

Supporting Elders During the Holidays

The same issues that apply to adults during the holiday season apply to elders, but there are a couple of additional things that might be important to note:

Losses and changes

As people get older, not only do they lose family members and friends with whom they have shared holiday traditions, but they may also face increased isolation as younger family members focus on their own nuclear families, sometimes excluding or forgetting about the needs of the elder members. In addition to the loss of spouses, family members and friends, there are also the loss of the ability to host their own holiday celebrations or participate in important rituals from the past, loss of cherished traditions with spouses or friends, loss of physical energy and stamina to do all the cooking, cleaning, shopping they used to do, and inability to get out on their own to shop. It can be helpful if people can focus on simplifying and prioritizing those traditions and rituals that are most meaningful instead of trying to "do it all."

Expressing feelings

Many elders avoid discussing feelings of sadness or depression at the holidays (or any other time) for many reasons, including not wanting to "burden" family members, fear of family members' reactions to their feelings, or simply a discomfort with "feeling talk." Many are from a generation when feelings were not identified or shared. This can lead to under-reporting of significant depressive symptoms. As a result, family members are not able to provide needed support or help with logistical problem solving. Supporting elders to share their feelings and needs with family members can be very helpful, as is encouraging younger family members to ask elders about their preferences, needs and feelings.

It is important to remind people that elders are both the same as everyone else, and that there are also differences that are age- and cohort-related.

Christine A. Dietz, LCSW, Ph.D.
Director of Elder Services
Community Counseling Center
Portland, Maine 04101
(207) 874-1030 x233
cdietz@commcc.org

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