

Top tips for a happier Christmas

Christmas for carers takes a little more planning. However, some of these top tips should help to make the festivities run more smoothly

If you become stressed, the chances are that the person you are caring for will become stressed and vice versa. This is called emotional contagion ⁽¹⁾. Similarly, if the atmosphere in the house is calm, relaxed and pleasant, the person you care for will have lower stress levels.

Many of these tips were contributed by carers ⁽²⁾.

Preparation



Practicalities

Ensure you have sufficient medication for the whole of the festive period.

Shopping: Use online, off peak times/autism hour; send someone else ('what can I do to help...?'); ring stores to see what they can do to assist.

Christmas is a time for treats but these can be sugary, and a lot of alcohol may be offered. Prepare by looking for a range of low or non-alcoholic alternatives and low sugar treats – for example; twiglets, easy peel oranges, grapes, carrot sticks or hummus (if you have access to the internet just Google for ideas).

Put up decorations gradually so they are not overwhelming. Ensure they are not going to be knocked over easily (e.g. cards on pegs rather than on shelves). Ask for help for things that require fiddly stuff such as the lights or assembling an artificial tree.

Create a quiet room. Make this room cosy yet 'Christmas free' and low sensory stimulation.

For people who have a dementia, think about what Christmas means to them in their current perspective – might they appreciate going to a church service? Will they need help to buy presents for family members? Will they want to write their own Christmas cards? Would they appreciate a traditional meal and if so, at what time of the day?

Involve the person you care for as much as you feel they can manage. Useful tips might include having printed labels to stick in Christmas cards instead of handwriting them or using festive bags rather than wrapping paper.

Buy prepared food or make it in advance and freeze it.

Take people up on all those offers of help by asking them to peel and chop veg and freeze it, or maybe make your Christmas cake for you. People love to be asked to do something practical and productive.

If it is likely that you will be going to someone else's house, pack everything you will need in a bag (e.g. special cutlery, plates, cup, meds, favourite food and drink). Ensure your hosts are understanding and won't make a fuss if the person you care for needs some quiet space or has specific ways of eating.

Going out? Check for accessibility including parking, quieter times, flexibility of menu, accessible toilets etc ⁽³⁾





Managing other people's expectations

Speak to the family well in advance so they have a chance to think about how they can help you. Some people might be disappointed if you cannot host your usual gathering. Explain it to them and try to work out a compromise. For example, having a few smaller, quieter gatherings; prepare the family for the likelihood of the person you care for having to leave the room to go to their quiet space or that they might fall asleep and that this is not a personal comment.

Consider asking not for material gifts this year but gifts of their time or practical help such as cutting the grass.

There are many gadgets available to make life easier – ask for things which are going to be useful. People might be able to club together for larger items and will be less offended by you asking than by wasting their money on something of no use to you ⁽⁴⁾. Maybe getting you connected online might be a good present – a laptop/smart phone and time to help you get use to using it.

Manage your own expectations

Make sure you have some nice things for yourself – even if the person you care for doesn't recognise the importance of the time or the day, you can still have some treats.

Be flexible in your outlook. You may have to change your plans – try not to show your disappointment.

'Can I do something to help?'

Train yourself to say, 'yes please', and have in mind practical tasks the person asking could do, depending on how close they are to you and the person you care for.

These might include:

- Going along with what you want to happen.
- Helping with the preparations – see above.
- Watching what the person you care for eats and drinks to ensure they do not over indulge (e.g. on things that might impact on medication) and that they are getting adequate food and drink. Alcohol might interfere with medication, can increase falls and lead to arguments.
- Watching for signs that the person you care for may want the loo or to go to a quiet place and helping them to do this - or alerting you.
- Helping the person you care for to join in conversations, singing or games. Or taking the initiative and starting these at a level they know the person is comfortable with such as 'I remember when...'
- Helping you to ensure that family members (especially children) have a good experience and remember the person you care for as being fun or nice to be with.

On the day

Keep things simple and familiar – including the usual daily routine.

Be mindful of meeting the usual eating preferences of the person you care for– ensure there are familiar and favourite things around.

Decant treats into small bowls so they are nicely presented and keep the temptation to over-indulge to a minimum.



Make time to go for a walk – either by yourself, together, or with family/friends. Walking and fresh air is good exercise, lifts mood and improves sleep.

Having folks over?

Explain to people that even if the person cannot remember their names or their visit, emotionally it means a lot to them. People with dementia are often very in the moment.

Ask people to do things together rather than just coming to talk. For example, singing well known Christmas carols or simple games such as pass the parcel or making mince pies.

Anticipate how excited everyone will be: there will be more people, more noise and more comings and goings than usual. Conversations may be loud and fast. There may be background distractions. Consider what the person you care for can cope with. Are they likely to be able to follow the conversation? Will they be able to respond? Will their response be appropriate? Will guests be offended by anything they say or if they just leave the room? Speak to guests to ensure they are sensitive to the needs of the person you care for.

Either listen to music/TV or turn it off to talk to guests.

For people with dementia, remind visitors to keep introducing themselves and not asking too many questions. Short chats about the weather, what the visitor has been doing, asking for stories about Christmas when the person was young; using objects and simple games will enhance communication.

If the person you care for lives in a residential setting or their own home elsewhere

Talk with the person you care for (where appropriate) and the staff (if they have staff) about whether bringing them to your home is the best option. People might appreciate being somewhere they feel safe and secure in familiar surroundings so prefer to stay put.

Look for ways to join with events planned by the residential setting and find out if other family members and friends can join with these events.

Could you take your person out to a short event around Christmas, such as out for lunch or a concert?

Feeling isolated?

Consider leaving the person you care for with someone you trust while you meet family or friends elsewhere.

Look out for events that you can enjoy together.

Invite a few people over at a time for a short visit.

Use social media – Facebook, Alzheimer’s Society Talking Point ⁽⁵⁾, Skype.

Indulge yourself with presents of your own choosing.





Whilst the Christmas you have may not be the Christmas you would have preferred, with a little forward planning it can still be a Very Happy Christmas for you and the person you care for.

You may be spending Christmas quietly at home, or with family and friends, whichever it is these ideas should help you to have an enjoyable and as peaceful a time as possible.

Use this space to make notes about your Christmas planning. Add ideas from other carers and things that have occurred to you.

References:

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