

"Everyone in my family is expected to attend my sister's holiday gathering—even our frail elderly parents. As their primary caregiver, I'm overwhelmed just thinking about going. What should I do?"



It's not uncommon for family caregivers to have mixed feelings about holiday gatherings. Juggling caregiving with raised expectations to engage in joy-filled activities may not ring true for you, especially if your family isn't tuned into your world as a caregiver.



Ask for what you need

It's not always easy, and challenging family dynamics can complicate things further. Set clear personal boundaries by firmly but gently asking your family for what you need, whether it's joining in the festivities, responding to unrealistic requests, or opting to not attend. Steer clear of bringing guilt and anger into your communication, such as saying, "Well, if you visited more, you'd know what's going on." Instead, try to listen to others and then trust your best judgement on moving forward. For more guidance on successful holiday planning, see [*Holiday Time, Siblings, and Parent Care*](#).



Re-set expectations

Your family members may not be aware (or willing to see) the extent of your parents' impairments. If their expectations are unrealistic or you're blamed for your parents' decline, avoid a defensive response. Instead, say something like: "Mom and dad's illnesses are taking a toll on their ability to do the things they've always loved to do. I do my best, but I can't change the disease process." If they persist, schedule a family conversation with your parents' health care provider, so the doctor can respond to their questions directly.



Adapt holiday activities for cognitive impairment

Heroic efforts to include family members with moderate to severe memory loss and related health issues can be tense and exhausting. While it can work wonderfully when others pitch in so you can enjoy yourself, too often this isn't the case.

Instead, encourage family and friends to visit your relatives where they live. Smaller gatherings in more familiar surroundings can offer everyone a chance for meaningful time together. Another option is to look into respite care, so you can attend the gathering while your parents are well cared for at home.



Allow time for self-compassion

Guilt and anxiety over the loss of treasured holiday traditions can take a toll. It's not your fault your parents' health is in decline, or that caregiving responsibilities consume your time and energy. Your feelings about caregiving are valid. Read more in [*The Emotional Side of Caregiving*](#).

Be gentle with yourself. You may need to tell your family, "I'm in a difficult situation. Sometimes I have to make difficult decisions," or "I regret our holiday traditions are no longer doable. Let's find new ones to try." Remember, caring for yourself is important too. Find self-care tips for family caregivers in [*Taking Care of You*](#).



Attending holiday gatherings

If you decide to attend a holiday gathering, speak with your family members ahead of time about sharing caregiving responsibilities and expenses. Invite your family to meet by phone or online to create a caregiving schedule and find out what others can contribute. This may include covering your travel and lodging, if caregiving has compromised your income. Find inspiration for asking for help (including a caregiving wishlist) in [*Caregiving and the Holidays: Stress 2 Success*](#).



Cultivate gratitude

Looking for the positive in situations and putting disagreements on hold can help you relax and enjoy time with family and friends. Find more tips for finding joy in the season in our guide, [*Not a Jolly Holiday?*](#)

After the holidays, write to family members or friends who you enjoyed connecting with and emphasize the positive impact of their presence. They may be encouraged to support your efforts more fully going forward. Keep in mind that the holidays can, in fact, provide unique opportunities to seek better communication, connection and support from family and friends.



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