

Anticipating the Holidays

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“It’s too soon! I can’t believe that the holidays are coming up so soon. There’s so much to do already, I am too exhausted to even think about the holidays and all the work that will mean for me. Can’t I just skip it this year?” –Karen M.

Most of us can relate to Karen, and her plea to “just skip it this year”. Many people feel overwhelmed, guilty and confused at holiday times. It may seem as if a bad trick is being played on our time, energy and emotions. Our task list seems to be endless, and yet we are wondering, how do we bring holiday joy to our loved ones, once again.

About Karen. . .

Karen is 58 years old, and is self-employed as an artist and weaver. She is married to Bob, 55, who is in a second career as a sales consultant for engineering firms. Their oldest two children are grown and have started families of their own. The youngest is in her last year at college and periodically comes home to stay for a few weeks.

Karen’s 86 year-old Mom lives in her own home, just two miles away. She has several health conditions that are worrisome, especially diabetes, low vision and arthritis. Karen has made it a habit to stop by to visit every other day, when she is in town. But Karen and Bob have a busy lifestyle with full schedules, and are often called away from home on business. Karen comes from a large family, and several siblings live close enough that they can check on their Mom when Karen is away, and be available for emergencies if need arises.

Bob and Karen have always hosted the family get-togethers, as they have a large, comfortable house. Because Karen’s business is especially busy during the months before the holidays, preparing her artwork, and attending shows and exhibits, Bob takes over as chief cook for the festivities, and the rest of the family all contribute by bringing dishes to share. In many ways, Karen feels fortunate, and yet...

Considerations for Karen

Family get-togethers and fun seem like they ought to go hand-in-hand. Often they do, but during the holidays, the atmosphere might get a little tense; in Karen’s case, due to her workload. The planning and preparation can be stressful enough, especially for the host. Mix in any pre-existing family tensions, and the celebration can quickly turn sour.

Consider also that Karen's Mom may be feeling isolated and overwhelmed even in the midst of family gatherings, because of her vision problems. She may not be able to keep up with so much going on at one time.

Family caregiving can shine an entirely different light on the holidays. Family rifts may be set aside for the sake of the care receiver. Family traditions take on a new significance and family members can be recruited to participate more fully in the life of their loved one. Everyone may begin to genuinely appreciate the time together.

What Are the Issues?

The main issues for Karen to think about follow. At each opportunity, I urge her to recruit family and friends to help.

- 1) Participation of her Mom and the family
- 2) Safety
- 3) Time for herself!
- 4) Location.

Let's discuss each issue in turn, and some of the available options. Some activities and suggestions to help Karen enjoy the holidays are also listed. Of course, Karen will have some ideas of her own, as well.

Issue 1 – Participation: "Tis the season to be jolly ..." The holidays are all about sharing time and doing things together as a family, making cherished memories. For family caregivers, the holidays also bring up feelings of sadness over loss and change in their loved one's ability to participate in the season's joys.

Option: Continue to include loved ones in holiday festivities, but keep expectations low. Tolerance for changes in daily routine and increased stimulation from decorations and noise may provoke an adverse reaction, so... don't overload with activities, and limit participation.

Activities to do together, as time allows and your loved one is able:

- Assist in making and sending cards
- Bake cookies and decorate them; package a few for gifts
- Drive around and see the lights and decorations

--Look at picture and scrap books, remembering past holidays

--Sing some traditional songs, hymns or carols

Issue 2 – Safety: Holiday hazards come in many forms: food, decorations, unnoticed wandering; just to name a few. Things that we have always enjoyed, such as scented candles, may become a danger to our loved one. By the way, these suggestions are helpful when there are small children present, as well.

Options: You can still enjoy many of the traditional foods and decorations. You can reduce the risk to your loved one (and your stress level) by making some simple adjustments in your presentation.

Activities/Suggestions:

--Put out only small amounts of treats at any one time. Vary the treats by including fresh fruits and vegetables along with cookies and sweets.

--Use soft, unbreakable ornaments. Avoid things with small parts that can cause choking. (Use the “Toilet Paper Roll Test” – if you can put the object down the tube of a toilet paper roll, don’t use it.)

