



Emotional Health for the Holidays

The holidays can be a wonderful and special time of year but can also be stressful and overwhelming. DAA Board member, Dr. Susan Wehry, a geriatric psychiatrist, provides helpful information about managing emotional health over the holidays. Special thanks to Laurie Scherrer and John-Richard Pagen, who are living with dementia, for compiling the tips.

Why do you think holidays are such an emotional time for people?

For some, this time of year is full of joyful anticipation; for others, it's met with dread. Holidays are typically a time of great expectations and powerful memories. Some memories may trigger a wish for a different time.

Family and friends gather, sometimes after long separations. Holiday TV specials would have us believe that these reunions are always happy or at least have

happy endings; real life is usually more complicated. And with everybody's best foot going forward on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, others' lives may seem better than our own.

And then of course there's usually an abundance of music piped into every air space. Music gets our attention and always activates some feelings. When shopping, music may be uplifting or mildly annoying. At home or in the car, listening to one's favorite music can awaken forgotten memories and feelings of intense pleasure, joy or sadness.

Any good tips on how to deal with the sense of loss about how things used to be?

Reminiscing about previous holidays can trigger sadness or regret at the loss of what was. This is true for people with and without dementia. I encourage families to acknowledge the loss. It's ok to feel sad. To name the loss, and let it go. If it's not pushed aside, it is more likely to pass.

Reminiscing about previous holidays can also trigger good feelings as one recalls the joys and laughter of days gone by. Then zero in on the present moment, on what *is*, rather than what *isn't*. Seeing the positive present helps balance and supersede the sense of loss.

In other words, be present in the present moment. It's ok to acknowledge what's different and to focus on what is positive now. Favorite familiar songs may trigger laughter and tears. Families can let it all in. If some music causes distress in either the care partner or the person living with dementia, no need to play it again.

Is all this attention on emotional health really necessary?

Taking stock of one's emotional health and stress levels prior to and during the holidays can help us prepare. Unchecked stress has a particular effect on mind and body and can lead to poorer health. Unchecked stress leaves us more vulnerable to becoming depressed. Simply knowing the holidays can trigger stress and the blues can help you plan to reduce it.

Everyone has different triggers but the top five are probably:

- Family dynamics and unresolved conflict
- Food. Too much of a good thing or altered eating rituals.
- Finances. Trying to meet everyone's expectations, even if unrealistic.
- Fun. Too little sleep.
- Forgetting one's own needs.

Planning helps us take charge of our health habits and can help us experience more joy and wellbeing. Be realistic. Ask for help. Create new and simpler rituals.

Much of what happens in life is beyond our control; taking stock of our emotional health now, allows us to make plans and make choices about the things we can control.

How should I prepare family members and friends for changes in the person living with dementia?

First, ask the person living with dementia if there's anything they'd like you to let others know. Second, focus on what works, not what's wrong. What the person living with dementia likes to do and what he or she still does well. So, for example, one may say to family members something like: 'Dad still really enjoys looking at old albums. For short periods of time'. Mom really enjoys walking in the neighborhood. She appreciates it when I say hello to the neighbors and use their names so she doesn't have to come up with them.' 'Mom likes to nap in the afternoon. She calls the shots on when to get up and go to bed.' Dad still enjoys conversation and may rely on you to keep it up. One on one works best'.

Crowds are often distressing. We probably all have our limit! It's individualized, but people living with dementia may find themselves more easily overwhelmed by too many visitors, especially all at once. The size of gatherings may need to be modified, or a quiet area provided for the person living with dementia to get away to. Reminding all of the need to keep the environment as calm and predictable as possible may help insure a better time for everyone.

Any additional tips on how to navigate the holidays and avoid the blues?

Yes.

- Do things you enjoy; scrap those you no longer enjoy.
- Learn to say no. Set boundaries. Take a breather when you need to. Don't hesitate to ask for help before you need it.
- Keep as many health habits steady as you can.
- Practice forgiveness. With stress and activity levels high, the holidays are not the best time to address grievances. They'll wait for a more appropriate time!
- Be patient and understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too
- When visiting, don't hesitate to ask a host to turn off animated or noisy decorations if they're distressing. Ask if there's a quiet area to chill in. Have headsets handy to listen to music or mute the noise. Bring something tactile that is calming. Agree on a signal with your care partner to designate when it is time to go. Have an exit strategy in mind before you go.
- Before you go shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend on gifts and other items. Stick to your budget! If you don't, you could feel anxious and tense for months afterward as you struggle to pay the bills.
- Expect travel delays, especially if you're flying. Take a good book or magazine or headphones to pass the time rather than grabbing more screen time!
- Surround yourself with love.

