



Surviving the Holidays

According to the Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org), nearly 5.2 million people in the United States are living with the disease. Alzheimer's doesn't just affect the patient. For the millions of caregivers, this disease can create tremendous stress and affect health. Holidays can be especially difficult. However, with a little planning, your holiday can be a happy time to spend with family and friends and be inclusive of your family member with Alzheimer's. Here are some tips to help keep holidays a joyful, fun time.

- Limit guests- Lots of people in the house can be confusing and upsetting, especially since more people usually means more noise. Consider having your guests wear a nametag. Ask your guests to introduce themselves to your loved one. Whenever I visit my 94 year old grandmother who is in the mid stages of the disease, I always say, "Hi Grandmother, its your granddaughter, Rachel, Rebecca's daughter."
- No blinking lights or large decorations- bright, loud decorations can be stressful and upsetting to someone with Alzheimer's disease. Consider toning down your decorations. Expensive, heirloom ornaments and decorations should not be easily accessible. I also recommend you have your loved one help with decorating the house. In my house, we like to use a lot of live greenery. These are familiar to my Grandmother and smell nice.
- Find a quiet spot- a quiet spot for your loved one away from all the hubbub can make a world of a difference. Have your guests "visit" one-at-a-time. This helps cut down on the feeling of being over whelmed. Its much easier to focus on one person at a time when you have Alzheimer's disease. The quality of the visit for the visitor is greater as well.
- Engage your loved one in holiday activities- stirring cookie dough, measuring ingredients, wrapping presents, folding napkins, setting the table. Everyone likes and wants to feel useful and part of the occasion. It helps to validate one's sense of self when you engage your loved one in easy holiday preparations. My favorite ones with my Grandmother are folding napkins (good for conversations) and setting the table. I can never remember which side the fork is on and which side the knife and spoon are on but not my Grandmother. Her manners and table etiquette are still top-notch!
- Re-think the holiday scene- what about a smaller meal with fewer guests? Your life is already stressful and it is okay to tone down the festivities. Do finances permit you to cater the meal or part of it? What about inviting fewer guests so you don't have to cook as much food? Think about changing the time of the big meal to an earlier time of day which can help reduce that end-of-the-day confusion. Brunch or getting family and friends together for appetizers can also help simplify things.

- Keep the dining table simple- this tip is from a client's wife. I have always admired her wisdom and practical approach to caring for her husband who has early on-set Alzheimer's disease. Pat suggests setting the table with a simple, solid tablecloth or place mats. Get rid of the elaborate table settings and use solid colored dishware and limit the amount of silverware and glassware. Fake fruit in the middle of the table or wild decorations on a tablecloth are distracting and confusing.
- Draw on your friends and family for help- according to AARP (www.aarp.org), caregivers stand a higher risk of a mental or physical illness, much of which is rooted in higher levels of stress, exhaustion and self-neglect. Caregivers appear more likely than non-caregivers to get infectious diseases and are slower to heal from wounds. Caregivers are also at higher risk for high inflammation which puts them at a higher risk for heart disease, cancer and arthritis. Have holiday guests rotate sitting with your loved one or being responsible for the evening. It will free you up to socialize and prepare. If family and friends are not available, consider hiring a caregiver or getting a Senior Volunteer from your local Area Agency on Aging.
- Get yourself a massage- according to www.massagetherapy.com, massage has been shown to decrease stress levels, help with flexibility, and reduce anxiety and depression. If a massage is out of your budget, then a long, hot shower can do wonders to reduce stress and relax stiff muscles.
- Watch traditional holiday movies and listen to traditional holiday music- my grandmother might not remember who I am but she and I connect by singing old Christmas hymns. It puts both of us in the holiday mood and makes us very happy.
- Is travel part of your holiday? –travel can be tricky, especially if your loved one is incontinent. Pat suggests wearing two incontinence briefs when traveling. If there is an accident, removal of the inner pull-up eliminates the need for undressing in a rest area or at the hosts home when others may be waiting for the restroom. It speeds up the process; which reduces anxiety and risk of embarrassment for your loved one.
- Routine, routine, routine- holidays can come with a lot of disruptions which can increase anxiety in someone with Alzheimer's disease. It is important to stick to your day-to-day routine. Get up at the same time, take that daily walk, eat at the same times and go to bed at the same time. This will go a long way in keeping your holiday day as stress free as possible.

No matter what, enjoy your holiday season with your loved one. He or she might not know all your guests or what the fuss is about but she will feel the love and connection of the season.

Know you have the best!

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