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## What You Wear Effects How You Think!

By Marcy Maler, MMFT, Art Therapy Educator and Care Specialist

What we wear is a deep personal decision. Making the choice of putting on that certain shirt, blouse, or sweater characterizes who we are and how we fit in. Clothes can make us more confident and improve our behavior, and for this reason deciding what to wear can be very time consuming. For a person with dementia the choice of what to wear becomes especially demanding and requires extra time. For a caregiver it can be aggravating when their loved one pares down to wearing the same clothes every day. **Many people with dementia have become angry or confused when somebody intrudes on their dressing ritual mostly because they truly believe they are getting dressed properly.** Frustrations can be alleviated by adjusting our caregiving expectations. Choosing what to wear can be demanding on our cognition and keeping it simple may help.

American author Henry David Thoreau once stated that “life is frittered away by detail.” In essence, the author suggests that it is beneficial to simplify and not sweat the small stuff.

Streamlining decisions can make your life easier by preserving your brain resources for a bigger picture. Thoreau is not the only person to have adopted this perspective when faced with life’s daily routines. Steve Jobs wore a black turtleneck with jeans and sneakers every single day with the intention to preserve creative brain power for



developing Apple products. Albert Einstein, by the same token, reportedly bought several variations of the same gray suit so that he would not have to waste time and brain power deciding what to wear each morning. Research has shown that making decisions degrades one’s ability to make further decisions. In response to this research, President Obama chooses to wear a blue suit every day supporting the logic that this routine helps mitigate decision fatigue.

### DID YOU KNOW?

**Decision Fatigue** is a real condition in which a person’s productivity suffers as a result of becoming mentally exhausted from making many irrelevant and relevant decisions. Stressing over things like what to wear every day leaves a person’s cognition less efficient-especially a person living with dementia.

Over time dementia affects both thinking and

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## Tips

Keep the closets free of excess clothing. A person may panic if clothing choices become overwhelming. If appropriate, give the person an opportunity to select favorite outfits or colors, but try offering just two choices.

Another idea is to Lay out clothing in the order that each item should be put on. Hand the person one item at a time while giving simple, direct instructions such as "Put on your shirt," rather than "Get dressed."



## Tools

If the individual wants to wear the same outfit repeatedly, buy duplicates or have similar options available. Keep in mind that it is important for the individual to maintain good personal hygiene, including wearing clean undergarments, as poor hygiene may lead to urinary tract infection or other infections that further complicate care.

Make sure the person has comfortable, non-slip shoes.

Use cardigans, shirts and blouses that button in front are easier to work than pullover tops.

cognition affecting people in different ways and different rates. Dementia gradually diminishes activities the person was able to perform. There is a phrase "over-learned behavior" that refers to actions a person learned long ago that were repeated so often they are currently achieved without thought.

Dressing is a daily activity that is over-learned and eventually, with Dementia, will be forgotten resulting in the most stylish of individuals being affected. You may notice that your loved one now outfits his or her self in ways that would previously have shocked them.

As a caregiver you are called on to plan an ever increasing role in decisions of your loved one living with dementia. Some of these decisions weigh more severe than others, yet taking control of any situation is never easy.

When called on to help a person dress you may be called on to decide how important the choices of what to wear are. Whether the person is wearing the same thing over and over again isn't too important. However, whether the person wears a warm coat on a cold day is.

**Adjust Your Expectations**-When caregiving you are a big part of your loved one's quality of life. Adjusting your own expectations about the task of dressing provides a space for appreciating the success of your loved one. This is best accomplished by letting go of your standards with regard to what you think your loved one should wear.

**Letting go of the Outcome**-At this point the goal boils down to trying to keep your loved

one comfortable and as involved and happy as possible. Try to remember to keep this goal in mind; *the person is content to be involved*. Making the decision of what to wear as well as maintaining the ability to get dressed is a key point. It can be helpful to rely on the doing (getting dressed), not the outcome (what they are wearing), that is important.

**Value the little things**—When dealing with dementia getting dressed is a small piece of independence to be appreciated and valued. Distinguishing these tasks as triumphs reassures your loved one and lifts his or her mood. A pat on the back and a compliment can turn this activity of daily living into a source of pride and confidence.

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**Simplify getting dressed**—Make the task of getting dressed easier. Hang only a couple items in the closet. If your loved one prefers one type of outfit especially, you may want to buy several just like it. If

he or she insists on wearing the same items every day, launder it when they are sleeping so it will be ready the next day.

Giving your loved one independence along with guidance is a balancing act for you as caregiver. Remember that it may be most helpful to take the perspective that fewer trivial decisions enhance your loved one's ability to make more important decisions later on in the day. Lastly, before you form an opinion of your loved one based on their desire to wear the same outfit every day, remember that they are in the best of company.

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