

Special Occasions

Life brings moments of joy, along with celebrations that mark milestones and times of sorrow. People with dementia, their family and friends encounter events that are filled with activity. Whether the event is a wedding, birthday, bar mitzvah, funeral, holiday or a visit from someone far away, the special occasion is an opportunity to celebrate people and their relationships.

When a family member or friend has Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia, there may be a temptation to overlook special occasions because the family is busy with their caregiving responsibilities. If the family network is celebrating an event, they may wonder whether to include the person with dementia or if it is in the best interest of everyone to make other care arrangements for the individual.

There is not a single right answer to the question: How should family and friends of a person with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia plan for and celebrate special occasions? The better answer may be found by asking these questions: How can caregivers of a person with dementia assist the person to have a meaningful time at a special occasion? How can caregivers best care for themselves while caring for a person with dementia at a special event or during a festive time of year?

Tips for Assisting a Person with Dementia at a Special Occasion:

- **Remember that celebrating an event can bring feelings of joy and/or sadness to a person.** If a celebration reminds a person with dementia of events they were involved with in the past, they may think that the event being celebrated is from another era. The person may speak of people and activities from the past as if they were taking place in the present. Rather than trying to reorient the person to the present, talk about the past event and the person's memories of similar occasions. Enjoy revisiting the experience through conversation and laughter. If a person experiences sadness, empathize with them reminding them that they are valued, and then redirect their thoughts to other things.
- **If planning an event that honours the person with dementia, plan to hold the activity at the time of the day when the person is the most able to participate.** Many people with dementia are at their best in the mornings while others need a relaxed morning and are more able to take part in afternoon activities. Consider having an event with fewer guests or staggering the times of guest's arrival so those attending are more able to interact with the person with dementia.
- **Choose a place that the person knows for the event.** Having a familiar environment reduces stress and provides a feeling of well-being.
- **Whenever possible, involve the person in the preparation for the occasion.** Much of the pleasure of an event is the camaraderie of getting ready and the anticipation of the special day.

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- **If a person is sensitive to too much stimulation, consider including them in the part of an event that would be most meaningful.** If the person enjoys things that are formal or sentimental, consider taking the person to the wedding ceremony, but arranging for other care during the busyness of the reception or dance.
- **If the person with dementia is unable to attend the special occasion, consider bringing the event to the person.** Arrange a special visit from the bride or groom, retiree or person that the celebration is honouring. Plan for opportunities where other family members can visit individually or in small groups in order to avoid overwhelming the person with dementia.

Though the person with dementia may not recall all their past accomplishments or their roles in the family story, they remain the person who could regale others with a humorous story, the one who hosted family gatherings, the person who could repair anything or the family tease. Their changing abilities have not altered their importance in the family or the need for them to be included at special occasions.

Tips for Caregivers Planning Special Occasions:

- Each person or their family decides on the best time to tell others about a person's diagnosis of dementia. If family or friends who are unaware of the diagnosis will be attending a special occasion, consider telling them about the diagnosis beforehand. This enables them to be more understanding of the changes in the person's abilities. Consider giving them ideas of things they could do while visiting with the person so that the visit can be a positive experience for everyone.
- Plan ahead for the event by delegating tasks to others. This helps the caregiver to come to the occasion more energized.
- Traditions are a significant part of special occasions. Consider the aspects of the celebration that are most important to you and plan to continue those traditions. Think of ways you might simplify family customs. For example, instead of baking many kinds of cookies, choose to make the two family favourites.
- In the days leading up to a special occasion, maintain routines that are important for yourself and the person for whom you care. Take the daily walk, follow patterns of sleep and wakefulness, eat regular meals and plan to have times of solitude.
- If the person with dementia will not be attending all aspects of a celebration, arrange companion care so that you are able to attend the event knowing that the person is cared for and happy.
- Though a special occasion may be a time when family members who live far away are present, plan any family conferences about the needs of the person with dementia for a time when everyone is relaxed and able to focus on the discussion. If the person with dementia will be participating in the conversation about their care, have the meeting at the time of day that is best for that individual. If the person with dementia is unable to take part in the meeting, have the discussion at a time when the person is engaged in another activity.

If you need emotional support while planning or preparing for a special occasion, consider calling a friend, a community professional – such as a pastor, priest or social worker – or the Alzheimer Society in your area. Speaking with someone else can help in sorting out thoughts and feelings. As a family caregiver, look for balance in your need to care for yourself and your desire to provide a positive experience for the person with dementia and other family members. Remember that being physically and emotionally healthy is the greatest gift you can give to the one for whom you care and those of your family and friendship network with which you will celebrate.

The Alzheimer Society of Manitoba's mission is to alleviate the individual, family and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related disorders while supporting the search for a cure.