

Valentine's Day: When a Loved One Can't Understand the Holidays

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Flowers and cards were a big deal to my parents, especially on Valentine's Day and their anniversary. Sadly, after dad's failed brain surgery threw him into dementia it was obvious that Dad would no longer be able to actively participate.

I knew Dad, if he could make that decision, would want to give Mom flowers and a card. I knew Mom would want to do the same for him. The only problem was, neither of them was capable of choosing a card or arranging for flowers to be delivered. And Dad couldn't even understand what the celebration was about. How do we celebrate special occasions when one or more of the people involved can't participate? Do we follow through, or do we pretend the special day doesn't exist?

Without celebrations, the light of life dims

If it hasn't been a tradition for your family to celebrate these special days with your elders, this is a good time to start. Even for "couple days" like Valentine's Day, there are cards and small gifts that are appropriate for adult children and grandchildren to present to their elders. Family participation takes a little of the pressure off the spousal connection so that as dementia steals an elder's memory, or a death is imminent, there's more to the day than just the couple's celebration. Then, when the time comes that your help is needed with their celebrations, you will already have laid some groundwork.

During their last years, my parents' special days would be considered by some to be a fiasco, if the celebrations were judged by traditional standards. Yet, I'll never regret trying my best to simulate the kind of celebration my parents had always had. Celebrations give life some texture. And if anyone needs something to make one day different than all of the others, it's people who are already coping with the indignities the aging process can bring.

Therefore, I did what I could. I'd buy them cards to give to each other and order flowers from an understanding florist. I'd give Mom the card for Dad so she could sign it. After futile struggles to help Dad sign cards, I found out I had to sign his name for him.

On the special day, I'd take Mom to Dad's room and I'd squat down by Dad's chair and try to wake him. Mom would give Dad his card, and I'd show it to him and read it, making it a big production. Understanding that something was expected of him, he'd generally nod his head and try to smile. I'd put the card for Mom into his hand and guide it to her. In this way, they'd exchange cards and sometimes gifts.

Some people would rightfully wonder what I thought we were accomplishing with these rituals. Was this just a sham that brought more pain than simply pretending the special days didn't exist? I will admit to an agony in my heart as I went through the whole process. I felt powerless to help my parents with the losses they had suffered. Yet, strangely, there was gratification in the routine. I felt, momentarily at least, as though I was doing all I could for them.

People with dementia are still alive. In my mind, it serves a purpose to honor their years of love and marriage on these special days, even if some of the process seems fruitless at times. In the case of my parents, we knew what was in Dad's heart. So, painful as the process of putting on a little celebration was, it would have been more painful to ignore the days. Family participation helped make the days special for my parents to whatever extent was possible.

What if the spouse has died?

The first Valentine's Day, anniversary, birthday or other special day after the death of a spouse is painful for nearly anyone. As an adult child, I think it's still a good idea to give the surviving spouse a Valentine from the family. Maybe have the grandchildren make cards, as well. Send flowers. Expect the expression of emotional pain and loneliness from the surviving spouse and allow him or her to grieve. Let your elder's response guide your actions when it comes to how much to do, but at least honor the day.

Caregivers can't take away their elders' disease or their grief. However, for their sake and ours, we can attempt to put a little light into their lives. Valentine's Day can be tricky, but you'll figure out what works for your loved ones. Your best attempt counts as a success, even if you aren't so sure you approached it right. The love in your heart is what counts.