

## Episode Eight: 'Support Over Christmas'

*Podcast Transcript*

*Life with Alcohol and Drugs*

Host: Rebecca Bradley (Scottish Families)

Guest Speaker: Lynne Wandrum (Scottish Families)

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### **Introduction:**

This is Life with Alcohol and Drugs. A podcast from the charity, Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs.

*Interview Begins*

### **Rebecca:**

Today we're joined by the lovely Lynne, who is our senior Family Support Development Officer, here at Scottish Families. And we're talking all things Christmas, as it is just the start of December. So we've got quite a lot of things to get through, some bits of advice for over the Christmas period, and also we've had some family members share a wee bit of insight into what their Christmases are.

We know that Christmas can be a really difficult time, especially when alcohol and drugs are in your life and there might be quite a lot of pressure to have that traditional Christmas, but you know deep down that's not going to happen, or your loved one is possibly drinking or using drugs over the Christmas period and it's just a very hard time for many families. We're bombarded with constant messaging over Christmas: all the deals you get on alcohol, it's just very constant. A constant stream of messaging everywhere: on your TV, when you're out shopping, on social media, your friends, your family all talking about it, and it can be quite a difficult time. But there are some things you can do and put in place to try and make things a wee bit easier to deal with.

I'll hand over to Lynne, who's going to share some pieces of advice.

### **Lynne:**

Thanks, Rebecca. Having supported families for a number of years now, we've been through a few Christmases together, and as you say, it is a really tough time of year. I think one of the top bits of advice is to make plans; plan ahead. Family members will talk a lot about how they're waiting to see what happens. They'll wait for this or that appointment or whatever, with regards to their loved one, but what we would encourage them to do is to make plans that suit you as a family member, not wait to see what your loved one is or isn't doing. If you are doing that, the stress just builds and builds and you create these expectations of, maybe they can get it together for that one day and it'll be a lovely day, and the reality is probably going to be quite different and quite difficult.

So, if you're making plans ahead of time, the plans should be about what's best for you. What suits you better? Is it a traditional meal? Is it a sit-down at a certain time? Is it to forget all that and stay in your jammies all day and have beans on toast? Whatever it is that suits you and is good for your wellbeing and stress levels, brings them down, helps you get into a space where you can look at this day of the year that we've set up to be Christmas day as not being something that you just have to get through, but something that you can actually find a bit of enjoyment in, even if it's just a really simple pleasure that you find in that particular day? You have your favourite pudding, or whatever it is; it doesn't

matter.

So make your plans in the hope that your loved one might be able to participate, but make your plans to suit you. That would be the first bit of advice. And running alongside that is the idea of self-care. Self-care is a bit of a buzz topic; we talk about self-care a lot, but you need to look at self-care as a real tool in your tool belt, that you can bring out and use and make it make sense to you. So for me, a nice hot bubbly bath is just something that is pure heaven. That might not work for other people. It might be a walk, a run, a cycle - that would never be me, but that might be what suits other people. Or sitting down with a film, and it doesn't have to be a Christmas film, it could be a film that you just love, or watching a bit of comedy, or meeting up with a friend. Self-care can be any or all of those things, a combination.

We get a bit tied up with self-care being about putting this time aside for ourselves and being a bit selfish, but actually, self-care is a lot more straightforward than that. Self-care is about when you put your feet on the floor in the morning, you think: how do I feel today? And how do I make today a day that I feel I can work with and not get stressed out so that I can't achieve anything? So self-care runs through all the advice we would give. Prioritising you and your needs is really important because that helps other people get the best of you as well.

I would say, again, going back to the plans you're making about buying gifts and giving gifts to a loved one who might be using alcohol or drugs, then think about what kind of gifts you want to give, how you want to give those gifts. The value of the gifts. Christmas is a time where we often feel that we have to be over-generous and kind of let our guard down a little bit and be a wee bit more giving, but if you are giving a gift to someone who is not in a great place in terms of their alcohol or drug use, then that might be something that they see as a way to access more alcohol or drugs, so they might use that lovely gift that you've spent time on, and sell it on to someone else or use it in a way that you hadn't intended it for. Then you're left with all the hurt and the disappointment that goes with that.

I would think ahead of time, what's practical to give? Giving a gift that is to do with helping them out with food, shopping and that sort of thing, is a really lovely gift to give, and it's not to feel the pressure that you should be giving more than you would actually want to give. That's really about getting that idea in your head that you are still supporting the person, you are still able to give a gift, but it has to be within the parameters of what you can afford and what you feel comfortable with. If you give something that they then sell on, you're just like: oh well, that was theirs to give away. It's about getting yourself into that headspace where you don't feel that crushing disappointment.

