



alzheimer's  association®

Midlands Chapter

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www.alz.org/midlands

Holiday Tips for the Caregiver



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Additional Gift Suggestions

As the holidays approach, purchasing a gift for an individual with dementia can become difficult. Please be sure to keep in mind where the individual is living as to what type of gifts will be appropriate. If they are in a facility be sure to ask the staff there what is best. Below is a list of gift suggestions that can assist family members and friends with this task:

1. Electric coffee or tea pots that turn off after a short period of time
2. Large desk calendars to mount on the wall
3. Medication holders—with timer to indicate time to take
4. Photo albums with names and dates next to each picture
5. Registration in the Medic Alert®/Safe Return Program®
6. Simple-to-manage clothing (tube socks, easy on sweatshirts, tennis shoes with Velcro closings)
7. Gift certificates for hair cuts and manicures
8. Older music (especially music from the 30's and 40's)
9. Tapes of sermons or church services
10. Cuddly stuffed animals
11. Tickets to take them to a musical event or circus
12. Trip to a shopping mall and lunch
13. Visit to the local senior center to participate in activities
14. Bird feeders
15. Tapes of bird songs
16. Gift certificates to adult day services
17. Hugs, Hugs, Hugs
18. Short visits often

Expectations and Action Steps

Adjust expectations. Discuss holiday celebrations with relatives and close friends. Call a face-to-face meeting or arrange for a long-distance telephone conference call to discuss major holiday celebrations. Make sure that family members understand the situation and have realistic expectations. By discussing past celebrations, you may be able to agree on how you'll handle upcoming holidays.

Give yourself permission to do only what you can reasonably manage. No one can expect you to maintain every holiday tradition or event. If you've always invited 15-20 people to your home, consider inviting five for a simple meal. Also consider asking others to bring dishes for a "potluck" meal or to host the meal at their home.

You may wish to familiarize others with the situation by composing a letter that makes these points:

"I'm writing this letter to let you know how things are going at our house. While we're looking forward to your visit, we thought it might be helpful if you understood our current situation before you arrive.

"You may notice that ____ has changed since you last saw him/her. Among the changes you may notice are _____. I've enclosed a picture so you know how ____ looks now.

"Because ____ sometimes has problems remembering and thinking clearly, his/her behavior is a little unpredictable. Please understand that ____ may not remember who you are and may confuse you with someone else. Please don't feel offended by this. He/she appreciates your being with us and so do I. Please treat ____ as you would any person. A warm smile and a gentle touch on ____'s shoulder or hand will be appreciated more than you can know.

"I would ask that you call before you come to visit or when you're nearby so we can prepare for your arrival. Caregiving is a tough job, and I'm doing the very best I can. With your help and support, we can create a holiday memory that we'll treasure."

General Planning for the Holidays

Preparation for the holidays can be stressful and tiring even under the best of circumstances. For families and caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's, the holidays are often sad and difficult. However, with acceptance and planning, they can be sources of great pleasure.

Traditional holiday activities which the families have enjoyed throughout the years may have to be changed to some degree. Set your limits early, stick to them and be clear about them with others. You do not have to live up to the expectation of friends or relatives.

Try to avoid situations that further confuse or frustrate many patients:

- crowds of people who expect the individual to remember them
- noise, loud conversations or loud music
- strange or different surroundings
- changes in light intensity - too bright or too dark
- over-indulgence in rich or special food or drink (especially alcohol)
- change in regular routine and sleep patterns

If possible scheduling activities, especially some outdoor exercise, early in the day to avoid the fatigue from added activity at the end of a long day. Familiar holiday music, story-telling, singing or church services (even on TV) may be especially enjoyable.

Preparing The Guests

Explain as clearly as possible what has happened to the person with AD. Give examples of the unusual behaviors that may take place with the patient. Explain that it may not be appropriate behaviors but the person has a memory loss and does not remember what is expected and acceptable.





If this is the first visit since the family member became severely impaired, tell the person the visit may be painful. The memory-impaired person may not remember the guest's name or relationship. Explain that memory loss is a result of the disease and it is not intentional.

Stress with the guests that what is important is the meaningfulness of the moment spent together and not what the person remembers.

For most families, holidays are filled with opportunities for togetherness, sharing, laughter, and memories. But holidays can also be filled with stress, disappointment, and sadness.

Because of the changes he or she has experienced, the person with Alzheimer's may feel a special sense of loss and time passing during holiday seasons. At the same time, caregivers may feel overwhelmed in their effort to maintain holiday traditions on top of caring for the person with this disease. In addition, caregivers may feel hesitant to invite other family and friends over to share the holiday for fear they will react negatively to the changed behavior of the family member.

