

Adapting for Holiday Success

By
Judith S. Parnes
LCSW, CMC
Executive
Director



For many people, the holiday season is a special time of year marked by festive celebrations and gatherings with family and friends. It is a time to look ahead with excitement to the approaching New Year. However, the holidays can also be a difficult time for many struggling with loss, ill health or for those who have no family available to visit with. Helping families plan for successful holidays for someone with Dementia can also be very challenging. At a time often guided by tradition, finding a way that feels right given changing family circumstances certainly requires some advance planning.

Adaptation is the key in life. Being able to connect to old traditions and memories while placing value on present life circumstances is the objective. Some people have found it more desirable to avoid old traditions and try some totally new experiences; Others find comfort in extending their holiday times to a different circle of “family” or friends. But all agree that having a plan ahead

of time as to what you will be doing during the holidays is what is most advantageous.

How do you create a new holiday experience that can have new meaning? Here are some suggestions:

1. Turn off the “old tapes” that may lead to sadness and unreasonable expectations. Cultivate an attitude of gratitude.
2. If planning to be alone for the holidays, consider calling any of the local churches or homeless centers and see if they could use your help volunteering.
3. Think of something you can inexpensively make for a nearby family that may have very little for the holidays. Perhaps pull out that favorite dessert recipe again. Or call the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts that may take children out caroling on frigid nights, and invite them to make a pit stop at your home to enjoy hot chocolate in exchange for a song or two.
4. For families caring for someone with Dementia, tolerance to a lot of activity and stimuli can vary. Abilities will change over time. Being mindful that it is not necessary or beneficial to include the person in every family holiday event is a reality.
5. For older people, energy level also enters into the planning of holiday celebrations. Frequently, the family makes so much effort in coordination of having their loved one participate at a holiday festivity, and shortly after arrival the person asks to go back “home.”
6. Intergenerational time can be so valuable, possibly having younger grandchildren ask questions that emphasize long-term memory strengths. This could include asking questions such as what their “favorite Christmas was” or describe their “favorite holiday food”.

Remember that creating the “essence” of the holiday is often more valuable than focusing on specific past rituals. It only takes a moment to create a lasting memory.

Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C., Gerontologist and Elder Care Consultant is Executive Director Of Elder Life Management, Inc., Ocean, NJ. ELM provides quality elder care planning and management services to older adults and their families. Please visit www.elderlifemanagement.org or call (732) 493-8080 for more information.