



Aging Wisely With Linda

Consultations/Consulting • Counseling/Coaching
Expert on Dementia • Speaking/Teaching

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Caregiving & Grief During the Holidays Ways to Find Peace!



Caring for someone with a progressive illness or experiencing the loss of a dear one during the holidays takes planning. Holidays are filled with traditions that prove challenging to say the least, particularly when you are also caring for a loved one. It is especially difficult for people heading into the fall holidays without a family member who passed away over the past year. Change is part of life but most of us enjoy and look forward to holiday celebrations even with the additional stresses.

How can one caring for someone with a dementia prepare and reduce stress and also find elements of peace and comfort? What about those grieving a loss and experiencing that empty chair at the table for the first time?

Here are a few suggestions for those who are caregivers, as well as those who are grieving.

- Create a mantra, saying something that gives you strength. A mantra is a statement you say to yourself, often and especially when you feel anxious. You might try “I am at peace sitting in nature”, “I have what I need and the support to feel at peace”, or “God is my strength”.
- Simplify. Reduce the amount of decorating but do some. Choose decorations that put a smile on your face. Decide not to send out holiday letters or choose to give gift cards instead of gifts this year. Opt for a potluck to entertain where you provide the place and others bring the food; or vice versa, where you bring something simple, like rolls, to someone else’s home.
- If a family member has dementia, you will want to limit the time spent at large gatherings because this can cause anxiety – not knowing everyone’s name or what they should be doing, especially if in the past they did the cooking or played Santa. It is advised to arrive at dinnertime and say your goodbyes right after dessert. Also, try to avoid alcohol for them as well – non-alcoholic wine is festive and so is sparkling apple cider.
- If you are assisting frail elders with gift shopping – share a catalog with them and allow them to make the choices with you doing all the paperwork.
- Activities like concerts, ballets, and plays can be attended with support from the theater if you are using a walker or wheelchair for your family member. Many venues have special seating and access; be sure to ask. For those with dementia I sometimes recommend leaving at intermission – 1 hour is usually long enough to sit and try to focus on a holiday performance. Instrumental music or choral works are better than performances with complex plots for those with dementia.
- Another enjoyable tradition for many is to enjoy a car ride to see holiday lights, and come home for hot chocolate and a treat afterward.



If you are grieving the loss of a close family member:

- Find a mantra that works for you – if even just for a few hours. Try words to help you focus on what you cherished about that person and not what you will miss. Allow yourself to move back and forth between cherishing your loved one and grieving for them.
- Honor the person who has passed through a charity that they would have supported. You might consider donating your time, such as helping out at a food bank. When we are doing work for others we have a little respite from missing and longing for that person.
- Try to find times when you can be in the “moment”. A walk in nature where you focus on your surroundings and nothing else is a great place to start. Even taking just 30 minutes will help with the loss. You will never forget your loved one. You are experiencing the process of healing from the deepest and early part of grief.
- At a holiday meal, you can set a place for that person this first year as an “honor”.
- If you are a spouse, you might buy yourself a gift or order flowers as if they were coming from that person based on what they did in the past.
- Make sure you are not alone. If you do not have an invite for a holiday meal, you can call friends and ask if they have extra room; alternatively, you can research community gatherings. You can invite people or neighbors to your home and order all the food. What is important is to be with others and focus on what your departed family member would want for you.

Wishing You the Peace of the Season and the Renewing of your Energy in the New Year!



Affirmation: “I find sacred times to just be in the moment.”