

Special Holiday Edition

The holiday season can be an overwhelming time for many people. This is particularly true when you are caring for a person with dementia. Families will often arrange gatherings to celebrate, although these events can sometimes pose special challenges for persons with dementia and their caregivers. However, with some adjustments to traditional holiday festivities, people with dementia and their families can enjoy what the holidays have to offer.



This special edition of In Touch provides information and practical tips for making this season enjoyable for you, the person with dementia, and your family. We hope that it will encourage you to find an all-important balance between rest and activity and inspire you to continue your traditions, start new ones, or take pleasure in just being in the moment.

Holiday Tips for Caregivers

Be prepared to let go of expectations of how things “should be”. Though it may be difficult to vary long-held traditions, consider the person with dementia’s response to the physical environment to determine whether making changes may be appropriate. Try to pick and choose which holiday traditions will mean the most to everyone and will be the least disruptive for the person with dementia. Dramatically changing the environment or routine may cause the person to feel anxious and disoriented.

Plan visits wisely. Consider holding smaller gatherings and allowing more time between visits. Think about potluck meals, shorter visits, and even paper plates and napkins. Keep in mind that people with dementia are often better able to cope earlier in the day, so try to plan events accordingly. If your gatherings involve a large group of people, consider having a quiet room where the person can rest or visit with one or two people at a time.

Keep changes to a minimum. Even in the flurry of holiday activity, try to stick to the person’s daily routine as much as possible. Keep mealtimes and bedtimes the same. This may help calm and orient the person in the midst of all the changes.

Encourage the person to participate. Focus on the person’s remaining abilities by giving them tasks that allow them to contribute to the festivities, such as setting the table, helping prepare food, or helping to decorate.

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Holiday Tips (continued)

Take the lead. As the caregiver, you know what is likely to work best. You might have to take the lead on this and explain to your family and friends why some changes need to be made this holiday season. You may need to remind people what they should expect from the person with dementia and how to best interact with them.

Ask for help. Try not to take on added holiday and entertaining responsibilities. If the celebration is being held at your home, plan with family and friends in advance to ensure that you have extra help. Family and friends can also help by spending time with the person while you attend to the holiday preparations.

Adjust expectations. Talk to family members and friends to ensure that they understand your situation and that their expectations are realistic. Prepare them for the changes they will notice, and let them know that the person may behave in unpredictable ways. For example, he or she may ask the same question over and over, or may become agitated if there is too much sensory stimulation. Remind family and friends that the person may have trouble remembering names and faces, and suggest they introduce themselves. Perhaps as a group you can all make plans to adapt your traditional activities to suit the needs of your family member with dementia.

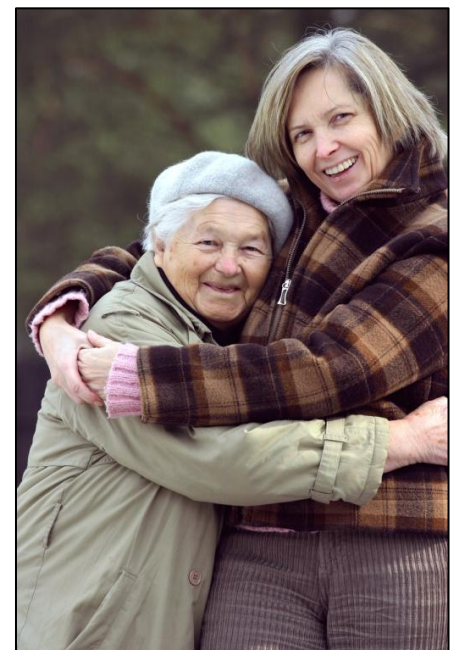
Reminisce together. Sharing memories from the past can bring families together and make the holidays meaningful and enjoyable for everyone. Surround the person with things that trigger their five senses to help spark their long-term memory; for example, photographs, seasonal music, pine boughs, seasonal foods and beverages.

Keep gifts simple, useful and practical. When giving gifts to someone with dementia, consider the symptoms they are experiencing, as well as their personal safety. Some ideas include comfortable clothes, CDs of their favourite music, or photo albums. Some people with early-stage dementia may appreciate receiving gifts to help with memory loss, such as a calendar with birthdays and anniversaries already written in. You may want to prepare a list of gift ideas to give to family members and friends.

Consider the location. If the person is living in a care facility and you plan on bringing them home for the holidays, plan to have one or two half-day trial runs in advance. If the person reacts negatively to the change, consider having a holiday celebration with them at the care facility instead. Many facilities host holiday activities that families and friends can attend.

Take care of yourself. The holiday season is stressful for everyone, but even more so if you are a caregiver. It is particularly important that you take good care of yourself during the season to avoid burnout. Try to be open to the idea that you may not be able to do everything you have done in previous years. Arrange to take some time to relax or to do something just for yourself.

When we truly care for ourselves, it becomes possible to care far more profoundly for another.
– Eda LeShan



Holiday Meal Time

For many families, meals play a large part in how the holidays are celebrated. If the person you are caring for is experiencing difficulty with eating, you may be anticipating that a holiday meal could be especially challenging. However, by planning ahead and making adjustments, it is possible to ensure that everyone around your table has a positive experience.

Here are some tips for supporting a person with dementia during holiday meals:

- Avoid having too many different patterns and decorations on the table. Use a plain table cloth with plates and napkins that are in solid, contrasting colours.
- If the person with dementia eats slowly, consider buying an insulated plate to keep their food warm. Or simply re-heat food in the microwave as needed (be careful that it doesn't become too hot).
- Be prepared to make adjustments. For example, if you have a large number of guests, the person with dementia may be more comfortable eating in a separate room with a smaller group of people, or one-on-one.
- Drinking alcohol in moderation may be fine for some people. However, keep in mind that alcohol can increase confusion and risk of falls.



