

## Enjoying the Holidays: Tips for Alzheimer's Family Caregivers

The holiday season can be overwhelming for individuals with Alzheimer's and very stressful for family caregivers. The individual with Alzheimer's may have to deal with a different routine, increased stimulus and activity, holiday lights and decorations, traveling to or visits from family and friends, and celebrations they may no longer understand. A time of year that should be happy and joyful, can often be confusing and fearful for the person with Alzheimer's. Caregivers are caught between keeping their loved one happy and calm, enjoying the holiday seasons themselves, and meeting the demands of family and friends. Below are suggestions and tips to make the holiday season more enjoyable for individuals with Alzheimer's and their family caregivers.

### 1. Try to have an old fashioned holiday celebration.

- a. If your loved one has Alzheimer's or other memory problems, they will most likely remember the celebrations and traditions from many years ago better than the recent years.
- b. Think back to the holiday celebrations 20, 30, and 40 years ago.
- a. Re-create some of the holiday traditions, foods and decorations they had years ago.
- b. Think back to the music they listened to year ago.

### 2. Be very aware of safety issues.

- a. Avoid using candles with flames and switch to the battery operated candles.
- b. Make sure the Christmas lights and wires are in good condition and out of sight.
- c. Avoid decorations that look like food. Your loved one may not be able to distinguish between a real candy cane and a plastic candy cane ornament.
- d. Avoid the fragile glass ornaments if your loved one wants to help.
- e. Be aware that many holiday plants are poisonous or can cause physical distress.
  - i. Poinsettias are not toxic, but the sap of the poinsettia can cause skin or eye irritation if touched. If eaten, it may cause a mild stomach for some individuals.
  - ii. Eating the bright red berries on a holly plant can cause nausea, vomiting abdominal pain and diarrhea.
  - iii. The leaves and berries on mistletoe are poisonous and can cause stomach and intestinal problems. Some species of mistletoe are more poisonous than others.
  - iv. If swallowed, the Jerusalem Cherry, also known as the winter cherry or Christmas cherry, can result in vomiting, redness of the skin, drowsiness or restlessness, and hallucinations.
  - v. Check with your local poison control center, gardening center or download an app for your smartphone that can identify the plant and tell you if it is poisonous.

### 3. Don't over stimulate.

- a. Avoid too many decorations that make noise, play music, and sing dance or move.
- b. Avoid too many decorations that are overly "funny", busy, confusing, upsetting.
- c. Avoid too many scented candles, wreaths, and flowers.
- d. Too much stimulation can cause agitation or make the environment confusing.

#### **4. Incorporate music and art**

- a. Singing and caroling are good activities to enjoy with your loved one. Be sure to sing the old time holiday songs and tunes.
- b. Incorporate art activities into your activities by making simple decorations, ornaments and decorating cookies. Be sure to pick projects that are easy and allow your loved one the freedom to express themselves through their art.

#### **5. Limit your time in the malls and stores that overdo the holiday**

- a. Take cues from your loved one to see if they enjoy being out during the holiday time.
- b. Find places that may have carolers if your loved one enjoys singing.

#### **6. Simplify holiday activities to accommodate your loved one**

- a. Make cookies, make decorations, and listen to old time holiday music and movies.
- b. Allow time for naps, quiet time and non-holiday time.

#### **7. Be tolerant and flexible, expect the unexpected and go with the flow**

- a. Don't be upset if your loved one sings the pledge of allegiance instead of saying grace. Don't correct them; just sing along and then have someone else say grace.
- b. Your love one may see the Hanukkah candles and gifts and may start singing happy birthday instead of the prayers.

#### **8. Adjust family gatherings and parties to meet your loved one's abilities and timing**

- a. Don't go to places where your loved one will know very few people.
- b. Pick your celebrations and gatherings wisely. You may have to decline invitations.
- c. Have people over when your loved one is at his or her best, not when it is convenient for your company. Suggest a holiday brunch gathering rather than an early dinner when your loved one often experiences sundowning.
- d. Make sure family members are aware of your loved one's limitations and preferences. Also, explain that your loved one may not recognize them due to their memory loss. Introduce visitors rather than ask your loved one if they know who they are. For example, say "Dad, your granddaughters, Jennifer and Lauren are here to visit you."

#### **9. Holiday travel: should I go or should I stay?**

- a. You need to think about traveling with your loved one and make sure the trip is appropriate for their abilities. Try to establish a daily routine as close to what they are used to as possible.
- b. Keep in mind your loved one may not remember the trip the day they come back home. So make sure you don't have unrealistic expectations and can enjoy the moments, even if they do not remember the trip afterwards.
- c. Traveling during the holiday season is more hectic than traveling other times of the year.
- d. Make sure there is a balance of visiting with family and friends with some quiet down time for relaxing.
- e. Make sure your loved one has identification on them and preferably, a GPS locating device in case they get lost or separated from you.

- f. Be realistic before going on a holiday trip. Is your loved one easy going and able to adapt to new environments? Does change make them upset, agitated or confused? How will they do staying in an unfamiliar hotel or a relative's home?

**10. Determine if they can go to religious services and make accommodations in advance**

- a. You may have to go to a morning service if it is quieter or a better time for your loved one.
- b. Ask if you can go to choir practice to enjoy the singing without the crowd of the congregation.
- c. Arrange for someone to stay home with your loved one so you are able to go to some of the holiday services.

**11. It's ok to say no**

- a. You don't have to accept all invitations to go to dinner or holiday parties.
- b. You don't have to make your famous holiday cookies or cake.
- c. You can say no to hosting the holiday dinner even if it is your turn this year.
- d. You can say no to "secret Santa" and too many gift giving obligations.

**12. Be aware that holiday food is typically different from the food throughout the year**

- a. There tends to be more sweets during the holidays so monitor how much your loved one eats.
- b. When planning your menus, try to include some of your loved one's old time favorites as these older holiday recipes may evoke positive memories and feelings. But don't be upset if they no longer remember it or no longer like it. Their taste buds and preferences may change.
- c. If your loved one is very used to a routine and only likes certain foods, he or she may not respond well to the different holiday foods.
- d. Alcoholic drinks are often more common during holidays so it is important to monitor your loved one's consumption. Too much alcohol can affect behaviors and interfere with medications.

**13. Ask for help and for gifts that will help you**

- a. Ask for someone to stay with your loved one so you can do your shopping or go out.
- b. Instead of the holiday sweater, candy or candles, ask for cooked meals, cleaning services, respite, and gift certificates.