

The Holidays and Dementia

By Ava M. Stinnett

For some, the holidays are a favorite time of the year. The days are about experiences and people, family traditions, recalling traditions, and creating new memories. For caregivers and people living with dementia-related conditions, however, there will come a time when it's just not feasible or practical to do everything you once did.

Writer Denis Norden is quoted as saying, “[When you hear your] children talking about holidays, you find they have a quite different memory of it from you. Perhaps *everything is not how it is, but how it's remembered.*” This seems to be an appropriate analogy for individuals living with dementia, Alzheimer's, or similar conditions. How do we celebrate special occasions when one or more of the people involved doesn't remember or even understand what the celebration is about?

First, adjust your expectations. It's common for people with dementia to lack enthusiasm and interest in the holidays. They might not remember past traditions, but that doesn't mean you can't continue to honor those traditions. You might need to reduce the number of activities an individual is involved in. Consider how your loved one could safely participate—whether it's decorating their residence, baking holiday foods, or creating homemade greeting cards. Many individuals with dementia enjoy handling paper, so wrapping gifts together is another way of connecting to a special day.

Do your best to maintain routines and familiar settings. Changes to the daily schedule can increase disorientation and anxiety. New environments and/or the presence of new or many people around can upset people with dementia. Be aware that they might also feel a sense of loss, or holiday blues, because they miss a loved one they lost a long time ago, they don't recognize the people around them, or they feel that someone is missing.

Music, whether seasonal or not, can cause a positive shift in mood. Try engaging the individual in singing songs together or dancing but watch the reaction. A particular melody that evokes a soothing memory for one person might be quite upsetting for another. Depending on the setting, it may be more practical to have ambient music playing in the background.

If appropriate, try to spark memories by bringing out family photo albums or heirlooms. Help stimulate memories by gently offering descriptions as you present each object. Keep the frustration level low by not asking your loved one to name people, places, or other facts.

Be aware that memories of better times and what's been lost might surface for the caregiver as well. Talking with a close friend or a counselor often helps one manage the emotions that come with holidays and other special days.