

News Column for Week of November 9, 2020

Barbara Stockebrand
Southwind Extension District –Yates Center
Family and Consumer Sciences

Reducing Loneliness During the Holidays

It's the season where we are looking for all things to be merry and bright. However, this holiday season is likely to look differently from previous years for all of us.

The focus on family and togetherness during this time of year can leave anyone not able to participate in their traditional customs feeling isolated or unhappy under "normal" circumstances. With our current environment, additional feelings of gloom can be expected, especially for older adults.

Isolation makes the holidays hard. A lot of changes may have taken place over the past year. Older adults inevitably suffer losses, even if they are relatively healthy. Friends may have become ill, the neighborhood may have changed, decreased energy levels – all resulting in feelings of lost independence and opportunities.

While we may have to work at adapting our own holiday plans and traditions, we need to remember what the holiday season is truly about. Some things may need to be simplified, yet we can still focus on what is really important: the people that matter in our lives. Here are some thoughts to brighten the darker winter days for those who remain at a distance.

--Be an active listener. Talk about what your loved one wants to talk about, even if the conversation tends to be negative. An empathetic listener can help them work through what is troubling them. Conversations might help them realize why they feel down and help find ways to improve their spirits.

--Remind them they are a significant part of your life. They may feel useless or burdensome if they cannot fully participate in festivities. Encouragement to do what they are capable of doing and showing them they are loved is important.

--Ask family members to send cards, photographs and drawings to help keep seasonal mail cheerful. The traditional Christmas cards don't always bring good news of updates from life-long friends and acquaintances, especially for older adults. Looking forward to receiving those cards and then not receiving one here and there can create concern for those friends.

--Help family members understand that you are trying to simplify your holidays to focus on what matters with the celebrations. Remind them that family and friendships are what is most important.

--If a virtual get-together is possible, plan a time for all family members to join. It doesn't have to be on a particular holiday. If a loved one is in a care facility, see if arrangements can be made where the staff would arrange for a virtual visit. Interactions with younger generations can be most uplifting for older adults.

--Send easy-to-use decorations that can be hung in smaller living areas, such as removable window clings or artificial wreaths to help create a festive atmosphere. Then phone or video call to follow up with the decorating process. Be prepared to listen to reflections on past holidays.

--Make some traditional baked goods or treats that can be safely sent through the mail and send those to family members. If several family units are involved, but cannot gather, consider each family taking a traditional recipe and sending some of that product to all family units usually involved in the gathering. Traditions based around food and certain recipes can be continued but in a new way.

--Remember, spending time with older adults speaks volumes in helping them feel included and letting them know they are loved. We may need to do that in a safe way through social distancing, wearing masks, sending notes and things through the mail, or meeting virtually. However you go about your holiday traditions this year, any time you can share is a precious gift.

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