



Training Your Caregiver: Holiday Safety and Activities with the Cognitively Impaired Veteran

For many veterans suffering from cognitive issues like brain trauma, PTSD, Alzheimer's and other dementias, the holidays can be a frightening time. Flashing lights can be confusing, cords make tripping easy, and the addition of many activities that go beyond their normal routine can be stressful.

Holidays can also be a time of fun and a chance for reminiscent activities that can be a great blessing to the veteran and the veteran's family as old traditions are replayed, and memories of past holidays are discussed as photo albums are brought out at family gatherings.

Here are a few tips to remember which can help avoid a disastrous holiday and may lower your stress as a caregiver during the holiday season.

Safety is paramount during the holidays, especially in homes in which a person with cognitive disorders or dementia resides.

Decorative Lights

Decorative lights are beautiful and can be a wonderful reminder to the veteran of past holidays and good memories.

It is preferable that you place all lights on the steady burn setting and avoid flashing lights that may trigger PTSD issues, or increase confusion for the cognitively impaired veteran.

With all the extra holiday decorating come the use of additional electric cords. Be sure to secure all extra cords so that they do not pose a trip hazard. It is recommended to run them along the outside walls where they are as far out of the way as possible. Elderly veterans are frail and a broken hip can trigger a major medical crisis.

Check all lights for frayed cords. Any lights with frayed cords should be discarded to avoid accidental shocks and the potential for electrical fires. It is recommended that older lights be replaced with newer lights which are designed to burn “cool” to avoid potential injuries.

Simplify Your Decorations

Instead of going "whole hog" when decorating for the holidays, it is recommended that you reduce your usual amount of decorations. Simple and clutter-free will be most helpful when living with a cognitively impaired veteran.

Keep decorations, presents, extra coats and shoes out of the common walk areas. Outdoor decorations should follow these same rules.

Another good idea is to try and maintain the same furniture floor pattern. For veterans who may be a little confused at times, moving the furniture may disorient them which could lead to agitation.

Holiday Candles

In homes with cognitively impaired veterans, open flames are dangerous and should not be left unattended when lit. Instead of a burning candle, it is recommended to use LED battery-operated candles. Some of these have the same smell as a scented holiday candle and will flicker in the same manner as a candle with an open flame.

Christmas Trees

With proper precautions, a live tree is a possibility. However, it is recommended that a smaller artificial tree may be less hazardous for the impaired veteran or adult. An artificial tree reduces the potential for a fire hazard and a smaller tree can be more stable than a taller tree reducing the potential for falling over.

Avoid ornaments that resemble food or candy. Try to use favorite memorable ornaments that may help the cognitively impaired veteran remember happy Christmas times.

Remove trees immediately after the holiday period.

Holiday Plants

Holiday Plants offer their own set of hazards. Some plants, like poinsettias and mistletoe are poisonous and should **NEVER** be in a house where a cognitively impaired veteran resides, not even “just for the holiday!” It is recommended that artificial plants be used instead. They offer the same beauty and joy for the season without the potential for allergic reactions or accidental poisonings.

Holiday Activities

Try to schedule major activities early in the day. All of us become tired as the day wears on, even in normal situations. For someone who is already struggling and already has a tendency to become confused, the stress and agitation of the holidays adds to their load. Reserve time at the end of the day for sitting and visiting. Talking of past holiday customs and remembering family stories may be enjoyable for your loved-one and may trigger some of their long-term memories that will make the holiday more enjoyable for them.

Try to include your veteran in some of the holiday preparations. Focus on their remaining strengths and let them use their own capabilities to help with small tasks. For example, one family had a memorable holiday when their cognitively impaired veteran helped make a special candy that the family makes every Christmas. The veteran remembered the steps, was able to do them correctly, and helped pass on that knowledge and tradition to his grandchildren. The veteran shared that it was one of the best Christmas memories he had in years.

Limit your visitors to small groups and let them know about the needs of the cognitively impaired veteran. Prepare other loved-ones for the changes they might see in the veteran, especially if they have not been over to visit in some time.

Using these few precautions may reduce everyone’s holiday stress level and allow more time to enjoy the holiday season with your cognitively impaired veteran.

Exam Follows on Next Page



Training Your Caregiver: Holiday Safety and Activities

Employee Name: _____

Date: _____

Mark the correct response:

1. For many veterans suffering from cognitive issues like brain trauma, PTSD, or Alzheimer's and other dementias, holidays can be:
 - a. Looked at with great anticipation.
 - b. A frightening time with flashing lights that bring back wartime memories.
 - c. A confusing time with lots of electrical cords that make tripping easy.
 - d. Both b and c.

2. Decorative lights are beautiful and are often a wonderful reminder to the veteran of past holidays and good memories. However, one should:
 - a. Avoid the use of flashing lights as it may bring about a PTSD episode.
 - b. Insure electrical cords are placed out of walkways to avoid tripping.
 - c. Discard any lights with frayed cords to avoid potential shocks and electrical fires.
 - d. All of the above.

3. A smaller Christmas tree will reduce the possibility for the tree to tip over and hurt someone.
 - a. True.
 - b. False.

4. Holiday plants like poinsettias and mistletoe are safe to use around cognitively impaired persons.
 - a. True.
 - b. False.

5. Cognitively impaired veterans enjoy being surrounded by friends and family so it is a good idea to have a large holiday party to help them celebrate.
 - a. True.
 - b. False.

6. Prepare other family members for the changes they might see in the veteran, especially if they have not been over to visit in some time.
 - a. True.
 - b. False.

7. For safety, it is recommended to use battery-operated candles around cognitively impaired veterans.
 - a. True.
 - b. False.

8. Circle all the appropriate holiday decorating tips for the home of a cognitively impaired veteran:
 - a. Use flashing lights to provide a holiday flair.
 - b. Use battery-operated candles instead of candles with flames.
 - c. Use artificial holiday plants.
 - d. Use a large living tree to bring back memories of Christmases past.
 - e. Choose ornaments that are meaningful to the veteran and invoke memories of past holidays.
 - f. Go all out with lots of decorations, the veteran will like that.
 - g. Decorate simply, using decorations that have a sentimental reminder of past holidays.

9. Limit holiday visitors to small groups and advise them of any special needs of the cognitively impaired or disabled veteran.
 - a. True
 - b. False

10. Encourage the veteran to share memories of past holidays with family and grandchildren.

Encourage the veteran to participate in holiday baking or decorating at the level the veteran wishes to participate.

- a. True
- b. False

In order to receive your state-required home caregiver CEUs, you must mail this test along with your signed FORM 1732 Management and Training of Service Provider (on the next page) to:

**CTADVRC – VDHCBS
PO Box 729
Belton TX 76513**

Score: _____ of 10

Pass – Fail

