

His and Hers Holidays with Dementia

The traditional gender roles of the holidays

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No matter where you are from, the holidays bring people together. The celebration and enjoyment level of each group depends on the family dynamics and whether or not everyone feels included in the traditions and activities. With dementia in the family, it can be hard to keep traditions alive exactly as they were before. This is a time to remember Teepa's adage; "I am who I was but I'm different." This November, we are going to take a look from the male and the female perspectives to try to find ways to celebrate and adapt the traditions to make the holidays inclusive and enjoyable for all.

HERS

As I think back over holidays with my family, or with other families that I have joined over the years, there is a general split between the women and the men leading up to the big meal when everyone comes together. Honestly, I'm not even sure I knew exactly what the guys were up to, but it didn't really matter. My fondest memories of the holidays were spent on a stool listening and learning, spreading flour, or washing dishes with my sister while my mom, aunts, grandmas, or other women were creating the perfect meals spice by spice. The kitchen transformed over the holidays into a magical place of sugar and spice and everything nice where all of the women would congregate and work hard. As we worked, there was the familiar chatter about the food itself, but there was also the bonding time created with the aromas swirling and the deeper discussions on life. We all learned about each other and we all knew which dishes belonged to which master chef based on the signature style.

Though the day has come when my grandmas are gone and our holidays are split between different families, I still crave that kitchen time with the women closest to me around the holidays. When a woman in the family is living with dementia, how do you keep these traditions alive when it feels like she is gone? It can be tempting to keep her out of the kitchen for her safety and for the ease of preparing things, but that craving for the warmth of the holiday kitchen doesn't go away.

So, how do you give that sense of belonging when someone is living with dementia? To start with, go back to the signature style. What are the must-have ingredients to make the meal exactly the way she would have made it? Work to set up one dish to make with her using ONE STEP at a time. Be sure that you know how to make it the way she would have so that you can assist with making in case the steps become too frustrating. Next, limit the amount of extra chit-chat and music that might be going on while the two of you are working on that dish. With dementia, language is already a struggle, so adding extra noise is going to make it too hard to focus on the task. Once you are done with the dish, find a comfy seat in the kitchen in which she can sit back and relax. This turns a once active activity into a passive activity where she can still enjoy the kitchen

atmosphere. Feel free at this point to put on music and chit-chat again to keep the holiday as it was, but different.

The key to being able to enjoy the holidays with the women in your life who may be living with dementia is balance. Ensure that she gets enough one-on-one time and limit large group time as that can be overwhelming. Work to break down her favorite tasks into smaller steps and be ready to assist if the task gets too frustrating. Plan active activities and passive activities so that her energy levels can reboot before the next activity. Overall, be willing to go with the flow to keep things as they were, but different.

HIS

The last two months of the year brings with them many traditions, particularly here in America. Thanksgiving Day, Black Friday, Christmas, Hanukah, and New Year's. Each of these has many facets including parades, football, shopping, music, movies, food, gift giving, family get-togethers, and so many others. What we may not think about is how do these traditions affect us differently, particularly between gender roles? Traditions tend to be done the same way, year after year, but what happens when we are working with brain change?

While not all men will do the same thing, there are many gender norms that have been passed down through the years. I know in my family, Thanksgiving meant the guys in the living room watching football, dad carving the turkey before we stuff ourselves, and then the guys heading back to the living room to nap in front of the TV while the next football game came on. As we prepared for Christmas, my dad would bring in the tree, maintain the water in the base, and hang the lights outside.

With brain change many of these dad-type roles are still possible, we just have to know what we can do to support the men in our lives. Let's take a look at some of the examples I listed earlier and see what we can do:

- Watching football with the guys:
 - Things to think about:
 - Too many people in the room can lead to several conversations at once which can be tough to follow.
 - In the information age and HD TVs, the screen is moving fast and often has a lot of information that can be difficult to process.
 - Things you can try:
 - Limit the time spent with large groups of people. Try to maximize one-on-one or two-on-one time and make sure adequate time to process information is given and allow him to respond.
 - Instead of watching the game that is on, talk about a game you watched together in the past. Talk about some of the players he enjoyed watching, even if they aren't playing anymore.

- Hanging the lights outside:
 - Things to think about:
 - Brain change can create many dangerous situations when we are dealing with ladders, roofs, and trees. Loss of depth perception, balance, and peripheral vision can make these situations even more dangerous.
 - Maintaining a sense of control will be important for men who are used to being in charge, so offering to help and still deferring on less dangerous decisions will be key.
 - Things you can try:
 - Offer to be the one climbing the ladder while asking him to tell you where the lights should be.
 - If he's unable to go outside, let him tell you before you go out how he likes it.
 - Reminisce with him about Christmases past, maybe when he first started decorating his house, or even when he was young and he was helping his father.

It's important to remember that these men in our lives are still who they've always been, they're just different. We all look forward to the holidays and most of what we enjoy are our traditions. These are the constants in our lives that we can enjoy together year after year. Dementia may lead us to adapt our traditions, but we can still enjoy them.