
Holidays

The holidays are often filled with opportunities for togetherness, sharing, laughter and memories. But they can also bring stress, disappointment and sadness. A person living with Alzheimer's or another dementia may feel a special sense of loss during the holidays because of the changes they have experienced. At the same time, caregivers may feel overwhelmed maintaining traditions while providing care.

In the early stage, a person living with Alzheimer's may experience minor changes. Some may withdraw and be less comfortable socializing, while others may relish seeing family and friends as before. The key is to communicate and discuss options. A simple "How are you doing?" or "How are you coping with everything?" may be appreciated. Plan the holidays together, focusing on the things that bring happiness and letting go of activities that seem overwhelming or stressful.

As the disease progresses into the middle and late stages, review your holiday plans to ensure they are still a good fit. Everyone is unique and finding a plan that works can involve trial and error. The following tips may help you make the holidays easier and happier occasions:

Adjust expectations.

- Call a face-to-face meeting or arrange for a group discussion via telephone, video chat or email for family and friends to discuss holiday celebrations. Make sure that everyone understands your caregiving situation and has realistic expectations about what you can and cannot do. No one should expect you to maintain every holiday tradition or event.
- Give yourself permission to do only what you can reasonably manage. If you've always invited 15 to 20 people to your home, consider inviting five for a simpler meal. Think about having a potluck dinner, asking someone to order and bring dinner, or asking others to host.
- Familiarize others with your situation by writing a letter or email similar to the following:

I'm writing to let you know how things are going at our house. We're looking forward to your visit, and we thought it might be helpful for you to understand our current situation before you arrive.

You may notice that ___ has changed since you last saw him/her. 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/her behavior 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/she appreciates your being with us and so do we. 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.

We would ask that you call when you're nearby so we can prepare for your arrival. With your help and support, we can create a holiday memory that we'll all treasure.

Involve the person living with Alzheimer's.

- Involve the person in safe, manageable holiday preparation activities that they enjoy. Ask them to help you prepare food, wrap packages, help decorate or set the table. (Avoid using candies, artificial fruits and vegetables as decorations because a person living with dementia might confuse them with real food. Blinking lights may also confuse the person.)
- Maintain the person's normal routine as much as possible, so that holiday preparations don't become disruptive or confusing. Taking on too many tasks can wear on both of you.
- Build on traditions and memories. Your family member may find comfort in going caroling, but you may also experiment with new traditions that might be less stressful or a better fit with your caregiving responsibilities, such as watching seasonal movies.

Adapt gift giving.

- Advise people not to give gifts such as dangerous tools or instruments, utensils, challenging board games, complicated electronic equipment or pets.
- Depending on the person's abilities and preferences, involve them in gift-giving. For example, someone who once enjoyed baking may enjoy helping to make cookies and pack them in tins or boxes. Or you may want to buy the gift so that the person can wrap it.
- If friends or family members ask you what you'd like for a gift, you might suggest a gift certificate or something that will help make things easier, like housecleaning; lawn, handyman or laundry services; restaurant gift cards; or a scheduled visit with the person for an afternoon so you can have some time off.

- Provide people with suggestions for useful and enjoyable gifts for the person, such as an identification bracelet or membership in a wandering response service. Or, suggest comfortable, easy-to-remove clothing; favorite music; photo albums of family and friends; or favorite treats.

Try to be flexible.

- Celebrate over lunch or brunch, rather than an evening meal, so you can work around the evening confusion (sundowning) if it sometimes affects the person living with dementia.
- Consider serving nonalcoholic drinks and keeping the room bright.
- Prepare for post-holiday letdown. Arrange for in-home care so you can rest, enjoy a movie or have lunch with a friend, and reduce post-holiday stress and fatigue.

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