

Holidays as a Caregiver

The holidays can be a stressful time for anyone, but particularly after you or a family member has experienced a stroke. Here are a few suggestions and strategies to ease the holiday season and help you find calm in the midst of what can be a busy and emotional season.

Tradition. Things have changed—for you and for the stroke survivor in your family. Take the time to reflect on traditions you have had around the holidays. See which of them you would like to continue, and which you could adjust for your new circumstances. Things have certainly changed, but you can be intentional in deciding which traditions you continue, which traditions you change, and which traditions you put on hold or stop.

Connection. At Judi's House, we work with our families to develop coping and caregiving skills after a significant loss. Connection is one of the most important of these skills. Being present with your family, *listening* to your spouse or your children, and setting aside the have-to's for just a couple of minutes is often enough to foster healthy family relationships and avoid potential meltdowns.

Connecting with friends is also important. If it feels too difficult to arrange the logistics of attending your neighbor's holiday party, remember your Personal Care Team (one of the three parts of the stroke survivor's care team you may have read about in the National Stroke Association's *Careliving Guide*). Or instead of just declining the invite all-together, you might ask if you can get together at another time.

Self-Care. Especially during the holidays, it can be challenging to meet your own needs, let alone the needs of those in your care. It is important to make time for rest and self-care, thirty seconds, five minutes, an hour—whatever your schedule allows for when you need it. Although it can be challenging to make the time, doing so makes you more available and gives you the reserves you need.

Relax: Breathe, release tension, slow down. This can be through yoga or meditation, muscle relaxation techniques, or just deep “belly” breathing. Even a long run or a hot bath can help bring back a sense of calm and steadiness to face the next wave of grief or holiday rush.

As you relax, take a moment to listen to your own thoughts and catch when they are making you feel worse. Challenge negative thoughts or self-talk that contribute to feeling overwhelmed or powerless during the holidays. Listen to your own wisdom without judgment.

Play: Make time to enjoy the friends and family in your life. Play a card or board game, play video games, put on music and maybe dance around the kitchen. Let yourself LAUGH. We need and deserve to take breaks.

By setting aside time to relax, listen and play, you make space for light and restored joy that can be part of your new, changed lifestyle, and your new or revised holiday traditions.