



Agency on Aging

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Caregiving During the Holiday Season

What is the most difficult part of being a caregiver during the holiday season? For some, it's the extra work that needs to be done when there isn't enough time in the day to complete what is already a demanding schedule. Some people would say it's the extra expense that holidays invariably bring. For others it's the feeling that the holidays should be joy filled and they're just not feeling it, in fact they may be feeling sadder than usual.

I think the most difficult part is trying to pretend that nothing has changed: the holidays will be merry and bright. Sometimes the holidays are less merry than we'd hoped. The people we love have changed. Our visions of sugar plums have been exchanged for medical equipment and incontinence products. It's hard to watch people change and feel powerless to stop it. It causes sadness when people we love no longer participate in the holidays. Each holiday that passes reminds us that time isn't standing still. We are on a path that doesn't have the ending for which we hope.

What can a caregiver do about all this? There is no magic wand but there are a few things that people have found helpful. Change your expectations of the holiday. Everything around you is different than in earlier years, why expect that the holidays wouldn't also change. Ask yourself what is realistic. Think about previous holidays and identify what aspects of the holiday you most enjoyed. Make a plan for celebrating that includes that aspect, but updated to reflect your present situation.

If holiday baking is a joyful memory, try baking one batch of a favorite cookie, with your mom. Not platters of multiple types of intricate recipes, just one favorite. The house will smell of baking and evoke happy memories. If it's simple enough there won't be too much time or money spent, so the project will be less stressful and the opportunity to enjoy it will increase.

If decorating the house is something you always enjoyed, make sure you decorate this year. However, maybe not in the same way. Don't spend precious time dragging out all your collections of decorations from the cellar and filling the house with boxes that have to be returned to the cellar (more work). Maybe this year you just purchase a few new, inexpensive items that bring joy and are delivered to your door. Open the package and set them out and you have the holiday spirit in your home.

Are you the host for the holiday meal? Maybe this year you talk with the guests about a potluck. Everyone brings their best dish. For the non-cooks there's always beverages, cheese platters, fruit baskets and pies from farm orchards.

The point is, everything has changed and holiday traditions have to change along with them. If you are willing to embrace change, there can be joy in your home during the holidays, or you can choose to be sad about what you've lost instead of joyful about what you have.