

Navigating the Holidays with Autism Spectrum Disorder

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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It is estimated that more than 3.5 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder. Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability. For every three children diagnosed there are two who aren't. Couple that with the number of adults who may be on the spectrum and chances are many families across America will be spending the holidays dealing with the challenges the diagnosis brings – both for the person on the spectrum and those around them.

Dr. Theresa Regan is a neuropsychologist who specializes in working with adults on the spectrum. She is also the mother of a son with Autism. Dr. Regan says while the holiday presents special challenges, there are things you can do ahead of time to make things easier. Start with giving your child or adult family member a heads up about what is going to happen. People on the spectrum often don't like surprises. You will also want to have a quiet space where they can go to calm themselves if things get too stressful.

SOT Theresa Regan, PhD. – Neuropsychologist – OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute

(Another quick tip that I find helpful is giving them a specific job so sometimes if they have a role that's structured and defined they're going to feel a lot better in a social setting then if there just after kind of make small talk or kind of mingle. :18)

V/O: Many holiday celebrations center around food and that can be difficult for people on the spectrum and others. Dr. Regan recalls the Thanksgiving morning her son woke up wanting tacos after she had prepared a traditional Thanksgiving meal. Understanding and flexibility are important.

SOT Theresa Regan, PhD. – Neuropsychologist – OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute

(Especially Thanksgiving to me is a lot about those traditional foods that we got from our moms and dads you know growing up in gathering around the table to eat the turkey and the stuffing. In the spectrum a lot of people have very specific food preferences. And they really aren't going to eat a large amount of food and they like to stick to their status quo :25)

V/O: Dr. Regan encourages people who don't live with Autism in their family and maybe don't understand it to remember this is a time for blessing each other and helping people not be isolated during the holidays.

If you would like more information about adults living with Autism Spectrum Disorders, contact Medical Psychology Services at (309) 655-7378.