If you're feeling guilty, angry, frustrated, or trapped before, during or after holiday celebrations, it may help to know that these feelings are normal and that you're not alone. Here are some suggestions that may help to ease the burden of caregiving and make holiday's happy, memorable occasions.

Involve the Individual with Alzheimer's Disease

Throughout all stages of preparation, involve the AD person in safe, manageable activities. This can help to prepare the person for the holiday and give you an opportunity to spend quality time together. You may want to begin slowly by asking the person to help you prepare food, wrap packages, hang decorations, or set the table. (Avoid using candies, artificial fruits/vegetables, or other edibles as decorations. Blinking lights may confuse the person.)

Maintain the person's normal routine so that holiday preparations don't become disruptive or confusing. Remember: Taking on too many tasks at one time can wear on you and the impaired person. Try to blend seasonal rituals into the daily activities that you both depend upon such as taking a relaxing walk.



5. Give to yourself. All too often people place their own needs last. Put yourself on your gift list, taking time for doing or getting something special for you.
6. Reach out to others. Some people find that their loneliness and pain decreases when they do something for another person or family in need.
7. Avoid alcohol and drugs as a way of coping with loss and loneliness. They will only compound your problems. Because alcohol is a central nervous system depressant, it can cause depression or intensify an existing depression and feelings of loss.

You don't need to shut yourself off from the holidays. However, it is important to take care of yourself.

Adapt Gift-Giving

Encourage useful gifts. Among the practical, useful gifts for people with this illness are identification bracelets, comfortable easy-to-remove clothing, audio-tapes of favorite music, and videos of family members, photo albums, subscriptions to magazines or cable television or gift certificates for long distance telephone service.



Warn people about difficult or unsafe gifts. Advise people not to bring dangerous tools or instruments, utensils, challenging board games, complicated electronic equipment, or pets.

Allow the person to join in gift-giving. For example, someone who once enjoyed cooking may enjoy baking cookies and packing them in tins or boxes. Or, you may want to buy the gift and allow the person to wrap it.

Don't neglect your own needs. If friends or family members ask what you want for a gift, suggest a gift certificate to a carry-out restaurant, laundry or dry cleaner, or cleaning service. If you don't receive these gifts, celebrate the holiday by giving such a gift to yourself.

Ask for help and support. Develop a bulletin board for listing tasks and responsibilities. If someone ever asks, "What can I do to help?" you can respond with a specific idea.

Holidays—Fact or Fiction?

Holidays often trigger so-called anniversary reactions, when we become more painfully aware of how much a loved one is missed. People who have lost someone during the year are especially vulnerable. The contrast between the expectations of the holidays--we "should" be happy; we "should" be having a good time--and actual feelings can increase the pain of loss and loneliness.

If you anticipate the holidays may be difficult for you, what can you do? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Plan in advance for a holiday season that will meet your current needs. Determine what will be the most meaningful for you. Although traditions are a major part of the holidays, do not let "what you have always done" bind you to doing something that will not nourish or comfort you. Be able to let go and say, "I am going to have my kind of holiday." Consider holding a family meeting to discuss the upcoming holidays. Review all possible activities and decide what to continue, what to eliminate, and what new traditions to begin.
2. Set realistic expectations. Recognize that the holidays may be a difficult time and plan accordingly. Set limits about what you can and cannot do and communicate them early to family members. Ask yourself, "Am I doing what I want to do or what I think others want me to do? Avoid getting caught in the "I have to" or "I should do" trap.
3. Talk to relatives and friends. More than ever, you are likely to need others, especially when memories of happier times get you down. It's important to have at least one person with whom you can talk openly about your feelings.
4. Make new memories. Memories of "what was" or of a deceased family member are appropriate. Build on those memories but avoid letting them dominate the holiday season. If they do, ask yourself, "Am I trying to rekindle a past that can't be as it was?" Too many people reminisce about past holidays when they could be making the current holiday season a pleasant memory. Remember, it will not be possible to "play the old scenes" with a cast member missing.

Build on past traditions and memories. Your family member may find comfort in singing old holiday songs, for example. But also experiment with new holiday traditions, such as renting seasonal videos that the less active person may enjoy.☺

Try To Be Flexible

Consider celebrating over a lunch or brunch, rather than an evening meal, to work around the evening confusion or sundowning that sometimes affects some people with Alzheimer's.

Prepare to deal with your post-holiday let down. You may want to arrange for in-home care so you can enjoy a movie or lunch with a friend and reduce post-holiday stress.

Remember that holidays are opportunities to share time with the people you love. Try to make these celebrations easy on yourself and the person with Alzheimer's disease so that you may concentrate on enjoying your time together.

Preparing Individual with Alzheimer's for Visitors

If possible, begin showing a picture of the guest to the person a week before the arrival. Spend more time each day explaining who the visitor is while showing the picture.

