



Dressing

Our clothes are very much part of our personality. Enabling someone with dementia to choose what he or she wears and to retain their particular style of dressing is a way of helping them to preserve their identity. As dementia progresses the person may need more assistance with dressing. Here are some suggestions.

Dressing is a very personal and private activity for most of us and one where we are used to making our own decisions. If a person with dementia needs assistance it should be offered in a tactful and sensitive way to enable them to make their own choices for as long as they can.

It is important to allow plenty of time if you are helping someone to dress so that neither of you feels rushed. Remember that a person with dementia will take longer to process information than they used to and this will affect their ability to respond and make choices.

Try to make this an opportunity to communicate what you are doing and anything else that might be of interest. If you can make dressing an enjoyable activity the person with dementia is more likely to feel relaxed, confident and co-operative.

Encourage independence

Encourage the person to remain independent by dressing themselves for as long as they can. Ways to help them may include:

- Laying out clothes in the order the person will put them on.
- Removing dirty clothes from the room. This will help prevent the person putting dirty clothes back on.
- Sensitively reminding the person which garment goes on next, or handing them the appropriate clothes as needed.
- Giving instructions in very short steps, when a person is more confused, such as: 'Now put your arm through the sleeve...'
- Being tactful if the person gets it wrong – for example, if they put something on the wrong way round. On the other hand, you may both be able to have a good laugh about something like this.
- Labelling drawers where particular items of clothing are kept, or by putting whole outfits together in a particular way.

General tips

When the person is getting dressed:

- Make sure that the room is warm.
- Ensure that clothing is appropriate.
- Encourage the person to use the toilet before getting dressed.

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- Try to keep to the routine the person is used to.
- For example, a person may prefer to put on all their underwear first, or they may prefer to dress their top half completely before their bottom half.
- If the person resists your efforts to help it may be best to leave them for a while rather than cause agitation and possible distress. They may be more amenable if you try again a little later.
- The person may no longer be able to tell you whether they are too hot or too cold. Several layers of thin clothing may be better than one thick layer. You can then suggest removing one layer if it gets too warm.
- Keep the wardrobe free of excess clothing or else choices can overwhelm.

Choice

Whenever possible, ask the person what they would like to wear. People with dementia need the dignity of having a choice in what they wear.

However, too many options can be confusing, so it is probably better to make suggestions one at a time. If the person lives on their own and has lots of clothes, select those that they are most likely to wear and put them in an accessible place. This will make it easier for the person to choose.

Reasons why a person may have difficulty dressing:

Some questions to ask yourself:

Physical Problems?

- Balance?
- Fine motor co-ordination? e.g. Zips, buttons

Thinking Problems?

- Forgot how to sequence steps for dressing?
- Does not recognize his/her clothes?
- Doesn't realize time of day? Season?

Environment?

- Confusing? Cluttered?
- Cold/Warm?

Other Concerns?

- Are you rushing the person too much
- Are you expecting too many sequences at once?
- Is the person embarrassed to dress/undress in front of you but can't express that?

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Buying clothes

- If the person wants to wear the same outfit repeatedly try to buy more than one identical outfit so you can keep him/her clean without stress.
- If you are buying clothes for the person with dementia make every effort to take them with you, so that you can choose the style and the colours they prefer.
- Check their size. They may have lost or gained weight without you realizing it.
- Look for clothes that are easy for the person to put on and take off, particularly if they are living on their own – for example, clothes with larger neck openings and front fastenings, velcro or no fastenings.
- If you are caring for a woman, front opening bras will be easier for you both to manage. Don't let her go without a bra as this could lead to discomfort and soreness.
- Self-supporting stockings should generally be avoided as these can sometimes cause circulation problems.
- For men, boxer shorts may be easier to manage and more comfortable than Y-fronts.
- Shoes with laces may be difficult for someone with dementia to manage. Well-fitting slip-on shoes may help the person to remain independent a little longer.
- Slippers should not be worn for more than a few hours as they may not offer enough support to the feet.

Adaptations

You may be able to adapt some clothes to make them easier to put on and take off.

- Longer zips are always helpful. Velcro fastenings, if the person can get used to them, are easier than buttons or hooks and eyes.
- You can sometimes replace shoelaces with elastic.

Changing clothes

A person may be reluctant to undress even when they go to bed or refuse to change their clothes. You may have to use a variety of strategies to persuade them. For example, it may help to remove dirty clothing and substitute clean clothing when they have a wash or a bath or shower. You may persuade them to change because someone is visiting, or you might say that it would please you to see them wearing something new. Try to ensure that the person changes their clothes frequently without causing them distress.

Bizarre clothing

As long as it does no harm, it is probably better to accept bizarre clothing or clothing that is out of place rather than having a confrontation. If a person is determined to wear a hat in bed, for example, colours that clash or a heavy coat in summer, then try where possible, to respect their choice.

Other aspects of grooming

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Help the person with their hair after dressing. A woman may like make-up, if she is used to it, or a dab of perfume. If she likes wearing brooches or beads this gives her another opportunity to make choices. If she enjoys having her nails painted you might do this at some point in the day.

Compliments

Helping a person with dementia to look good is an important way of maintaining confidence. It is also a fact that strangers will judge a person by their appearance and this is important if a person has dementia. Compliment the person on the way they look and encourage them to take pride in their appearance.

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