

Monthly newsletter for people caring for those affected with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia.



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A "New Normal" This Holiday Season

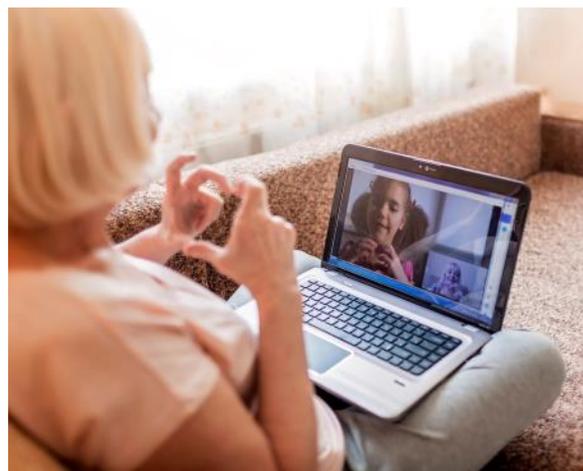
We have certainly heard much about the "new normal" within COVID-19. The holidays are often filled with sharing and gathering, but this holiday season there will be isolation and stressors with heightened risk for spreading the virus. A person living with dementia may feel an increased sense of loss during the holidays because of the changes he or she is experiencing. Caregivers will likely feel additionally overwhelmed this season as they attempt to carry on family traditions while providing care and tending to safety precautions.

The safest option is to avoid in-person holiday gatherings with people outside of your household. A holiday is still a holiday no matter where it is celebrated, so how else can we enjoy the holidays this year? Here are some tips and ideas for safely engaging with loved ones with dementia, caregivers, family and friends during the holidays:

Adjust Expectations:

The stresses of caregiving responsibilities layered with Covid-19 challenges AND holidays can take a toll. Holidays are often filled with emotions and this year it is even more important to take care of your physical, mental and emotional health.

- ♦ *Arrange for group discussion via video call, email or telephone to discuss holiday celebrations in advance.* Make sure everyone understands the safety precautions you're taking and have realistic expectations about what you can and cannot do. This is also a good time to let others know about changes taking place with the person with dementia.
- ♦ *If the person is in the early stages of dementia, relatives and friends might not notice any changes.* But the person living with dementia may have trouble following conversations or repeat themselves. These changes may be



hard to accept, so be sure to remind friends and family that changes in behavior and memory are caused by the disease and not the person. Share these tips with family about the best ways to communicate:

- Be patient
- Don't interrupt or correct
- Give the person time to finish his or her thoughts

- ♦ *Give yourself permission to do ONLY what you can reasonably and safely manage.* If you are having a gathering – make it small. New traditions can be created.
- ♦ *Consider celebrating earlier in the day.* This will allow you to work around any sundowning that may occur with the person living with Alzheimer's.

Celebrate while physically distancing Nancy, a caregiver for her mom with dementia, shared, "We are continuing the tradition of baking cookies for the holidays! My mom lives with me and still enjoys mixing ingredients together while I supervise all of the correct portions and use of the oven. Whereas we won't be seeing the rest of our family in person, we are going to put together care packages with Mom's tried and true favorite recipes!" These special deliveries make for a wonderful surprise and merge old and new traditions. Here are some other ideas:

- Create a “holiday parade” by driving by your loved ones’ homes with homemade signs or other festive decorations.
- Plan an outdoor visit with hot chocolate and blankets at a park or in the yard with distance between each other.
- Go outside for a walk in the neighborhood to enjoy holiday lights and decorations.
- Create and send holiday cards – encourage help from your loved one with dementia in decorating, folding and/or signing the cards and stuffing the envelopes.

Connect through technology

Sal, a caregiver whose husband Bill has dementia, has a weekly video call with her son where they cook a part of a meal together. If her husband isn’t engaged as much, they don’t stay on the call as long. Often times, the recipe includes foods from places they have visited over the years, which helps add those memories to the conversation while cooking. Here are some tips for a successful video chat:

- It’s good to provide a structure to the call. This will help to engage the person with dementia. Try playing a trivia game, singing carols, opening gifts or sharing pictures from past gatherings.
 - Schedule a time to watch a favorite holiday movie together from separate homes. Text or video chat while you watch, or use a service like [Teleparty](#) to facilitate a watch party.
 - Be careful about simultaneous conversations. This can be challenging and confusing for the person with dementia.
- Involve the person in holiday preparation activities

Accommodate the person with dementia

As with Nancy and Sal above, ask your loved one to help prepare food, wrap packages, decorate or set the table.

- Avoid using candies and artificial fruits and vegetables as decorations. A person with dementia might confuse

them with real food.

- Blinking lights may also confuse the person.
- Maintain the person’s normal routine as much as possible, so that holiday preparations are less disruptive and confusing.
- Focus on what brings happiness and let go of activities that seem overwhelming. Taking on too much will wear on both of you.

Adapt gift giving

- Ask people to send gifts in the mail instead of delivering in person, then open the gifts over a video or phone call.
- Provide suggestions for useful gifts: identification bracelet or membership (i.e. MedicAlert.org), comfortable clothing, favorite music, photo albums of family and friends or favorite treats.
- Suggest gift certificates for your favorite take-out restaurant, food delivery, house cleaning, landscaping, handyman or laundry services.

If you are able to visit a loved one and notice more changes, ask yourself:

- Is there food in the refrigerator? Is it spoiled? Is the person eating regular meals?
- What is the condition of the inside and the outside of the home? Has it changed?
- Are the bills paid? Are there piles of unopened mail?
- What is the person’s personal appearance? Is the person bathing and grooming? Does daily personal care assistance need to be arranged?
- Are there safety precautions that should be taken? Can those adaptations be scheduled during your visit?
- Is the person engaged in meaningful activities during the day?
- How are family caregivers who live nearby? Do they have the information and support they need? Are they getting burned out? Is their health being affected? Are you able to support respite caregiving for them?

Tips & Resources

If you do meet in person, please follow these COVID-19 Safety guidelines:

- Do not attend or host a gathering if you’ve been (or think you’ve been) exposed to COVID-19.
- Ask attendees to strictly limit contact with others for 14 days prior to your gathering.
- Host the event outside, if possible.
- Ask attendees to wash their hands regularly, wear masks and maintain 6 feet of distance.
- Shorten the duration of the event.
- Avoid hugs, handshakes and close contact.
- Limit the number of people at the event.

Additional Visit Considerations:

- Make appointments with the person’s physician, lawyer, financial adviser to participate in decision-making
- Meet with neighbors, friends and relatives to hear how they think the person is doing.
- Take time to reconnect by talking, listening to music, going for a walk or participating in activities you enjoy together.
- Review medications to make sure they are being taken as prescribed.
- Assess the support needs of family caregivers providing day-to-day care.