Sometimes we feel under more pressure at Christmas to hand money as gifts, and that's never a fantastic idea when someone's in a state of mind that they might want to spend that on something that's harmful to them. So think about how you can avoid doing that, or avoid being put in the position where you feel like you've got to do that.

Another piece of advice would be to look forward to including your family member or your loved one in celebrations, if that's possible, but don't put your plans on hold if that's not going to be the case. When we think about the messaging you talked about Rebecca, when you're out in supermarkets and shops, TV adverts and all the rest of it, it's all about fun, parties, alcohol, and everything that goes with that. So if you have a family member that is struggling with those elements of their life, then it might be that they give in to those messages at Christmas and they maybe lapse, or relapse, or maybe their use escalates at that time of year.

Again, it's not about not believing that they can maintain sobriety or recovery, but it's about being realistic and thinking, actually, they are going to be under increased pressure at this time of year as well, so let's make a plan. Let's have it in our mind that this is quite likely to happen, so how do I deal

with that? What tools do I have in place now? And that's back to that self-care as well. Those would be the top tips that would hopefully be helpful to people.

**Rebecca:**

Yes, they are really helpful. It's just, you didn't really put in place just how badly stressful Christmas came be for many people. And I think, after the last few years that everybody in the world has had, it's quite clear that negative messaging is, we've been bombarded with that for so long. If you think back to Christmas last year, where right at the, I think it was a week before Christmas that you were told that you weren't allowed to go and see your family, you weren't allowed to go and be with your loved ones. Hopefully that's different this year. I think those tips can be used so much, because Christmas is like a whole week long. It's not just that one day' you've got Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, then all the way up to New Years.

I know not many of us are big fans of New Year's Eve. It's an interesting one. They are really helpful though. I feel it can be quite hard; if you are planning ahead, we can all make plans but sometimes plans are broken, or it doesn't really happen the way we thought it would be. So I think there's even that wee bit of knowing that not everything might go to plan.

**Lynne:**

Yes, absolutely. And keeping that in mind so you don't feel it's your responsibility, it's nothing that you've done or should have done or could have done, it is what it is, and it's about how you pick yourself back up from that disappointment and try to still make the best of the situation.

Again, I'm just swing back to self-care; it's the most important thing to remember when you are faced with disappointments and change in plans and all the rest of it. It's about: well, how am I in all this? Where am I and how do I get to the other side of this?

**Rebecca:**

Just on the self-care, I actually read a quote the other day, from a family member from one of our support services, and it said that they thought that self-care was selfish of them. It was a ridiculous thing for them to do. Why should I care about myself? Why should I give myself this time to have a bath or read a chapter of a book. How do you have any sort of advice there, for how to stop feeling like it's being selfish?

**Lynne:**

It's not selfish at all. But that is the most common response that we get. So when we start supporting families, at the beginning they come with all this information about what a normal day's like for them and where their loved ones are at, and all their fears and anxieties they've got around that. Then I suggest: when was the last time you picked up a book or went to the cinema? And they're like: are you ridiculous? Of course I don't do that. there's just no time. And it's a really painful reality actually. If you then stop and think: well, actually, when was the last time I did that? That can be really, really difficult to face because that when that big, massive pause button that you've been living under becomes so heavy.

When self-care is suggested, and it's a big part of CRAFT - Community Reinforcement And Family Training - it's a huge part of CRAFT is about self-care. So when you start looking at those aspects of self-care, what we are actually asking people to do is to prioritise themselves so that they can move out of that continuous cycle that they are in and make a positive change. Because self-care comes with such a

big label about going for spa days and all that kind of thing, self-care has become a bit of a difficult topic for people. But self-care can be as simple as sticking to a routine that's really important to you. So, not getting up before a time that would be comfortable for you because somebody's got to be at an appointment, or not keeping your phone on overnight because you can't sleep when your phone's on. So, self-care can be those little things that have just become so normal, that you don't realise that actually, they are quite damaging.

You want to build up; you don't have to go from doing nothing for yourself to taking a whole day and going away to a spa. Self-care can be a tiny, little thing like stopping and having a cup of tea. It can be as simple as that. But as long as you are recognising this is my choice, this is what I want to do, this is what I think will make me feel better just now, that's self-care and we can count all those things. We can build these things up in little small increments, it doesn't need to be nothing to everything.

