A Conversation about Alzheimer’s Disease

Mary Kenan, PsyD

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Dr. Kenan is a board-certified psychologist. Her clinical and research interests include dementia, memory disorders, issues of adjustment and caregiving, the psychology of aging and personality disorders across the lifespan.

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Susan Rountree, MD, is an assistant professor of Neurology at Baylor College of Medicine (BCM). She also serves as chief of neurology for the University of Texas Health Science Center at Tyler and worked in private practice for more than a decade.

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Alzheimer’s patients benefit from simple holiday strategies

In April, many of us will gather with family to participate in activities that welcome spring or celebrate our religious beliefs. However, caregivers must be sensitive to their loved one’s strengths and weaknesses, and celebrate accordingly, a Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) expert advises.

“Too much holiday noise and activity can confuse patients with Alzheimer’s disease, causing them to withdraw from surrounding social activity,” said Mary Kenan, PsyD, a psychologist with BCM’s Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center. “Disruption of routine for those with Alzheimer’s can trigger behavioral symptoms, which makes care giving more difficult.”

To cut down on confusion, Dr. Kenan suggests asking family and friends to arrive at different times or visit in small groups. If everyone is coming together, find the Alzheimer’s patient a side room with soft music and lighting where he or she can escape with one other person.

“Conversations can be very hard for people with Alzheimer’s to follow if many people are participating,” Dr. Kenan said. “One-on-one conversation allows them to focus their attention and engage.”

Dr. Kenan offers caregivers these dos and don’ts for making this holiday with your loved one as joyful and meaningful as possible:

**Dos:**
- Compare the present with the past. If you aspire to a picture-perfect holiday, you are likely to be disappointed.
- Test your loved one’s memory by asking, “Do you remember who this is?” Testing memory does not preserve it, and often demoralizes the person with Alzheimer’s disease. Instead, introduce the family member to your loved one by name and state his or her relationship to your loved one. For example, say, “Bob, your nephew David wants to wish you happy holidays. Say hello to your nephew David.”

**Don’ts:**
- Include the person with Alzheimer’s in the activities of the day. An Alzheimer’s patient may help with meal preparation by peeling vegetables, stirring batter, tossing salad, folding napkins or setting the table.
- Be aware that active, loud children may distress the person with Alzheimer’s disease. Try to have some activities planned for the kids, ideally those that they can do with the Alzheimer’s patient such as making holiday decorations or decorating cookies. Watch for any signs of anxiety or distress in your loved one and intervene immediately: send the children to another part of the house, sit with the patient for awhile in a quiet room or take them on a short walk or drive around the neighborhood.
- **Try to maintain routine as much as possible.** If your loved one customarily takes a walk after eating lunch, try to maintain this activity and go with him or her.
- Develop new ways of marking the holiday season. For example, ask family and friends to come prepared to tell a favorite story from past holidays involving the loved one with Alzheimer’s. Reminiscing is an important therapeutic tool that benefits those with the illness.
- Use the sights, sounds and smells of the holiday to stimulate your loved one’s senses. For example, your loved one may be able to participate in the singing of well-learned holiday songs.
- Ask for help. Your stress increases the stress of your loved one with Alzheimer’s. Do not hesitate to delegate holiday responsibilities to family or friends.

Alzheimer’s’s Disease

Alzheimer’s disease is a progressive and fatal brain disease that currently affects as many 5 million Americans, the national Alzheimer’s Association reports. The illness destroys brain cells and causes problems with memory, thinking and behavior that affect work, lifelong hobbies and a person’s social life.

Alzheimer’s disease usually affects individuals that are age 60 or older, the National Institutes of Health reports. A family history of the illness may also increase your risk for developing the disease. While there is no cure for the debilitating illness that is the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States, some drugs may help keep symptoms from getting worse for a limited time.

**Ten Signs of Alzheimer’s Disease**

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<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Alzheimer’s Patient</th>
<th>Regular Aging Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory loss</td>
<td>Forgets recently learned information, forgets more often, unable to recall information later</td>
<td>Occasionally forgets names or appointments</td>
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<td>Difficulty performing familiar tasks</td>
<td>Loses track of the steps to prepare a meal, place a telephone call or play a game</td>
<td>Occasionally forgets why they came into a room or what they planned to say</td>
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<td>Problems with language</td>
<td>Makes speech or writing hard to understand by forgetting simple words or substituting unusual words</td>
<td>Sometimes has trouble finding the right word</td>
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<td>Disorientation to time and place</td>
<td>Becomes lost in their own neighborhood, forgets where they are and how they got there, doesn’t know how to get back home</td>
<td>Forgets the day of the week or where they were going</td>
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<td>Poor or decreased judgment</td>
<td>Dresses inappropriately for current weather conditions, shows poor judgment with money</td>
<td>Makes questionable or debatable decisions from time to time</td>
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<td>Problems with abstract thinking</td>
<td>Has difficulty performing complex mental tasks such as understanding numbers and how they are used</td>
<td>Finds it challenging to balance a checkbook</td>
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<td>Misplacing things</td>
<td>Puts things in unusual places: an iron in the freezer or a watch in the sugar bowl</td>
<td>Temporarily misplaces keys or wallet</td>
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<td>Changes in mood or behavior</td>
<td>Has unexplained rapid mood swings</td>
<td>Occasionally feels sad or moody</td>
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<td>Changes in personality</td>
<td>Becomes extremely confused, suspicious, fearful or dependent on a family member</td>
<td>Personality changes somewhat with age</td>
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<td>Loss of initiative</td>
<td>Becomes very passive, sleeps more, shows no interest in usual activities</td>
<td>Sometimes feel weary of work or social obligations</td>
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*Source: Alzheimer’s Association*