



Avoid Emotional Pitfalls During the Holidays

In Hollywood Christmases, we see family crises resolved and longstanding wounds healed through the power of the season. In real life, however, it is rarely that simple.

The truth is, the holidays intensify existing issues, adding more pressure rather than relieving it. Family dynamics, already exacerbated by a parent's or a spouse's Alzheimer's disease or dementia diagnosis, prove to be even more stressful, as each individual struggles to process the changes they see in their loved one.

Relatives arrive from out of town, bringing with them their own set of expectations and pressures. There is a temptation to compare this holiday to previous ones, to compare their loved one's behavior now with that of previous years.

A grieving process begins. It can manifest as anger, intolerance and general irritability. We can become depressed, even experience a crisis in faith.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

There are several steps we can take to help us avoid some of these emotional pitfalls. First, we can remind ourselves that being with our loved one is what matters, regardless of the holiday. Second, we can try to let go of all our expectations surrounding the holiday and the person with Alzheimer's disease. Letting go can open us up to many wonderful moments that we might miss if we are distracted by our own agenda. Having a plan is essential for including our loved ones. We just cannot afford to invest too heavily in a specific outcome.

Some concrete strategies that can help make the holiday happy:

If a large family group is expected to visit, stagger their arrival times. Let the group form around your loved one so that they are less likely to feel overwhelmed. This can also be a helpful approach to large gatherings at restaurants.

Limit the length of the visit. For some people living with dementia, several short visits are easier to handle than one long one. They may no longer be capable of determining when they are getting tired, causing them to feel stressed, increasing possible disorientation.

Go along with what your loved one may need to do at that moment. In response to a break in their routine, they may need to walk for a while. Walk with them. They may need to stay in activities for some moments as part of their 'switching gears' before visiting. Join the activity for a few minutes. In other words, go with the flow.

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Make an agreement with your family members to leave all issues at the door. Do not discuss family controversies in front of your loved one. It might be best for the family to go on a hiatus from family matters until after the holiday, since people with Alzheimer's disease or dementia are hypersensitive to the emotional atmosphere.

Simplify. Make one-step plans. For example, treat 'shopping and lunch' as two separate outings. If you shop together, get food to go. Are people visiting from out of town? Encourage them to break up their visiting time, perhaps into morning and afternoon sessions, giving the loved one time to rest.

Truly enter into the moment and enjoy it. Take time to do other things for the holiday, even if you have limited time. Get enough sleep. It is hard enough to resist the holiday frenzy without pressuring oneself about making holiday cheer. Remember, your family member who is living with dementia lives in the moment. They just want to be with you. So do not overload your schedule. Come when it is convenient for you—your loved one will appreciate it whenever it occurs. Take time for your friends and family.

Make a resolution to create new family traditions, based on the experiences of the current holidays and, in every way imaginable, make the most of every moment.