

## CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS

The holiday season can be an overwhelming time for many people. This is particularly true when you are caring for a person with dementia. Families will often arrange gatherings to celebrate, although these events can sometimes pose special dilemmas for persons with dementia and their caregivers. However, with some adjustments to traditional holiday festivities, people with dementia and their families can enjoy what the holidays have to offer and create new memories and traditions.

**Be prepared to let go of expectations of how things “should be”.** Though it may be difficult to vary long-held traditions, consider the person with dementia’s response to the physical environment to determine whether making changes may be appropriate. Try to pick and choose which holiday traditions will mean the most to everyone and will be the least disruptive for the person. Dramatically changing the environment or routine can cause the person to feel anxious and disoriented

**Plan visits wisely.** Consider holding smaller gatherings and allowing more time between visits. Think about potluck meals, shorter visits, and even paper plates and napkins. Keep in mind that many people with dementia are often better able to cope earlier in the day, so try to plan events accordingly. If your family gatherings involve a large group of people, consider having a quiet room where the person can go to rest or to visit with people only one or two at a time.

**Keep changes to a minimum.** Even in the flurry of holiday activity, try to stick to the person’s daily routine as much as possible. Keep mealtimes and bedtimes the same. This will help calm and orient the person in the midst of all the changes.

**Take the lead.** As the caregiver, you know what is likely to work best. You might

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have to take the lead on this and explain to your family why some changes need to be made this holiday season. You may need to remind people what they should expect from the person with dementia and how best to interact with them.

**Ask for help.** Try not to take on added holiday and entertaining responsibilities. If the celebration is being held at your home, plan with family and friends in advance to ensure that you have extra help. Family and friends can also help by spending time with the person while you attend to the holiday preparations.

**Reminisce together.** Sharing memories from the past can bring families together and make the holidays meaningful and enjoyable for everyone. Surround the person with things that trigger their five senses to help spark their long-term memory. For example: photographs, seasonal music, pine boughs, seasonal foods and beverages.

**Encourage the person to participate.** Focus on the person's remaining abilities by giving them tasks that allow them to contribute to the festivities, such as setting the table, helping prepare food, or helping to decorate.

**Keep gifts simple, useful and practical.** When giving gifts to someone with dementia, you need to consider the symptoms that the person is experiencing, as well as their personal safety. Some ideas might include comfortable clothes, CDs of their favourite music, photo albums, or hand lotions. You may want to prepare a list of gift ideas to give to family and friends.

**Safety first.** You may want to avoid small ornaments, hard candies, and plastic fruit decorations as these could be choking hazards. Do not leave the person alone around an open fireplace, burning candles, or space heaters.

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**Consider the location.** If the person is living in a care facility and you plan on bringing them home for the holidays, plan to have one or two half-day trial runs in advance. If the person reacts negatively to the change, consider having a holiday celebration with them at the care facility instead. Many facilities host holiday activities that families and friends can attend.

**Take care of yourself.** The holiday season is stressful for everyone, but even more so if you are a caregiver. It is particularly important that you take good care of yourself during the holiday season to avoid burnout. Accept that you won't be able to do everything you want or you feel you should do.

**References:**

The material in this handout contains partial excerpts and adaptations from *In Touch*, December 2009, Alzheimer Society of B.C.

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