

Celebrate the Holidays with Dementia

By Kate McCarthy

Alice and Roger loved the holiday season. Every year they would open their home to friends and family to celebrate Christmas and New Year's in grand style. Blinking fairy lights on the tree, cocktail parties with music and dancing in the living room and huge holiday feasts with family. They looked forward to making new Christmas memories each year.

When Roger began to show signs of memory loss, Alice became his Caregiver and found keeping up their holiday traditions and

managing Roger's care to be a challenge. Overtime, as Roger's condition worsened, Alice found that they no longer invited people over for the holidays. She missed the joy of the season but found that the commotion of Christmas was too much for Roger. He would grow more confused, aggressive and angry, which was hard to explain to family and guests.

The Holiday season can be stressful for almost everyone. The bustle and busyness of the season is suppose to be fun and help create happy memories with loved ones. Yet for those with dementia the extra activity and excitement of Christmas can cause a major increase in anxiety and anxiety related behaviors. This season can be especially difficult for those who provide care for loved ones with dementia. Many family Caregivers prefer to skip holiday celebrations out of fear of unsettling their loved ones. Yet there are some practical ways to make Christmas and New Years enjoyable for families with a loved one with dementia. Here are some tips that may help keep the holidays merry and bright for everyone in the family.



Help loved ones with dementia
celebrate the Holidays.

Warn visitors of what to expect

Help prepare visitors ahead of time by explaining your loved ones current situation. Something like this letter would go a long way in preventing upheaval during a family gathering.

“I’m writing to let you how pleased we are about your upcoming visit over the holidays. We are very excited about your visit but thought it might be useful if you understood our current situation before you arrive.

You will probably notice that Roger has changed since your last visit. Among the changes you may notice are short term memory loss, confusion, and angry outbursts. I’ve enclosed a recent photo so you know how Roger looks these days.

Roger has dementia. He has trouble remembering people and thinking clearly, and so his behavior can be a little erratic. Roger may not always remember who you are or may confuse you with someone else. Please don’t feel offended by his behavior. Please treat Roger as you always have. Give him a warm smile and a gentle touch on his shoulder or hand. Avoid asking him too many questions or changing subjects too quickly. Be patient as he takes his time thinking about how to answer you. If you feel he is getting upset try to direct the conversation toward subjects he is familiar with, such as his past hobbies or family memories from long ago.

Please call before you come to visit so I can prepare Roger for your arrival. I will need to help him adjust to a change in his routine. With your help and support I know we can make this holiday visit a memory we will all cherish.

Plan Family Holiday Gatherings

Rather than avoid the holidays all together, Caregivers need to firmly set limits with the family so that they and their loved ones with dementia are not isolated during the season. Here are some triggers the family needs to avoid over the holidays:

- Crowds of people – It’s not a good idea to take the loved one with dementia to the mall or a crowded event for Christmas even if the entire

family wants him to go. Too much stimulation will result in anxiety and the crowds of people can be overwhelming at times.

- Noisy settings, loud conversations or loud music – Christmas parties with too much noise and music will often set off negative behaviors with those with dementia. Avoid taking a loved one to office parties or school Christmas concerts where the noise and commotion levels may be overwhelming.
- Strange surroundings – Confusion and anxiety will result in taking a person with dementia to a strange setting, like Cousin Mary's new house. Better that everyone gather at a place familiar and comfortable for the one with dementia.
- Changes in lighting – Bright lights or blinking lights can trigger anxiety and confusion.
- Giving a loved one with dementia a lot of rich food or alcoholic drinks.
- Disrupting routines and sleep patterns. Plan family gatherings at a time when the loved one with dementia is usually at their cognitive best. Avoid late afternoon/early evening gatherings as those with Sundowners will find that time of day very difficult.

There are ways to include the loved one with dementia in the holiday celebrations. Quiet preparations for the holiday season are a wonderful way to get into the spirit of the season. Have the loved one help with Christmas decorating, baking and wrapping gifts. Play old time favorite Christmas songs and look through photo albums of past Christmas gatherings. Plan smaller gatherings for brunch or luncheons instead of larger family gatherings and keep celebrations simple and low key.

Avoiding stress over the holidays is hard under any circumstance, but when a loved one has dementia, proper planning is a must to managing the season so that the entire family can enjoy the holidays.