

Dementia Holiday Activities That Lower Stress and Raise the Joy

By Paula Spencer Scott, *Caring.com* senior editor

Holiday stress can soar for caregivers whose loved ones have Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. And for good reasons: Your own already-**bursting to-do load** stretches longer than the lines at the post office. **Safety worries** intensify and the person who has dementia may want to drive to the mall to shop, wander away in a crowded store, or insist on resuming dangerous old habits or activities, like baking or woodworking. You may feel prickles of grief over things the person can no longer do (travel cross-country to visit grandchildren or set up the Christmas tree, for example). **Beloved traditions** -- especially lots of lights, lots of company -- may now be bothersome or frightening to your relative. And did I mention that longer-than-ever to-do list?

One solution: **Help the person keep busy and engaged with repetitive seasonal activities.** Repetition that seems tedious to the rest of us is often soothing to someone with cognitive impairment. These activities stoke feelings of accomplishment and pride. All good: Call it repetitive *de*-stress syndrome.

Some ideas:

Make decorations

- **Set the person to work stringing garlands.** All you need is a long heavy thread and a darning needle. Try stringing cranberries, popcorn, even O-shaped cereal (Fruit Loops are cheerfully colorful).
- **Fashion paper chains.** These require a bit more dexterity: You have to cut the strips of paper, then curl them around one another and staple. A good project to have an older grandchild supervise while the person with dementia helps in whatever way she can. Use construction paper or, for a really festive look, heavy-stock wrapping paper.
- **Make pomanders.** Clove-studded oranges to hang or display in a bowl are not only lovely, but their scent may evoke calming, happy memories. Again, they require a little dexterity but not much.

Have fun with food

- **Make cookies.** Someone once famous for her Christmas cookies may miss the kitchen activity. She may no longer be able to handle Pfeffernusse or a spritz gun, but together you could mix up a simple slice-and-bake dough (or do it for her in advance) and then let her slice the log and arrange the cookies on a baking sheet. Or set out colored sugar, sprinkles, and other decorations for decorating a tray of sugar cookies or gingerbread men you've already cut-out. (Kids love this, too.)

- **Crack nuts.** Put the person to work with an old-fashioned nutcracker and a big bowl of walnuts, pecans, and Brazil nuts. A nice, soothing activity during family gatherings. *

Make a soothing atmosphere.

- **Stock up on classic holiday movies.** Favorites to put in your Netflix queue or pick up cheap at the local superstore: "*It's a Wonderful Life*," "*Miracle on 34th Street*," "*White Christmas*," "*Christmas in Connecticut*," "*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*," (animated Seuss version), and "*A Christmas Story*" (that's the 1983 modern classic about the boy who dreams of a Red Ryder BB gun). Invite your relative to choose if decision-making is not yet too fraught.
- **Put together a photo album of holidays past.** This one takes a little time, but pays off in hours of repeated reviewing. Better yet, get a child to jot down the person with dementia's descriptions of each photo -- faces, places, funny things that happened (you may be surprised what's remembered, though also be prepared for nothing to be recalled); insert the notes in the album next to each picture.
- **Play holiday music throughout the day.** Mental grooves are deep for these tunes, which makes them especially soothing. Stick to classics you know the person is familiar with -- this is probably not the year to spring Bob Dylan's or Taylor Swift's new Christmas album. (Although you never know!)