--Turn on tree lights only when someone is in the room with your loved one.

--Don’t light your candles. They will be pretty, and the scent will still be noticeable, but you won’t have to worry about burns.

--Consider the types of live plants brought into the house. Some of them are harmful to people and animals, so you might want to use artificial plants.

--Try to keep your loved one’s walking area as unchanged as possible, and keep it clear of obstacles.

--Place bells or door alarms on all doors leading outside to help alert you when your loved one may be leaving the house.

Issue 3 – Time for YOU, the caregiver! Holidays add yet another level of tasks to caregivers who are already overloaded, but you can make adjustments in holiday routines to make the season more enjoyable for both your loved one and you. Remember that you are entitled to have a good time with your family, too.

Options: This may be an opportunity to widen the care circle. Gift a family member or friend with a chance to experience the positive aspects of caregiving, while giving yourself the gift of time, and a much-needed respite.

Activities/Suggestions:

--Lower your expectations. Make a plan; but when the day is not going according to plan – throw out the plan and start over. Give yourself permission to not have a “perfect” holiday.

--Take steps to reduce your stress level. Take regular walks, practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing, and find a yoga or Tai Chi class. Find something you like to do and stick with it. The time you put into reducing stress will be repaid to you many times over!

--Re-evaluate your family traditions and continue the most meaningful ones as much as possible. Against the upheaval and uncertainty of a caregiving situation, traditions are a stabilizing force. Everyone in the family—and especially the care recipient—identifies with them and draws comfort from them.

--Share the care with other family members. I can't say this often enough. Many people don't pitch in simply because they aren't asked to. In fact, especially if your loved one requires full-time attention, try the following two ideas:

1. While the family is around for the festivities, and after the main activities have taken place, ask someone to watch your loved one while you slip away for an hour or two. Take that time for a nap or bubble bath and relax! Who says you have to be there every minute?
2. Hire a care attendant, or ask a friend or family member to stay with your loved one while you go out and visit others. Don't feel guilty about take some time away so that you can relax and socialize.

Issue 4 – Location: Consider changing the location and size of your celebrations. It could energize the caregiver, and provide some family members an opportunity to contribute in a new way. Here's more ...

Loved ones living at home or with family members may not be able to deal with the stimulation and commotion that large, noisy groups create. The family caregiver may also feel unable to cope with the stress of hosting holiday festivities.

Loved ones living in facilities may not be able to tolerate more than a few hours “out”, since going away from their care units can make them feel anxious and insecure.

Options: Holiday joy, feasting and family traditions fill us with secure and warm feelings...all except family members who have dementia or other health challenges. There are things you can do to help make it less stressful on our loved ones and ourselves, whether you choose to host the festivities at home or take your loved one to visit others.

Activities/Suggestions:

--Keep the visits to smaller gatherings of 6 – 12 people, if possible, and for shorter periods of time. Lead your loved one to a low traffic area to visit with small groups.

--Have a quiet room where your loved one can go if things get too active or noisy.

--Provide a separate area for little children where their games, noise and super-activity will not distract and upset your loved one. Television and other noisemakers, with limits to volume, should be in the same separate area.

--Suggest another relative host the family party this year, or invite one or two relatives over early to help prepare dinner and assist with hosting.

--If going out, pack a bag for your loved one with a change of clothing, favorite objects, washcloths, and snacks for the car – whatever you might need in any situation.

--Make visits “out” no longer than 2 hours.

Last thoughts...

Remember that you are not Superwoman/Superman. You do have limits. Consider the many options mentioned here. You will find that you can still enjoy the holidays, and that they have become more intimate and personal, turning what could be a stressful season into a time of joy and love!

I can't say it better than Tim Brennan, a writer who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. He wrote, "As I think of Christmas today, I am so very aware of the sacrifices, the time, energy and commitment caregivers make in the management of a patient's well being. Your gift of giving is, perhaps, prompted by necessity, but it is driven by love. And love is truly the greatest gift, which teaches us that it must be given in order to also be received."

References:

www.alzwell.com/hints.html

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More resources

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network's web page (www.caregiverresource.net) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, LLP, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. Hanni is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network. a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of Mature Lifestyles.