Enjoying the Holidays: Tips for Alzheimer's Family Caregivers

The holiday season is a wonderful time of year to spend with family and friends, but can be very stressful and emotional for Alzheimer's family caregivers. Individuals with Alzheimer's cannot participate in the holiday preparations and celebrations like they did years ago. The sights, sounds, and holiday pace may be overwhelming for a person with Alzheimer's. By simplifying your celebrations and minimizing the stress, you and your loved one can still enjoy this time of the year. Your loved one may not remember the meaning of the holidays, but may still enjoy the familiarity of the songs, prayers and traditional holiday decorations and foods.

Here are some tips to help make the holidays more enjoyable and less stressful.

1. Think back to the holiday celebrations 20, 30 or 40 years ago
   - Re-create holiday traditions and decorations your loved one was familiar with from years ago.
   - Think back to the music and holiday foods from many years ago.
   - Incorporate religious or ethnic customs that were important to your loved one growing up.

2. Do not over stimulate as too much stimulation can cause agitation.
   - Avoid malls and stores that are crowded and overwhelming with holiday decorations.
   - Keep the decorations in the home simple. Avoid flashing lights and decorations that make a lot of noise, or are confusing or upsetting.
   - Keep their normal routine as much as possible and limit the number of holiday activities.
   - Keep holiday gatherings small.
   - Turn off the music and background noises during the meal to avoid over stimulation.

3. Keep them safe during the holiday season.
   - Avoid decorations that are fragile and easily breakable.
   - Do not have lit candles on display as this can be a fire hazard or burn risk.
   - Avoid decorations that look like food (ceramic candy canes or cookies) to prevent potential choking.
   - Avoid going to places with large crowds where your loved may get lost or wander.
   - Watch what they eat- there is often an abundance of holiday cookies and candy easily accessible.
4. Simplify holiday activities to accommodate your loved one's abilities.
   - Make cookies, make simple decorations, and watch old time holiday movies.
   - Have fun singing holiday favorites, dancing or clapping to the music.

5. Expect the unexpected and go with the flow.
   - Don’t be upset if your loved one sings the pledge of allegiance instead of saying grace. Don’t correct them, join them!
   - You may give presents and they may sing happy birthday.

6. Adjust family gatherings and parties to meet your loved one’s needs and your needs.
   - Communicate in advance with out of town family, or family and friends you haven’t seen in a while, about your loved one’s condition. Let them know how he or she has changed and how to best interact.
   - Pick your celebrations and gatherings wisely- don’t add to your stress to please others.
   - Have people come over to visit when your loved one is at his or her best, not just when it is convenient for your company.
   - Keep the guest list small. Smaller gatherings will be easier for your loved one.

7. If your loved one is in an ALF or nursing home, think how to best celebrate the holidays together.
   - Consider visiting them the day before or the day after the actual holiday, and then have a small celebration the day of the holiday at home with other family and friends so you can relax.
   - Find out what the facility is planning and join in their festivities.
   - If you want to bring your loved one home for the holiday, try a test run and bring them home weeks prior to see how they cope. As hard as it may be to not have them home, it may be better for you and your family to celebrate with your loved one at the facility where they live.

8. Determine if they can go to religious services and make plans in advance.
   - If there are options, go to the shortest service with the fewest number of people.
   - Ask if you can bring your loved one to choir practice to enjoy the singing without the crowd.

9. It’s ok to say no
   - You don’t have to accept all invitations to dinner or holiday gatherings.
   - Don’t feel bad if you have to change plans last minute to accommodate your loved one.
   - You don’t have to make your famous holiday cookies.
   - Cut back on your shopping and gift giving.

10. Ask for help or support
    - Ask someone to stay with your loved one so you can gout and enjoy a holiday activity.
    - Ask for cooked meals and gift certificates for respite as gifts.
    - Go to a support group to talk to other caregivers. They will understand the stress and emotions you are dealing with during the holidays and offer support.