

# Tips for celebrating special occasions

This help sheet gives tips about ways to plan special occasions and enjoy these times together. Everyone living with dementia is unique, so when reading these tips, consider the person's abilities, the impact dementia is having on them and their symptoms.

Traditionally, holiday and religious festivities or milestone birthdays involve families gathering, exchanging gifts, sharing food and drink, and general celebrations.

However, they can be stressful for the person living with dementia because they are a break from normal routine and may be a different and busy environment for the person to manage.

There are ways you can make these special occasions enjoyable for everyone.

## 1. Involve the person with dementia

When planning a special occasion, include the person with dementia. This may include helping with meal preparation or simple tasks. It is important for their sense of wellbeing. If they become anxious or confused, change the task to something else.

During the occasion, simple games or music activities can be useful in helping the person remain active and included.

## 2. Be aware of the environment

Decorating a celebration space with special occasion ornaments or decorations may confuse someone with dementia. The person might mistake a table ornament or decoration for something they can eat, or it may trigger a negative sensory reaction. If necessary, change the environment.

### 3. Share the caring

Create opportunities for family members and friends to share the caring role.

This could be done by:

- family or friends hosting an event at their home
- going out as a group to a specific cultural or religious activity
- asking someone to sit with the person with dementia in a quiet space to give them a break from a busy event.

### 4. Changes in routine

Changes in routine may be confusing for a person with dementia. To minimise possible feelings of insecurity or stress, try to stick to their routine. For example, when planning a special meal, consider the person's usual mealtime.

### 5. Rest and quiet times are important

Taking on too many tasks or trying to maintain traditions may increase the feeling of being overwhelmed by the demands of the occasion.

Some tips to help you not feel overwhelmed:

- Consider not taking on too many tasks or trying to maintain all traditions.
- Consider that someone with dementia may need to be around smaller groups of people.
- Where possible, maintain regular routines.
- Plan for periods of inactivity and quiet.
- Plan rest and quiet times for you and the person with dementia.

### 6. Gift giving and receiving

Depending on their interest and ability, encourage the person with dementia to be involved in preparing and giving gifts. There are activities you could do together, like:

- baking and packaging biscuits
- wrapping gifts
- writing cards.

Family and friends may appreciate you suggesting gift ideas.

## 7. Share memories

Celebrations may trigger memories of previous times spent together. It can be reassuring and validating for everyone to:

- listen to and encourage shared recollections
- listen to favourite songs or sing traditional songs together
- watch favourite movies together.

## 8. Seek emotional support

Recognise that special times may make both the person with dementia and family members feel a sense of loss. This may be strong for those living away from family, or without family members. Being aware of emotional needs and seeking support may reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

## Additional reading and resources

- **Dementia Australia library service**

Visit: [dementia.org.au/library](https://dementia.org.au/library)

- **Family and friends matter**

Visit: [dementia.org.au/resources/family-and-friends-matter](https://dementia.org.au/resources/family-and-friends-matter)

- **Dementia-friendly communities**

Visit: [dementiafriendly.org.au](https://dementiafriendly.org.au)

### Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

**National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500**

**For language assistance: 131 450**

**Visit our website: [dementia.org.au](https://dementia.org.au)**