



Caregiving and the Holidays

“I promise you nothing is as chaotic as it seems. Nothing is worth your health. Nothing is worth poisoning yourself into stress, anxiety, and fear.”

Steve Maraboli

While the holiday season can be fraught with challenges and stresses around family get-togethers in general, when you're a caregiver it can present even more tension. Sometimes your loved one will not even be able to attend a family event so you may be even more bombarded with inquiries, opinions, and recommendations.

Here are 10 basic strategies and tools to keep in mind to help ease the stress when faced with the inevitable awkward and tension-inducing questions, demands, and unsolicited advice.

- 1. Know your Desired Outcome:** A desired outcome must be what you want, and it must be something over which you have control. Be clear what you want and need; then plan so that you can lay out your strategies for this holiday season.
- 2. Acknowledge, Respect, and Accept your own feelings** about your loved one's health and ongoing needs that may come under scrutiny at a family gathering. Typically, discomfort around questions arises because you are uncomfortable, insecure, upset, angry, etc. around your life circumstance and the judgments others may have on how you are handling your loved one's needs and care. Take steps to deal with your feelings, (either with a friend, professional, or clergy) so that you can come from a place of greater strength and confidence.
- 3. Set boundaries and limits.** You do not need to attend every gathering, and you do not need to bring your loved one to every gathering when it doesn't work for you to do so. You do not need to explain, defend, or justify your decisions. If someone is most eager to see your parent, you're allowed to ask them to be responsible for his/her care. You already know that caregiving is a 24/7 job, and you do deserve breaks.
- 4. Be willing to see the inquisitor's loving intentions:** Most family members who delve into uncomfortable topics do so out of care and concern, or with the desire to ensure they are updated on the latest health status. Remember that their goal is not to cause upset and discomfort and may even believe that they're inquiries are signs of their caring. Even though they may have loving intentions, you are still allowed to tell them when you do not want to discuss mom's condition. (When they really are the nosy, busybody, malicious family members, boundaries and limits are particularly important, but this is a topic for a different class...)



5. Be prepared: You know questions will be asked, and it's best to have a couple of answers that you practice saying out loud, so you feel comfortable giving *your* answers when the time comes. Here a few possibilities: *"Thank you for your care and concern. This is not something I care to discuss at the party. Let's focus on enjoying the party"* and then redirect the conversation to noticing decorations, reminiscing about a memory of holidays past, a topic that your family holds near and dear, be it sports, hobbies, politics, etc. You could also say, *"I appreciate your interest, but this topic is not open for discussion."* Again, be prepared to either walk away or change the subject. Have new topics ready to go.

If you want to be even more direct, you can say, *"This topic is far too heavy (sad, upsetting, aggravating, etc.) for this party. Let's keep things light."* And again, have topics you are willing to talk about or walk away and strike up a conversation with someone else.

6. Remember, it's important to take care of your needs and feelings first: Someone will be uncomfortable; it doesn't always have to be you. You may initially feel uncomfortable at not answering someone's questions, and that is understandable because it's different. But, you would feel uncomfortable answering questions on topics that you do not want to get into. Now you get to decide which discomfort you are willing to experience.

7. And We Breathe... When you take that deep breath before answering anyone's questions, you have a better chance at being thoughtful and responsive rather than reactive. This is the pause that will help you to give a response that you can ultimately feel good about. When you are clear about your needs, facing family gatherings will feel less intimidating and overwhelming.

8. Walk Away: When you feel stressed or overwhelmed, take a break. Take a walk around the block, go into a quiet room for a short breather, or call your best friend to vent. Remember your needs and feelings matter. If you feel exhausted, you can also have the option to leave early.

9. Don't expect Miracles: The above strategies take courage, practice, patience, and perseverance. Enter the holiday season prepared for how you want to handle family gatherings, recognizing that not everyone will be on the same page or have the same expectations. (And keep repeating Step #6).

10. Laugh, have fun, and enjoy: Do what you can to have a good time, even if it's for a limited time during the holiday season. Every moment of enjoyment is a moment when you don't feel worried, stressed, anxious, or frazzled. Take those moments as gifts and let them in. Life does have a lighter side when we allow ourselves to connect to it, even in the midst of the overwhelm.