

A Look at Holiday Traditions

*When Dementia Is A Factor
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Holidays can be times filled with joy for many reasons, one being that we have the opportunity to participate in traditions. These traditions can be unique to our family, social organizations or groups, and community of faith. Traditions are kept for a reason. One of the best reasons to keep a tradition is because it fosters a sense of community, belonging, and connectedness. Often we are taught these traditions by our parents or grandparents, elders in our community, or family. So what happens when the people who have held and taught these time-honored traditions begin to experience brain change? Do the changes and difficulties that can come with brain change impact our traditions? The answer is yes if we believe that our traditions must look the same to have the same outcome. But we all know that to help someone live well with brain change also means that those around them must do their best to make the necessary changes to help this happen. Traditions can be extremely important to helping families living with brain change continue to stay connected and promote a sense of wellbeing within the family unit. This is also the case for social and religious communities. Because, after all, the most significant part of tradition is connectedness.

If your family or community is experiencing brain change, meaning, if there is someone in that family or community who has brain change, then it will be important to look at the tradition and person with two sets of glasses. One set of glasses is to look back at the past, what has been important to the person living with brain change, and how they have participated in the tradition. You also want to remember if that person was and is an extrovert or introvert and if they liked being the leader or spectator of the tradition. Did they like to read the sacred story or say the prayers? Did they like to light the candles or put the star on top of the tree? Did they prepare the food or host the event? Who have they been and who are they now?

The other set of glasses is to look at the present person. Who are they now? How does the person living with brain change respond to crowds of people? Are they sensitive to light and noise? Are they able to manage being around a lot of conversation or would they rather be with just one person? What is their energy level and when would it be best to engage in an activity? What kind of assistance do they respond to and will the people around them be able to engage appropriately?

We also want to look at the tradition itself. What are the visual symbols, sights, and sounds of the tradition? Someone living with brain change will need more visual cues, less verbal communication, and they will also benefit from our ability to tap into what is retained long into the process of brain change which includes prayer, rhythm, music, and poetry. Old familiar songs are retained until end of life. Singing the first verse to a familiar song may seem repetitive to you but it allows the persons living with brain change a way to tap into emotions, have moments of joy, and connect to what has been important to them throughout their life. Does your tradition have these pieces and therefore opportunities for the person to be involved and connected?

Think of your tradition, who the person has always been, how they have changed, and where they can be involved and connected. Can a person who has prepared food all of their life be involved in the preparation even if it is in mixing up a bowl of cookies that we may never eat or to tell us if the food smells good? Can the person hold onto the star and tell you if you have placed it properly on top of the tree? Can they hold and hand you the candles as you light the menorah?

Traditions, time honored ways of connecting to what is important in our life, and ways in which we keep families and communities together, can be used to fill our days with meaning and find moments of joy when we keep in mind what is most valuable about life.

Take a few moments and think about the traditions that you have in the holiday seasons ahead and plan for adjustments that will make your tradition be special. Remember that we have the healthy brains and are the ones that will be able to make the adjustments and changes that will help the person living with brain change continue to be connected to the traditions and people that they love.

What is your tradition?

Questions to think about ahead of time as you prepare for a holiday season with brain change:

Who is the person living with brain change? Are they an introvert, extrovert, early bird, night owl, someone who wants to know why we do things or how we do things, a head first person or a heart first person?

What kind of brain change is present? Abilities, needs such as different ways of communicating, assistance needed, and ways to be engaged.

What is happening with health and wellness? Are there new physical challenges that will need some adjustments like time of day, energy level, medication interaction, and/or side effects that may change someone's ability to be part of the tradition?

Who has been involved and what was their participation? Does any of this require adjustments and what would those adjustments look like? Can the person living with dementia participate in the same way or do they require the just right assistance so that they still feel valued and important?

Is the environment friendly, familiar, functional, and forgiving? What are the sights, sounds, smells, and feel of the environment, and will they be overwhelming to the person living with brain change, or can you modify them to help make the experience positive?

Finally, we want to think about time. The time of day and is it the best time of day for the person living with dementia? What is their energy level and need for rest? How will you help the person living with dementia transition into and out of the tradition and what will the flow of the day look like? Remember that we all like to spend our days in a combination of rest, wellness, productivity, and leisure. For the person living with

dementia, being able to spend time in all four of these ways of engagement is important as well. However, people living with brain change will need assistance for this to happen and for them to spend as little time waiting for us to help them stay engaged is of vital importance.

Our relationships and connectedness to who and what holds value and meaning can remain a source of joy when we take into account what we know about our past, when we make accommodations for and celebrate our present, and when we acknowledge and adjust for our future. We hope that you have a wonderful season of meaningful and happy traditions!