later).

My Morning Micro-Routine (choose 1–3)

- ☐ Set an intention
- ☐ Drink water
- ☐ 1–2 minutes of stretching
- ☐ Prayer
- ☐ Make my bed
- ☐ 1 minute of fresh air
- ☐ Read a single grounding quote
- ☐ Quick check-in with a support person

My Midday Stability Habit

- ☐ 3-minute walk
- ☐ Eat something protein-based
- ☐ Slow breathing
- ☐ Step away from noise
- ☐ “Name what’s pulling on me right now.”

My Evening Micro-Routine

- ☐ 10 slow breaths
- ☐ Quick journal reflection
- ☐ Plan tomorrow in 60 seconds
- ☐ Light stretching
- ☐ Set my sleep anchor

Real Example (Expanded)

A client who often felt “swallowed by holiday chaos” created a tiny ritual:

Every morning he made his bed, drank water, and stepped onto the porch for one deep breath. That’s it.

His family thought it was nothing.

But to him, it was everything.

It reminded him:

“I still set the tone for my day.”

Those three minutes kept him from drifting into old behaviors when everything around him felt unpredictable.

Why This Strategy Matters

You cannot rely on willpower when your environment is unstable.

You rely on identity and micro-habits.

Micro-routines:

- reduce overwhelm
- maintain emotional stability
- stop autopilot behavior
- keep you aligned with your why
- prevent the “slippery slope” of holiday chaos
- give your brain predictable anchors

You don’t need a perfect routine during the holidays.

You need a small enough routine to survive them well.

Reflection Prompts

- Which part of my day feels the most chaotic during the holidays?
 - Which tiny habit would ground me the fastest?
 - What micro-routine makes me feel like “myself” again?
 - What does my body need more of—movement, stillness, sleep, or food?
 - Where do I tend to drift when my normal routines disappear?
-

STRATEGY 7 : Prepare for Emotional Ambushes from Family Dynamics

Even the healthiest families have emotional landmines. Old roles. Old expectations. Old wounds. Old versions of you that no longer match who you are today. When you return to childhood homes or see relatives you barely speak to during the year, your body remembers patterns faster than your mind does.

You can walk in as a successful, stable, adult professional—and instantly feel 14 again.

This is normal.

This is predictable.

And this is manageable with a plan.

The holidays are not just about external triggers—they also reactivate internal stories, loyalties, defense mechanisms, and unresolved tension. Understanding this ahead of time prevents you from being pulled into emotional whirlpools you've already outgrown.

Step 1: Identify the Dynamics That Pull You Off Center

Certain interactions drain you.

Certain comments destabilize you.

Certain people activate old versions of you.

Start by naming them:

- the uncle who comments on your appearance or life choices
- the parent whose disapproval still stings
- the sibling who drinks too much and gets loud
- the relative who interrogates your decisions
- the cousin who asks invasive questions
- the family member who always triggers guilt, competition, or shame

You aren't judging them—you're identifying pressure points so you can prepare.

Step 2: Choose Your Stance Before You Enter the Room

You don't need a script for every conversation.

You need a stance—a posture for how you show up.

This stance becomes your anchor, especially when someone tries to pull you back into outdated versions of yourself.

Examples of Effective Stances:

“I will be the calm one.”

Slow speech. Measured responses. No emotional tug-of-war.

“I will be the adult version of myself.”

You don't shrink or defend.

You answer only what you choose.

You stay rooted in your present identity.

“I will observe more than I respond.”

You give your nervous system space instead of absorbing everything.

“I don't match their energy.”

If they escalate, you de-escalate.

If they pry, you keep boundaries.

If they judge, you stay neutral.

A stance gives you identity when emotion tries to hijack you.

Tool: The Family Dynamics Prep Sheet

Fill this out before seeing family (this becomes a worksheet later).

1. Who consistently triggers me?

List up to 3 people:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

2. What pattern happens with them?

(criticism, guilt, competition, pressure, drinking, boundary violations)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

3. What version of myself do I become around them?

(teenager, peacemaker, avoider, fixer, silent, defensive)

4. Who do I choose to be this year?

(my adult self, calm observer, detached listener, grounded professional)

5. What is my emotional exit plan?

(example: step outside, change rooms, take a walk, text someone)

This prep sheet alone can prevent half of the emotional spirals people fall into.

Step 3: Shorten or Redirect Draining Interactions

You don't owe anyone long emotional labor.

