

As we prepare for the closing of another year and as the holidays are approaching, it's a good time to do a check-in! Before we get revved up for a round of holiday activities, festivities, and commitments, consider how your partner is doing, how your support system is functioning, and most importantly, how you are doing.

As dementia progresses and we find our partner is still with us, yet remarkably different, we will want to do more frequent pauses and reassessments of how each of us is looking, sounding, moving, feeling, and doing. Taking a step back and estimating time use, energy use, and satisfaction is critical prior to embarking on old holiday traditional activities, planning additional special events, or gathering large groups of people together for interactions.

If any one of us is already maxed out, then adding one more drop in the bucket could tip the scales into distress! That does **not** mean no holidays. It *does* mean we will want to change or modify something **before** we take on something or someone else for the holidays. Getting *us* to a better place, before attempting something **special** will increase the probability that the *something special* is a good special and not a mess.

What are the key items to check on when measuring your holiday readiness? Consider doing this review with a good friend or support partner. Actually set a chunk of time aside to complete this assessment of what is happening. Encourage one another to pause and really consider what you have noticed about the last few months or weeks, not just assume it is the same as it was the last holiday season. Please make sure you both include the person living with dementia in the experience. Add their lived experience into the mix as plans are considered.

1. How are you each spending time? How balanced is the 24 hours?
 - a. How much and when is sleep happening? (6-9 hours per 24 is a decent balance point)
 - b. How much time is spent on taking care of body, brain, home, and hearth?
 - c. How many hours are spent at work or doing *something* that gives a sense of purpose—of value? (I matter, what I do matters to someone or something, I am still here for a reason.)
 - d. How many moments of pleasure, satisfaction, or joy are included in each day? What is the frequency, intensity, and duration?
 - e. How many hours are spent relaxing or being spiritually refreshed?
 - f. On the down side, how many minutes or hours are spent simply waiting on someone or something to get done or to happen? How much **down** time is there in the day?

2. How about physical wellness, health, illnesses? Where are each of you on a 10-point scale? (from barely alive to thriving)
3. What pain is present—physical, emotional, or spiritual? Is it being well-managed or addressed?
4. What physical, emotional, or spiritual reserves are available? What more can be offered?
5. Where are other system supports? What else is available and not being used, no longer available, or beginning to wear out or give out?

Now that you have taken inventory, where does that land you, your partner, and your support system? Are you looking great and ready for some holiday festivities, in a big way? Is each of you in the same place, or is someone in a different place and needing a change of pace this time around? If there is a low spot in the mix, what can we do this holiday season to balance things out?

Is it time for a break from the routine? Would little pieces of holiday spirit and pleasures be just the ticket? Or is there one or more of those involved who really needs something very different or smaller this year? Is it possible that breaking the season into small moments and very short, single sensory experiences would be a better idea for all concerned? Or is it possible that different members of the team will each need something different out of the holiday season to find purpose and joy this time around?

Pausing and taking inventory can make all the difference in holiday experiences this year. It could be, that like Santa or Kris Kringle making a list and checking it twice, there is as much fun and purpose to be had in having short sing-a-longs on Zoom as getting everyone together to have a holiday party. Preparing for the holiday feast by looking through the family cookbook, the pantry, and the fridge may be all that is really needed to celebrate the meal. Then, stopping in and eating with a good friend or faith community family for the meal could take the place of completing the rest of the traditional meal preparation. Perhaps there will be new moments of pleasure and joy without the work and waiting involved in a full-out gathering at your place or a long-distance trip to others.

Could there be as much pleasure and less stress with turning on a small crockpot of apple juice and cinnamon sticks as there is with a full-out trip to the local farm? Or would the car ride to the farm with the leaves turning or the holiday lights shining be the best match up?

The bottom line for changing abilities and special times...

Check in and assess in the moment, rather than assuming this year will be like the last. Make sure this season has moments of joy built in, and savor each one. Perhaps it's time to change—to stop keeping up traditions that simply fill us with a sense of longing or loss, or overwhelm our partners or supports. Instead, let's find or create new options or opportunities that satisfy or fulfill a sense of purpose and value, by doing less and liking more. There is a big difference between letting go of what is not working and enjoying what is possible, rather than enduring or giving up and simply grieving that loss.