



By [Ruben Castaneda](#) | Staff Writer
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For most people, whether they're married, dating or in some romantic space in between, Valentine's Day is a time to step up their love game with flowers, candy and jewelry.

[Newly sober single alcoholics and addicts](#), though, are better off staying on the sidelines. (The advice doesn't pertain to people in long-term, healthy relationships.) Unattached addicts and alcoholics who are new in recovery shouldn't date or launch a new relationship for at least a year, experts say.

"The first year of sobriety is fraught with challenging issues," says [Anne Lewis](#), a psychologist and clinical addiction counselor at [Indiana University Health](#), based in Indianapolis. "It will be easy for many to find replacement addictions, such as a love addiction, to replace the high the drug or alcohol provided. Many people enjoy the honeymoon phase of relationships, feeling euphoria from the new love, making it more challenging to address issues that underlie the addiction. Typically these underlying issues are related to our negative core beliefs, a difficult thing to uncover when we are viewed as 'perfect' by our new partner."

A new relationship can also become a distraction from the spiritual aspects of recovery, says [Anita Gadhia-Smith](#), a therapist who practices in the District of Columbia and Bethesda, Maryland. Many people in sobriety join a 12-step program, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, both of which recommend following spiritual principles and stress the belief in a higher power as a path to [recovery](#).

A new love interest has the potential to become the [substance abuser's](#) higher power, Gadhia-Smith says. "That's dangerous because the person can fail you, and relationships end," she says. "Most people in early recovery aren't stable emotionally, and relationships in early recovery are fraught with volatility and emotional instability." Such romances tend

to be short-lived, and “the collapse of a new relationship can easily trigger relapse,” says [Beth Kane-Davidson](#), director of the Addiction Treatment Center at [Suburban Hospital](#) in Bethesda, Maryland.

Nonetheless, many newly sober single people ignore the advice to stay single for a year, clinicians say. When [Sarah Hepola](#), author of The New York Times best-seller “Blackout: Remembering The Things I Drank to Forget,” a memoir of alcoholism and [recovery](#), first tried to get sober at age 25, she thought swearing off dating for a year was unfair. Like many substance abusers in recovery, Hepola didn't get and stay sober on the first try. She went to support group meetings and quit drinking for 18 months, “which felt like forever,” she writes in her book. If she could drink again, she could lose herself “to [a] handsome stranger and not be hobbled by my own nagging insecurities. You know what I miss? A hangover. You know what I want? A night I regret.” She resumed drinking.

Hepola says she went in and out of support group meetings intermittently over the years, but couldn't quit drinking for long. About a decade after her first try, she returned to support group meetings to again try to get sober, though she remained skeptical about the advice to abstain from dating for a year. “I had no interest in following the rules, but I did accidentally, because none of the relationships I wanted came even close to working out,” she says. “I ended up not dating for two years. This was surprising to me, because I'd been so casual about sex when I was drinking. But alcohol had been an escape from my body and my insecurities, [and] it took a long time for me to feel comfortable being known and seen. A lot of the qualities a woman needs to date successfully – a sense of her own worth, proper boundaries, trust in her own gut – those had been plowed down by years of excessive drinking, and they took a long time to grow back.”

Dating Complicates Recovery

Hepola, 42 and sober now, is glad she took a dating timeout. “A lot of us have a fantasy that dating someone will make the process easier, but it makes it much harder,” she says. “If that person still drinks, then you have issues like where to go on a date: Will you feel comfortable at a bar? At a party where everyone else is drinking? There's the issue of kissing a person who has the taste of alcohol on the lips. I was like a vampire in the first year. Just a tiny taste of the stuff would have sent me back to the bottle.”

Whether, like Hepola, you decided on your own to get help or did so only after friends and relatives staged an [intervention](#), staying away from booze or drugs is a daunting task for newly sober people. Launching a new relationship can complicate that effort during the first year of sobriety. Here are five strategies clinicians recommend for those foregoing romance to focus on recovery:

Develop a support network. Building [a reliable group of sober friends](#) you see at meetings and meet for coffee and lunch can reduce your temptation to date. “If you have a strong network of sober people in your life, you're less likely to feel lonely and try to date,” Gadhia-Smith says. “You can do a lot of fun things together, like going out to eat, going to the movies or going on hikes. Being part of a group also means you're less likely to get

fixated on one person.” Not everyone is equally adept at developing new friends, but keep in mind that all you have to do is raise your hand at a support-group meeting and say you're a newbie and want to befriend sober people, and you'll be surrounded after the meeting. Staying isolated or trying to "cure" your addiction with a [self-help approach](#) won't work.

Commit to a fellow sober substance abuser to abstain from dating. Sober friends will help you stay focused on your recovery program and will assist you in following the guidance to not date for a year. “Once we say out loud we want to remain relationship-free the first year, we have a host of people who will hold us accountable for this,” Lewis says. “Keep saying it out loud every time you share your story [with fellow substance abusers in recovery]. It helps remind you of your goal as you keep those who may be interested in you an arm’s length away.”

Set and execute goals. Make a list of things you'd like to do and didn't while you were drinking excessively or abusing drugs, activities and projects that don't require a significant other, and do them. “Always wanted to try bungee jumping? Do it! Experiment with new foods, games, activities or types of books,” Lewis says. “Try a variety of distractions to keep from using drugs or drinking. Those distractions, once repeated enough, become the activities that bring us healthy comfort.”

Don't keep secrets about your relationships. “We're only as sick as our secrets,” says Gadhia-Smith, author of “From Addiction to Recovery: A Therapist’s Personal Journey.” People in early sobriety need to be completely honest with their sponsor – a fellow recovering alcoholic or addict who guides them through the 12 steps – or a therapist or trusted friend. If they're thinking about dating or have launched a new relationship, they should share that. A sponsor could point out that a broken relationship increases the risks of relapse, which can, depending on the substance abuser's drug of choice, prove fatal by leading to an [opioid](#) or cocaine overdose. For [alcoholics](#), a relapse could lead to a host of diseases associated with excessive drinking, such as cirrhosis, [cancer](#) of the [breast](#), mouth, throat, liver and [colon](#), or [stroke](#).

If things go south, reach out. If you date during your first year of sobriety and experience a painful breakup or other relationship tumult, share it with your sponsor, therapist or group of sober friends, says [Holly Daniels](#), clinical outreach director at Sober College, a substance abuse rehabilitation facility for young adults in San Diego and Woodland Hills, California. “They'll remind you that even if you feel heartbroken or angry, you don't have to use drugs or drink.”