

## Challenges of holiday gatherings

As the year-end holidays approach, we should be aware this can be a very challenging time of year for individuals with dementia, as well as their caregivers. Individuals living with dementia need a quiet, calm environment, low sensory stimulation and a predictable routine. The holidays, by their very nature, can be very disruptive to these lifestyle qualities.

Big family gatherings, for example, can create significant challenges for those caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. The first thing a caregiver must remember is that what is fun for the family may no longer be fun for a loved one with dementia. The fact that they used to enjoy big, joyous, noisy family get-togethers is no longer relevant. The things they once enjoyed may create too much confusion and sensory stimulation for them to deal with.

Be aware it is likely your person with dementia may not remember many — or even any — of the relatives who attend a holiday function. This can be especially stressful for all concerned. Those caring for a loved one with dementia know how much it hurts the first time their loved one no longer knows them, or even calls them by someone else's name. This sad scenario can replay itself many times at a family gathering. While the person with dementia cannot be blamed, it can ruin the event for everyone.

Individuals with dementia lose many of their sensory abilities in addition to their memory. But they do not lose their feelings. They are especially sensitive to their environment and to the moods and behaviors of you, the caregiver. All of us become stressed during the holidays, and just preparing to attend a big family function can increase our anxiety. A person with dementia will sense this, and respond in turn. But unlike you, they cannot manage their anxiety or talk themselves down the way you can, and they will become more reactionary and unmanageable.

Holiday celebrations tend to take place in the evening. For a person with dementia, morning is the better time of day and their ability to cope declines as the day wears on. Fatigue from just getting through the day accounts for some of this, but there is also the phenomenon known as "sundowning" that can result in extremely disruptive behavior.

So, what do we do, just give up on the holidays and remain alone? While this may in fact be the best thing for an individual with dementia, it can be very depressing for the caregiver. We need to look for a middle ground; for ways to modify our traditions.

You need to try to explain your situation to your friends and relatives involved. Perhaps all you can do to meet family obligations is to drop in at the beginning of the event. Say hello

to your relatives and let them greet your person with dementia. Keep a close eye on your person's reactions and anxiety level, and if it becomes necessary, politely excuse yourself and leave. Some may not understand, but some will understand why this is best.

There is always the possibility you can leave your person with dementia in the care of a competent friend or professional caregiver while you attend the family function. It may be difficult or impossible to find this kind of support on a holiday, and you should exercise this option only if you know you can handle it emotionally. It may not be a good solution if you feel anxious and neglectful the whole time you are away.

Perhaps you should simply decline to attend and explain that at this time in your life you have other responsibilities. This, however, does not mean you cannot create your own ways to enjoy holiday traditions. You can organize a simple brunch earlier in the day where you can invite close relatives you know will understand. Or invite a small circle of friends you have met in your caregiver support group.

We all want the holidays to be a happy time, and this is no less true for a person with dementia. But it will require some adjustment in how you observe the traditions of the season. Focus on the quiet and low-stimulation activities that your loved one seems to enjoy, and avoid disruptive and stressful activities.

To guide your decisions, ask yourself the question: "Is this something I am doing for myself, or is it in the best interest of the person I am caring for?" If it is something you want to do for yourself, for your friends, and for your relatives, be aware that it may not turn out well if you include your loved one with dementia.

Keep in mind that your situation will not continue forever, and seek ways to be kind to yourself and kind to your person with dementia. Find ways to help them — rather than others — enjoy the holidays. We do this because "We all deserve the best."

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