For Those Who Love Them Series

Holiday Gatherings

How Can We Make Holiday Gatherings More Enjoyable for Someone Living with Parkinson's?

Holiday gatherings can absolutely be enjoyable and meaningful for a person living with Parkinson's disease (PD), but thoughtful planning can make the difference between an exhausting experience and a successful, memorable one.

Parkinson's affects far more than movement alone. Anxiety, fatigue, sensory overload, temperature regulation, balance, gait, urgency to use the restroom, medication timing, and cognitive overload can all become significant challenges in large, stimulating environments.

The holidays often bring changes in routine, busy households, travel, unfamiliar surroundings, and extended periods of social interaction. Understanding these challenges and making a few thoughtful accommodations can help everyone enjoy the celebration.

Environment & Seating

- Provide seating in a quiet, calm area whenever possible.
- Avoid seating near:
    - loud televisions or speakers
    - busy kitchen areas
    - crowded walkways and doorways
    - flashing holiday lights or other visually stimulating decorations
- Use a stable chair with armrests/handles to assist with standing up and sitting down.
- Ensure there is:
    - enough room for a rollator/walker/wheelchair
    - clear leg space
    - easy entry and exit from the table
- Consider a table or seating area near:
    - restroom access
    - exits
    - quieter surroundings

Anxiety & Sensory Overload

Anxiety is extremely common in Parkinson's disease and is often neurologically driven — not simply emotional or "situational." Large gatherings, noise, unpredictability, changes in routine, and overstimulation can intensify symptoms dramatically.

Helpful considerations:

- Assign a trusted support person to stay nearby throughout the gathering.
- Offer a predictable plan of the day's activities and meal schedule ahead of time.
- Reduce surprises whenever possible.
- Allow the guest to arrive before the house becomes crowded.
- Create access to a quiet recovery room or rest area where the person can:
    - rest
    - regroup
    - lie down briefly if needed
    - decompress from stimulation

Mobility & Navigation

Moving through crowded homes and unfamiliar holiday gathering spaces can be very difficult for someone with PD.

Important supports:

- Clearly identify the easiest bathroom route ahead of time.
- Avoid routes involving:
    - stairs
    - dim lighting
    - uneven terrain
    - crowded bottlenecks
- Ensure:
    - walkways are wide and uncluttered
    - electrical cords and rugs are secured
    - holiday decorations do not obstruct walking paths
    - lighting is adequate, especially in hallways and outdoor entryways
- If outdoors:
    - avoid slippery, uneven, or unstable surfaces if possible
    - consider temporary pathway mats or easier access routes
    - provide assistance navigating steps and entrances when needed

Bathroom Access

Urgency and frequency are common in PD.

Helpful considerations:

- Seat the individual near a restroom.
- Make sure bathrooms are:
    - easy to locate
    - well lit
    - accessible
    - not down long, crowded hallways

- If the gathering is at an unfamiliar home, let the person know where the bathroom is before the gathering gets underway.

Medication Timing

Medication schedules are often extremely important in Parkinson's disease.

Helpful considerations:

- Allow flexibility for medication timing.
- Keep water readily available at all times.
- Have small snacks accessible in case medications need to be taken with food.
- Avoid long delays before meals are served.
- If holiday activities, meal preparation, or family traditions run long, recognize that fatigue and worsening symptoms may occur.

Fatigue & Energy Conservation

Even joyful events can be physically exhausting.

Helpful supports:

- Encourage pacing and rest breaks.
- Understand the person may:
    - leave early
    - need breaks frequently
    - participate selectively
- Avoid over-scheduling expectations such as:
    - long standing periods
    - excessive family photos
    - prolonged social interaction
    - participating in every holiday activity

Remember that being present does not mean having to participate in everything. Allowing someone to enjoy the gathering at their own pace can make the experience much more meaningful.

Temperature & Comfort

People with PD can have difficulty regulating temperature.

Helpful considerations:

- Avoid excessive heat exposure.
- Provide:
    - comfortable seating away from fireplaces or heating vents
    - fans and airflow when needed
    - hydration
- Keep tissues, water, and perhaps light snacks readily available.
- Be mindful of temperature changes when moving between indoor and outdoor environments.

Communication & Dignity

- Speak directly to the individual — not only to the caregiver.

- Allow extra time for movement and communication.
- Avoid rushing.
- Normalize accommodations quietly and respectfully.
- Include the person in conversations and family decisions rather than assuming what they can or cannot do.

Holiday Activities & Participation

Participation matters more than perfection.

- Provide safe opportunities to engage without pressure.
- Offer activities that allow the person to participate while seated, if needed.
- Ensure there is space for assistive devices and easy access to seating.
- Understand that freezing, balance issues, fatigue, or cognitive overload may limit participation unexpectedly.
- Allow flexibility when plans change or the person needs to step away.

The goal is meaningful participation, not keeping up with everyone else's pace.

One Often-Overlooked Consideration

Transitions are frequently the hardest part:

- parking → entering the home
- arriving → greeting family and friends
- moving from one room to another
- gathering → sitting down for the meal
- meal → holiday activities
- gathering → transportation home

Having one designated person help guide and simplify transitions can dramatically reduce anxiety and exhaustion.

Ideally, this person should understand how to assist someone with PD in case they have difficulty standing up, experience a freezing episode, or fall. Knowing when and how to provide appropriate assistance is important for everyone's safety.

The Goal

The goal is not simply attendance — it is helping the individual with Parkinson's feel:

- included
- safe
- calm
- respected
- comfortable enough to meaningfully participate in the celebration

Small environmental adjustments can make an enormous difference in preserving confidence, dignity, and enjoyment.

The holidays are about spending time together. With a little understanding, preparation, and flexibility, families can create an environment where everyone has the opportunity to be part of the celebration.

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