

Alzheimer's foundation offers tips, examples for holidays

December 22 2017, by Laura Blasey, Newsday

The table is set, the tree is decorated, cookies on festive platters are wrapped in plastic.

Melissa Garofalo's home is ready with days to spare to welcome two dozen family members on Christmas Eve, just like it is every year. And that's a good thing, too, because for one of her relatives, Alfred Falzon, the holidays require a bit more simplicity and care. He has [dementia](#).

"He's at the point where he doesn't fully understand what the holidays are anymore," said Andrew Falzon, 35, his son. "But they just help enhance his quality of life. He enjoys being around people."

Across Long Island, thousands of families will celebrate the holidays alongside loved ones with dementia. More than 50,000 people on Long Island are living with Alzheimer's or a related dementia, and thousands more are their caregivers, according to the Alzheimer's Foundation of America.

"The holidays can be very stressful for families, with getting everybody together, and caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's or a related dementia can add to that," said Charles Fuschillo, president and CEO of the foundation. "What we want to emphasize is that it doesn't have to."

The foundation recommends families maintain their loved ones' routines, even around big events, and rely on traditions to keep them involved.

Caregivers should be open with their family about the needs of a person with dementia, from how far the disease has progressed to what the person's sensitivities, such as loud noises, might be. The foundation also suggests planning travel carefully to keep a loved one comfortable and finding ways for that loved one to join in, such as giving them simple tasks in the kitchen or choosing music from their favorite era.

For the Falzon and Garofalo families, accommodating Alfred Falzon, 78, who is Garofalo's mother's cousin, is about taking the holidays in at a controlled pace and finding ways to keep him entertained.

"Fred is very easy going, so we don't have to do too much for him," said Garofalo, 40. "We always try to make him as comfortable as we can."

Alfred Falzon, who lives with his son, was diagnosed with [frontotemporal dementia](#) in 2014, Andrew Falzon said. His father experiences confusion more than memory loss, his son said, and he can struggle to put his thoughts into words.

"He can't necessarily understand every word that's being said ... but if you look over at him every now and then and say, 'That was a good one, right?' - just include him in the moment—he gets a lot of enjoyment out of it," Andrew Falzon said.

Traditions and memories can be an important point of connection. Alfred Falzon, who was once a professional soccer player, takes joy from old [family](#) photographs from holidays past and his soccer-playing days, so Garofalo keeps those on hand to share with him.

Alfred Falzon is also a big fan of clearing the table. It's an old habit of his and they help him do it whenever they get together, his son said.

"It's really about taking the holidays at the pace that your loved one

wants to take it at," he said.

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