

## **A Caregiver's Christmas**

For many caregivers, Christmas is a bittersweet time. The very things that are so much a part of the season – the family gatherings, the traditions and reminiscences – seem to highlight the challenges that life has dealt them. In the following stories, caregivers acknowledge their mixed feelings about the season but all have found ways to make it a worthwhile and satisfying time.

### ***Focus on the essential***

Janet has always loved a party, especially at Christmas. But following her husband's stroke, it became more difficult for her to maintain the social activities she loved. Even the traditional family Christmas dinner became increasingly hard to prepare, since her husband didn't like her leaving the house long enough to do the shopping required.

One year Janet dropped the event completely, but the holiday season seemed empty without it. Since then, she has replaced the dinner with a Christmas potluck. Her family brings the main courses and Janet provides the dessert. The meal is eaten on disposable plates so clean up is easier. Janet has found that by simplifying the trappings, she has been able to maintain the family togetherness that is most important to her. And though her husband says little, he seems to value the nearness of family members.

### ***Enjoy what you still have***

Henry has no family other than his wife, Susan, who is cognitively impaired. Christmas, for him, always looms as a potentially lonely affair. He has almost no communication with his wife, and he finds it hard not to dwell on the better times they shared before his wife's illness began.

He decided to make the best of matters by emphasizing the things he and his wife can still share. One activity they have been able to maintain is the tradition of listening to carols on the stereo as they enjoy a glass of eggnog. He finds the time peaceful and the best part is that his wife responds to the songs by humming along.

### ***Give yourself a gift***

Ethel and Selma are old friends and full-time caregivers – Ethel for her husband and Selma for her father. Getting away is difficult since their loved ones need supervision, but at least once during the Christmas season they spend a day off together.

In Ethel's case, her husband drops by to spend the time with his father. She told her husband one year that time off would be the greatest gift he could give her. Since then, he has made the 'gift of a day' an annual event. Selma arranges in advance for a respite worker from a community service agency to stay with her father.

The two women explain that they take the day off as a way of thanking themselves and reminding themselves that despite their shortcomings, they have done work worth recognizing in the past year.

Christmas takes a different form for each of these caregivers. Turning hardship into celebration is what we wish for all caregivers and their loved ones.

Monthly support groups are held for family caregivers, people with Parkinson's, MS and recovering from stroke and their family members. All are welcome to attend these informal free sessions. Assistance may be available if you need respite or transportation to attend. For times and locations, contact 1-888-746-5102.

Presentations can be made to any size group on such topics as community resources, caregiving, hospice/palliative care, and prevention of abuse to older adults. Books and educational videos are also available from our lending library.