

What to Give a Person Living with Dementia this Holiday Season



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If presents are what you are after, there are some nice ideas out there – check out the Alzheimer’s Store (<https://www.alzstore.com/holiday-gift-ideas-for-dementia-s/2001.htm?msclkid=6ddea94f862b12d3e31ec8fce15d3e97>).

This blog entry, however, focuses on the gift of your *presence*. Is there anything better than fully being with another person, in a relaxed, fun, comfortable way? How can we give more of **that** to our loved ones who are living with dementia? Let me count the possibilities!

1. **We can step out of our comfort zone a tad to communicate more effectively.** We may simply need to be a bit louder, to utilize more gestures and to add a little more energy and expression into our words and our tone of voice.
2. **We can avoid arguing with the person about their view of reality.** (If you have ever won an argument with a person who is living with dementia, well, that’s a first!) We can practice recognizing and acknowledging whatever emotions the person is expressing. I think of this as crossing to their side of the street, looking around, and reporting on what we see. *“I get it, Mom. Of course, you’re angry. I would be too.”*
3. **Sometimes a simple apology is validating.** *“I’m so sorry, Dad. I can see I’ve upset you.”* Validation opens up some space. In that space, you can then change the subject to something else that is meaningful to the person. *“I always feel better after a walk. Let’s stretch our legs and find a cup of coffee.”*
4. If the person is not averse to being touched, **we can use gentle touch to connect, reassure, and to express affection.** As dementia progresses, the person may crave good, solid, sincere, gentle touch, as opposed to a cursory pat on the back or a brief hug. Might the person enjoy a little longer hug or a touch on the upper arm that lingers? I think if I were a person living with dementia, I would feel like your gentle (but firm) touch on my arm was telling me, *“I am glad you are here. I appreciate you.”* If you held BOTH my hands, not just one, I would think, *“WOW, that’s nice!”* If I fondly remember my mother cupping my face with both her hands, I might even love it if you would do that for me now! If you have a parent living with dementia who gave you nurturing, gentle touches as a child, consider

whether giving those same kinds of touches back to your parent now might be a comfort. It's possible that they got those same sorts of touches from a beloved parent!

5. We can think out of the box to try new ways of communicating and spending time together, whether our visits are in person or virtual. Especially if conversation is becoming more of a struggle as dementia progresses, how about **keeping conversation to a minimum in favor of doing things together?**

- Sing your person's favorite song(s)?
- Read and discuss favorite holiday recipes?
- Read a short poem out loud. Perhaps something the person has memorized which is still intact in that long-term memory.
- Remind them of a favorite or funny holiday memory?
- Even virtually, if it can be arranged for you both to have an adult coloring book and some crayons or colored pencils at the ready, you could color together.
- If each of you have a cup of tea or coffee nearby, you can toast one another.
- Play peaceful holiday music, listen together, and breathe deep.
- Move to the music. Movement is critical in preventing falls and in keeping our brains working well. Whatever limitations we may have, we must keep moving whatever we can still move! Invite your loved one to move with you: circle your wrists, roll your shoulders, reach up or out or down, touch each finger one at a time to the thumb, march in place and/or do whatever other movements may conform to both your abilities.
- If visiting virtually and your session is just about over, how about saying goodbye by kissing the screen? I bet they will get a kick out of your big lips!

I don't expect every idea here to be an ideal fit for you and your loved one, but I do hope this grab bag will inspire you to explore what will work for you both, so that you can more successfully share YOU, your PRESENCE with them, during this holiday time and beyond!

Blessings to you and yours.

--Marysue Moses, Ebenezer Dimensions Program Coordinator