

Holidays

For most families, holidays are filled with opportunities for togetherness, sharing, laughter and memories. But holidays can also be filled with stress, disappointment and sadness.

Because of the changes he or she has experienced, the person with Alzheimer's may feel a special sense of loss during the holidays. At the same time, caregivers may feel overwhelmed maintaining holiday traditions while caring for the person with this disease. In addition, caregivers may feel hesitant to invite family and friends over to share the holiday for fear they will be uncomfortable with behaviour changes in the family member.

If you're feeling guilty, angry or frustrated before, during or after holiday celebrations, it may help to know that these feelings are normal and that you're not alone. Here are some suggestions that may help to make holidays happy, memorable occasions.

Adjust expectations

Discuss holiday celebrations with relatives and close friends. Call a face-to-face meeting or arrange for a long-distance telephone conference call to discuss major holiday celebrations. Make sure that family members understand the situation and have realistic expectations.

By discussing past celebrations, you may be able to agree on how you'll handle upcoming holidays. Give yourself permission to do only what you can reasonably manage. No one can expect you to maintain every holiday tradition or event. If you've always invited 15-20 people to your home, consider inviting five for a simple meal.

Also consider asking others to bring dishes for a potluck meal or to host the meal at their home.

Please contact the DEMENTIA SA Office

Support | Awareness | Education | Counseling | Training | Resource centre | Advocacy
info@dementiasa.org or support@dementiasa.org www.dementiasa.org

National Helpline 0860 MEMORY / 0860 636 679



Throughout all stages of holiday preparation, involve the person in safe, manageable activities.

Familiarize others with your situation by writing a letter that makes these points:

- “I’m writing this letter to let you know how things are going at our house.
- While we’re looking forward to your visit, we thought it might be helpful if you understood our current situation before you arrive.
- “You may notice that ____ has changed since you last saw him. Among the changes you may notice are _____. I’ve enclosed a picture so you know how _____ looks now”.
- “Because _____ sometimes has problems remembering and thinking clearly, his behaviour is a little unpredictable”.
- “Please understand that _____ may not remember who you are and may confuse you with someone else. Please don’t feel offended by this”.
- “He appreciates your being with us and so do I. Please treat _____ as you would any person. A warm smile and a gentle touch on _____’s shoulder or hand will be appreciated more than you know”.
- “I would ask that you call before you come to visit or when you’re nearby so we can prepare for your arrival. Caregiving is a tough job, and I’m doing the very best I can. With your help and support, we can create a holiday memory that we’ll treasure.”

Involve the person with dementia

Throughout all stages of holiday preparation, involve the person in safe, manageable activities.

This can help to prepare the person for the holiday and give you an opportunity to spend quality time together. You may want to begin slowly by asking the person to help you prepare food, wrap packages, hand your decorations or set the table. (Avoid using candies, artificial fruits/vegetables or other edibles as decorations. Blinking lights may confuse the person).

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Maintain the person's normal routine so that holiday preparations don't become disruptive or confusing. Remember: Taking on too many tasks at one time can wear on you and the person.

Build on past traditions and memories. Your family member may find comfort in singing old holiday songs, for example. But also experiment with new holiday traditions, such as renting seasonal videos.

Adapt gift giving

Encourage people to buy useful gifts for the person such as an identification bracelet; comfortable, easy-to-remove clothing; audio tapes of favourite music; videos of family members; and photo albums.

Warn people about difficult or unsafe gifts. Advise people not to bring dangerous tools or instruments, utensils, challenging board games, complicated electronic equipment or pets.

Allow the person to join in giving gifts. For example, someone who once enjoyed cooking may enjoy baking cookies and packing them in tins or boxes. Or, you may want to buy the gift and allow the person to wrap it.

Don't neglect your own needs. If friends or family members ask what you want for a gift, suggest a gift certificate to a restaurant, laundry or dry cleaner or cleaning service. If you don't receive these gifts, celebrate the holiday by giving such a gift to yourself.

Ask for help and support. Develop a bulletin board for listing tasks and responsibilities. If someone ever asks, "What can I do to help?" you can respond with a specific idea.

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Try to be flexible

Consider celebrating over a lunch or brunch, rather than an evening meal, to work around the evening confusion or sundowning that sometimes affects some people with Alzheimer's. Also consider serving nonalcoholic drinks and keeping the room bright.

Prepare to deal with your post-holiday letdown. You may want to arrange for in-home care so you can enjoy a movie or lunch with a friend and reduce post-holiday stress.

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