

A Simpler Holiday Season When Someone You Love Has Dementia

By Marian O. Hodges, MD, MPH and Anne P. Hill, JD

The holidays can be a stressful time under the best of circumstances but when someone you love has dementia, the holidays can be especially nerve-racking. However, with a little flexibility and planning you can create a holiday for your family member who has dementia that will be enjoyable for both of you.

Here are three tips for a happier holiday:

1. **Avoid holiday crowds with your family member who has dementia.** This means every holiday crowd, *especially* the shopping crowds. When people have dementia, their brains are failing. One of the areas of the brain that fails is the frontal lobe, which normally filters out the distractions we encounter every day, thus letting us focus on what we need to do. When the frontal lobe is damaged, nothing is filtered out. People with dementia have no ability to shut out any distraction: every light, every decoration, every Christmas tree, every holiday carol, all the noise and crush of hundreds of people at the mall assaults their brains and quickly confuses and overwhelms them.
2. **Keep your family member's routine as close to normal as possible.** Help your family member who has dementia stick to the usual routine. Changes in routine are always distracting to people who have Alzheimer's disease and can cause a person with dementia to become more confused and sometimes agitated. Be sure your family member eats regular meals; keep the number of outings to a minimum; encourage family members who don't live with your loved one to visit in small groups, not all together. If possible, plan small holiday celebrations for your loved one where he or she lives, instead of large family gatherings away from home. Remember, a large family gathering really is a holiday crowd and you should avoid holiday crowds!
3. **Consider every event from the point of view of your family member who has disease or another dementia,** even happy events can be terrifying. For example, one Christmas morning, when co-author Anne Hill visited her mother, who lived in a group home, she found her mother sobbing in the living room, and no one could explain why. Anne finally understood that families of several residents had been arriving to take their family member home with them for a holiday celebration, but her mother believed that strangers were taking people away and she was afraid that someone was going to take her away, too.

As you consider how to celebrate the upcoming holidays with your family member who has dementia, think simple. Low key, quiet celebrations will be much more fun for your loved one, and that will be much more fun for you!

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Together, they have co-authored a book, *Help Is Here: When someone you love has dementia*.

The book provides practical help by using vignettes that describe what other families have experienced, as a way to help more families through this journey. *Help is Here* is available, at cost, through the Providence Foundation. To learn more about *Help is Here*, or to order a copy, go to www.dementiahelpishere.org.