

Craniotomy Support Group Newsletter 12/11/14

Flashing lights. Crowded stores. Loud family gatherings. The holiday season should be joyful, but it can often be overwhelming to someone who is living with brain injury.

If you are living with brain injury or coping after brain surgery, here are some tips to share with your friends and family. If someone you love is living with TBI, the tips below can help you plan in advance to make the holiday season happier and more relaxed for all of your friends and family.

- Identify — in advance, if possible — a quiet place to go at gatherings if you are feeling overwhelmed. This gives you a chance to take a break, and lets your loved ones stay involved in the festivities.
- Avoid crowded stores and order gifts online instead. If you are shopping in stores, remember to make a list in advance and plan your trips on week days — either early in the morning or late at night when there are fewer crowds.
- Wear a cap with a brim or lightly tinted sunglasses to minimize the glare of bright lights in stores or flashing lights on a tree.
- Wear noise-reducing headphones or ear buds. These are also great gift ideas for loved ones with TBI if they don't already have them.
- Ask a friend to go with you to stores or holiday parties. They can help you navigate crowds and anxiety-producing situations.
- Plan in advance as much as possible. And ask your hosts what their plans are so you aren't surprised by anything.
- Volunteer to help with the holiday activities that you enjoy the most and are least stressful for you.
- Remember to ask for help and accept help if it is offered to you. Ask someone you trust to help you with a budget to avoid overspending on gifts.
- Take a nap if you need a break. Remember that it's okay to skip the big parties and plan to celebrate in a way that makes you comfortable and happy.
- Check in advance to see if fireworks are part of outdoor celebrations — and skip them if they make you uncomfortable.
- If flashing lights bother you, ask your friends and family to turn off the flashing feature on Christmas tree lights or other decorations when you visit their homes.
- You can let your host know in advance that you may need to leave early. It will help you feel comfortable if you need to get home.

It is certainly normal to feel sadness and loss over the life you and your spouse/caregiver had before their 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 spouse, 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 spouse 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 surgery, 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 spouse, 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 spouse 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.