

Caregiver Options Around the Holidays

by Hanni Epp, MA

Karla: “We brought mother to our home for our Christmas day celebration and everything was going well until she had a nap after our mid-day dinner. She woke up confused and agitated. We could tell she was frightened, and to tell the truth, it scared us, too. We didn’t know what to do.” --Karla S.

Have you had a situation like Karla's? From seemingly endless holiday tasks to wondering how to bring holiday joy to our loved ones -- many people feel overwhelmed, guilty and confused at this time of year. It doesn't need to be that way.

More about Karla...

Karla is a 63-year old retired accountant. She and her husband have one son who recently moved out of the home, but is still a frequent visitor. Karla is the oldest “child” in her family, and enjoys having the holiday celebrations in their home. There is a lot of activity, and sometimes Karla's arthritis holds her back, but she loves all of the traditions surrounding the holidays, and doesn't want to give up any of it.

Karla is also the primary family caregiver for her mother, who lives several miles away in a skilled care facility. She and her husband visit Mom every week, as well as take care of any financial or other needs. She used to take her mother out for a drive or to visit, but lately, her mother's joy at being out has quickly been replaced with anxiety. Karla is concerned about the upcoming holidays.

Issues, Options and Activities

Some of the issues are (1) Participation (of the loved one), (2) Location (Where to celebrate), (3) Safety and (4) Time for You!

In this article, you'll find a brief discussion of the issues and some of the available options. I've also listed a number of activities and suggestions to help you to enjoy the holidays. You will have many ideas of your own, too.

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 your loved one is able:

- Drive around and see the lights and decorations
- Bake cookies and decorate them; package a few for gifts.
- Assist in making and sending cards
- Look at picture and scrap books, remembering past holidays
- Sing some traditional songs, hymns and carols.

Issue 2 - Location: 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.

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.

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 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 noise makers, 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, wash cloths, snacks for the car – whatever you might need in any situation.

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

Issue 3: Safety: Holidays 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.

Options: *You can still enjoy many of the traditional food 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 4. 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:

--Take proactive steps to reduce your stress level. Take regular walks, practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing, find a yoga or Tai Chi class. Find something you like to do and stick with it.

--Share the care with other family members. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help to monitor and care for your loved one. In fact, 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?

--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 taking some time away so that you can relax and socialize.

--Lower your expectations. When the day is not going according to plan – throw out the plan and start over.

Last thoughts...

Remember that you are not Superwoman/Superman. You can not provide unlimited care to your loved one. You do have limits. Consider the many options mentioned here. You will find that you can still enjoy the holidays, and you'll find that they have become more intimate and personal.

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

www.ec-online.net/Knowledge/Articles/holidays.html

www.alzwell.com/hints2.html

www.zarcrom.com/users/yeartorem/articles/copingwithholidays.html

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.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver's Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, or e-mail at Hanni@wmichcare.com.

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. She 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*.