



The Holiday Experience

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Home in Time for the Holidays

Mrs. Mary Peterson fell at home in October while attempting to get out of her bathtub. She fell sideways and fractured her hip. She was hospitalized for surgery, transferred to a rehab unit for a short stay, and then was admitted to your facility for continued rehabilitation.

Mrs. Peterson's goal was to return home to her townhome by the holidays or at least be able to live with her daughter for a few weeks before returning home. Mary's recovery has not gone as she intended, and she has not progressed in therapy to the point of being able to return home. Her daughter works during the day and there would be no one to assist Mary while she is away. Additionally, Mary's daughter lives four hours away and she has children and grandchildren that will be visiting for the holidays.

Mary has always loved the holidays. She loves to decorate, bake holiday cookies, and send personalized gifts to her family. While her two adult children and grandchildren have not always been able to travel to see Mary for the holidays, she has been able to travel and spend time with each family. Mary's two adult children have made plans to spend a weekend with her in early December but will not be able to see her for Christmas.

The reality of not being "Home for the Holidays" is real and Mary has lost her enthusiasm in her therapy sessions, and she is struggling at mealtimes. Her care team is working together to create a special holiday season for Mary including making holiday cards and cookies and decorating her room.

The Holiday Experience

The holiday season can be an exciting time with family and friends; things to look forward to including time-off, travel and vacations, parties, favorite foods, and drinks. For many seniors, however, this time of year can feel very different – the sun doesn't shine as much, the daylight hours are shorter, and the temperatures are colder. Some of their friends have passed away and family obligations make "going home" a challenge. Favorite family traditions may no longer be possible. Along with these changes, feelings of loneliness and isolation can accompany the holiday season.



Care providers are in a unique position to recognize changes in behaviors and physical responses that may suggest holiday depression. Managing expectations (e.g., “I’ll be home for the holidays”) on admission and during care conferences, along with understanding social preferences and important family traditions, can help support a healthy transition into what might be a new set of traditions in the senior living community. The holiday activity calendar with card making, cookie baking, special holiday visits from different community groups can be a time to listen, share stories and connect past and new traditions.

Warning Signs of Senior Depression (include, but are not limited to)

- Reduced participation in social activities
- Persistent sadness
- Weight changes
- Sleep changes
- Speaking of loss, lack of joy, sadness
- Lack of energy or interest in things that were once enjoyable
- Excessive worry
- Frequent tearfulness
- Changes in concentration¹

Individuals that are feeling sad or blue during the holidays can generally function in day-to-day activities. Resident depression that lasts longer than the holiday season or interferes with activities of daily life, such as refusing to get out of bed, get dressed, or eat, may signal clinical depression and should be professionally evaluated.

Care Staff

Provide education and training for clinical care staff to promote early recognition and response to holiday depression. Initiate proactive interventions to support the resident’s emotional and psychological health and well-being. Involve the resident and family in understanding social preferences for the holidays. Share resources with family members to support old and new traditions.



One such example is **CONNECT** for Family Members:

C

Connect – Have a plan to connect with your loved one often. A phone call, text message, electronic video chat, or email from a family member can make a senior’s day. If feasible, consider upgrading your family member’s electronic device(s).

O

Organize – Involve the entire family in a visitation/connection schedule.

N

Note – Capture your family’s memories, reminisce. Share favorite pictures and music. Consider a memory book of your family member’s stories or a video recording of their most fond holiday traditions. “Even seniors with advanced memory loss retain long-term memories and may be able to speak vividly about a Christmas more than 50 years ago.”²

N

Navigate – If this is your family member’s first holiday season in senior care or if they have had several, make new holiday traditions (e.g., provide a few small decorations as allowed by the facility, be a Secret Santa for your family member and another resident or two at the facility).

E

Empower – Empower/encourage your loved one to remain active, including participating in facility and family activities and events.

C

Communicate – Communicate your family member’s preferences with the facility (e.g., My mom loves to bake cookies during the holidays).

T

Treasure – Treasure your time together. Take pictures, tell stories, create memories, and enjoy holiday favorites (e.g., hot chocolate with marshmallows and sugar cookies).