**Rebecca:**

Yes, it's even when you realise that that tiny wee thing, that's for you. It's you looking after yourself. My self-care is making sure I don't look at my work emails constantly. I switch them off every now and again, and I'm like, there you go. But I guess that's the kind of same thing as the phone; imagine a phone that's just constantly going off. You'll have messages coming through from your social media, WhatsApp messages, texts, missed calls, it's just like the most nosiest thing ever. When you think of just turning it off, it would take that pain away, but then a lot of people get quite stressed about that, if you turn your phone off: but what if they need me? What if something happens? It's like a vicious cycle that keeps just going round

**Lynne:**

Exactly. There's a whole other conversation about how do we set boundaries around that that are actually realistic for you to hold onto? There's no point us suggesting that you set a boundary of switching your phone off at 8 o'clock at night and back on at 7 o'clock the next morning if that is going to cause your stress levels to go through the roof. A much better boundary about that might be to take an hour or 2 hours out of your day, if that's manageable for you, and say I'm not available from midnight until 2 in the morning, but I always get up at 2, for the loo, so I might as well check my phone then, or whatever it might be.

So we need to be realistic about things like boundaries, but family members talk a lot, particularly with the phone thing, about the dread of that ping of a message or a missed phone call or whatever, and the pressure of that is enormous. So actually, setting a boundary around when you are available is a really good place to start, because no one can be available 24/7.

You mentioned work emails there, we have a start time and an end time to our day. Family members don't get that luxury, but we can encourage them to make that one of their self-care routines, where they actually do say I'm not available between 6 and 7, because that's when I sit down for my meal and I watch something for half an hour on the TV. It can be really simple, really straightforward. We don't need to overcomplicate it.

**Rebecca:**

Yes, for some people just take to the self-care boundaries so easily, but for some other people it can just be really hard, but that's because you've been stuck in this routine for so long. I will say, if there's anyone who has been struggling with putting themselves first, then Scottish Families is here to help with that. My lovely team can help with all of those things.

So, I know you very kindly reached out to a few family members that you are supporting and asked what they were looking forward to for Christmas, or what they were particularly worried about. And I know you've had some lovely responses from people, if you want to share some of them?

**Lynne:**

Yes, that would be great. So, yes, our lovely family members, we worked very well with this year, they shared their experiences and their plans that they've maybe got for this year.

I'll start with this lovely one. It says: 'I love Christmas and I always have and have always tried to make it special. As I've got older though, I've started to put less pressure on myself to focus on one day, where I usually end up exhausted and missing everything because I'm in the kitchen half the day. Last year wasn't easy with my son, and he was out for a big part of the day and then the police were involved on Boxing Day. So this year we've decided to do something different, take the pressure off ourselves so that if things don't go as planned it won't really matter.'

This year, this lovely family decided to order a Chinese takeaway for Christmas Day, and it's something that she says they would never have done before because they loved the whole tradition of Christmas, but actually, she's really looking forward to it now that she's made that decision. So she's not cooking, no dishes, and a lot cheaper! She's still going to lay her table and have it all set up so they can sit down together, which I think is just lovely, and make it special, but she can spend the rest of the day relaxing (hopefully). Then having that time off from work and stuff, she's just going to chill out and do whatever she wants, whenever she wants to do it. I just think that is a massively important message, and you mentioned it earlier: Christmas isn't one day. We shouldn't try and squeeze everything in, we could spread it out. We could do gift-giving the night before, so there's not that pressure, or you could do the big meal the night before and have your gifts on Christmas Day. I love the idea of a takeaway or staying in your jammies all day and having sandwiches. It really doesn't matter. We've made it into this big thing. I thought that was a fantastic bit of advice.

Another family member shared a bit about how her anxiety is building about how other people might treat her loved one at Christmas. So what she's decided to do is to try and counteract that by inviting family members that she knows are supportive of the situation, so there's no judgement, and it's someone who you can have a bit of normal conversation with as well, so it's not all about attention of what's he doing? When's he doing it? Is this going to happen? They'll be there to field some of that difficulty. She's saying that she's keeping the door open to as much positivity as possible, and if something goes wrong, she might just join the other family and get a take away. So I think that's a fantastic message that we're putting out there!

Another family member shared that they like to prepare everything in advance and then just eat when they feel like it, which I also think's a great idea. So you're really just going with the flow on the day. There's no pressure: it's 3 o'clock - we should be sitting at the table just now. If everything's prepared, you can just stick it in the oven and have it whenever it suits you. So that gives you time to go for a lovely walk or a visit with family, or got to church, or whatever it is that suits you. I really liked that idea as well.

We also got some input from some of our other FSDOs, our Family Support Development Officers in different areas. And they had some great tips and ideas to pass on to people about that idea about taking Christmas just down a few notches, keeping it quiet, taking time for yourself, being prepared to disinvite your loved one if they've crossed a boundary or if their actions and behaviours aren't going to be compatible to being with the rest of the family. You know, can I be brave enough and have the support to be able to say: actually, it's not suitable for you to come round today. Having other people that can back you up. So I thought that was a really good piece of advice.

