

Help with dressing and undressing

Support for family carers providing personal care for people living with dementia



Crossing the line

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The information provided in this booklet is general guidance and not intended to be used as formal advice. Please see your healthcare professional for more personalised advice.

All information was correct at the time of publication. It is recommended to check what is available in your area.

This booklet is one of a series of booklets developed through the 'Crossing the line' research project.

The Crossing the line project was funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) under its Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) Programme (Grant Reference Number NIHR202970)

FUNDED BY

NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research



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Dressing activities are often problematic for people living with dementia. Dressing and undressing involves considerable practical, visual, sequencing and motivation skills, all of which can be compromised in dementia.

Helping the person you care for to get dressed or undressed is one of the simplest types of personal care, but it is still something that most of us have never had help with since childhood. Dressing and undressing someone can feel uncomfortable. It can feel over-familiar and too intimate, and can also make someone feel like they no longer have their independence.

Choice of clothes

The clothes we wear are part of our identity and impact upon our self-esteem. Gender and how an individual expresses their gender through clothes may be different to yourself. This can also change over time.

It is important for an individual to feel encouraged to express themselves in a way that is authentic to them. Some people are very particular about the clothes they wear, whereas others seem less bothered. However, almost every individual makes a decision every morning of their lives about what to wear.

Top tips of giving someone choice

- Early on in a person's dementia, it is a really good idea to record the person's preferences about clothes, colours, styles, garments they love and garments they hate.
- If you are helping someone to dress, it is important to dress them according to their preferences rather than yours.
- Reflect on whether you are approaching clothes in the way you like or the way the person prefers.
- People can make very different choices about what to wear at home and what to wear when they go out.
- Some people have very strong views about keeping some clothes for best and will be uncomfortable wearing 'best' clothes at home.
- Some people may like polished shoes on and formal clothes as soon as they are out of bed. Others like to wear night clothes until after lunch.
- Reflect on what the person you are caring for has been like over the years.
- Sometimes looking at magazines together can help you to understand the person's preferences better.
- Involve the person in buying and selecting clothes as presents if possible.
- If someone likes a particular item of clothing and feels comfortable in it, consider buying multiple items of that same clothing.

- Give people a choice of at least 2 garments whilst you are helping them get dressed. Showing them the 2 garments side by side and asking which they want to wear today is a good way of getting to understand preferences. It also maintains a feeling of choice and control.

People may need physical help to dress because they have problems with body awareness and movement. Or they may need help in remembering to change their clothes or dress appropriately for the day.

Preparing to help someone dress

- It's important to reflect on what the person can manage physically before giving help. For example can they raise their limbs upwards, backwards, forwards? Can they stand from sitting? How long can they stand for? Can they stand on one leg?
- For some, providing prompts may be all that is needed to help them dress themselves. Providing or reminding the person for the reason for changing clothes can be helpful here. For example, "We're going to meet Nazeem in the park today so you'll probably want to wear something warmer."
- Lay out the clothes in the order in which you will put them on. Underwear on top, outer clothes underneath.
- Sometimes, people will put the same type of garment on too many times – e.g. dresses on top of dresses. Having just the clothes out that you have chosen together helps to avoid this.

Physically helping someone to dress

- If you are physically helping, only help where necessary and follow the lead of the person you care for if possible.
- When putting on a sweater, it can be easier to 'dive in' arms first and then put it over the person's head.
- Gathering up sleeves at the cuff and rolling them down the arm once someone's hands are through can be an easier way to approach long sleeves.
- Distress sometimes results from not understanding what is happening or what to expect. Try explaining what you are going to do, and why, before you do it.
- Use non-verbal cues such as mime with hand gestures and show the person you care for what the garment is .
- Putting bras and tights on another person can be particularly challenging if you are not used to putting them on yourself. Give yourself plenty of time.
- If you get in a muddle, make any shortcomings sound like your own rather than the person you are helping.
- Be mindful that the clothes are comfortable as they will be nicer to wear and easier to get on and off.
- Using humour where possible can also help keep things light, diffuse awkwardness and tension, and put people at ease.
- Follow the activity with something enjoyable for the person you care for, that they might look forward to. Refer to this 'treat' in your conversation during the activity as a focus towards completion.

Helping someone get undressed

- The same general principles apply to helping a person get dressed.
- If the person lives alone, a sign to remember to take off clothes and put on pyjamas before bed may help.
- Remove dirty clothes out of sight so that the person does not just put them straight back on in the morning.
- If the person has enough energy in the evening it can be useful to choose and lay out clean clothing for the next day.



Types of clothing that make dressing and undressing easier

- Loose clothing that can be pulled on and off, over the head avoids the need to do up and undo buttons.
- If the person likes shirts, a bigger size, already buttoned up can be pulled on and off over the head.
- Larger buttons and chunky zips are often easier for people who have dexterity problems.
- Elasticated waists and Velcro fastenings may mean someone can dress themselves.
- Front fastening bras, or bras that fasten with a zip rather than hook and eye, or pull on sports type bras may be easier to manage.
- The size of neck openings can be important in how easy a garment is to get on and off.
- Avoid itchy fabrics and tricky fasteners.

This booklet is part of a series about support for family carers providing personal care for people with dementia:

1. Why does having dementia make personal care difficult?
2. Dealing with complex emotions
3. Common physical issues that impact on personal care
4. Legal and financial issues
5. Changes to the home environment to make personal care easier
6. Strategies that will help make giving personal care easier in the long term
7. Staying strong in the long term
8. Help with continence and using the toilet
9. Help with washing, showering, and bathing
10. Help with teeth and dentures
11. Help with dressing and undressing
12. Help with eating and drinking
13. Help with personal appearance
14. Help with caring for hands and feet
15. Supporting good hearing and vision

All booklets and the information within them can be found online at: caringhelp.on.worc.ac.uk

August 2024 edition

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The illustrations in this booklet were created by
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