

Helping Seniors Beat the Holiday Blues

For most of us, the holidays are a wonderful time to share the joys of family life and friendship. But for many older adults the holidays can be highly stressful, confusing, or even depressing if their mental, physical and emotional needs are not taken into account. Older, frail family members can get lost in the shuffle and chaos of happy family gatherings. Additionally, there are particular influences that contribute to seniors being at risk for the “holiday blues.”

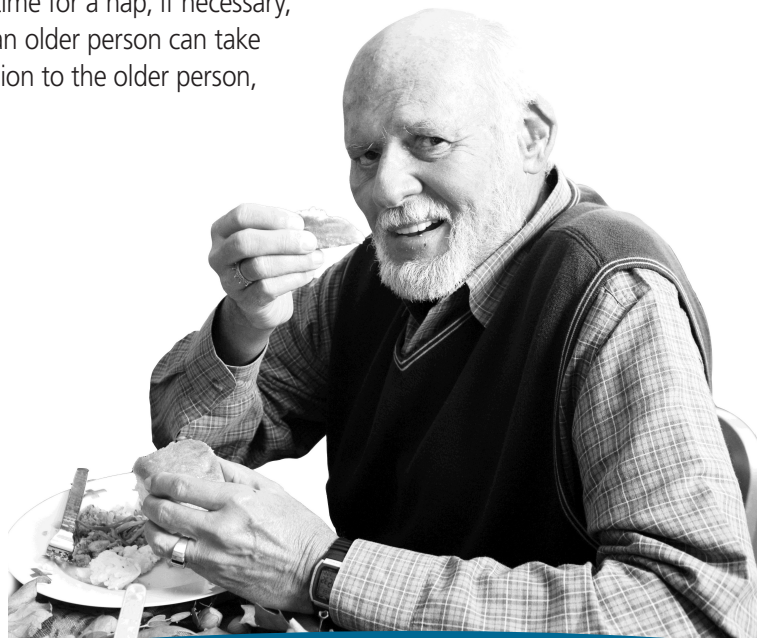
Many seniors face loneliness. Even if family members live in the same city, adult children often become so busy with their own lives and social obligations that they fail to recognize how much their parents or grandparents look forward to spending time with them during the holidays.

Another contributing factor is that many seniors have outlived cherished friends and family members and these losses feel even more painful during the holidays. For many, the memories of holidays past so outshine present day celebrations they feel unable to experience joy in the here-and-now.

Help an elderly person enjoy the holiday season by following these simple tips:

Stroll down memory lane. Older people whose memories are impaired may have difficulty remembering recent events, but they are often able to share stories and observations from the past. These shared memories are important for the young as well—children enjoy hearing about how it was ‘when your parents were your age’. Use picture albums, family videos and music, even theme songs from old radio or TV programs to help stimulate memories and encourage older seniors to share their stories and experiences.

Plan ahead. If older family members tire easily or are vulnerable to over-stimulation, limit the number of activities they are involved in or the length of time they are included. The noise and confusion of a large family gathering can lead to irritability or exhaustion, so schedule time for a nap, if necessary, and consider designating a “quiet room” where an older person can take a break. Assign someone to be the day’s companion to the older person, to make sure the individual is comfortable.



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Eliminate obstacles. If a holiday get-together is held in the home of an older person with memory impairment or behavioral problems, don't rearrange the furniture. This could be a source of confusion and anxiety. If the gathering is in a place unfamiliar to an older person, remove slippery throw rugs and other items that could present barriers to someone with balance problems or who has difficulty walking.

Avoid embarrassing moments. Try to avoid making comments that could inadvertently embarrass an older friend or family member who may be experiencing short-term memory problems. If an older person forgets a recent conversation, for example, don't make it worse by saying, "Don't you remember?"

Get out of the house. In addition to memories, seniors need new things to anticipate. Enjoy activities that are free, such as taking a drive to look at holiday decorations, or window-shopping at the mall or along a festive downtown street. Consider giving the gift of seasonal tickets to events or places they enjoy; ball games, concerts, plays or museums. And make the gift extra special by attending the event as a part of the gift.

Be inclusive in meal preparation. Involve everyone in holiday meal preparation, breaking down tasks to include the youngest and oldest family members. Older adults with physical limitations can still be included in kitchen activities by being asked to do a simple, helpful task, like greasing cooking pans, peeling vegetables, folding napkins or arranging flowers.

Reach out. Social connectedness is especially important at holiday times. Loneliness is a difficult emotion for anyone, and recent research with older people has documented that loneliness is associated with major depression. Spend quality time with senior family members and make it easier for them to be social by purchasing food they can have on-hand to entertain without stress when folks stop by, such as nuts, dried fruit, an assortment of teas and cookies in tins.

Keep on the sunny side. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) or winter depression is an illness that can be provoked by reductions in sunlight during the short days of winter. It is important for people confined indoors, especially those at risk for winter depression, to make time for activities that will increase exposure to daylight.

Consider a pet. Many have also found that assuming the responsibility of caring for and loving a pet brings new joy and companionship into their lives. But don't spring a new four-legged creature on Mom; let her buy into the idea first and then help her to the humane society to adopt a pet of her choice. (It's very hard to choose a pet for someone else.) Also, before acting, consider the pet as well: is the new pet owner competent and a good choice to care for a pet?

Monitor medications and alcohol. Be sure to help older family members adhere to their regular schedules of medications during the frenzy of the holidays, or contact **Coastal HomeCare** for assistance with medication reminders. Also, pay attention to their alcohol consumption during holiday parties and family gatherings, as alcohol can interfere with medications.

And while visiting for the holidays, or even if living close by, consider an extra set of caring eyes for a parent or grandparent. **Coastal HomeCare** can provide companionship, meal planning and preparation, transportation, housekeeping services and much more. Contact us at **805-966-3312** Santa Barbara or **805-969-3312** Montecito or visit **SeniorPlanningServices.com** to learn more.

Tips Courtesy of About.com Senior Living and Studio 5 Wellness