

7 Ways Caregivers Can Create That Holiday Feeling Amid the Pandemic

Adapt old traditions, or start new ones, to help loved ones adjust

by Amy Goyer, AARP, November 19, 2020



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For most of us, the holidays will be different this year. For family caregivers, there are extra challenges as we struggle to make the season feel special for loved ones who may be isolated and grieving the loss of the usual traditions.

In a recent survey of caregivers by Care.com, 85 percent of respondents named the holidays as the primary time of year when their family comes together with an older loved one. More than 2 in 5 say they will not be able to see their care recipient in person this holiday season.

Many care recipients may feel depressed or abandoned, or have difficulty understanding the changes due to cognitive issues. That makes it all the more important for us to make the holidays as full of meaning and connection as possible for our loved ones, within the limits of safety precautions.

The good news is, there's no need to cancel the holidays this year — just make them unique! There are lots of ways to help ensure the 2020 holidays still bring comfort and joy.

Easing the adjustment

As caregivers, we need to balance our loved ones' mental and physical health, keeping them safe while also keeping them connected. Nearly half of family caregivers say the pandemic has had a negative effect on their care recipient's mental health, and three-quarters worry about the risk of COVID-19 exposure at holiday get-togethers, according to a new AARP report on how COVID-19 is affecting holiday plans.

While 62 percent of caregivers plan to get together with family at some point during the season, many of those gatherings will be smaller, shorter and devoid of physical contact, the AARP survey found.

"I am OK with a year off from hosting massive gatherings," says Renee Riley, a longtime caregiver for multiple family members in Columbus, Ohio, "but I worry about family members who live alone and face such loneliness."

Start by acknowledging that things are different, and validate whatever your loved ones are feeling, whether you agree or not. It's OK for them, and you, to feel sad, angry, disappointed or even relieved that some holiday traditions will be canceled or amended. Reassure loved ones that their health and safety are everyone's top priority.

But remember, too, that holiday activities help bring us out of our everyday lives, lifting moods and sparking good memories and joy. So, try to focus this year on the holiday things you can and will do rather than those you can't or won't do.

Making the season feel special

It's a complicated challenge. "Regardless of how much they 'understand,' traditions held for years will be broken this year," says Roberto Quinones of Tysons Corner, Virginia, a long-distance caregiver for his parents, who live in New York City. "How can we keep the positive outlook with remote parents we're not able to visit?"

Make it your goal to create shared experiences — for most people, that's what makes the holidays the holidays. Here are some tips on how to adapt holiday traditions to make them uniquely special this year.

1. Make frequent contact

If you generally call your loved one once a week, up your game. If your family gatherings were centered around the few days immediately surrounding a holiday, try spreading out activities over the coming weeks instead. These steps are especially important if your loved ones live alone or in long-term care facilities.

Marianne Parker of Quincy, Illinois, saves holiday greeting cards she receives, covers the signature with a sticker, signs the names of family and friends, and sends them to her brother, who has dementia and lives in a memory care facility.

"I'll have the facility give him one or two each day in December as though he received them in the mail," Parker says. "I hope getting a card each day may spark and keep alive a holiday feeling for him, and I'm organizing friends to go Christmas caroling at the facility, too."

2. Avoid all-or-nothing thinking

Feeling like holiday activities aren't worth doing if you can't do it all can leave you and your loved ones feeling empty. Some overwhelmed caregivers feel a bit relieved that certain holiday activities are canceled this year; others will adapt and focus on what is easiest, like holiday table linens to create a festive feeling.

You may even want to go all out more than ever for some activities — it's all OK. Just try to anticipate how your loved ones will feel and talk over plans with them if possible. If they balk at adapting old traditions for current circumstances, take a new approach and surprise them.

3. Focus on activities that mean the most

There is comfort in the familiarity of holiday traditions. Ask loved ones what seasonal rituals are most important and fulfilling for them, and get creative about ways to adapt them:

- Is the annual cookie baking a highlight? Bake and send a batch to your loved one, or make them simultaneously while on a video call.
- Are holiday music performances and religious services most meaningful? Find concerts and services on TV or online and watch together.
- Are certain vintage decorations a must, but you can't get to a loved one's home to get them out of the attic? Try to find something similar (you'd be surprised what you can find in online auctions), or buy a new item and ship it for them to enjoy.
- Is the traditional family green beans recipe what makes it a holiday meal for them? Make the dish, get dry ice and ship it!

4. Create a mood with holiday decorations

I used to bring my grandmother a little potted Christmas tree when she could no longer put up a large one, and her eyes sparkled each time. Caregiver Deb Kelsey-Davis of Downers Grove, Illinois, says it's holiday lights that give her parents a lift.

"I put my parents' lights and tree up," she says. "It makes such a big difference with Dad and Mom ... gives them such joy! We had a good time, too, reminiscing about Christmases past."

She's not alone: Just over half of U.S. adults plan to put extra oomph into holiday decorating to brighten up the end of this tough year, according to a survey by Porch, a company that provides customer-management solutions for moving and home maintenance professionals.

If you are avoiding indoor visits, ask family and friends to help with outdoor decorations your loved ones can enjoy from their windows. If they live in facilities, ask to put decorations outside their window for a daily reminder of your presence. Share videos and photos of your holiday decorations, or those you see in your neighborhood or online.

If loved ones are decorating in their homes, you can cheer each other on and chat while you work. Try sending ready-to-display items like a small decorated pumpkin, turkey toy, tree, menorah or other symbol of the holidays.

Decorations can give caregivers a boost as well. I'm getting mine out early this year because I need a little cheer, being 2,000 miles away from my sister as she gets ready for a major surgery.

5. Take your traditions virtual

Virtual connections can go beyond a short conversation. Do you sing carols, bake, create crafts, or watch *It's a Wonderful Life* every year like my family does? We're doing these things from a distance thanks to video chat apps like FaceTime, Zoom and Skype.

For example, we choose a movie and queue it up on our DVR or streaming device. Then we call each other on FaceTime, hit play at the same time and watch in unison, unmuting our phones to share laughs, tears or comments. It's the next best thing to being together!

Or you might set up a phone or tablet on a tripod so you can see each other and bake, create crafts, feast, play charades or trivia, or engage in other holiday traditions. Play digital games together, online or via apps. Record and save as visual keepsakes loved ones can return to, as you might make videos of traditional holiday get-togethers.

6. Shop online together

Help loved ones do their holiday shopping online, together or from a distance. Remember the old Sears catalog Wish Book? Create your own version by downloading or printing photos of items they might like, creating a document or notebook, and sending it for them to peruse.

7. Start new traditions

It can be helpful to focus forward instead of on the past. Make this a year to create new holiday rituals. Perhaps you could:

- build a holiday bonfire
- make homemade gifts

- meet for a walk outside
- cook the same recipes from a distance and compare
- read to kids or grandkids via video calls
- call each other while you have your first holiday morning cup of coffee

Those old family traditions had to start somewhere, right? Some of your holiday adaptations this year will likely become traditions!

Daunting as it might seem to make the holidays memorable this year for something other than their difference, in future years we may look back and marvel at how creative we were.