

Managing Holiday Stress

Family caregivers often experience difficult emotions and conflicting feelings, but they may find themselves feeling particularly sad during holidays. It's understandable—holidays have been special times that caregivers shared with their loved ones in the past, before a disabling condition started its course. Caregivers often feel a great sense of sadness or loss when familiar traditions cannot be celebrated as they were during those times. There are ways to lift your spirits, however, as you anticipate a favorite holiday. Sharing a comforting tradition, going to a church or synagogue service, participating in another meaningful ritual, or preparing a special meal can be an uplifting way to observe the day.

You might worry that your loved one will be overwhelmed at a large family event. To avoid the disappointment of missing out on a gathering, make a plan beforehand. Be honest and open with your family and friends about your loved one's limitations. Consider visiting family early in the day when your loved one is alert and sociable. You might ask small groups of guests to visit you at your home. This can be less overwhelming to your loved one, who may be more comfortable in familiar surroundings.

Some family caregivers may choose to go to holiday gatherings without their loved one, and this is an understandable choice. Someone suffering from Alzheimer's or another dementia may simply be too confused or agitated to enjoy the event. You can give yourself a break and enjoy the festivities by allowing another family member or a paid attendant to watch your loved one. If you do bring your loved one, take turns attending to him or her so that you don't have to do all of the caregiving yourself.

With reduced expectations of the holidays, it can be helpful and even enjoyable to focus on what you can still share with your loved one on this special day. Try reminiscing about family and friends from past holidays. Watching movies, listening to songs or looking at old photos connected to holiday memories are other good ways to share and re-experience the warmth with your loved one, even if he or she is no longer able to communicate with you verbally.

Lastly, it is normal to feel sadness and loss as a caregiver during the holidays, and it probably will not be helpful to ignore or deny these feelings. The loss you experience with your loved one is real and, despite your efforts to lift your own spirits and plan ahead, you can still run into the "holiday blues." Finding someone understanding you can talk to about such feelings can be one more important step to lift your spirits.

We wish you a tranquil holiday season and Happy New Year.

To learn about support groups or other venues where you can talk to someone who understands, call **Caregiver Resource Center OC** at **(800) 543-8312** or visit www.caregiveroc.org