Arrange for a phone call for the patient and the visitor. The conversation may help both. The call gives the visitor an idea of what to expect and gives the memory-impaired person an opportunity to familiarize himself with the visitor.



Keep the memory-impaired person's routine as close to normal as possible. During the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, guard against fatigue and find time for adequate rest.

Try to allow some quiet private time for yourself. Remember to take care of the caregiver! Support groups can be especially helpful during the holidays. Protect your sense of humor and let others help you.

Long Term Care Facility – Holiday Tips

Holidays are supposed to be times of good cheer, joy and creating happy memories. Having someone in your family in a nursing home has not traditionally been part of the “holiday scene.” It is hard to know how to include residents in the celebration, what type of things they might enjoy as gifts, and what types of activities are most pleasurable. The answers are as varied as the residents themselves. The staff at your loved one’s nursing facility can provide guidance and suggestions on how to best handle holiday visits.



Persons who are mentally confused often respond negatively to the usual high activity level of holidays. Normal routines that provide a sense of security are disrupted. Holidays can be a sad reminder to everyone of their incapability. It may be unwise to plan to take them to a different environment with much noise and holiday excitement. If you wish to try including them in the usual festivities, be sure you have a plan for someone to leave with them early, if needed. Often they fatigue rapidly and request to return to the nursing center. Rethink holiday outings if your loved one has had difficulty with family outings in the past.

Planning a smaller gathering or celebration earlier in the day may make the day more successful. Don’t expect the confused person to actively participate in their old roles. Allowing them just to be observer is often less stressful.

If you plan to celebrate with a visit to the nursing home, it is better to come in several small groups than one large one. If the resident is unable to converse, reading them their Christmas cards and reminding about special times you’ve shared with them in the past can provide comfort and a feeling of connectedness.

The nursing home has a variety of activities scheduled for the holiday season and you are welcome to join them. Special prayers and scripture are often welcomed by resident – especially when they come from a family member or friend.

Hints to Happier Holidays

As you see and feel the holidays approach...families gathering...you may be overwhelmed with grief. These suggestions might help families of individuals with Alzheimer’s disease (AD) cope with not having the individual participate in activities during the holiday season.

1. Change traditions. Have your Holiday dinner at a different house this year. It is paradox that the more you try to make it the same as it was before, the more obvious your loved one’s absence will be.
2. Balance solitude with sociability. Solitude can renew strength. Being with people you care about can be equally important.
3. Relive the happy memories. Pick several special memories of past holidays with your loved one.
4. Set aside "letting go" time.
5. Counter the conspiracy of silence...because family and friends love you, they may think they are doing you a favor by not mentioning your loved one for fear you will be upset. Break the ice by mentioning him or her yourself. Tell your family and friends that it is important for you to talk about your loved one during the holiday season when that missing person is very much on your mind.
6. Find a creative outlet. Write a memorial poem or story about your loved one and share it. Contribute to the Alzheimer’s Association . Use the money that you would have spent for a gift for that special person to buy something for someone he or she cared about.
7. Don’t forget the rest of the family. Try especially hard to make it a good holiday for the children. Listen to them. Talk to them. If decorating or buying gifts for the holidays is too difficult to do this year, ask a friend to do it for you.
8. Utilize available resources. If your faith is important to you, participate in the holiday services. Some veterans of the faith have serenity, a kind of healing wisdom. They can help you. Seek out a support group of other caregivers.



Preparing for the Holidays

Celebrating special occasions and holidays with a loved one who has dementia may require improvising new ways of carrying out family traditions.

Before you make plans for the upcoming holidays, take time to consider the following:

First, it is important to think about what you wish to achieve from your holiday activities and interactions. Is your loved one's mere presence at family gatherings important in order to keep the sense of family togetherness? Which family traditions are most important to try to maintain? Is simply spending time together with family and friends, regardless of your activities, the primary goal?

Second, you must also consider the level of functioning of the person with dementia. How will you be able to incorporate holiday activities in the person's normal routine? For example, it may be best to have visitors or plan outings during the daytime to avoid any evening restlessness or "sundowning" which affects some people with dementia. Also, think of ways the person can safely participate in holiday preparations, such as helping you hang decorations, wrap gifts, and prepare food. Substitute new activities for ones in which your loved one can no longer take part. Take your loved one out for a drive to see others holiday decorations.



You may take into account your own abilities and resources as a caregiver. Do only what you can manage. Take inventory of the people and organizations you may be able to ask for help, and some experienced caregivers might suggest that you ask for help before you feel you need it.

Finally, it will be helpful to your family and friends, and the person with dementia, if you talk with them in advance about any memory, behavior or personality changes in your loved one. You may want to suggest appropriate gifts or activities for the person, or best times for visits.