Use neutral redirect phrases to maintain boundaries without creating conflict.

If someone asks intrusive questions:

- “I’m keeping things simple this year.”
- “Not much to report, but thanks for asking.”
- “I’ll fill you in another time.”

If someone criticizes or judges you:

- “I hear you.”
- “Thanks for your perspective.”
- “I’m not getting into that today.”

If someone’s drinking makes you uncomfortable:

- “I’m going to get some fresh air.”
- “Going to check on something—be right back.”
- “I’m going to step away for a bit.”

Short. Neutral. No explanations.

Step 4: Use the Role Upgrade Technique (Expanded)

This is one of the most powerful emotional tools for family situations.

Role Upgrade = Choosing the version of yourself that leads the room, not the one the room expects.

A client with a critical father once decided:

“My role this year is the adult version of myself.”

That one decision changed everything:

- He slowed his speech.
- He answered only what he chose to answer.
- He didn’t take the bait.
- He walked away when conversations turned sharp.
- He didn’t defend old choices.

- He didn't perform.
- He didn't shrink.

His father didn't change.

He changed.

He left that holiday both proud and steady.

Role upgrades break generational patterns one moment at a time.

Why This Strategy Matters

Family dynamics can create emotional collisions that spike cravings.

Not because you're weak, but because your nervous system reacts faster than your thinking brain.

This strategy works because it:

- keeps you rooted in the present
- protects you from emotional regression
- reduces overwhelm
- breaks old cycles
- preserves your peace
- keeps your adult identity intact
- prevents reactive decision-making

You cannot control your family's behavior.

You can absolutely control your stance.

And that is enough.

Reflection Prompts

- Who in my family drains my emotional energy the fastest?
- What pattern do I fall into around them?
- Who do I choose to be this year instead?
- What boundaries do I want to maintain?

- What physical signs tell me I'm being emotionally pulled into old roles?
 - What strategy will I use when I feel myself slipping back into old patterns?
-

STRATEGY 8 : Stay Connected to Your Why, Not Just Your Rules

Rules can keep you sober for a night.

Your *why* keeps you sober for a season.

Rules are external.

Your why is internal.

Rules say “don’t.”

Your why says “become.”

A rule can be overridden by exhaustion, pressure, guilt, loneliness, overstimulation, or “just this once.”

But your why—the deeper motive behind your recovery—reminds you of the life you’re building, not the moment you’re escaping.

The holidays are a season designed to distract you. Noise, food, alcohol, family expectations, social events, travel, emotional flashbacks—everything pulls you outward.

Your why pulls you inward.

It anchors you in purpose.

Step 1: Write Your Why in One Clear Sentence

Keep it plain. Keep it real. Keep it honest. This is the sentence you’ll carry with you into every challenging moment.

Examples from clients:

- “I want to wake up clear and proud.”
- “I want my kids to trust me again.”
- “I want to feel like I’m steering my life, not reacting to it.”
- “I want to break the pattern I was raised in.”
- “I want to build a life I don’t need to escape from.”
- “I want to protect the future I’m working so hard for.”

This is not motivational fluff.

It is identity reinforcement.

Step 2: Keep Your Why Physically Accessible

Your why is a tool, not a concept.

It only works if you can access it in real time.

Ways to keep it close:

- Put it in the notes on your phone
- Write it on a card in your wallet
- Tape it inside a laptop sleeve like one client did
- Set it as your lock screen
- Put it in your car console
- Put it in your Bible or journal
- Save it as a screensaver

When your nervous system is overloaded, you won’t remember your why unless you see it.

Step 3: Use Your Why Before Every Event and When You Feel Shaky

This practice is simple and powerful:

Before an event

Stop. Read your why. Say it slowly.

When cravings hit

Pause. Read your why. Breathe.

When family triggers activate

Step away. Read your why. Recenter.

When you feel yourself drifting

Anchor back to your why.

Your why doesn't remove the challenge.

It reminds you you're stronger than the moment.

Tool: The Why Statement Builder

Fill this out to sharpen your personal why (will be turned into a worksheet later).

1. What future version of myself am I trying to become?

2. What pain am I refusing to repeat?

3. Who am I becoming responsible for?

(kids, marriage, career, your own health, your faith)

4. What does sobriety make possible for me that substances destroy?

5. Final Why Statement:

In one sentence:

Make it short enough to remember.

Strong enough to matter.

