

**Keeping the “Happy” in the Holidays**

For families living with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, the holidays can sometimes be less than happy and instead filled with anxiety and stress. When adult children travel to visit older parents there are often changes that have been occurring over the time apart. Things like short term memory may be the first symptoms to appear however, judgment, speech, balance and even personality changes may also increase in between visits. If some family members live nearby and interact with mom and dad regularly the changes may not seem so significant as for family who isn't around quite as often. The holidays also bring increased anxiety with larger crowds to serve at meal times, more planning and activities spent together, loud conversations and a desire to maintain harmony at any cost.

For a mom with Alzheimer's who has always taken on meal planning and preparation, the holidays may simply prove to be too overwhelming. As the disease steals the ability to perform daily tasks, doing the grocery shopping, following a recipe or even setting the table may be too complicated with too many steps to remember and follow. For dads who traditionally host the viewing of the holiday football game, crowds of people all talking at once may cause anxiety and even anger as the ability to keep track of conversations decreases.

There are a number of things families can do if they are aware of changes before descending on mom and dad for the holidays. Sharing with friends who might stop by can also help eliminate stress and worry about whether a visit might go well:

**Tips to enhance communication with person who has dementia:**

- Always approach the person from the front to say hello or hold a conversation
- Use name badges for all guests so no one has to remember names and ask everyone to introduce themselves even if it seems silly. “Hi Grandpa, it's Billy”
- Address the person with dementia by name or nickname. They may not always remember they are Dad, Uncle, or Aunt.
- Maintain eye contact
- Be patient and encourage the person to continue to express themselves even if it's hard to understand or it takes a long time
- Avoid criticizing, correcting, and arguing. Be prepared to accept the reality of the person with dementia, whether that is today or 20 years ago on the farm. Who benefits by correcting the person with dementia? Why remind them someone has died if they don't remember?
- Be calm and supportive
- Avoid using negative statements and quizzing (e.g., "You know who that is, don't you?")
- Use short, simple, and familiar words but don't speak to an adult using childish, cutesy phrases
- Avoid talking about the person as if he/she weren't there
- Try not to use phrases like “remember that?” for recent memories instead reminisce about general family memories. Do we always have pumpkin pie? Instead of “remember that Hanukah when we all went to the cabin?”
- Instead of television or games, pull out family albums and let the person with dementia share stories and memories

### **Tips for success at meal time:**

- Suggest a grandchild help out in the kitchen as a way to practice following a recipe and measurement skills
- Have everyone pick a job to do, even if this is a change for the family who always relied on mom to do everything in preparation for the big meal
- Try new recipes with foods that are easy to eat, more finger foods and less cutting up of meat
- Use solid color plates so food can be more easily seen and not compete with flower patterns
- Offer the role of carving to a new or younger family member as a way to pass the torch while keeping sharp knives out of the hands of someone with dementia
- Offer sparkling water, non alcoholic wine and beer to all guests. Alcohol is not a good mix with dementia medications, depression and mood swings.
- Help keep clothes clean and maintain dignity for the person with dementia by suggesting everyone tuck a napkin into their shirt or blouse

Caregiving is a 24/7 job. The Alzheimer's Association describes caregiving as the 36 hour day. The responsibility is non-stop. Caregivers are often managing the household budget, cleaning, cooking, doing laundry, taking care of the children if the person has Younger Onset Alzheimer's, personal care and hygiene for the person with dementia as well as maintaining their sense of comfort, safety and security, and even sometimes, the caregiver is juggling care with a full time job. It is exhausting and without a break and/or support, the caregiver will feel the effects physically as well as emotionally. When visitors come from out of town there are many ways they can assist the caregiver.

### **Tips for helping caregivers:**

- Visitors from out of town can provide much needed respite for the daily caregiver
- Offer to sit and visit so the caregiver can grocery shop without a sense of vigilance
- Give the gift of a night out with movie tickets or a sit down dinner at a local restaurant
- Offer to run errands to the store, the pharmacy, the hardware store
- Home repair and gardening may have become lesser priorities, offer to rake, clean up, or do simple repairs the caregiver is unable or doesn't have the time for
- Take the person with dementia out for coffee or to the hairdresser so the caregiver can get things done at home or simply sit and enjoy the quiet without having to caregive
- Ask how the caregiver is doing not just the person with the disease
- Consider using an online scheduling program for helpers like Lotsa Helping Hands

If concerns arise after a visit with family over the holidays, start by talking with siblings. If it's possible, try and get consensus about what everyone experienced to see if concerns are shared. If there are conflicting opinions, the Alzheimer's Association can help sort things out. Additionally scheduling a visit with mom or dad's family doctor to talk together about concerns might be helpful. There might be medication interactions or vitamin B deficiencies that are contributing to memory issues without signs of dementia so ruling out what might be causing concerns is the best first step. Suggesting a visit to the doctor's office could actually put mom or dad's own mind at ease as there are bound to be concerns they haven't shared with family and friends.

While the holidays should be a time of celebration and being together with friends and family, a little planning ahead may help relieve stress and anxiety for everyone, especially for the person who is seeing things slowly change as the disease progresses. For more tips and support contact the Alzheimer's Association of Colorado at 800.272.3900 or go online to [alz.org/co](http://alz.org/co)