



6 Tips to Have A Better Holiday Season When Dementia Is Involved

Between family get-togethers, cooking, and shopping, even people living with a healthy brain can start to feel burned out. But, for a person that is living with brain change, the changes to their routine can feel overwhelming, too. So, what can you do to try to help you both have a better holiday experience? Below are six tips for you to try:

1. Smaller, simpler, shorter

To help reduce stress, you may want to consider simplifying your festivities. What can you let go of, or minimize in a way so it still sparks joy without the added stress? Can you identify the essentials, and eliminate the rest?

By simplifying or cutting things that require a lot of work, maybe even some long-held traditions, you actively reduce your stress level. And by shortening or not doing some of these things, you gain additional time to focus on creating more joyful interactions and memories. How? Read on to the next point.

2. Use retained abilities

When a person is living with dementia, the changes to their brain will impact the person's abilities over time. However, it is important to realize that this is gradual and doesn't usually happen overnight without other health incidents.

What that means for you, effectively, is that there are opportunities for you to engage your person living with dementia using the abilities they still possess. *(If you like the concept of looking at what remains instead of what is lost)*, During the holidays, you can create moments of joy by using photos or other images to talk about stories, memories, or the season itself. As an example, you may pull out an old photo book and say something like *Hey mom, look what I just found – some childhood photos of yours. Is that girl here your friend Ruth, or someone else?*

If you don't have photos handy, you could use an object or Google an image of a place or time they tend to associate positive memories with to help spark a conversation. You could also play a few songs the person likes, or even create a music playlist in advance. (If you're not sure how, can you pull in someone else to help you set it up)?

3. Be ready to hear the same story multiple times

Have you heard your loved one's stories many times? Chances are, you've answered something like *yup, I sure have*. We understand that it can be tiring to hear the same stories repeatedly.

Yet did you know that reminiscing and telling these stories is actually good for the person living with dementia? When they reminisce, it fires up the person's brain cells and helps keep them alive and functioning longer.

In addition, as the disease progresses, the person will lose their ability to tell you these stories. However, knowing these stories will provide you with an opportunity to continue to connect with the person as time goes on. So, hearing the same stories over and over again really is an opportunity to connect with and learn about the person, so that you can continue to share these memories with them even when they're no longer able to tell them.

Tip: If the person in your care asks if they've already told you a certain story, you're typically left with the choices of *yes* or *no*. The first answer may discourage the person from telling you the story again, and the latter may be a lie. Instead of answering with either of these options, try responding with *tell me more about that*. Using this phrase is not discouraging, but you're also not needing to lie if you're ready to hear the story once more.

4. Avoid direct corrections

How would you like to be interrupted with phrases like *that's not how this story happened*, or *that's not what he said at all*? Would that make you feel good, or something else?

If you are like most people, corrections like these would not leave you feeling good about yourself or may even provoke you to get defensive. Yes, maybe the story really happened differently. And yes, maybe the person's recollection of a prior conversation isn't quite correct. But, if no one suffers real harm from an incorrect comment, does it *really* matter? Is correcting the person, on the chance of making them feel bad and hurting your relationship, really that important?

Realize that when a person is living with dementia, their brain is chemically and structurally changing. The brain may no longer be able to correctly recall a memory and will instead fill its gaps with information that may not be accurate. This, in fact, means that to the person this false memory seems as real as any. *They are not lying*

to you; their brain is lying to them. So, if the person living with dementia says something incorrect, you may want to try to let it go and **go with the flow** instead.

In addition, you may be able to gently guide the interaction by offering **this or that** or **this or something else** type choices. As an example, you may say: *Mom, was your first car green or blue? (This or that).* Or you may say: *Mom, was your first car green, or something else? (This or something else).*

5. Accept general comments

As a person is living with dementia, their communication will become vaguer as the disease progresses. For you as the care partner, it is important to remember that they're doing the best they can with what they have left.

So, instead of pushing for specifics, consider if their general comment may not be enough. If you do need more detailed information, try to avoid asking open-ended questions like *Which decorations would you like on the Christmas tree this year, Mom?*

Instead, try using the *this or that* or *this or something else* type choices communication techniques discussed in point #4. In this situation, you may instead say something like *Mom, would you prefer I use the white or the multi-colored lights this year?* or *Hey Mom – would you like the Menorah on the mantle, or somewhere else?* This way you're gently gathering the information you're looking for, while also providing the person with choices and signaling that their wishes matter.

To help your person even more, consider giving a visual cue by pointing at the lights while you mention them, or placing the Menorah on the mantle while asking about it.

6. Give room to get away if needed

When a person is living with dementia, the hustle and bustle of holiday celebrations can get particularly overwhelming.

If you have other family members or friends visit, consider letting your person living with dementia sit on the edge of the table, instead of the center. This way, the person may only have one person talk to them at a time for less sensory input, and give them space to get away if it becomes too much or they get tired.

In addition, consider where in your home you can offer a quiet space for the person to get away to or spend a little time to quietly relax and recharge.

Conclusion

The holiday season can be stressful even when dementia isn't part of life. If, however, a person you care about is living with the condition, some alterations to your usual holiday tasks and activities may benefit everyone.

See how and where you can simplify your celebrations and look for opportunities to engage the person while allowing them to use the abilities they still have.

Embrace the idea that you'll likely hear the same story multiple times and see if you can view this situation as a learning opportunity instead. Try to resist the temptation to directly correct the person living with dementia and embrace general comments or offer choices to gather the information that you do need.

While it can be easy to fall into your long-standing holiday habits, simplifying things and being more intentional about your choices can positively affect the experience for everyone involved. And by choosing not to do things that matter less, you're allowing more time and opportunity for the things that truly matter – creating meaningful moments with those closest to your heart.