The holidays are often a time for family gatherings where people near and far travel to be with one another. It can be a joyful time, but being with family, friends, and loved ones over the holidays can also be stressful and tiring. The pace is hectic, the days are long, and the routine is non-existent.

How do you feel when the holidays are over? Do you feel rejuvenated? Or do you ever feel like you need to go back to work to get a rest? Being off a schedule, eating too much, and staying up late can make a person feel sluggish and not your best self.

Now imagine how a person with dementia feels. Too much stimulation can create confusion and anxiety for a person living with dementia. It’s important to strike a balance of activities during the holidays that meets their needs but doesn’t overwhelm them.

Here are ten tips to help you make the most of your time together with extended family this holiday season:

1. Consider having smaller gatherings rather than one large one. Smaller, more intimate events with one or two guests may be less stressful for the person living with dementia than a crowd of twenty people.

2. Consider the time of day. If your loved one is at their best in the morning, host a brunch rather than a dinner, by which time they may be tired and not interested in socializing.

3. Keep the environment safe. Eliminate clutter, make sure rooms are well lit, and avoid burning candles.

4. Prepare your guests before they arrive. Let them know what to expect and how to engage with your loved one. Provide some ideas for conversation starters or topics that may be of interest.

5. Provide an activity that a guest can do with your loved one if conversation is difficult. Have some photo albums available for people to look at or a puzzle that can be worked on together.

6. Have someone stay close by with your loved one during family gatherings to ensure their comfort and to gauge how they are doing.

7. Stick to routines as much as possible. Allow time for exercise, a nap, or whatever activities the person normally enjoys during the day.
8. If you take the person out of the house, keep the outings short, enjoyable, and don’t rush around to too many different places.

9. Be kind to yourself and to other care partners. Set limits and don’t overdo it. It’s okay to simplify or to modify your holiday traditions.

10. Take the time to plan for the holidays so that you can manage the stress and make the most of your time together as a family.

Time spent with family to catch up and reminisce is more important than the food, decorations, or gifts. Focus on the people and let the rest go! And don’t forget to capture the special moments with photos that you will cherish for years to come!