

As health charities supporting individuals with neurological conditions, the Alzheimer Society, the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, and Parkinson Canada have natural commonalities in the people they serve and support. A key commonality is the family caregiver who provides support to people living with these respective diseases. Our organizations have partnered to share resources and provide new information and webinars to support family caregivers.

Caregiver tips for the holidays

The leaves are changing, the days are feeling frosty, and decorations are making their way across homes and storefronts. Though the holiday season is enjoyable for many, it can be a stressful time for families affected by Alzheimer's disease or other dementias, multiple sclerosis, or Parkinson's disease. Unfamiliar places, large groups of people, noise, and a hectic pace can bring feelings of anxiety, fatigue, and depression.

As a caregiver, this adds to the other challenges you may be facing. For example, you may find that seasonal obligations are pulling you in multiple directions and adding to your stress level. Finding the time and energy to buy gifts, visit others, and even feel "the holiday spirit" can be difficult as the commitments layer on.

So how can you make the coming holidays a time to enjoy and connect with family and friends for you and the person living with the disease? Here are some tips that can help make the holidays more enjoyable - for everyone:

Make a simple wish list

To help you manage some of the holiday stress, try to plan as much as you can ahead of time.. Creating a list of simple and straightforward goals will allow you to set realistic expectations for yourself and the person you care for, and prioritize the occasions and traditions that are most important to you and your family.

Some items to consider include:

- ✓ Scheduling your holiday gatherings for dates and times that best suit the person with the disease.
- ✓ Letting your family and friends know in advance about your priorities and availability.
- ✓ Aiming for as few changes in routine as you reasonably can.
- ✓ Ensuring that you are well-supplied for the season to avoid last-minute running around (for example, have extra medication on hand).

It's also a good idea to make a list of doctors, walk-in clinics, and pharmacies that are open during holidays in case of an emergency.

Keep gatherings small and short

Smaller gatherings, with fewer faces to see and conversations to hear, will reduce overwhelming feelings of stress for the person living with the disease. For larger, longer gatherings, consider bringing the person

to the most meaningful part of the event, and designate a quiet room where the person can retreat to. Consider choosing familiar and accessible places for gatherings.

Get them involved

Have the person participate in preparations and tasks that have meaning for them. Are there any holiday activities that bring them joy, like making cards or wrapping gifts? Remember that changing abilities have not altered the person's importance in the family or the need to be included in special activities and events.

Travelling? Have a plan

Changes in the person's abilities can make travel challenging, but careful planning can help. If your holiday plans include travel, make as many requests as you can ahead of time, particularly with flights and accommodations. Most airlines have assistance services for those with medical conditions, and can provide special accommodations such as wheelchairs, additional legroom, and early boarding. If staying at a hotel, let the staff know about your needs and explain some of the possible difficulties you might encounter.

Long trips can be stressful for you and the person living with the disease, so plan ahead and give yourself plenty of extra time to get where you're going. Pack a few days before you have to leave, and have a doctor's note for any medication you carry.

Find time for yourself

Be realistic and don't overdo it—avoiding burnout and finding respite is key to enjoying the holidays. Spread your errands around, and don't feel afraid or guilty to ask for help. Take a look at your network—is there another family member, friend, or a neighbour whom you can ask for help? The holidays provide good opportunities to seek support from those you know. Should you be unable to find support in your personal network, remember that you're never alone—we're here to help!