

**Service, Support and Success:
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***Unwrapping The Perfect Holidays:
Tips for Staff Serving People with Intellectual Disabilities***

Dave Hingsburger and Chanelle Salonia
Vita Community Living Services

Loneliness.

Loss.

Isolation.

These are not words that one often associates with the Holiday Season. We see images of happy families gathering, commercials of loving parents searching for presents for their perfect children, holiday movies emphasize home and heart. For many people, however, the holidays increase their sense of isolation, rejection and exclusion. This can be especially true for many with intellectual disabilities. Those who lived in institutions often do not have a history of close family ties or a multitude of friends. This season can bring home, a powerful sense of loss.

We want to make a few suggestions over the next couple of weeks, starting with this edition of *Unwrapping the Perfect Holiday*, of ways that you can best support those with disabilities in your care. Just some ideas, mostly common sense, for ensuring that the holidays go as smoothly and as positively as possible. These ideas may not be appropriate for everyone, but now is an appropriate time for those teams who work in group homes and other environments to take time and think, deeply, about how best to provide support to those for whom holidays are more likely to bring disappointment than joy.

Some ideas:

- 1) Recognize that this can be a difficult time.

It starts with just paying attention. It's easy to get so wrapped up in the spirit of the season that you don't notice signs or symptoms of sadness or loneliness. Be alert to the way the holiday is affecting those in your care. Don't give in to the temptation to 'cheer people up' or try to 'kid' someone out of sadness. Just remember to be there for people if they want to talk. Or take opportunities to spend some real quality time with someone who is feeling lonely. Don't make a

big deal out of it, just do it naturally, comfortably – done right, the person shouldn't notice the extra effort you are making.

2) Take time now to review behavioural approaches

It's a really good time to sit down and have a review of people's programmes or support plans. Even if someone has done really well over the last several weeks or months, the stress of this season can bring it all crashing down. Take a look at the approaches and re-familiarize yourself with them. Look at what the warning signs of deterioration are and what triggers might set someone off. This will allow you to plan well and set the person up for success.

3) Avoid unnecessary stressors

Know what causes people stress. Plan around those issues to avoid any unnecessary upsets. For example, if someone has difficulty standing in line or being patient waiting ... come up with strategies. The obvious one is to go shopping very early in the day, before the crowds are out. The other is to offer to be their official 'shopper' have them go shopping with you, pick out what they want – take a photo on your cell phone to remember, and then return later and pick up the items for them. Simple, efficient and may reduce the likelihood that an outburst may happen. If someone doesn't like noisy places, it's probably best not to have lunch in a food court. Those places are loud at the best of times. Remember they may cope with it on an ordinary day in the summer, but with all the shoppers, carts and children, it can be overwhelming – plan to eat somewhere else, or even bring a picnic to have in the car on the way there or on the way home. Go somewhere to park where you can watch people or look at scenery.

4) Develop traditions

One person with a disability who lived in a group home remarked that every year the holidays were different depending which staff were on. We have traditions for a reason, they are comforting and familiar. Develop a 'holiday traditions book' where you write down how things are done so that they can be done in similar ways every year. Have the people who live in the house develop this with you. Let them design the holidays and then let them know that these traditions will be carried on so they can look forward to them every year.

5) Dealing with family visits

When someone is going home with their family or their friends, it's wonderful for them but may cause real distress for the person who is not going anywhere. Plan to be out with the individual staying back so they don't have to be there and watch someone else be welcomed to go home by family. Try to go and do something really fun, something the person really likes, so when you get back, the person has something exciting to talk about and share with other residents or other staff.

6) Be careful about what you say

Remember that people can hear you. If you find out you are working on a holiday special to you, you might be tempted to say to one of the other staff, 'Oh, darn, I have to be here for the holiday' or 'I'm so going to miss being with my family this year.' It's hard enough getting through the holidays without thinking that you are personally ruining the holiday for your staff. Feeling these things are natural, saying them in front of those you care for, though, is cruel.

7) Choose entertainment carefully

Those wonderful old movies like 'It's a Wonderful Life' may be terrific for you, but then, you didn't live for 20 years in an institution. These kinds of films can cause a sense of depression and loss. Pick entertainment that focuses on things other than family and the loving embrace of friends. It's fine if the person wants to watch these movies, but don't choose it if it isn't asked for. There are all sorts of movies about the holidays that are just fun – pick one of those.

8) Take a breather ... pace yourself

The holidays can be overwhelming, they come more quickly than you might expect. Plan out with other staff what needs to be done and how it's going to be done. If you get overwhelmed, you will be more likely to lose your patience. Further, if you are rushing around, so are they ... so pace yourself, take breaks, give everyone a breather. Schedule in days and shifts where nothing is going on except being home together.

9) Low impact holiday activities

So many of the holiday activities are really high energy, high volume, high stimulation kinds of events. Try doing some 'low impact holidaying'. Go for a drive at night to look at decorations. Put on some soft holiday music in the car and maybe even bring a thermos of hot chocolate. Make it an event. It's quiet, it's fun, it's quality time. There are many holiday activities that are calmer and more intimate than malls and loud parties. For example, carol sings and holiday services might be a perfect quiet celebration.

10) Take care of yourself over the holidays

It's a stressful time of year for everyone, even you! The expectations we have of the season are so difficult to live up to. Many of you work at providing a home for people with disabilities and then go home to provide home for children. It can seem never ending. Find time for yourself. Quiet moments when you can remind yourself of the spirit of the season – and remind yourself about how wonderful it is to be able to make 'home' twice over.

That's it for now. In a few days, we're going to send you some ideas for the celebrations that are coming. How to make them fun and inclusive. Our goal here is just to get you thinking and talking. We

want everyone to have the best holiday possible – maybe start a tradition of ‘happiness’ in place of a tradition of ‘loss’. It’s a big goal, but a good one to try for. Watch your email box for the next edition of ... Unwrapping the Perfect Holidays.