Step 4: Reinforce Your Why Through Identity, Not Fear

You are not simply saying,

“I can’t drink.”

You’re saying,

“I’m becoming someone I respect.”

That shift changes everything.

Fear-based recovery collapses under pressure.

Identity-based recovery holds steady.

When you reconnect to your why:

- cravings lose power
- old patterns feel less appealing
- self-respect rises
- shame shrinks
- direction becomes clearer
- decisions align faster

Your why puts you back in the driver’s seat.

Step 5: Anchor Your Why in Something Bigger Than You (Optional, Faith-Friendly)

For many of Brett’s clients, this is where subtle faith grounding comes in.

A simple prayer before events:

“God, help me remember who I am and who I’m becoming.”

A quiet moment at night:

“Give me strength, clarity, and self-control.”

This is not about religion.

It’s about alignment, intention, and grounding in a deeper source of strength.

Real Example (Expanded)

A client often relapsed on work trips during the holidays. He felt lonely, bored, and disconnected from his normal structure. He wrote his why—“I want to wake up clear and proud”—and taped it to the inside of his laptop sleeve.

Every morning before he opened the computer, he saw it.

That one reminder snapped him back into alignment.

It broke the autopilot pattern.

It became his compass.

He stayed sober that entire season for the first time in a decade.

Your why is your compass.

Use it.

Why This Strategy Works

The holidays will tempt you to drift.

Your why pulls you back.

Rules rely on willpower.

Your why relies on identity.

Rules tell you what to avoid.

Your why tells you what you're moving toward.

You're not just staying sober for a few weeks—you're becoming someone who can be trusted year-round with your own wellbeing, your own decisions, and your own future.

Reflection Prompts

- What do I want my January 1 self to feel when they wake up?
 - What pattern in my family or personal history am I breaking?
 - Which person in my life deserves the strongest version of me?
 - How is my life better when I'm sober and clear?
 - What is the simplest, truest version of my personal why?
 - What identity am I stepping into this year?
-

BONUS STRATEGY 1 : Give Yourself a Quiet Anchor Moment Every Day

The holidays blur together. Days get loud, crowded, rushed, and emotionally dense. You move from task to task, room to room, conversation to conversation without stopping long enough to notice your own internal state.

That's how people drift into overwhelm—and overwhelm often becomes the spark for cravings, irritability, and emotional shutdown.

You need at least one quiet moment every day that belongs only to you.

Not to your family.

Not to your job.

Not to expectations.

Not to the holiday chaos.

Just to you.

This moment doesn't have to be long.

It just has to be intentional.

Why an Anchor Moment Works

A quiet anchor moment:

- lowers your nervous system's activation
- reduces emotional residue from interactions
- recenters your thoughts
- reconnects you to your identity
- catches stress before it stacks
- reminds you that you still control your internal pace

Most professionals live externally all day—meeting deadlines, responding to people, performing, managing, fixing, providing.

The quiet anchor moment reminds you that your inner world matters too.

This is where you gain clarity.

This is where you breathe.

This is where you reset.

This is where you come back to yourself.

Simple Ideas for Quiet Anchor Moments

Choose one. Rotate them. Mix and match. What matters is consistency, not perfection.

1. A slow morning coffee alone

No phone. No noise. Just breath, warmth, and five minutes of stillness.

2. A quiet drive with no music

Let your mind settle instead of absorbing more stimulation.

3. Sitting on the porch for a few minutes

Feel the air. Notice your breath. Let your system decompress.

4. A short walk alone

Ten minutes is enough to reset your mind and body.

5. A single grounding prayer

“God, steady me today.”

or

2“Give me clarity and peace.”

Simple. Centering. Effective.

6. A few minutes of journaling

Not pages. Just a sentence or two:

“How am I really doing today?”

7. A bathroom break reset

Yes—this counts. Many clients use the bathroom during gatherings as a private reset moment.

8. Silence in the car before you go inside

One minute of breathing before entering a loud house can prevent hours of overwhelm.

A quiet moment is not a luxury.

It's maintenance.

Tool: The Daily Anchor Builder

Fill this out to create your own (this will become a worksheet later).

1. What time of day feels most realistic for my anchor moment?

- ☐ morning
- ☐ midday
- ☐ evening
- ☐ before bed
- ☐ whenever I can find a pocket of silence

2. What anchor activity resonates most with me?

- ☐ quiet coffee
- ☐ porch time
- ☐ journaling
- ☐ prayer
- ☐ silent drive
- ☐ short walk
- ☐ breathing practice
- ☐ stepping away to a private space

3. My Anchor Statement (write one short sentence):

"This moment is for me."

or

"I'm allowed to slow down."

or

“I choose steadiness.”