With careful thought and advance planning you and your loved one will be able to share a meaningful holiday season.

Plan to unwrap the resident's present for them and explain and show the purpose of the gift. Some useful and enjoyable gifts are: slippers, warm slacks, sweaters, leg warmers, and jogging suits/sweat pants that are comfortable, loose and easy to get on and off. Peaceful posters can brighten up walls and even ceilings of the room. Pictures of family members are enjoyed and provide a meaningful focus of conversation with staff and others. It is helpful to label photographs with the names and relationships of those pictured.

Most residents enjoy a "stroll" around the nursing home with their families whether it's walking or in a wheel chair. It gives them a chance to show off their visitors. Ask if you could sit in the dining room and share a cup of coffee or tea (perhaps share some of your Christmas goodies—*be sure to check with facility staff first though in case of diet restrictions the resident might have*). A quiet room or conference room may be available for family gatherings.

Holiday Visiting

The holiday season is a time for visiting and reconnecting with family, friends, and neighbors. Sometimes families can be sad or stressful caring for a loved one. These hints are our gift in wishing you an enjoyable holiday season.

Holidays can be meaningful enriching times for both the individual and family. Maintaining (or adapting) old family rituals and traditions help all family members feel a sense of belonging and family identity. For an individual with AD, this link with a familiar past is reassuring and builds self esteem, i.e. "Look at the beautiful family I created!"

Set your own limits early, and be clear about them with others. You do not have to live up to the expectations of friends or relatives. Your situation is different now.

Encourage family and friends to visit the individual with AD even if it is painful for them. Keep the number of persons visiting at one time to a minimum, or try a few individuals visiting quietly with the individual in a separate room. Most individuals with AD can pull it together for brief periods, if they have adequate private rest in between.



Holiday Gift Tips

Those of us with relatives or friends with AD know how difficult it is to find appropriate and useful gifts for birthdays or the holidays. Yet there are a number of excellent gift items available for this special population if we use our knowledge of the disease to identify the needs of each individual.

Look for items to reduce the problems caused by short-term memory loss. For instance, electric coffee and tea pots with turn off after a short period of time, day planners to keep track of appointments and special occasions, medication holders with timers which can be set to signal when doses are due, photo albums with names and dates next to each picture and ID bracelets purchased through the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return program.

The moderately impaired individual usually has some difficulty communicating and needs help with daily activities. Appropriate gifts for this group include: simple to manage clothing (tube socks which can't be put on the wrong way or slippers with Velcro closing are good examples), or gift certificates for a hair salon or manicure. How about a variety of materials to sort through, (vary sizes, textures and colors for sensory stimulation)? Try a punch balloon for chair volleyball or purchase an exercise video produced for the impaired elderly or chair bound. Music makes a good gift for this population but be sure to select something the person will enjoy. Older music is usually a good choice (can include gospel, barber shop, or country music and 'golden oldies'), and especially music from the 30's and 40's and classic holiday music such as "Silent Night" or "White Christmas."

Gifts of a more personal nature can include such things as tapes of sermons and services put on by their church each week, family photo albums and short trips in the car to familiar places. However, please do not give them irreplaceable gifts or pictures if living in a facility. Also, try to give them non breakable things.



Although we need to remember that the individual with AD is not a child and should not be treated as such, the fact that the person has regressed to some extent should be considered. Cuddly stuffed animals are often a comfort to the individual with late stage dementia and many women seem to enjoy having a doll baby to hold. Soft pillows and afghans are also a welcome gift for this group since most will also be suffering from the physical declines associated with late stage dementia.

To encourage continued socialization and activity try the following: tickets to a concert or musical, sports event or the circus, a taxi charge account for transportation to visit friends, a trip to the shopping mall topped off with lunch, or a visit to the local senior center to participate in activities.

A popular gift for the impaired elderly is a bird feeder and tape of bird songs. Feeders come in a variety of styles from small ones which can stick on windows to large freestanding feeders for yard or garden. The AD patient will enjoy watching the feeder and can often be prompted to fill it with seeds when needed, and activity both the individual and the caregiver can enjoy together.

These are just a few of many appropriate gifts which impaired adults would enjoy. People with AD may not recognize the event or holiday as it passes by. However, even the most impaired person will feel the love included in the gift you give.

Try some simple holiday preparations with the individual several days ahead. Just observing your preparations will familiarize him/her with the upcoming festivities; if they participate with you, they experience the pleasure of helping and giving as well as the fun of anticipation and reminiscing.

Prepare potential quiet distractions (a family photo album or simple repetitive chore like cracking nuts) to use if the patient becomes upset or over stimulated.

