

# Loved one in assisted living? How to approach holidays so everyone is merry

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For families with loved ones in assisted living, holidays can be challenging but rewarding too.

Stress levels during the holidays often increase, and families with a relative residing in an assisted-living facility may fret about how to include the family member in celebrations. Typically, residents in assisted living — as opposed to nursing homes or independent living — are mobile enough to get around but advanced age or health issues can limit their capabilities.

The burden can be twofold here. Many families are unsure whether or not those relatives should leave their residence to join the family's holiday celebrations. Also, holiday stressors may cause them to be concerned about how much time they can or should devote to visit relatives, especially if distance is a factor.

"No matter how much you see your family in assisted living, I think you're always going to feel like it wasn't enough," said Stephanie Zishka, co-owner of BrightStar Care of Fort Wayne and Lafayette, Ind., and a registered nurse. "And you're always going to have that guilt that 'I should be spending more time there,' which is going to cause anxiety. Don't beat yourself up if you can't spend more time."

Psychologists and administrators who work with residents in these facilities say it's important for families to try to balance their other obligations with visits to loved ones during the holidays. Here is some advice to consider:

**Consult with the facility staff.** Before deciding on whether or not to bring grandma or Uncle Chester home for the day, ask the facility staff if such a visit would be disruptive to the person — or the host family. Zishka and Dr. Ildiko Tabori, a Los Angeles-based licensed clinical psychologist, said facility staff can help you determine if the relative is functioning well enough for a home visit. Additionally, they said, families need to review whether their home is equipped to accommodate the visitor, especially if he or she needs a mobility aid.

Maryann Crenny, administrator and director of operations at FilBen Group, a New York-based developer and manager of assisted-living properties, said it's always great when residents can leave to spend the day with loved ones. But keep in mind that elderly people can tire easily, so be prepared to limit the visit. Don't expect them to stay more than six hours, and keep early bedtimes in mind. It also would be wise to have someone available to drive them home at any time during their visit.

**Decorate and deliver holiday reminders.** Whether the relative is staying in the facility or coming to visit, decorating the family member's room with appropriate holiday items is recommended. (Check with facility staff in case some items are prohibited.)

For example, Tabori said, "bringing a small Christmas tree, the kind you buy at the drugstore, is nice."

Decorations are good for all residents, Crenny said, including those with advanced [dementia](#).

"With residents with dementia, they remember those things from their childhood," Crenny said. "They might not know it's March 17, but they do know (St. Patrick's is) a fun day because everything is decorated. ... They know it's a holiday."

The same applies to favorite foods. Again, consult with the nursing staff for any dietary restrictions.

**Take advantage of technology.** Jack York, chief executive officer of Colorado-based It's Never 2 Late, which provides senior-friendly technology to assisted-living communities, said there are ways to relive past holidays using slide shows or videos.

For facilities without technology, families can bring in large-screen laptops or tablets. Include "things that tie into who they are," York said. "For some people it's music; for some it's spirituality." This is especially helpful for relatives suffering from dementia, York said.

If visiting on-site isn't possible, York said that facilities equipped with Wi-Fi can accommodate webcams to connect relatives on holidays. "There's obviously a lot of different ways to use Skype or Facetime or whatever may be (available)," he said.

**Celebrating there: All ages welcome.** Facilities will often have holiday parties and invite families to take part, Crenny said. Try to attend, and bring the kids.

"We actually welcome children in the communities," Crenny said. "The elderly residents do respond extremely well with children, even if (they're) not their own. Children really bring residents to life."

**Gifts to go around:** When you're celebrating at their place, don't just bring presents for your relatives to open. Bring a round of gifts for everyone to open along with them, Tabori said.

"Presents are great. What do we do at Christmas? We open presents," Tabori said. "The patient can still watch the enjoyment of a grandchild opening presents."

**It's the visit that counts, not its length.** Throughout the year, visits are helpful. There is no right or wrong time, Zishka said. The same applies to the length of your visit.

"Any sort of visit is good," Zishka said. "You don't have to think that visits should be for three or four hours at a time. Even a five-minute stop in can have a huge impact."

*Debbie Carlson is a freelance reporter.*

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