

## The Holidays and Dementia- Putting a Plan into Place

The holidays mean a lot of different things to different people, but we can all agree that it is a time of traditions and gatherings. During the holidays and everyday, Dementia changes everything. At this time of year, we want time spent with friends and family to be successful. It is an opportunity to make new memories while reliving time-tested traditions, but it is also a good time to look at how you can modify those plans to accommodate a person with dementia.

Dementia affects not only the person who has the disease but also the people around them. It may mean that they are not up on current events, have a hard time following conversations, forget names and possibly “looping” (repeating stories or saying things that aren’t true). To honour that person, no matter what, please don’t say “don’t you remember” or correct them when they’re telling a story that everyone else may know is not true or at the very least, did not occur. In their mind the story is true, and it did happen. Arguing or debating these facts will only serve to make the person feel badly inside, remind them that they are not correct, and may even be a source of agitation and frustration that could result in negative feelings and words. One of the creative and fun parts of dementia means to go along with it! It’s ok if mom tells you she was out dancing last night and had so much fun (maybe she does remember a night like that) or that dad can still recite, word for word, the very moment he saw your mother. These are fond and familiar memories so go along with it.

### 6 Things that the Person with dementia really needs:

1. Routine
  - Medications on time
  - Naps and meals as the usual times as much as possible
2. Timing of events
  - Plan events to occur at a time that suits the person with dementia
  - Take into consideration:
    - ✓ sundowning
    - ✓ time of day are they are most alert
    - ✓ attention span
    - ✓ fatigue
3. Minimal or manageable stimulation
  - The right amount of stimulation:
    - ✓ Quiet room
    - ✓ Assign a ‘buddy’
    - ✓ Avoid places that are crowded and noisy
    - ✓ Be aware of triggers
  - Several smaller get-togethers or shorter visits rather than one big party
  - Situate to maximize participation in conversations and minimize distractions

4. Help with short term memory
  - Everyone wears name tags (and then the person with dementia is not centred-out)
  - Choose familiar places, foods, activities
  - Photo albums
    - ✓ for conversations, to identify visitors
  - Reminisce – lots of cues at Christmas time
5. Meaningful activities like photo books and rituals
  - Possible activities that are safe, repetitive, remembered
  - Be aware of apathy of dementia; invite to participate (but try not to ask a yes/no question)
  - Music remains long after language is gone
  - Be present – in that moment – it’s ok if it doesn’t go exactly as planned
  - Christmas baking, present wrapping, signing cards, sticking stamps on envelopes, decorating tree, setting the table, etc.
6. Safety
  - Misinterpretation of decorations that look like candies or food
  - Over stimulating decorations like blinking lights
  - Visual cues in the space or miscues, dark contrast that looks like a hole
  - Being aware of where they are at all times (definitely the Buddy system – and pick someone that is not the primary caregiver, so they too can enjoy the festivities worry-free).
7. Look for new take on old tradition:
  - DVD instead of a live performance
  - Signing and stamps on cards, rather than writing addresses
  - Turkey dinner at noon
  - Shopping online

For the primary Caregiver, this is a time to recognize: things will need to be different and there may be some feelings of grief that come with the Season. That’s ok and to be expected. Reach-out to your people; ask for help; go with only what you absolutely have-to have for the holidays and let the rest go; be nimble and flexible so that this season is the best it can possibly be.

- Arm yourself with knowledge, meet the person with dementia where they are at
- Set limits – give yourself permission to say no
- Get help – delegate and don’t overdo
- Losses
- Self care – eat well, rest, exercise

There are many resources for support like your local Alzheimer Society so don’t hesitate to reach-out for help and information.

For family and friends, they may be surprised at the changes in your loved one since the last time they’ve seen them. Help them ahead of time so they’re as ready as they can be to have a positive visit with your loved one.

### **Tips for Communication**

- Be calm and patient

- Speak slowly with a relaxed tone
- Don't argue or correct
- Use their name and introduce yourself, with your name (everyone wearing name tags with first-names only is a great idea)
- Avoid saying 'don't you remember?'
- Ask questions they can answer
- When your person gets into a story – or agitated – take them to a happy place and then let them talk

### **Gift ideas for a person with dementia**

- Classic movies or TV shows (favourites are "I love Lucy" and old-classic TV shows)
- Activity books – colouring, spot the difference
- Music CDs, especially from a decade when they would've been younger
- Fidget cuff
- Manipulative devices – playable art, tiles – that you can stack, sort into other containers
- "Interactive books"
- Simple games and puzzles – Memo matching game
- Toiletries or other consumables
  - Great resource: [www.best-alzheimers-products.com/giftsforalzheimers.com](http://www.best-alzheimers-products.com/giftsforalzheimers.com)