

## **Easing Holiday Hubbub for a Family Member With Alzheimer's**

The cheerful chaos and joyful confusion of a typical holiday season can end up overwhelming and distancing an Alzheimer's patient from loved ones just at the time when family members want to feel closest. But with a little forethought you can take steps to help draw a loved one with Alzheimer's disease into family gatherings and make the holidays less stressful for all involved.

"It's important to try to minimize how hectic the environment is," says Peter Reed, PhD, senior director of programs for the Alzheimer's Association. "Too much activity and noise can confuse a person with Alzheimer's, making them withdraw."

### **Holiday Planning With an Alzheimer's Patient in Mind**

There are a number of things you can do in advance to help both the person with Alzheimer's and the entire family enjoy themselves during holiday get-togethers. Here are a few suggestions that might be of assistance:

- **Communicate with family members.** "The holidays could be the first time that the family sees changes that have taken place in the person with dementia," Reed says. "It's important to communicate the fact that that person has Alzheimer's and explain that it's changed the way he or she interacts with people. It's also important to tell family members to be as patient as possible." An added benefit to breaking the news: You can ask other family members and friends for their help in taking care of the Alzheimer's patient during the holidays, allowing you time to handle other tasks.
- **Plan ahead and be flexible.** Involve the Alzheimer's patient in planning your holiday festivities by finding out which traditions mean the most to them. Try to keep your favorite family traditions, but be flexible in paring them down to ease your burden and adapt to changes wrought by the disease. Keep your expectations reasonable; acknowledge that things have changed and that the gathering will not be as it was in years past.
- **Prepare a "quiet room" for the person.** "Make sure the person with Alzheimer's has a dedicated space where he or she can go to get some rest and take a break from the noise and confusion of holiday get-togethers," Reed says.

## Minimizing Festivity Frenzy for the Alzheimer's Patient

Here are strategies you and your family should keep in mind to make sure the festivities go as pleasant as possible for the person with Alzheimer's disease:

- **Don't turn the gathering into a memory test.** By asking, "Do you remember who this is?" a loved one with dementia will likely feel demoralized and agitated. Instead, introduce each person by name, including the nature of their relationship to your loved one. For example, you might say something like, "Sharon, your nephew Fred wants to say hi."
- **Involve kids.** The energy and enthusiasm of kids can rub off on someone with Alzheimer's and brighten their day. Plan activities that children and a loved one can safely participate in together, like singing or making cookies. Just be sure to keep an eye out to make sure that the kids aren't wearing out or stressing the Alzheimer's patient as they spend time together.
- **Maintain the person's routine.** If your loved one with Alzheimer's usually takes a walk after lunch, help them to keep up with this activity during the holidays. You should also allow them to take a nap at their usual time and eat at the same times as usual. Such structure can make someone with dementia feel more comfortable amid the hustle and bustle of the holidays.
- **Include the Alzheimer's patient in the day's activities.** Depending on their current abilities, your loved one might be able to help prepare the meal or set the table. Getting involved will help them to feel like they have a purpose in the day's events.

## Keeping the Larger Picture in Mind

When you do some advance planning, what could have been a stressful time for a loved one with Alzheimer's may actually end up feeding the soul. "We find they often get kind of energized when they're with family," Kim Linder of Tampa, Fla., says of her elderly in-laws, both of whom suffer from dementia. "They just like to be around us, especially because we make a big fuss over them."

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Medically reviewed by Cynthia Haines, MD