Write yours:

4. My Backup Anchor

(For chaotic days)

This way, even on the busiest days, you still get your moment.

Real Example (Expanded)

A client with a demanding corporate job and three kids said he had “no time” for quiet moments during the holidays. Everything felt hectic, noisy, chaotic.

We found one pocket:

The 2–3 minutes when he sat in the driveway after work before walking inside.

He made that his anchor moment.

He took three deep breaths.

Said a quiet prayer.

Let the day slide off him before entering the house.

He told Brett later:

“That tiny ritual saved me more than anything else. I walked in grounded instead of scattered. My evenings went from tense to peaceful.”

Small practice.

Huge impact.

Why This Strategy Matters

You cannot regulate your emotions if your life has no pause button.

Quiet moments are where you reconnect to your why, your identity, and your stability.

This isn't self-care.

It's self-regulation.

And without self-regulation, cravings escalate fast.

A single anchor moment creates internal space.

Internal space creates emotional resilience.

Emotional resilience protects your sobriety.

You deserve at least one moment every day that belongs only to you.

Reflection Prompts

- When do I most need a quiet moment during the holidays?
 - What kind of stillness calms me the most?
 - What gets in the way of silence—and how can I create a pocket anyway?
 - What grounding phrase helps me reset quickly?
 - What difference would it make if I created space in my day instead of reacting to everything?
-

BONUS STRATEGY 2 : Know What to Do the Minute a Craving Hits

Cravings are not signs of failure. They're signals—your body and nervous system telling you something is out of balance:

- You're overwhelmed.
- You're tired.
- You're overstimulated.
- You're hungry.
- You're lonely.
- You're anxious.
- You're emotionally flooded.
- You're trying to push through instead of reset.

Cravings are not the problem.

Your response to them is what determines what happens next.

You need a simple, clear, automatic plan you can run without thinking.

This three-step method works because cravings follow a predictable pattern:

They spike fast. They fade fast.

If you can delay action by just a few minutes, the craving loses 80–90% of its power.

The 3-Step Craving Breaker

You can run this anywhere—bathroom, hallway, car, porch, bedroom, outside, even at a crowded holiday event.

STEP 1: Label It

Say out loud or in your mind:

“This is a craving. It will pass.”

Labeling pulls the craving out of the emotional part of your brain and into the rational part.

It interrupts the autopilot story of:

- “I can’t handle this.”
- “I need something now.”
- “I’m going to crack.”

Naming it reduces its intensity.

Add a grounding phrase:

- “This is temporary.”
 - “I’ve handled this before.”
 - “I’m not doing this today.”
 - “Steady.”
-

STEP 2: Change Your Environment Immediately

Cravings grow strongest in the same physical and emotional space where they started.

Moving—even for 60 seconds—breaks the loop.

Examples:

- step outside
- go to a bathroom stall
- walk to your car
- move to a quieter room
- go upstairs or downstairs
- step onto a porch or balcony
- walk around the block
- move away from the group or the bar area

Environment is one of the most powerful interrupters of craving cycles.

You don’t need a new plan—you need a new location.

STEP 3: Do Something Physical to Reset Your Body

Cravings live in the body.

To shut them down, you need to interrupt the physical tension behind them.

Choose from this list:

- shake out your hands
- stretch your neck

- splash cold water on your face
- do 6 slow breaths (inhale 4, exhale 6)
- walk for 2 minutes
- put your hands on something cold
- tense then release your shoulders
- step into fresh air
- press your feet firmly into the ground

When the body resets, the craving collapses.

The 90-Second Craving Reset (Use Anytime)

This is a micro-routine that works anywhere.

1. Name it:

“This is a craving. It will pass.”

2. Move:

Step into a bathroom, hallway, porch, outside, or any new location.

3. Regulate:

Six slow breaths.

Shoulders down.

Jaw unclenched.

Feet grounded.

4. Redirect:

Ask yourself:

“What do I actually need right now—food, sleep, air, quiet, or space?”

Meet that need instead of the craving.

Tool: Craving Intervention Worksheet

Fill this out so you never have to think when a craving hits (this will later be a printable sheet).

