In Just Five...The Holiday Spirit – From Harried to Heartfelt

by Jan Sturges, M.Ed., LPC, LWC Caregiving Coordinator

(Revised from December 2010 version with "10 Warning Signs Your Older Family Member May Need Help")

Holidays at any time of year are about staying connected to the values, people and experiences that enrich us; they acknowledge the importance of our relationships by highlighting the joys of the past and giving us the opportunity to create memorable moments that will nourish us in the future, when we need to be uplifted.

For caregivers, the holidays can be particularly challenging when they are caring for a loved one in declining health. They may have conflicting emotions about how they 'should' feel ('happy' and 'merry'...isn't that what holiday songs suggest?) vs. how they really feel (sadness or sorrow) because it is no longer possible for family and friends to enjoy past traditions and celebrations due to illness or dementia.

How can caregivers add holiday-related tasks and activities to the long list of caregiving responsibilities they already have, in addition to work and family obligations? And, sometimes relatives don't realize how much an elder's health has declined until they 'go home for the holidays.' Click here for 'warning signs' that your elderly relative or friend may be in declining health, and in need of more assistance than previously thought.

Below are a few caregiver 'Tips and Treasures' for coping with holiday stress that have been assembled from many different sources. You can also click on the following links for additional online information.

http://lifework.arizona.edu/ec
http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/home.jsp
http://www.caregiver.com/articles/holiday/holiday_stress_caregiving.htm
http://www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_holidays.asp

Tips and Treasures for Caregivers

- **Mindfulness** - Focus on the intrinsic values of the holidays - stay connected to people and relationships - and participate in one or two meaningful events (not ten or fifteen!) that will nourish you, your family and friends. Instead of cooking a large meal, host a pot-luck party, attend a holiday concert or participate in a faith celebration.

- **Compassionate presence** - Set aside time to include the elder or dependent person in practical, but meaningful, non stress-producing activities. Even if they are not able to participate or converse at length, your compassionate presence and ‘being’ vs. ‘doing’ will create a caring bond.
- **Priorities** - Set realistic expectations for activities and gift-giving based on your resources - people (family, friends, community resources, and professional health care providers), time, finances and energy.
- **Traditions** - Decide what past traditions are no longer appropriate, and develop a few new ones. Combine some of the ‘old’ with the ‘new’ and create a different set of holiday traditions without comparing them to ‘the way it used to be.’
- **Affirmations** - Be kind, and acknowledge disappointment without judging yourself or others when life gets messy during the holiday rush.
- **Self-care**
  - Eat, drink and be merry, but not too much! Balance sugar and alcohol intake with healthier foods.
  - Allow yourself a ‘time out’ every day. Take four deep breaths, walk around the yard, read a few pages of a book or listen to music. (Really, you can do this!!)
  - Arrange for someone to stay with the person in your care while you attend a social event, or complete some of the tasks on your simplified ‘To Do’ list.
  - Find a supportive listener to help you solve problems that arise, or express your feelings about caregiving during the holidays. Remind yourself that it is normal to have mixed feelings at this time of year.
  - Humor - Give the gift of laughter to yourself and others, and relax!

References:
Family Caregiver Alliance, ‘Managing Caregiver Stress’
Hope Publications, ‘How to De-Stress the Holidays’
Mara Levin, M.S.W., Pima Health System Caregiver Program, ‘Coping with Holiday Stress’