



Between Friends

Thoughts on Caregiving

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Coping with the Holidays: Survival Strategies for Caregivers

Thanksgiving already?!? I don't know about you, but I just am not ready for the holidays to be starting!

As caregivers, many of us face enough challenges in our "usual," ordinary, every day lives. Thoughts of having to deal with the holidays on top of everything else can be positively overwhelming.

If we can barely get through the day sometimes as it is, how in the world can we get through the holidays? How can we maintain our usual family traditions?

Well, sometimes, we can't. And that can bring up all sorts of feelings – sadness, grief, or anger that our family members and our lives can't be as wonderful as they once were or should have been. Dread or fear that our loved ones may disrupt family events, or that we will draw criticism and unsolicited advice from family members and friends who just don't understand what we go through every day as caregivers.

We can feel trapped. Reluctant to have family or friends over, or reluctant to visit family and friends, not knowing whether it's going to be a "good day" or a "bad day" for our care receivers – or for ourselves.

Is it still possible to enjoy the holidays? With some advance planning, absolutely.

Here are some things to consider:

Get Real!

Sometimes, we can be our own worst enemy, having unrealistic expectations for ourselves and for our family members. The perfect meal, the perfect gifts, the perfect family gathering, the perfectly behaved children and adults.

Get Real!

There are no perfect families. No perfect caregivers. And no perfect care receivers.

Then again, dreading the holidays as disasters in the making can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. If you expect things to go badly, they probably will. Attitude is everything.

Maintain Routine

Keep mealtimes, bedtimes, and other daily routines as close to "usual" times as possible. Easier said than done, I know, but routine is particularly important for those with memory loss.

Involve Your Loved Ones

Don't exclude your loved ones from continued participation in holiday traditions. Whether you're caring for an aging family member with memory loss or a cranky grandchild, know your loved ones' limitations. Some people do very well attending holiday concerts and liturgical celebrations. Some don't. Sometimes, you just don't know until you try. Be prepared by trying to sit on an aisle (preferably near a bathroom) in case you need to leave.

Be Realistic and Flexible

Give yourself permission to say no – preferably, guilt-free. Do only what you can and want to do. Don't expect to single handedly maintain every one of your family's holiday traditions. Maybe it's time to let someone else take over, or to start some new traditions.

Expect the Unexpected

Anticipate adverse reactions. Holiday decorations and family gatherings can be over-whelming for those with memory loss, as well as for little ones.

Be prepared with a quiet room, soothing music, family photos, treats or other things that can provide your love one (or you!) with comfort, to help her or him (or you!) get through the rough spots.

Everyone has good days and bad days, as well as better parts of the day. People can usually respond to changes in routine when they are rested. Some people, particularly those with memory loss, are more alert in the mornings and become more confused as the day goes on. Other people do better after their morning dose of caffeine, or in the early afternoons. Try to plan family events accordingly.

Communicate

It's difficult to care for other when you don't take care of yourself. Need time away from care demands? Speak up! Seek help when you need it, from family or friends. Use adult day services. Try in-home respite – someone to stay with your loved one while you do errands.

Maintain Your Sense of Humor

If you don't have one, find one! Read the daily comics. Watch old videos, or look at old family photo albums or videos. Buy a cartoon or joke book.

Sometimes, people with memory loss will find great humor in something that totally escapes us, or will laugh in response to the laughter of those around them. Whether they (or we) understand what they're laughing about doesn't matter. They're happy! Accept it! Laughter is, indeed, one of the best and least expensive medicines around.

Enjoy a laugh with those you love!

A Friend's House Adult Day Services

A program of Catholic Services of Macomb

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