

THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving gatherings can be stressful in the best of circumstances. Between preparing a huge meal, negotiating family conflicts and expectations, and the general pandemonium many of us struggle to maintain a thankful spirit. For those with Autism, stress levels are magnified due to sensory and social differences. Preparation can be key to surviving (and enjoying) the day.

At Autism Society of Ohio, we recommend preparing your family and relatives, as well as yourself or loved one with Autism ahead of time. Remind those you will be spending the day with that this is a time to be thankful, not critical. If you/your person with Autism knows they are loved, accepted and valued for who they are, they will be more relaxed. Specific reminders to the other guests can include:

Don't judge. Autistic behaviors are not the result of being "bad", but are likely the result of sensory aversions (Aunt Joan's perfume or the roasting turkey may not smell as good to someone with Autism; a hug may feel like needles on their skin, etc.). Give them some grace.

Speak to them directly and calmly in simple phrases. Do not talk as if they weren't there. LISTEN when they try to communicate. And don't criticize them or be offended if they do not talk to you.

If other family members or guests have expectations, ask that they explain them and provide simple guides as to how the Autistic person can meet them. Remind them that they need to say what they want, show the Autistic person how to do it, and support them when they try. Visual cues are helpful.

Explain that the Autistic person's eating needs are not related to a lack of affection or discipline. They may have tastebuds that are far more sensitive than average, making the pepper in the dressing feel like fire in their mouth. Ask everyone to let the Autistic person eat what they can and will without commenting or coaxing them to try something different.

Provide a quiet space with comforting activities (you can bring these from home) so that you/your person can retreat when they start to feel overwhelmed. It is okay for them to leave the dinner table when they need a break.

Once the other guests are prepped, you can prepare your loved one with Autism.

Let them know where you will be celebrating Thanksgiving, who will be there, what the schedule is likely to be – how is this day different from a typical one?

Provide them with a script or some other means of social interaction (but don't push them to use it once the event starts). If your family goes around the table to tell what they are thankful for, you can help the person with Autism practice what to say or create a written statement or picture to pass around.

Talk about how they can manage when they start to feel stressed – deep breathing, going to a prepared quiet space, doing a preferred activity.

Pack comfort objects to take with you. Be flexible about their use. You can explain that, because this is a special holiday, they can have extra screen time, etc.

Remember to keep your own expectations for the day reasonable. A successful day may be that you were able to stay 30 minutes longer than last year. And, above all, know that it is okay to start your own traditions!