

Helping seniors enjoy the holidays

*By Ellen Waldman
December 15, 2014*

For many years, Edith and her husband went to visit her family for the holidays. They took a plane from Medford to the East Coast and spent several weeks enjoying the company of loved ones. A few years ago, Edith's husband passed on, and her low level of memory impairment was now increasing. She still planned to travel over the holiday season, alone. This did not work out the way everyone had hoped, and the traveling took its toll on her. Sometimes, new holiday traditions need to be created to assist people as they age.

Since the holidays are closer than ever, here are some good tips for making this easier for those with physical or cognitive health issues. Too many times, I have seen the after-effects of well-meaning family visits. The older person might try to be more involved than they can really handle. They can become stressed and may decline even further in their confusion. If you think your friend or family member could become overwhelmed this holiday, these following ideas might help. And please call the local Alzheimer's Association at 541-772-2230 or go online at alz.org for specific help around the holidays. Planning ahead for the holidays can result in a much better outcome for everyone. Here are some things to keep in mind.

1. Sharing their memories using photo albums, music or stories, helps them feel more included.
2. Less is best. Limit activities, times and duration of visits and allow for periods of rest.
3. Make it comfortable and safe. Keep things familiar and check for fall hazards in the home.
4. Be sensitive to memory changes. The thing to NOT say is "don't you remember?"
5. Change the scene. Go for a ride around town, looking at the lights in downtown Ashland.
6. Include them in preparations, even if it's just putting out the napkins.

Choosing a gift can be difficult, especially for persons with dementia or other disabilities. Gift ideas that say you care include activities you do together or alone such as crossword puzzle books, board games, books on tape or MP3 players (Ashland Library can help with downloading). Gifts of time are also great, such as scrapbooks, videos and doing chores together. Gift certificates are great for shows or movies, food, hair salons and even massage.

Look into sharing a fun outing together. There is a huge range of local events and holiday-themed shows right now. The best place to start looking for events is in this newspaper. Go to www.dailytidings.com/revels for a long list of shows, concerts and other events in our town and nearby. Do keep in mind that what might seem like a blast to you might be over-the-top for them. You can't go wrong by doing less than more, and making what you do fun and very easygoing.

If you visit your family or friends over the holidays, and notice that things are not quite as well-ordered as they used to be, this might indicate some increasing care needs. This always requires some follow-up. Get help from a state organization like the Aging and Disability Resource Connection of Oregon (ADRCofOregon.org; 855-673-2372). If your family lives at a distance, look into the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers (caremanager.org; 520-881-8008) for help in their area. This

time of year can also bring on depression for many older people. This is not a normal condition of aging and can be treated. It's important for them to stay on their regular medications and watch alcohol intake as well. Check in with their doctors if you have any concerns about this condition.

Hopefully, all will go smoothly and everyone will have a great time together. Everything changes, and we need to be ready to make any accommodations. Now relax and enjoy one another. With a little bit of information to guide us, that's what we do best.