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PALOS VERDES PENINSULA NEWS • Opinion Columnist

Alzheimer's Whisperer: Dashing through dementia, tips for spending holiday time with loved ones



Lauren Mahakian

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By **LAUREN MAHAKIAN** |

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As we approach the end of the year, many of us will celebrate the holidays this month brings, both religious and secular.

And especially after experiencing the last two years, most of us will be ready to return to a sense of normalcy experiencing once again long-awaited traditions and special gathering with families and friends.

But this season of cheer can also be a season of stress, especially for those caring for a loved one experiencing dementia.

As much as we long to celebrate, our holiday traditions can often be a mixed blessing.



Much of this rushed environment is unique to this time of year creating a change in schedule. And for those of us who also have loved ones experiencing the symptoms of dementia, the holidays can bring about some challenges and give us a sense of pause with mixed fears and emotions.

There are emotions of what “was,” what “is,” and emotions about how our lives have changed and uncertainty on how to capture a more positive spirit.

After more than a decade of working with elders with dementia and supporting their families, I have seen first-hand how this time of year can bring about new and unexpected stresses and even discord among family members.

Many adult children will return to see their aging parent after a long absence and may be surprised by what seems like a sudden loss of memory and diminishing mental and/or physical capacity. They may encounter their sibling who cares for their parent with dementia, and may express shock and even levy criticism or well-meaning advice after they’ve been away.

Visitors are often unprepared for the extent of change and witnessing the “new normal” that may include everything from caregivers and food and laundry services, to new home settings, health professionals, additional expenses, planning for an uncertain future.

But even for those of us who are involved in the day-to-day caring for a loved one with dementia, interactions may include boredom and awkwardness with difficulty communicating as we use phrases like, “Don’t you remember?” or “What do you mean you can’t.....?” All of which adds additional stress on top of what may already be typical during this season.

Dash away the stress

We have all experienced 2021 as the second year of COVID-19, remembered with vaccines and hesitation.

As we are all trying to come out of isolation, we are still aware of the risks involved in larger gatherings, especially for the elderly. Rather than be frustrated by this, I suggest we embrace it as a blessing in disguise.

As much as we may desire to host large gatherings again, the person with dementia actually does much better in smaller settings. Large groups can trigger agitation and feelings of being overwhelmed by the commotion and the crowd. A Charlie Brown Christmas, so to speak—a

simple holiday season—is actually what we want.

This year, let us focus on enjoying the holiday season with a special awareness towards our loved ones with memory impairments! Let's just dash away this holiday stress following some of these tips:

Practice simulating holiday activities

If we have the ability to control the size of the crowd, we can spend quality time and greater engagement with our loved one.

Family traditions likely created some of the most enduring memories after many others fade. You can relive some of these. I always recommend stimulating activities to engage the senses. Here are some that may especially appropriate during the holiday season and which can trigger fond memories.

- Looking through old photo albums. Thumbing through a book with memories is mentally stimulating and tactile. Not that long ago, and certainly throughout much of the adult lives of many who now suffer with dementia, photo albums were how memories were preserved and stories passed down. Find these albums and enjoy them with loved ones at your side. Chances are also good these albums will have photos of holidays past, which is a great way to keep a conversation current.
- Baking and cooking are another great way to tap into memories. Both bring the smells and activities of the holidays that people remember and feel comforted by, forged by traditions over many years. If you are not a baker, beautiful smells can still be created in the kitchen with a few spices.
- Paper, markers and colored pencils can create new magic as decorations as well as conversation. Have fun doodling!
- Music is always a good for tapping into long-term memory. At this time of year, play that old holiday music. Use it while looking at photos, while baking or cooking, or an any time. Music is almost always soothing and calming. I recommend a playlist of no more than five to seven songs, but we might adjust the songs to get them right, each having meaning to our loved ones. It can take some time to reach the "music memory," so when your loved one responds, feel free to sing along.

Happy holidays, and best wishes to you and yours for the coming year.

