



# Oh Sweet Silver Bells

## A Holiday Season Shines through the Clouds of Alzheimer's

**Q:** Dear Adia,

I am 83 years young living comfortably in the Palos Verdes Estates. My bride and I became empty nester's almost 29 years ago and since then, our lives (and hearts) have taken us down many paths, with lots of twists and turns. The most memorable path is when my wife decided it was Christmas Day – *everyday*. This happened approximately 11 months after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. It seems that her memory is fixed on this holiday. As a result, we have a permanent and beautifully decorated Christmas tree, gifts, snow flakes and lights throughout our home. From time to time, I'll change the lights when the bulbs burn out. Because of Alzheimer's, my wife does not have any context about the meaning of the holiday season. She enjoys seeing the lights and tree everyday but she

can't share why the holiday season is important. What should I expect this holiday season and should I prepare my family? What can I do to make *this* holiday season feel special for her...and different from our *everyday*?

**A:** Alzheimer's can be an *especially* sad disease during the holidays. The clouds that surround a loved ones memory prevent them from making connections with people, places, things and feelings from the past. The key is taking advantage of a possible opening in the fog. Those in the family that do not have the disease should take this possible opening as an opportunity to be there and ready when the clouds part. In your case, this is important because your wife will be looking for you to be there as if nothing has changed in any way.

The flurry of the holiday season may not always fill people with holiday cheer and thus, your own memories of this time can be a mixed blessing. The central issue that concerns family members of loved ones with Alzheimer's during the holidays is the inevitable *emotional disconnect and sometimes, physical separation*. The inability for our loved one with Alzheimer's to be "mindfully present" at the moment of thanksgiving prayer or not cooking the old family recipe anymore may trigger or enhance feelings of isolation, depression and separation for family members. A sense of loss and powerlessness sets in and changes the holiday experience. It's hard to accept that the typical "emotional response or behavior" that the loved one with Alzheimer's *used* to exhibit during the holidays will not happen anymore. Examples are "My mom folded and saved the torn-used wrapping paper for next year" or "my mom made funny faces when opening her gifts..." or "dad insisted cutting the turkey with his vintage set of knives from WW II...and always complained about not finding the same quality of knives at Sears anymore...the knives are plastic now!"

The memories of the holidays often change when caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's. Celebrating the holiday season takes on new meaning for people with Alzheimer's and their family members. Sometimes the best decision is to change some family traditions, but it's still possible to find new innovative ways to keep the holiday spirit cheerful for you as well as the rest of the family. Please remember it's not the person (your "beautiful bride") refusing to recall holiday family traditions, it's the **disease**.

Here are good tips for you and your bride during the holiday season:

1. Clothing
  - Pull out her favorite "special" dresses or knit sweaters as well as the pearls that matched perfectly. ALL women have at least one favorite dress and an all-time-favorite piece of jewelry.
2. Pictures and Story-Telling
  - Display old pictures around the house. Have scrapbooks and photo album of family reunions and events nearby.
  - Share stories without the expectation that your wife will remember. Just talk to her about *her* favorite and finest moments in life. She may, just maybe...trigger a memory. Hold her hand while you share the sweet stories. Holding hands doesn't require much but a warm heart.
  - Take a moment to sit and admire the lights on your tree together in her "favorite spot." Perhaps buy a new set of lights and decorate together!
3. Outdoor Decorations
  - Drive to a local neighborhood with lots of holiday decorations and lights on trees, front yards and homes.
4. Holiday Carols
  - Call a senior center for a Holiday Caroling schedule. The familiar songs may momentarily trigger a parting of the clouds.
5. Take time for yourself
  - Consistent exercise, joyful companionship and a good diet are key factors to preventing and/or slowing the progression of Alzheimer's according to many national studies. Don't lose sight of your own health!

Welcome helping hands to assist you in caring for your wife. Many of the physical needs associated with Alzheimer's can be met by hiring a professional caregiver to assist with basic activities of daily living such as meal preparation, medication reminder, assistance with dressing, bathing or toileting, exercise plans and joyful companionship! These types of services must be customized for people with Alzheimer's. Seek out quality caregivers or friends that truly understand how to care for someone with Alzheimer's because there is a difference in care!

In the moments when the clouds part, remember to appreciate every story told by your loved one. Often times our loved ones tell the story not to amuse (or bore) the listener, but to test if **they** can **still** tell the story...over and over again.

Yours truly, Adia LLC  
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