Enjoying the Holidays After Brain Injury

Elaine Phillips, BrainLine – www.brainline.org

Question:

I spent last year's holiday season feeling down and depressed because I realized how different things are now after my husband's brain injury. This year, I'm ready for suggestions on how to move on — doing things that are joyful but which won't be overwhelming or exhausting. Any ideas?

Answer:

It is certainly normal to feel sadness and loss over the life you and your husband had before his brain injury. Having definite plans is a good strategy when you are grieving, especially during the holidays when emotions tend to intensify. In fact, probably the most important concept to successful and joyful holidays after any loss, including brain injury, is pre-planning. Now may be the time to think about establishing new rituals and routines rather than expecting things to be like they were pre-injury. And people with brain injury, like your husband, do better with consistent daily routines. However, if a routine needs to be altered, make sure to discuss the changes in advance. Reminders are always helpful, and like anyone, your husband would no doubt appreciate the freedom to weigh in on the family's plans.

Here are some ideas around holiday themes:

Because finances are often strained after a brain injury, remember that much of holiday joy is simple and free. Your loved ones will treasure small gestures as gifts such as a dozen cookies, a personal note from you and/or your husband, or simply time together watching a holiday movie with popcorn.

When shopping is called for, rather than wandering around wondering what family members want, plan ahead and ask them what's on top of their lists. Pick one or two gifts to buy on an outing and think about calling ahead to see if the store has what you're looking for in stock. If two gifts get scratched off the list, it's a real sense of accomplishment for everyone. If you have a computer, you can consider doing some of your shopping online — good prices can be found without a lot of effort, and, of course, it can be less tiring.

If going to a mall is too overwhelming, think about going to smaller stores instead, especially in the morning when there is usually less hustle and bustle. At smaller shops, items are often easier to find, and sometimes there are holiday open houses with treats like hot cider or cookies to make the trip even more festive.

Helping to cook or plan a dish for a get-together can be a lot of fun. There are cookbooks and many Internet resources for three-, four-, or five-ingredient recipes that can make the event achievable, enjoyable, and delicious.

Many families say that attending earlier religious services can be less hectic and crowded. For those who can stay up late, a candlelight service can be peaceful and reflective.

Finally, many people with brain injury and their caregivers enjoy giving back in some fashion. Many charitable organizations have opportunities at this time of year that involve only a little time and effort, but offer such great reward. You and your husband can choose an activity that would be meaningful for you both, such as an hour helping in a soup kitchen or delivering goodies to those spending the holidays in the hospital. Be sure to contact the organization in advance to be sure you understand any special requirements they may have.

All the best this holiday season as you continue on your journey.

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