

Alzheimer's caregiving: How can I find joy in the holidays?

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Q: I feel sad around the holidays because I can't stop thinking about how things were before my loved one developed Alzheimer's disease. How

can I bring back the joy of the holidays?

A: Many people enter the holiday season with a mixed bag of memories and emotions. Rituals, familiar food and smells, songs and decorations all stimulate memories of people and holidays past. The season may loom particularly heavy if you have a loved one living with Alzheimer's disease. It's common to think about what has changed and yearn for the way things used to be.

It is important to realize that how you feel is a byproduct of your thoughts, and caregivers may be especially susceptible to unhelpful thought patterns during the holidays. While you can't control many of the realities of Alzheimer's, you can control your thoughts.

One way to help cope with your grief is through mindfulness. Mindfulness is the practice of intentionally bringing one's attention to the [present moment](#) and has been found to produce significant results in terms of stress reduction and overall well-being. Research has found that practicing mindfulness helps caregivers of loved ones with dementia improve feelings of depression, stress and overall quality of life in terms of their mental health.

Mindfulness practices help create some separation between unhelpful thoughts and your life in the moment. Think of it as refueling your caring center.

These steps can help you be more mindful and enjoy the holiday season:

Focus on breathing. Don't just think about your breath, but feel it throughout your body. Take some time each day to sit quietly, without distractions, and relax from head to toe.

Savor everything. Conversations, interactions, observations, meals—go

slowly and use each of your senses to truly absorb and appreciate all that's around you.

Allow your thoughts without judgment. Sit quietly, with eyes open or closed. Relax your mind and body. Let your thoughts come and go without judging yourself.

Watch the world with fresh eyes. Maybe you see the same things every day, but changing your perspective can make it all new.

Plan a holiday that your loved one with Alzheimer's can enjoy:

Avoid travel. It's easier on you and your loved one to stay home for the holidays. See if family can travel to see you to avoid disrupting the usual routine and familiar surroundings.

Stick to your usual schedule. Try to maintain your [daily routine](#) as much as possible. Keep meals and other daily activities, such as bedtime or exercise, on the same schedule. Remind [family members](#) that your loved one may need a break in a quiet area of the house from time to time.

Ask for help. The holidays are a time for celebrating with loved ones, so make good use of help from family and friends. Request a hand with [household chores](#), or ask each family member to bring a dish to enjoy for holiday meals.

Enjoy familiar family favorites. If you have favorite long-standing family dishes or traditions, keep them—they'll be familiar to your loved one. Look at old pictures together and listen to favorite traditional music. If your loved one is able, encourage participation with decorations or preparing a favorite food.

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