

6 Tips to Make the Holidays Less Stressful & More Enjoyable

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I've always loved the holidays – the gathering of family and friends, the traditions, the presents! But after my father died and my mother's dementia made it necessary for her to move into an assisted living community and then to a nursing home, my holidays changed dramatically. Though initially difficult and emotional, I found that by changing my mindset – looking at it as creating new “traditions” rather than dwelling on how things “used to be” – and some advanced planning, the “new” holidays have created some good memories, too. And I felt a lot less stressed and guilty!

If you have taken on caregiving responsibilities, have a loved one in an assisted living community or nursing home, or are simply beginning to realize that your parents are aging and may not be around for many more holidays, here are 6 tips that will help make the holidays happier, less stressful, and preserve family traditions.



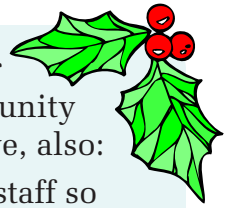
1 Whether you're going to your aging loved one's house or they're coming to yours, the holidays are a wonderful opportunity to open the lines of communication and learn more about your family history.

- ❖ When the group is gathered (at dinner, for example), encourage each person – even the youngest child and non-family members – to share their favorite holiday memories. For example:
 - ❖ How they celebrated as children
 - ❖ Their favorite gift and why
 - ❖ Their favorite holiday memory
 - ❖ Their favorite holiday food
- ❖ Take advantage of any opportunity that arises, such as while preparing dinner or wrapping presents. While these stories are fun and informative for the whole family to hear, don't force a group activity.
- ❖ Slow down the day. Ask that only one person (including the children) opens a present at a time. It gives everyone the pleasure of seeing the gifts being opened and reduces the activity level which makes the atmosphere feel more relaxed.



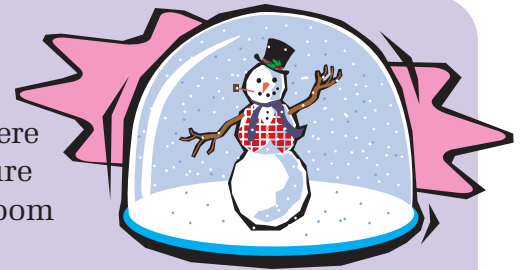
3 If your loved one is coming to your home from an assisted living community or nursing home, in addition to the above, also:

- ❖ Confirm holiday meal times with the staff so that you can pick up your loved one before the meal has started and return them in time for the evening meal.
- ❖ Make sure you have all meds and (extra) supplies your loved one will need.
- ❖ The elderly get cold more easily so suggest they dress in layers and bring an extra sweater. You may also want to have an extra sweater or blanket on hand at your house.
- ❖ If your loved one has dementia, it's important to make the atmosphere as relaxed as possible – too much excitement can make them anxious and agitated.
- ❖ Talk with your other guests – especially siblings – about their needs and expectations and negotiate – in advance – any differences around what's best for your loved one.
- ❖ Talk with your kids about your loved one's situation (for example, they may not remember them or may have physical limitations or issues) and coach them on how to handle it.
- ❖ If your loved one has an aide, decide in advance whether s/he will be needed for the day and make appropriate arrangements.
- ❖ Allow family and friends to help you. If you don't get any offers of help, ask for it. Divide up the caregiving duties, clarify the scope of each, and ask each person which one they'd like to take.



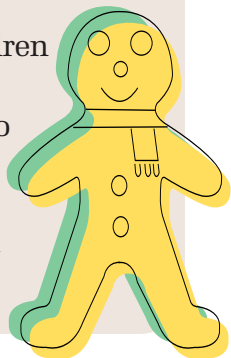
2 If your loved one is coming to your home, keep in mind:

- ❖ Too much noise, activity, and hustle and bustle can be overwhelming for the elderly. Set aside a "quiet place" where anyone can go to get away from the activity. (But make sure that it isn't a place that will displace others, such as the room with the television.)
- ❖ Don't over schedule the day. "Sharing" flows best during the down time.
- ❖ Prepare as much as you can in advance so you have longer periods of "calm" time.
- ❖ Put in those safety aids you've been thinking about (such as grab bars in the bathroom and/or lighting in dark hallways and stairs).



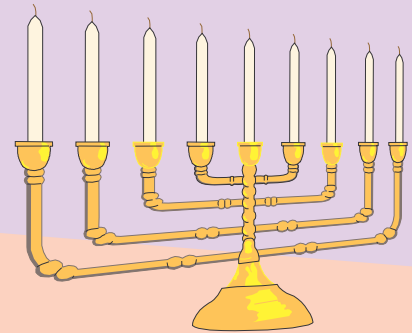
4 If you're visiting your loved one at the assisted living community or nursing home:

- ❖ Unless you're planning to eat with them (and made arrangements in advance), confirm holiday meal times so your visit doesn't conflict.
- ❖ If possible, arrive an hour or two before mealtime so you have an opportune time to leave.
- ❖ Try to coordinate schedules if other family members who will also be visiting. You may want to plan the visits at different times so that your loved one has company throughout the day.
- ❖ If you visit all at once, keep the atmosphere as calm as possible. Sitting literally lowers the energy level so visit in a location with enough chairs for everyone.
- ❖ If you bring children, talk with them in advance and coach them on appropriate behavior. Depending on your loved one's condition, you may decide not to bring very young children.
- ❖ If your loved one hasn't gotten gifts for the visiting children, you may want to bring a present "from" your loved one for each of the children that they can play with while there.
- ❖ Whether the children come or not, encourage them to make cards and gifts that can be hung or placed in the room.



5 If your loved one is living in an assisted living community or nursing home and you can't visit them, you might want to send a "holiday in a box". It's a fun way to share the holidays and the whole family can participate in its creation.

- ❖ A Chanukah box might contain an electrical menorah, gifts for each day, a draydel, and Chanukah gelt.
- ❖ A Christmas box might contain a small artificial tree with all the trimmings, and special ornaments, cards, and gifts.
- ❖ Include special "family tradition" items that will help them recall happy holiday memories.
- ❖ Set up a time for a phone call that's good for both of you. If possible, call in the morning and early evening when they may be feeling lonely.
- ❖ And, of course, make sure everything arrives well in advance.



6 Give yourself a gift. Allow others to help and remember to be kind and gentle with yourself – you deserve it! ■

© Copyright AgeWiseLiving™ 2001-2005 Barbara E. Friesner is the Country's leading Generational Coach and speaks on issues affecting seniors and their families. She is an adjunct professor at Cornell University, where she created and teaches "Seniors Housing Management" at Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. You can find information about Generational Coaching and AgeWiseLiving™ seminars at www.AgeWiseLiving.com or by calling toll-free (877) AGE-WISE.