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Putting the Positive in Dementia-Friendly Holiday Activities

Is it possible to create meaningful and positive holiday experiences for those in care communities or at home?

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With the holiday season coming up, you may find yourself reminiscing about your family's traditions, preparing and planning for festive adventures, or searching for new activities to bring meaning to your loved ones. For most people, the holiday season can be a time of joy, celebration, and togetherness. For individuals living with brain change and dementia, the holidays can bring added challenges.

Is it possible to create meaningful and positive holiday experiences for those in care communities or at home?

What does that look like? Here are some engaging activities to support those living with dementia during the holidays, ensuring their season is filled with meaning. Consider the following games, crafts, or puzzles that can be modified for individuals living with dementia:

- **Memory-Focused Crafts:** Engage residents in activities that stimulate their cognitive functions, such as creating holiday cards or ornaments. These projects can tap into fond memories and provide a sense of accomplishment.
- **Interactive Games:** Play games like trivia, bingo, or simple puzzles with a holiday twist. These activities not only entertain but also stimulate cognitive abilities.

- **Virtual Tours:** Take virtual tours of famous landmarks, travel destinations, museums, zoos, aquariums, theme parks, or even fairs. Some virtual tours may feature holiday or seasonal displays and exhibits. This can be an immersive and educational experience.
- **Puzzles and Crosswords:** Provide holiday-themed puzzles and crosswords that cater to different skill levels. These brain exercises can be both fun and stimulating.
- **Virtual Caroling:** Arrange for virtual caroling sessions with local choirs or volunteers. Residents can sing along or simply enjoy the music and festive atmosphere.



Sensory activities can elicit memories of holiday celebrations, traditions, and overall feel-good reminiscence for individuals living with dementia. Consider the following activities to support individuals at varying states of dementia.

- **Music Therapy:** Music has a powerful effect on individuals with dementia by evoking emotions and creating a sense of connection. Play familiar holiday songs and encourage residents to sing along or even participate in light dancing.
- **Sensory Activities:** Offer sensory experiences like baking cookies, decorating trees, or arranging holiday-themed sensory bins. These activities can trigger positive memories and engage residents' sense of taste and touch.
- **Storytelling:** Share heartwarming holiday stories or encourage residents to reminisce about their own holiday traditions. Storytelling can provide a sense of continuity and connection to the past.
- **Nature Walks:** If possible, go for nature walks to observe seasonal changes, like falling leaves in autumn or snow in winter. Being outside in nature can have a calming and grounding effect.
- **Reminiscence Boxes:** Create personalized reminiscence boxes filled with items from each resident's past holiday experiences or traditions. Allow them to share stories and memories associated with the items.
- **Music and Memory Apps:** Music streaming services and personalized playlists, like Spotify and Pandora, enable individuals with dementia to reconnect with their favorite tunes and relive cherished moments.
- **Aromatherapy Sessions:** Offer aromatherapy with scents like cinnamon, pine, or peppermint. These scents can trigger pleasant memories associated with the holiday season.



- **Seasonal Sensory Boxes:** Create sensory boxes filled with holiday-themed items like jingle bells, soft scarves, or textured ornaments. Residents can explore these boxes for tactile stimulation.
- **Holiday Book Club:** Read holiday-themed books or short stories together as a group. Offer opportunities for individuals to ask questions, share their experiences.



Tap into technology for celebrating the holidays with loved ones, care partners, and friends who may not be able to visit. Video calls can facilitate virtual family gatherings. This enables residents to connect with loved ones who may not be able to visit in person.

Create digital memory books with photos and videos of past holiday celebrations. These can be easily shared on tablets or computers, allowing residents to reminisce. Assistive technology devices can be simplified for individuals with dementia to act as memory aids.

Once you select activities that get the person living with dementia engaged in the festivities, be sure to approach them with patience and empathy. Use simple language, maintain eye contact, and offer reassurance when needed.

Utilize your *Positive Physical Approach (PPA)* with the person living with dementia to assess their willingness to participate in the activity. This may involve adapting traditions or creating new ones that accommodate their needs.

Conclusion

The holidays can be a special time for individuals living with dementia when approached with sensitivity and creativity. Engaging activities and person-centered support can make a significant difference in the quality of life for residents, care partners, and individuals living with dementia. By focusing on creating positive experiences and fostering connections, you can ensure that the holiday season is filled with warmth and meaning for all involved.