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Author **Lauren Mahakian** | Contributor

Lauren Mahakian is a certified dementia practitioner, care manager, speaker and author, support group facilitator and podcaster. She is an advocate for those experiencing cognitive decline and for the families who love and care for them. In 2008, Lauren became the founder and CEO of Family Connect Memory Care, which provides care services and operates four Memory Care Homes in the Torrance and Solvang areas. Learn more at www.FamilyConnectMemoryCare.com or 310-383-1877.



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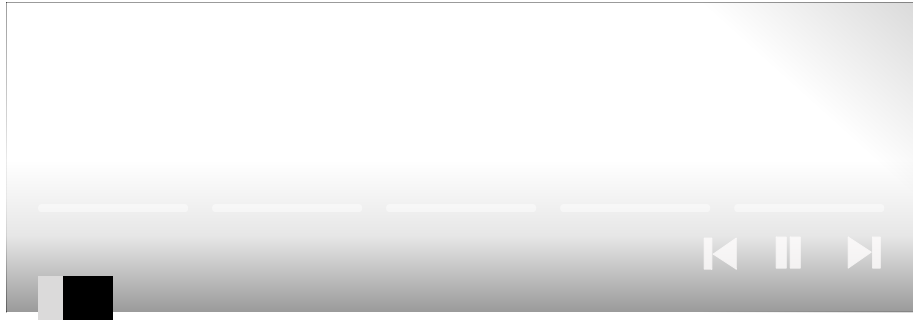
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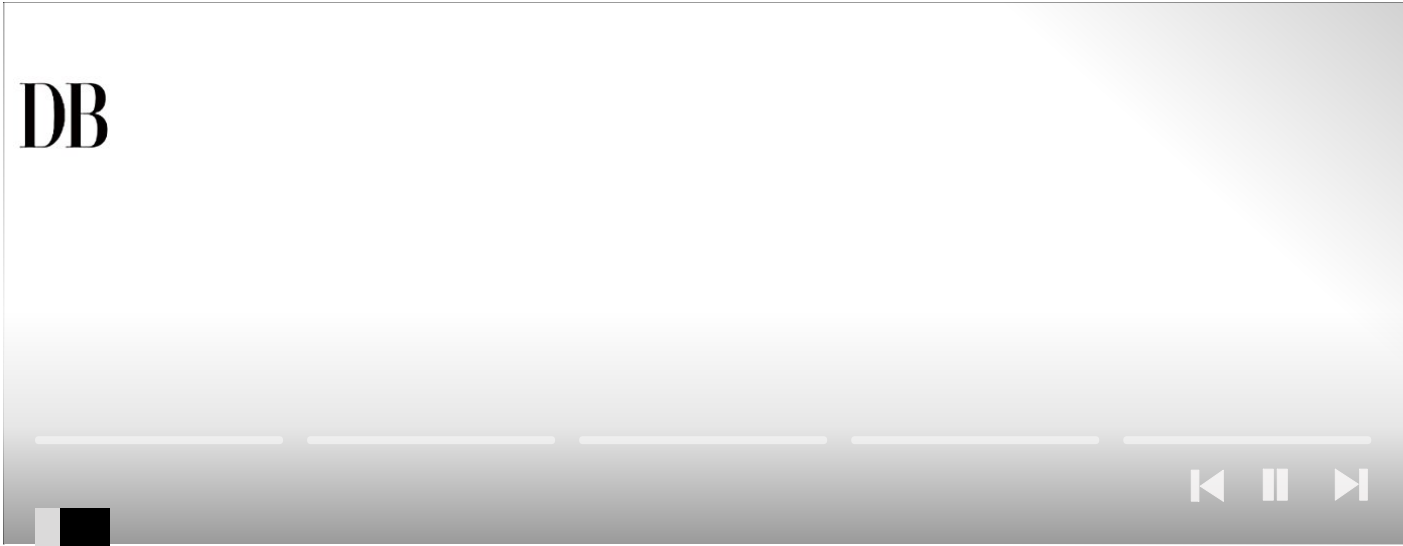
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