I think even as well, the family member response is that you've shared their...you can see how well you've been supported, I think, by your team over the years, because it's just...I'm sure that probably before that it would have been a whole different story, but now they've managed to settle in with things and putting themselves first and knowing that they can do those things and have the power to do those things.

**Rebecca:**

I think that's a crucial part of this, it's about people actually saying, so I use a hula hoop analogy: imagine there's a hula hoop on the ground - this is my funny joke - not a hula hoop like a crisp, an actual life-size hula hoop that you can stand inside and pick up. Imagine that you are standing inside your hula hoop and you are holding on to it. What's in there is yours - that's it. That's all you can deal with. What's outside of that is nothing to do with you. So if you are holding on to that hoop and then your hoop is beans on toast for your Christmas dinner - happy days. That's where you're at. So I hope family members see that as a way of taking that control back: this is what I'm in charge of, these are my responsibilities. Everything else outside of that is nothing to do with me.

**Lynne:**

Yes. Beans on toast for Christmas dinner would be nice.

**Rebecca:**

A wee bit cheaper than a take away.

**Lynne:**

I've never had a take away for Christmas dinner. It sounds quite nice though. It could be something you could do. Last year was the first time I didn't have turkey. It's the fact that there's no dishes - no dishes and I'm in, that's me! I'll have that.

**Rebecca:**

I know. I think it's all fair and wellbeing able to smile over things and you know that people can look after themselves and do things like that. But for anybody right now that is just dreading it. You know, it's the worst time of the year or their really stressing out over it, it's really worrying them, they don't know what's going to happen, they don't know what they're going to do. It's keeping them up at night and it's just really upsetting them. You can imagine that if you've had Christmases where it really hasn't been good, and you're anticipating the worst to happen, and this is this person right now that just doesn't know what to do, do you have anything helpful, or even just anything that you would like to say to somebody that might be in that scenario?

**Lynne:**

Yes, and that is going to be, sadly, the situation for lots of families that we support. What we would say to people is: remember that up to this point, you survived every hard day that's been thrown at you. So you can do it. Often we think that if we've got a choice then it's a good choice or a bad choice, but actually, usually we've got a rubbish choice and a really rubbish choice to make. So if your rubbish choice is to take all the decorations down and forget that Christmas was ever a thing and just go about your normal business, then do that if you think that will be helpful for you. and if you want to make a really rubbish choice and not bother putting the decorations up in the first place, then do that.

So that idea that this is a pressure that is put on is by the 'normal' way of things; things that we think we should be doing, and actually, in reality, we have that choice to make all the time. For us as a support team, what we'll be trying to do is to get as much information about support that's available over the festive period, because obviously, things kind of slow down and some services go off. So we'll be trying to make sure that all of our family members have every possible contact number that they could need over that time. And we'll be talking to people about what their plan would be. We plan for the worst-scenario; if that happens, what tools have you got in your toolbox? What are you doing about that? Who are you going to phone? All of that stuff that goes with that.

We're actually, in Forth Valley, we're going to be available for some support between Christmas and New Year this year, and there will be other ways to get support. I know that our lovely Scottish Families Helpline will be available to offer support as well to people. So I'd say, stay connected. We use a WhatsApp group to support families as well, and actually, it's the thing that makes me the proudest when I'm at work; it's to see the peer support that goes on there. Families supporting families. And I'd imagine that's going to be a really useful tool for people over the holidays as well, that idea that they know that there's still a whole bunch of people there, that are maybe experiencing something similar to them and they're not alone. And back to what I said earlier, it's not something that could have done or should have done; it's where they are at just now. Christmas day will come and go and then in the New Year, it will be: where are we now? And there's always that hope that things are going to improve and get better. Family members can be back in charge of what's happening to them in their own lives.

**Rebecca:**

Brilliant. Thank you so much. That is really good advice for people. As you said, Scottish families is here, and we've got a wonderful support team and we will be here over Christmas as well. Just get in touch with us. The details will be at the end of this podcast. And if you want to speak specifically to Lynne, we've got her details as well.

**Lynne:**

I'm happy to speak to anybody.

**Rebecca:**

Thank you so, so much. And I really appreciate all your time. Thank you.

**Lynne:**

You're welcome. Thanks, Rebecca.

*Interview Ends***Exit:**

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at [helpline@sfad.org.uk](mailto:helpline@sfad.org.uk). We also have webchat and further information on our website [www.sfad.org.uk](http://www.sfad.org.uk).