

Richard A. Courtney, CELA
Certified Elder Law Attorney
4400 Old Canton Road, Suite 220
Jackson, Mississippi 39211
601-987-3000 or 1-866-ELDERLAW
For more Articles, go to: www.elderlawms.com

Holiday Helps for Alzheimer's Caregivers

This article is a follow-up to our article two issues back, entitled “Holiday Blues and Depression in the Elderly,” which focused on the different symptoms of dementia and depression and on how to help the older adult who experiences depression. This article, taken from the National Institute on Aging, will help caregivers plan for positive holiday experiences for their loved ones who have dementia.

The holiday season is a time for visiting and reconnecting with family, friends and neighbors. Sometimes this season can be sad or stressful for those caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease. Here are some hints to help ensure a more enjoyable holiday season:

Holidays can be meaningful, enriching times for both the person with Alzheimer's and family. Maintaining (or adapting) old family rituals and traditions helps all family members feel a sense of belonging and family identity. For a person with Alzheimer's, this link with a familiar past is reassuring and builds self-esteem.

Set your own limits early, and be clear about them with others. You do not have to live up to the expectations of friends or relatives. Your situation is different now.

Encourage family and friends to visit even if it is painful for them. Keep the number of persons visiting at one time to a minimum, or try a few people visiting quietly with the person in a separate room. Most people with Alzheimer's can pull it together for brief periods, if they have adequate private rest in between.

Try some simple holiday preparation with the person several days ahead. Just observing your preparations will familiarize him/her with the upcoming festivities; if they participate with you, they experience the pleasure of helping and giving as well as the fun of anticipation and reminiscing.

Prepare potential quiet distractions (a family photo album or a simple repetitive chore like cracking nuts) to use if the person with Alzheimer's becomes upset or over-stimulated.

Try to avoid situations that further confuse or frustrate many people with Alzheimer's:

- crowds of people who expect the person to remember them
- noise, loud conversations or loud music
- strange or different surroundings

- changes in light intensity—too bright or too dark
- over-indulgence in rich or special food or drink (especially alcohol)
- change in regular routine and sleep patterns

Try scheduling activities, especially some outdoor exercise, early in the day to avoid the fatigue from added activity at the end of a long day. Familiar holiday music, storytelling, singing or church services (even on TV) may be especially enjoyable.

If you receive invitations to holiday celebrations which the person cannot attend, go yourself. Enjoy the chance to be with friends and family who love you and enjoy your company, with or without your relative.

Preparing the Guests

Explain as clearly as possible what has happened to the person with Alzheimer's. Give examples of the unusual behaviors that may take place: incontinence, eating food with fingers, wandering, hallucinations.

Explain that it may not be appropriate behavior but the person with Alzheimer's has a memory loss and does not remember what is expected and acceptable.

Remind the visitor through phone calls or letters to be understanding and not to shun the person with Alzheimer's.

If this is the first visit since the person became severely impaired, tell the visitor the visit may be painful. The memory-impaired person may not remember the guest's name or relationship.

Explain that memory loss is the result of the disease and it is not intentional.

Stress with the guests that what is important is the meaningfulness of the moment spent together and not what the person remembers.

Preparing the Memory-Impaired Person

Begin showing a picture of the guest to the person a week before the arrival.

Spend more time each day explaining who the visitor is while showing the picture.

Arrange a phone call for the person with Alzheimer's and the visitor. The conversation may help both. The call gives the visitor an idea what to expect and gives the memory-impaired person an opportunity to familiarize him/herself with the visitor.

Keep the memory-impaired person's routine as close to normal as possible.

During the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, guard against fatigue and find time for adequate rest.

For more information about Alzheimer's Disease, visit the [Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral \(ADEAR\) Center website](#), call 1-800-438-4380 or e-mail: adear@nia.nih.gov

ADEAR is a service of the National Institute on Aging, part of the National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

For help with planning for the care of your loved ones who have dementia or other chronic health problems, contact Richard Courtney or his Geriatric Care Manager, Leigh Leverette, BA, CMC, at 866-ELDERLAW(353-3752).

We wish you a Merry Christmas and blessed Holiday Season!