Adapted From American Caregiver Association. Managing the Holidays With Aging Parents²

Holiday Decorating

A festive holiday environment also helps to support emotional and psychological health and well-being. As part of your holiday planning, consider the following safety reminders:

Maintain Your EXITS

Keep all exits and exit signs free and clear of obstructions and clutter including holiday decorations and trees, rearranged furniture, and equipment.³ Do not let holiday excitement impede exit access requirements, creating a fire code violation and potential life safety deficiency.⁴

Maintain Fire Protection Systems

Do not hang holiday decorations (e.g., mistletoe, garland, bulbs) from features of fire protection systems (sprinkler heads, smoke detectors, pull stations, etc.). These critical life-saving devices should be clear of all obstructions that can impede performance.⁵



Open Flames/Candles Cause Fires

According to the National Fire Protection Association, “more than one-third of home decoration fires are started by candles.”⁶ Consider battery-operated flameless candles as a safer option. If candles are allowed for special events, like candles on a birthday cake or religious event, the flame must be constantly monitored by staff maintaining appropriate clearance.⁷

Select Safe Decorations

Decorate with “flame retardant” or “flame resistive” artificial trees and decorations. Use UL-approved decorative lighting (use in supervised areas and turn off when not in use.)⁸

Moderation in Decorating

Understand the electrical capacity of your facility and the proper number of electrical outlets needed for holiday decorations and lighting. Use common sense for electric holiday decorations (e.g., don’t piggy-back power strips together, avoid extension cords, avoid multiple items being plugged into a single outlet)⁹

Provide Holiday Decorating Reminders

Ensure residents and family members are aware of your holiday decorating policies. Review and update your policy annually to comply with Life Safety Code, CMS, and local and state fire regulations.

Consult the Life Safety Code, CMS, and local and state fire regulations for facility-specific requirements.

Winter Weather

“Let it Snow”,¹⁰ a favorite holiday classic certainly can represent the holidays in the Dakotas and Minnesota. Keeping in mind the following weather and snow-removal reminders can help to reduce injuries and accidents and support participation in outdoor activities for seniors.

Hypothermia: Seniors are more susceptible to hypothermia

Certain health disorders affect the body’s ability to regulate body temperature. Risk factors include:

- **Older age**¹¹
- **Exhaustion**¹²
- **Drug and Alcohol Use**¹³
- **Medications**¹⁴ - some medications can impact body temperature regulation (e.g., certain antidepressants, antipsychotics, narcotic pain medications and sedatives)
- **Medical Conditions** – some health conditions can also impact body temperature regulation (e.g., hypothyroidism, poor nutrition, diabetes, stroke, severe arthritis, Parkinson's disease, trauma, and spinal cord injuries)¹⁵
- **Cognition/Judgment**¹⁶ – Conditions that interfere with cognition and judgment (e.g., mental illness, dementia, Alzheimer’s disease) may create risk for inappropriate dress for outdoor weather or wandering outside



Being Prepared for the Elements

Proper outdoor footwear, appropriate weight clothing, scarfs, hats, and mittens, and being aware of current temperature and wind-chill conditions are important considerations for care staff, residents, and family members that are taking their resident on outings.

Being Alert for Resident Elopement Risk

The media has reported several events related to senior deaths after wandering outside of senior care facilities without appropriate attire. Conduct regular preventative maintenance on your exit alarms, including daily checks for proper functioning.

Ice and Snow Removal

To reduce slip and fall injuries, the following procedures are recommended:

- Designate responsibility for daily monitoring of snow and ice conditions during winter months. Be alert to winter weather warnings.
- Assign responsibility for timely coordination of snow and ice removal, including the use of contracted vendors. Monitor response times and the effectiveness of snow and ice removal operations. Request snow removal logs as part of monthly billing.
- Maintain readily available snow and ice removal equipment including shovels, ice melt, snow blowers, etc.
- Establish protocols for snow removal including the application of de-icing products (e.g., when one or more inches of snow has fallen or ice conditions are present).
- Monitor entrances for snow and water accumulations. Ensure mats are monitored and replaced as necessary for weather conditions.
- Assign responsibility for monitoring of walking surfaces that may have runoff from roofs, downspouts, and other areas.
- Maintain a written snow/ice removal log for all activities performed by facility personnel. Each entry should include date, time, who completed the activity, and a brief description of what was done. By maintaining a log, the facility will be able to establish a documented pattern of activities related to snow and ice removal which can be helpful in the event of a slip and fall claim and serves as a helpful tool for employees to reference in determining the last time someone was out to shovel, apply ice melt, etc.



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