

Dressing

Physical appearance contributes to a person's sense of self-esteem. For a person living in the middle or later stages of Alzheimer's or another dementia, choosing and putting on clothes can be frustrating. They may not remember how to dress or may be overwhelmed with the choices or the task itself.

There are many reasons why a person living with Alzheimer's or another dementia might have difficulty dressing. Consider the following when trying to understand the cause(s):

Physical

- Does the person have problems with balance or lack the motor skills needed to fasten buttons or close zippers?
- Does the person remember how to put clothes on and in the appropriate order?
- Does the person recognize their clothes?
- Are they aware of the time of day or season of the year?
- Is the person in pain due to arthritis or some other issue affecting movement?

Environmental

- Is the person troubled by lack of privacy, a cold room, poor lighting or loud noises?

Other concerns

- Is the person being rushed to get dressed quickly?
- Is the person receiving clear step-by-step instructions on how to dress or does the task seem too complicated?
- Is the person embarrassed by dressing in front of you or others?

Encourage the person to do as much as possible, but be ready to help when needed. The following tips may be helpful in providing dressing assistance to the person living with dementia:

Simplify choices

- Lay out clothes for the person.
- When possible, give the person an opportunity to select favorite outfits or colors. Try offering only two choices of a clothing item (e.g., two pants or two skirts).
- Keep closets free of excess clothing. A person may find many clothing choices overwhelming.

Choose comfortable and simple clothing

- Select comfortable clothing that's easy to put on and remove.
- Cardigans, shirts and blouses that button in front are sometimes easier to work than pullover tops.
- Substitute Velcro for buttons, snaps and zippers, which may be too difficult to handle.
- To avoid tripping and falling, make sure that clothing length is appropriate.
- Make sure the person wears comfortable, non-slip shoes.
- If the person uses a wheelchair, choose clothes that protect privacy and allow for greater comfort.
- Make sure that clothing is loose-fitting, especially at the waist and hips, and choose fabrics that are soft and stretchable.

Organize the dressing process

- Lay out clothes in the order each item should be put on.
- Hand the person one item of clothing at a time while giving short, simple instructions such as "Put on your shirt," rather than "Get dressed."
- Don't rush the person — this can cause anxiety.

Be flexible

- If the person wants to wear the same outfit repeatedly, consider purchasing a duplicate or having similar options available.
- It's alright if the person wants to wear several layers of clothing, just make sure they don't get overheated.
- When outdoors, be sure the person is dressed appropriately for the weather.
- It's OK if clothing is mismatched — try to focus on the fact that the person was able to get dressed.

Visit alz.org/caregiving to learn more.

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