

How To Connect With Relatives With Dementia

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Relatives with Alzheimer's disease and other memory loss disorders can be overwhelmed at family holiday gatherings and feel left out.

Mary Salzieder, a family support specialist with the Alzheimer's Association of South Central Wisconsin, suggests a way to engage a person who's having trouble answering questions or who is otherwise not participating.

Start reminiscing about a wonderful family tradition or other holiday memory, explaining how you remember it, she says. "Either the parent is going to be able to remember ... and they'll chime in and it'll be very fulfilling for both, or, if the parent can't, it's still a beautiful thing because the parent is listening to a child talk about something that mattered to them and there's still that fulfillment of connecting to something they shared in the past."

The memory could be about a favorite Christmas dinner food, how the family trimmed the tree or another holiday tradition such as caroling or playing football in the snow.

"It's reconnecting with that past as opposed to a fast-paced recitation about where you're at in your life and about your kids," Salzieder says. "The fast-paced current events things are hard for folks to keep up with."

"Bring one kind of cookie that Mom used to make and say, 'Now I'm making these for you. Taste them. I hope I made them right,'" Salzieder says.

Pictures sound like a good memory trigger but can be tricky, she continues. "You hold a picture, say, from 1957, and say, 'Mom, remember this?' That can be horrible for Mom if she doesn't."

Instead present it with your memory, such as, "There I am when I was 5 years old. That's the year you gave me the baby doll that wets."

And if the person's memory differs from yours, she continues, "You just listen and appreciate the emotion behind it if it's a happy one or an excited one, even if the details are wrong."

Salzieder offers more tips for making holidays less stressful for those with Alzheimer's disease or other memory loss:

- * Expect changes.
- * Relax expectations.

* Minimize stimulation, perhaps turning off the Christmas music so the person can focus on the conversation.

* Ask guests to speak one at a time.

* Find out the person's usual routine for eating and sleeping and try to stick close to it.

* An hour or two of family time is probably enough, so plan for someone to leave early and take the person home or, if you're at the person's home, plan to let the person take some quiet time or even a nap.