- Think about the size of the meal you serve. Although many people eat a lot on special occasions, a very full plate can be overwhelming for someone who has difficulty with eating and/or making choices.
- It may be easier to portion out some or all of the food before sitting at the table.
- If someone else is preparing the holiday meal, be sure to inform them of any preferences or favourite foods that the person with dementia may have. This can help make meals much more enjoyable.
- If eating with a knife and fork has become a challenge, a simple adjustment may help. For example, try preparing finger foods or foods which only require one utensil (e.g. soups, mashed vegetables, food cut into bite-sized pieces, etc.).

Easy Holiday Recipe

Here is an easy recipe that you and the person you are caring for can make together. Requires no oven, stovetop, or knives (just the microwave). Perfect for holiday parties!

Chocolate-Dipped Pretzels



Ingredients:

1 bag of mini pretzels or pretzel sticks
 12-ounce bag of semisweet chocolate chips
 2 tablespoons of butter
 Sprinkles, finely chopped nuts, shredded coconut or another topping of your choice

Directions:

Microwave chocolate chips and butter until melted (about 1 minute 30 seconds). Stir. Dip pretzels into the chocolate mixture and place on cookie sheet lined with wax paper. Add topping of your choice while chocolate is still wet. Let pretzels sit for 30 minutes before serving.

Visiting Preparation Tip

As a caregiver, you may be concerned about having visitors during the holiday season, especially if the person with dementia has experienced significant changes in their behaviour and ability to communicate. One way to prepare your family and friends for visits is to familiarize them with your situation by writing a letter or e-mail with information such as:

I'm writing this to let you know how things are going at our home. 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 behaviour has changed.

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 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.



Adapted from Alzheimer Association fact sheet – "Holidays"



Poetry

I Will

*Will you still listen;
When I don't make sense anymore?
When I'm a million miles away,
and I haven't stepped foot out the door?
When I sense you by heart,
but no longer recognize your face.
And suddenly all my memories
are slowly being erased.*

~

*I'll still listen to every story,
no matter how many times it's been said.
And go over every scrap of paper I've already read.
I'll still love you when we are strangers.
Please know I'll always care,
because I know the real you,
Is still inside somewhere.*

by Desiray Fenrick

Discovering the possibility of being together in silence can be deeply moving and meaningful... When we put aside our dashed dreams long enough to be open to the rich emotions alive in that silence, just being together can release an unspoken emotional exchange.

People with significant cognitive limits can get satisfaction out of life, and it is possible for us to have meaningful relationships with them – if we learn to shift what we want and expect from them, see the person who is still inside, and develop the capacity to live in the emotional moment.

- Michael Freedman, L.M.S.W.

Holiday Checklist

This Holiday Checklist is a tool that can be used by all families facing dementia. Whether you are coping with the early symptoms or caring for someone who is experiencing the later stages of the disease, you may want to consider whether this is a good time to make some changes to support the health and wellbeing of you and the person with dementia. **Underline** what you would traditionally do and then **circle** what you want to do this year. Share this with your family and have them do one of their own and compare notes.

Cards:

- Mail as usual
- Shorten your list
- Include a "holiday letter"
- Elect to skip this year



Shopping:

- Shop as usual
- Give cash
- Ask for help
- Shop early
- Make your gifts
- Give baked goods
- Ask for help wrapping gifts
- Do not exchange gifts now but perhaps later
- Make a shopping list before you go out

Traditions:

- Keep the old traditions
- Attend holiday parties
- Don't attend holiday parties
- Bake the usual holiday foods
- Buy the usual holiday foods
- Bake but modify what you usually do
- Attend religious services
- Do not attend religious services
- Attend religious services at a different time
- Visit your family member with dementia at their new residence
- Spend quiet time alone
- Open gifts early
- Open gifts on usual day

Decorations:

- Decorate as usual
- Ask for help
- Let others do it
- Make changes, such as an artificial tree instead of a real one
- Have a special decoration for the person with dementia
- Eliminate some or all decorations

Holiday Music:

- Enjoy as usual
- Avoid turning on the radio
- Shop early before stores play holiday music
- Listen to it, have a good cry, and allow yourself to feel sad

Holiday Food:

- Prepare as usual
- Eat with the person with dementia at their residence
- Go out for dinner
- Invite friends over
- Change routine (e.g. go to a buffet)
- Ask for help

Post-Holiday & New Year's Celebration:

- Spend as usual
- Remove decorations early
- Attend a New Year's party
- Host a New Year's party
- Spend time with only a few friends
- Write in a journal your hopes and dreams for the New Year
- Go to bed early

Notes and Events

DEMENTIA HELPLINE



1-800-936-6033
(Lower Mainland 604-681-8651)

Helping people with dementia, their friends, and their family members to build the confidence to maintain quality of life when facing dementia.



Our Vision

Our ultimate vision is to create a world without Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

Our Mission

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. exists to alleviate the personal and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, to promote public awareness and to search for the causes and the cures.

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Free Telephone Workshops



Thursday, December 15th, 2011
7 pm (PST)
Children, Teens and Dementia

Are you having difficulty talking about dementia with the children and teens in your family? Are you wondering how much you should say? This tele-workshop for family caregivers explains what children and teens need to know to better understand dementia and offers suggestions on how to help them interact with the person.

To learn about upcoming workshops, go to www.alzheimerbc.org and click on **We Can Help**.

Did you know?

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. also publishes *Insight*, a bulletin written specifically for people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. It offers information, tips for living well and stories from people with dementia.

Consider subscribing to the *Insight* bulletin in addition to *In Touch*. Visit www.alzheimerbc.org and click on **News and Events – Newsletter and Bulletins** to subscribe.

