

Surviving the Holidays with our Loved Ones

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Anyone who works with older adults that have memory impairment or behavioral problems may be especially anxious over their loved ones' holiday experience. Studies of these Elders and their reactions have shown a number of ways that over stimulation; and, the resulting problems can be prevented or controlled. Just in time for the holidays, these are suggestions on how caregivers can help their aging loved ones with these types of difficulties, and their family members, get the most enjoyment out of holiday gatherings.

- If the loved one is vulnerable to over stimulation, limit the number of activities or length of time in which they are included such as, don't let holiday dinners drag on for hours or an endless stream of visitors.
- Establish a quiet room in the home so that the senior can step out of the hustle and bustle for a calm moment.
- Budget in naptime, especially if your loved one is accustomed to daily rest periods.
- Assign a family member to be that day's companion to monitor the emotional status of them and be certain that they are still feeling comfortable. Or share the companion duties with other family members in two-hour shifts.
- If the get-together is in the home of the person with memory impairment or behavioral problems, don't rearrange the furniture. Re-arrangement can cause confusion and anxiety. If the gathering is in a new place, remove slippery throw rugs and other objects that impair mobility stability. Additionally, you may want to take a couple of the senior's photos or other objects with you so that they feel some sense of security of being in an unfamiliar location.
- Don't distribute an excess of sweet finger foods, especially if your loved one has a problem with impulse control. Too many sweets can result in sugar-induced hyperactivity or an upset stomach.
- Be mindful of alcohol consumption with the medications your senior may be taking. Over consumption of alcoholic beverages can provoke problem behavior or interfere with their medications.
- Involve your loved one in helpful preparation tasks, such as folding napkins or peeling potatoes. This aids self-esteem and helps your loved one feel a sense of contribution to the day's celebrations.
- Engage everyone, including the memory-impaired senior, in reminiscing. Individuals with short-term memory problems can recall the past even though they can't remember recent events. By engaging your loved ones to talk about the past, families can help younger members discover their roots; and, the memory-impaired Elder will feel validated for their perspective on family history.
- Avoid criticism that can embarrass or discredit your loved one such as, when they forget a recent conversation. Refrain from asking or using expressions such as, "Don't you remember?, It was only yesterday, dad!, I already told you that!, We just discussed this issue., or I don't know why I have to keep reminding you?".
- Be certain to maintain the regular medication schedule and/or other usual activity such as watching a favorite news broadcast or taking a walk after dinner.

Maintaining their regular routine helps avoid anxiety and the feeling of displacement.

- If you're traveling by air, plan on how much time you'll need -- then double it. Rushing is very stressful for you and them. Airport services, such as wheelchair accommodations, might be in short supply with the heavy load of travelers during the holiday season.
- If you're driving, brief stops are also critical for those with arthritis, edema, or any circulation health problems. These individuals need to stand or walk about every 2 hours so that circulation is not impaired and swelling in the lower limbs is kept to a minimum.

All of these suggestions need to be individualized for each person and their family. Sometimes, our senior folks can get lost in the shuffle and the chaos of what is supposed to be a happy family gathering. And most of all, don't forget to hug often reinforcing your sense of gratitude for your loved one being with you on this special day.