

Holiday Hints for Alzheimer's Caregivers

Holidays can be meaningful, enriching times for both the person with Alzheimer's disease and his or her family. Maintaining or adapting family rituals and traditions helps all family members feel a sense of belonging and family identity. For a person with Alzheimer's, this link with a familiar past is reassuring.

However, when celebrations, special events, or holidays include many people, this can cause confusion and anxiety for a person with Alzheimer's. He or she may find some situations easier and more pleasurable than others. The tips below can help you and the person with Alzheimer's visit and reconnect with family, friends, and neighbors during holidays.

Finding the Right Balance

Many caregivers have mixed feelings about holidays. They may have happy memories of the past, but they also may worry about the extra demands that holidays make on their time and energy.

Here are some ways to balance doing many holiday-related activities while taking care of your own needs and those of the person with Alzheimer's disease:

- Celebrate holidays that are important to you. Include the person with Alzheimer's as much as possible.
- Set your own limits, and be clear about them with others. You do not have to live up to the expectations of friends or relatives. Your situation is different now.
- Involve the person with Alzheimer's in simple holiday preparations, or have him or her observe your preparations. Observing you will familiarize him or her with the upcoming festivities. Participating with you may give the person the pleasure of helping and the fun of anticipating and reminiscing.
- Consider simplifying your holidays around the home. For example, rather than cooking an elaborate dinner, invite family and friends for a potluck. Instead of elaborate decorations, consider choosing a few select items.
- Encourage friends and family to visit even if it's difficult. Limit the number of visitors at any one time, or have a few people visit quietly with the person in a separate room. Plan visits when the person usually is at his or her best.
- Prepare quiet distractions to use, such as a family photo album, if the person with Alzheimer's becomes upset or overstimulated.
- Make sure there is a space where the person can rest when he or she goes to larger gatherings.
- Try to avoid situations that may confuse or frustrate the person with Alzheimer's, such as crowds, changes in routine, and strange places. Also try to stay away from noise, loud conversations, loud music, lighting that is too bright or too dark, and having too much rich food or drink (especially alcohol).
- Find time for holiday activities you like to do. If you receive invitations to celebrations that the person with Alzheimer's cannot attend, go yourself. Ask a friend or family member to spend time with the person while you're out.

Holiday Home Safety Tips

Holiday decorations, such as Christmas trees, lights, or menorahs, should be secured so that they do not fall or catch on fire. Anything flammable should be monitored at all times, and extra precautions should be taken so that lights or anything breakable are fixed firmly, correctly, and out of the way of those with Alzheimer's disease. Candles should never be lit without supervision. When not in use, they should be put away. Also, try to avoid clutter, especially in walkways, during the holidays.

Preparing Guests

Explain to guests that the person with Alzheimer's disease does not always remember what is expected and acceptable. Give examples of unusual behaviors that may take place, such as incontinence, eating food with fingers, wandering, or hallucinations.

If this is the first visit since the person with Alzheimer's became severely impaired, tell guests that the visit may be painful. The memory-impaired person may not remember guests' names or relationships but can still enjoy their company.

- Explain that memory loss is the result of the disease and is not intentional.
- Stress that the meaningfulness of the moment together matters more than what the person remembers.

Preparing the Person with Alzheimer's

Here are some tips to help the person with Alzheimer's disease get ready for visitors:

- Begin showing a photo of the guest to the person a week before arrival. Each day, explain who the visitor is while showing the photo.
- Arrange a phone call for the person with Alzheimer's and the visitor. The call gives the visitor an idea of what to expect and gives the person with Alzheimer's an opportunity to become familiar with the visitor.
- Keep the memory-impaired person's routine as close to normal as possible.
- During the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, guard against fatigue and find time for adequate rest.

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