Making Room for Everyone at the Table: Dementia-Friendly Holiday Gatherings

Thanksgiving brings us together around familiar food, music, and faces. For a loved one living with dementia, the crowds, noise, and change in routine can also feel like a lot. With a few simple changes, everyone can enjoy the day, including the person doing the caregiving.

Every person's dementia is different, and symptoms can change from one hour to the next. Use what works for your family and let go of what doesn't. If your loved one has a primary caregiver, ask that person to look over your plans first.

Start small. If your family usually has a big, lively crowd, invite the people closest to your loved one to come a little early. That way they can visit before the house fills up. You could also plan a second, quieter gathering on another day.

Plan around their rhythm. Keep the meal close to your loved one's usual mealtime. Many people living with dementia do better earlier in the day. Plan the meal plus one or two activities instead of an all-day event, and don't worry if they arrive late or leave early.

Make the table easy. Finger foods like sliders, mini quiches, and veggie sticks are easier to manage than a full plate. You can offer to fix a plate with smaller portions. Seat your loved one next to someone they're comfortable with. Some people like being in the middle of things, and others are happier at the end of the table. Turn the music down during dinner.

Set up a quiet corner. A comfortable chair, soft lighting, and a cozy blanket give your loved one somewhere to rest if things get too busy. Name tags in large, clear print help everyone remember names. Ask one or two guests to watch for signs that your loved one is getting tired.

Do things together. Decorating cookies, listening to favorite songs from your loved one's younger years, or going around the table to share a favorite holiday memory works for all ages. Open-ended questions with no right or wrong answer, like "How do you give thanks?", often start the best conversations.

Let guests know what to expect. Ask visitors to say their name when they greet your loved one. They should approach from the front and get down to eye level if your loved one is seated. Instead of quizzing ("Do you remember the summer we spent on Deer Isle?"), share the memory: "We had so much fun that summer on Deer Isle." Short, clear statements usually work better than questions, for example "Here's your coat" or "Dinner is ready." Give your loved one plenty of time to answer, sometimes up to 20 seconds. If they say something that isn't accurate, let it go. Even if your loved one can't remember a name, they will remember feeling loved and comfortable.

Eating out? A restaurant meal can mean less work for the host, and a little planning goes a long way. Choose a place your loved one already knows, and book a late lunch or early dinner, before the busiest hours. When you call, ask for a quiet table or booth away from the kitchen, the bar, and the front door, and find out where the restrooms are. If you're comfortable, mention to staff that one guest is living with dementia. Most restaurants are glad to help, for example by bringing food out promptly or bringing the check when you're ready. Look at the menu ahead of time and offer your loved one two or three choices instead of the whole menu. Seat them facing a wall or window rather than the busy dining room, next to someone they trust. Bringing two cars makes it easy for someone to head home early without ending the meal for everyone.

Above all, be flexible. The details matter much less than being together.

Want to learn more? Dementia Friendly America, a program of USAging, offers a free online Dementia Friends session that takes about an hour, along with its full Dementia-Friendly Holiday Toolkit, at dfamerica.org. Many thanks to them for sharing these ideas.

If you're helping a loved one through the holidays, you're a family caregiver, and you don't have to do it alone. Read about the Family Caregiver Connection in this issue, or call us at 508-394-4630.