

Handling Holidays and Visits Ideas for People with Family Members Who Have Dementia

Coping with Holidays

Holidays are opportunities to share time with family and friends, but can also be bittersweet for many caregivers. The happy memories of the past contrast with the difficulties of the present and extra demands on time and energy can seem overwhelming. Try to make these celebrations easy on yourself and the person with dementia so that you may concentrate on enjoying your time together. Finding a balance between rest and activity can help both of you.

- Keep or adapt family traditions that are important to you. Include the person with dementia as much as possible.
- Recognize that things will be different, and adjust expectations about what you can do. Discuss holiday celebrations with family and friends. Make sure that everyone understands your caregiving situation and is realistic. No one can expect you to maintain every holiday tradition or event.
- Encourage friends and family to visit. Limit the number of visitors at one time, and try to schedule visits during the time of day when the person is at his or her best. Write a letter or an e-mail to others letting them know about your situation. See the sample letter for some words you might use.
- Give yourself permission to do only what you can reasonably manage. If you've always had a big holiday party, consider inviting fewer people for a simple meal, having a potluck dinner or asking others to host at their home.
- Consider celebrating over a lunch or brunch, rather than an evening meal, to work around the evening confusion that may affect the person with dementia.
- Involve the person in safe, manageable holiday activities. He or she could help you prepare food, wrap packages, hand you decorations or set the table.
- Build on past traditions and memories. Your family member may find comfort in singing old holiday songs, for example. But also experiment with

new holiday activities that fit the person, such as traditions, such as watching seasonal movies.

- Help the person participate in giving gifts. For example, someone who loves cooking may enjoy helping to bake cookies and pack them in tins or boxes. Or, you could buy the gift and have the person to wrap it.
- Avoid crowds, changes in routine and strange surroundings that may cause confusion or agitation. Taking on too many tasks can wear on you and the person with dementia.
- At larger gatherings such as weddings or family reunions, try to have a space available where the person can rest, be by themselves, or spend some time with a smaller number of people, if needed.
- Do your best to enjoy yourself. Try to find time for the holiday things you like to do. Ask a friend or family member to spend time with the person while you are out.

Caring for yourself

- When friends or family members ask what you want for a gift, suggest a gift card to a favorite restaurant or store. Or you can suggest something that will help you out as you care for your person, like a cleaning or household chore service.
- Do your best to manage holiday stress and caregiving stress (not to mention the family stress that can come with holidays). Allow others to help. Seek support.

Visiting a Person with Dementia

Visitors are important to people with dementia, even though they may not always remember who the visitors are. The human connection still has value. Here are some ideas that may be helpful when planning to visit a person with dementia.

- Plan the visit at the time of the day when the person is at his or her best. Consider bringing along some kind of activity, such as something familiar to read or photo albums to look at, but be prepared to skip it if necessary.
- Be calm and quiet. Avoid using a loud tone of voice or talking to the person as if he or she were a child. Respect their personal space.
- Try to establish eye contact and call the person by name to get his or her attention. Remind the person who you are.
- If the person is confused, don't argue. Respond to the feelings you hear being communicated, and distract the person to a different topic if necessary. Enjoy the moment and try not to worry about the content.
- If the person doesn't recognize you, is unkind, or responds angrily, remember not to take it personally. He or she is reacting out of confusion.

Gift ideas for the person with dementia

- Choose the best type of gift based on the person's interests and abilities. In the earlier stages of dementia, a person may appreciate tickets to a show or musical, or simple and familiar games like dominos or bingo.
- Choose gifts other than dangerous tools or instruments, utensils, challenging board games, complicated electronic equipment or pets.
- When a person is in the middle or later stages of dementia, you may have to adapt your gift giving. Useful gifts might include:
 - identification bracelet, such as the one offered through Safe Return ®
 - comfortable, easy to manage clothing
 - favorite music or books
 - DVDs of favorite movies, animals, sports or travel
 - warm blankets or quilts
 - photo albums

Sample letter to friends and family: If you are expecting visitors, it might be useful to adapt the following to send to people ahead of time.

Dear _____,

I am writing this to let you know how things are going at our house. While we're looking forward to your visit, we thought it might be helpful if you understood 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 will 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 I. Please treat _____ as you would any person. A warm smile and a gentle touch will be appreciated more than you know.

I would ask that you call before you come to visit or when you're nearby so we can prepare for your arrival. Caregiving is a tough job, and I'm doing the very best I can. With your help and support, we can create a memory that we'll treasure.

Adapted from:

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center
<http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/caring-person-ad/adapting-activities-people-ad> ac

The Alzheimer's Association; http://www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_holidays.asp,

12/23/2021