

5 TIPS for caregivers

HOLIDAY SURVIVAL

It's the most wonderful time of the year – so the song goes. With all the parties, food, decorations, more food, friends and family, and of course, food, there's certainly a lot to enjoy! But rather than a statement of fact, sometimes the old song has to serve as a reminder. It can be the most wonderful time of the year - even for caregivers – with a few simple tips. Here are 5 tips for not just surviving, but making the holidays the most wonderful time of the year.

1 Familiarize your long lost relatives.

One of the joys of the holiday season is seeing friends and family you may not see throughout the year. Whether it's a big family New Year's party or a small dinner gathering, you may be worried about your loved one's behavior. But rather than focus on what you may not be able to change, focus on what you can - your relative's response. If your family hasn't seen the person in a while, let them know what changes to expect. This can be as simple as a quick email, "Mom has been having more word finding difficulty recently, so please be patient when you're talking with her next week. She still loves to chat!" Or when you're calling to confirm plans, ask your relative, "Can you remind the family that Dad is forgetting more names now, so please don't be upset if he can't remember the grandkids." Remind your friends and family that this isn't personal – it's the disease. If they are more prepared for what to expect, it will make your loved one more comfortable too.

2 Familiarize the decorations.

While we all balk when they go up in stores before Halloween, most of us truly enjoy holiday decorations. And while you're probably not putting up giant inflatable snowmen inside your house, it can be good to go easy on the decorations – for everyone's sake! First, moving too much furniture around - to accommodate your giant

snowman - can be confusing for someone with memory impairment. Keeping things simple, and keeping their spaces as familiar as possible will keep them more relaxed. That's not to say you shouldn't put up any decorations though! Second, pick decorations with a family history or significance that your loved one might enjoy. Talk about familiar ornaments as you decorate the tree, or share stories around special decorations on the mantle. This leads to the third point, keep your loved one involved in decorating, and holiday traditions in general if you can. Whether they can help you unpack ornaments, or just participate in conversation, they will feel more involved in the holiday season.

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3 Keep their familiar routine.

Our loved ones with memory impairment thrive on routine. A structured day helps them know what to expect – when lunch is, when dinner is, and when it's time for bed. However, this time of year is when that structure can easily get tossed out the window! An afternoon open house means you skipped dinner, or a dinner party gets you home two hours past bedtime - and your loved one knows it! Though you won't be able to control everything, try to keep to the routine with things you can. If you've typically hosted a big

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dinner party, perhaps consider a lunch, at your loved one's normal time, that will keep their day on track. If you typically take them out in the early afternoon, stop by an open house then, rather than later in the day when they're more tired. And most of all, learn when to say no when it just doesn't fit in the routine!

4 Adjust (your) expectations.

I'll repeat it again, because it's an important point: learn when to say no. It's fun to go to all the parties, put up the giant inflatable snowman, and bake enough cookies to feed your relatives along with the neighborhood – but it's also exhausting! When you're caring for both yourself and your loved one, you have to set your limits. Perhaps you can't go a friend's evening party (too late and too many people for your loved one), but you can set up a time to meet them for dinner in January. Perhaps your big dinner party not just turns into lunch, but a potluck, and everyone brings a favorite family holiday dish. Start some new traditions that help both you and your loved one be less stressed.

5 Ask for help.

As a caregiver you want to do it all at the holidays. Or just in general - but it's okay to ask for help! It can actually be easier this time of year too – just don't be shy about it! If someone asks what's on your wish list, ask for something that can give you some respite – a gift certificate for house cleaning, so you can take that off your to do list. If you have family in town, ask a relative to stay with your loved one while you do some shopping. Your family and friends want to get you something you want – so just tell them how to help! A few hours to yourself can be the difference between holiday survival and actually making it a wonderful time of year.



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