What my cravings usually mean:

- ☐ I'm tired
- ☐ I'm lonely
- ☐ I'm overwhelmed
- ☐ I'm hungry
- ☐ I'm overstimulated
- ☐ I'm anxious
- ☐ I'm emotionally triggered

My personal craving signs are:

- ☐ tight chest
- ☐ restlessness
- ☐ irritability
- ☐ "I need to escape" feeling
- ☐ fast thoughts
- ☐ zoning out
- ☐ physical tension
- ☐ obsessing

My 3-Step Plan:

Label:

Move:

Physical Reset:

My Backup Plan:

If I'm stuck or overwhelmed, I will text or call:

This makes your plan automatic.

Real Example (Expanded)

A client who feared relapse during stressful holiday dinners used this craving-breaker one night when he suddenly felt shaky. Everyone around him was drinking. His stress spiked. His chest tightened. Old patterns started whispering.

He stood up, said, "I'll be right back," stepped onto the porch, breathed slowly, and looked at the sky.

The craving dropped by half within 90 seconds.

Within three minutes, it was gone.

He walked back inside steady.

He later said:

"It wasn't self-control. It was having a plan."

That's the whole point.

Why This Strategy Works

Cravings feel dangerous because they feel powerful and permanent.

But they are neither.

Cravings are:

- time-limited
- driven by nervous system overload
- weakened by physical movement
- regulated by awareness
- disrupted by environmental change
- beaten by delay

You don't fight cravings.

You outlast them.

You interrupt them.

You respond instead of reacting.

You are stronger than the craving—and this strategy proves it every time.

Reflection Prompts

- What does a craving feel like in my body?
 - Where do my cravings usually hit hardest during the holidays?
 - What environment tends to intensify them?
 - What physical action seems to calm me the fastest?
 - Who can I check in with if I need support during a craving?
 - What false story do cravings try to tell me—and what truth do I need to replace it with?
-

NEXT STEPS : Keeping Your Momentum After the Holidays

You made it through this guide. That alone tells you something important:

You're committed. You're thinking ahead. You're taking yourself seriously.

That's what real recovery looks like—intentional, thoughtful steps taken before a crisis, not after one.

The holidays are just a few weeks out of the year, but the pressures you face don't disappear when January begins. Work expectations return. Life transitions continue. Stress fluctuates. Responsibilities pile up. Unexpected moments still show up without warning.

The same tools you used to stay steady this season are the same ones that will carry you through the rest of the year.

Sobriety isn't built on willpower.

It's built on systems, structure, and self-awareness.

It's built on knowing yourself well enough to get ahead of the moments that used to take you down.

And most importantly, it's built on not doing this alone.

Why Support Matters Going Forward

Professionals—especially high achievers—tend to carry everything alone. You're capable. You're strong. You're used to being the one people rely on. You don't want to burden anyone. You don't want to look weak. You don't want to explain yourself. You want to "handle it."

But the truth is simple:

People who succeed long-term in recovery aren't the ones who try harder alone.

They're the ones who allow themselves consistent, private support.

Not dependency.

Support.

The kind that keeps you from drifting.

The kind that keeps you accountable.

The kind that reflects back your patterns before they derail you.

The kind you don't have to perform for.

The kind you don't have to explain your entire life to.

Someone in your corner makes the difference between knowing the tools and using the tools.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Brett Lowrey is a certified addiction counselor and recovery coach who specializes in helping high-performing professionals build lasting, meaningful recovery through practical tools, structured support, and grounded accountability. For 20 years, Brett has worked with high-performing leaders navigating substance use, stress, burnout, and major life transitions—guiding them toward

clarity, stability, and long-term change.

His coaching philosophy is simple: recovery grows when you take responsibility, practice daily action, and face your life with confidence instead of avoidance.

Brett teaches strategies that work in real moments, not theories that collapse under pressure.

What sets Brett apart is his ability to understand the unique challenges of high-achieving leaders who want private support without stigma. He provides discretion, structure, and tools that fit the complexity of real life—not one-size-fits-all advice.

Brett works with clients across the United States through group and private one-to-one coaching programs

To learn more or explore coaching options, visit:

www.BrettLowreyCoaching.net

READY FOR THE NEXT STEP?

Join Our Group or Private Coaching

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YOU'LL GET ACCESS TO

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- Practical tools you can use daily
- Strategies grounded in real clinical experience

CHOOSE THE OPTION THAT FITS YOUR LIFESTYLE:

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