

# Christmas Gifts for Those with Dementia

*Recently, Alzheimer's WA published a wonderful article about selecting appropriate Christmas gifts for someone with dementia. It seems to me that these gifts would also be suitable for someone who is dying, perhaps mostly sleeping, finding it difficult to concentrate and not able to communicate well anymore. See what you think.*

There is much discussion in the community – and in my family – about the commercialisation of Christmas. Some worry that Christmas draws you into its vortex and you end up spending far more than you planned. Others worry that the oversupply of gifts simply contributes to unsustainability and landfill.

These are not easy considerations, as they are usually weighed against the fact that gift giving is one of the great Christmas traditions, one of the key ways we celebrate those we love at this festive time. It is at this time we are reminded of the old proverb that it is better to give than to receive.

Christmas can also be a time where people feel disconnected, lonely and isolated. What gift is of value to these individuals?

I'd like to throw out my usual Christmas challenge to you, and ask you to consider the gifts you can give that are entirely sustainable and bank account friendly. While these gifts have value and meaning for everyone, they have special meaning for those living with dementia.

We often feel challenged by our loved ones with dementia at Christmas. How should we spend time? How can we best relate to our loved one whose cognitive impairment now impacts on their ability to easily relate. How can our exchange be positive, affirming the value of our relationship? How can we be with them and be confident that we have given a gift of value to them? This Christmas, I want to give you some tips on how you can give any or all of the following gifts to any of those you love, especially those with dementia.

## **Give Your Time and Just 'Be'**

A person with dementia may not always remember what you have said, but they will always remember how you made them feel. Time spent with a person with dementia is never wasted. This is never more so than at Christmas.

When you spend time with your loved one this Christmas, don't focus on information or items of fact that they may not be able to store or access. Focus on sharing at an emotional level. 'Do' less, and 'be' more. Be present in the moment, find where they are in time and share that memory. Don't feel pressured to fill your connect time with language. Just 'be'. Time is the most wonderful gift of all.

## **Connect Through Shared Memories or Experiences**

The second great gift is to connect with your loved one with dementia. Christmas is full of nostalgia and sensory cues that assist the memory or reminiscence of the person with dementia – the smell of Christmas dinner, the sound of Bing Crosby singing *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*, the sight of the Christmas tree.

Connect through shared memories or experiences. Reminisce about times shared. We do that with everyone at Christmas – we laugh about the Christmas camping trip that went wrong, the time the dog ate from the Christmas table while Grandma was finishing serving up, we look at photos of the children as babies and wonder at where they years went. All of these activities have visual, auditory or emotional cues that support a person with short term memory loss to access their memories of treasured times. You can facilitate this precious connect. It is a great gift to give.

### **Joy Will Result**

When you connect with another human being and share a moment where you are both joined by the memory or experience, joy will result. It is the same for all of us. For people with dementia, it is a special gift. You have supported their recollection, shared in the moment of its remembering and joined with them in relationship that enables them to feel the joy of being connected and remembering something familiar that is treasured. What a gift to give.

I always feel privileged to be able to give the gift of supporting a person with dementia to feel valued, connected to their memories and life experiences and more importantly connected to those around them. It is one of the most treasured parts of my role at Alzheimer's WA. At Christmas, you can give these gifts. You will experience the truth that giving is the best reward of all.

Give the gifts of time, connection and joy to those you love, and especially to those living with dementia. It will bring sparkle to their Christmas and yours.

If you need to talk about a loved one with dementia, or how you can help care, please call Alzheimer's WA on 1300 66 77 88.

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