



Clothing: Silver Threads for the Golden Years

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Introduction

Clothing is important to our lives regardless of our age or gender. Its various functions include adornment, protection, enhancing self-esteem and expressing one's personality.

The clothing people wear contributes to their perceived feelings of comfort, satisfaction and general well-being. Besides economics, factors which traditionally influence the selection of apparel include:

- climate or environment;
- one's state of health;
- individual interest in and knowledge of fashion and personal appearance; and
- one's age — perceived and/or real.

As the human body ages, it naturally experiences a number of changes which affect the physical, emotional, social and psychological aspects of our lives. Clothing is a tool which can be successfully used to help individuals deal with some of the changes brought about by the aging process.

The guidelines in this publication are meant to help you discover the importance of properly selecting clothing for the golden years of life.

The Effects of Aging

The aging process is as varied as the individuals who experience it. Because aging is an individual phenomenon, it is difficult to provide precise information about its effects. The following descriptions are meant only to provide generalized information and to set the stage for the discussion of clothing requirements and needs which follows.

Physical Changes

As the body ages, it gradually declines in condition and function. Overall body movement becomes slower and less steady. Reflexes are slower, and muscle strength decreases. These conditions tend to result in a more sedentary lifestyle.

Aging makes the body more susceptible to diseases and illness. Osteoporosis, a thinning of the bone mass, can affect the posture and body structure, while arthritis can attack joints, making movement difficult or painful. These physical impairments make even simple tasks more difficult. The daily care and upkeep of clothing may be a real burden. Taking garments to the drycleaner or washing items by hand can become a challenge. Limited mobility also makes the elderly one of the population groups most susceptible to injuries resulting from fires that involve clothing.

The senses also decline with age. Eyesight may be compromised by cataracts, glaucoma or other health problems. Hearing tends to

decline as a result of nerve and vascular degeneration. One's sense of smell becomes less sensitive. The thinning and drying of the skin that commonly occurs with aging increases sensitivity to friction from fabrics or the abrasive fibers in fabrics.

Because of these physical changes, safety and healthfulness become key factors to consider when selecting apparel and household textile fabrics for older adults. Comfort and ease of dressing also become high priorities for a great percentage of older individuals.

Social Changes

The physical changes that older adults experience have a direct effect on social relationships in this age group. Physical limitations may impair or disrupt social activities one has enjoyed over the years. Relationship changes occur throughout life, but those occurring during the later years may be more difficult to accept because the relationships have lasted so long. An older person's contemporaries die at a high rate, creating a feeling of despair. Changes as a result of retirement, death of family members or the breakup of close friends can be very upsetting.

Keeping active and seeking out and maintaining meaningful relationships are vital ways to handle the social changes that come with the aging process. Clothing that is attractive and fits well can help older individuals feel more comfortable in changing social situations.

Emotional and Psychological Changes

Emotional well-being is a function of self-worth, one's outlook on life and perceived control of one's destiny. In the study of aging, gerontologists have identified several common reactions of the elderly to such stressful changes as retirement, declining physical ability, changes in physical appearance, perceived or real loss of control of one's life and the loss of loved ones. Typical reactions may include withdrawal, apathy, loss of self-esteem and depression.

Change is an inescapable aspect of aging. However, how a person sees, accepts and learns to deal with these changes is more important than the actual changes. As individuals age, the ease with which they adjust to social changes may lag behind what is generally considered to be the cultural norm. We have come to refer to this phenomenon as the so-called "generation gap," and it may be evidenced by a longing for the "good old days." If older adults' value systems remain rooted in another generation, they may experience isolation and loneliness.

However, changes associated with aging should not be equated with impaired mental processes. Although senility and Alzheimer's disease can be a result of aging, a decline in mental activity is not a given. Individuals who keep an active mind retain the ability to think clearly and effectively.

Clothing can make a significant contribution to our emotional and psychological well-being. Sometimes called a "second skin," clothing is the aspect of our environment with which we are in closest contact and over which we have the most control. Feeling good about one's self, including one's appearance, promotes a positive self-concept and a healthy state of mind. Clothing can play an important part in how we deal with the psychological aspects of our lives. It can and should be used to emphasize positive body features and conceal less attractive ones.

Choosing Appropriate Clothing

Throughout history, clothing has been an important means of non-verbal communication. Not only does it communicate to others how we feel about ourselves, but it can enhance self-esteem. To be personally satisfying, clothing must:

- facilitate independence in dressing and caring for one's needs;
- be comfortable and allow freedom of movement;
- have the approval of peers and significant others; and
- encourage and promote self-confidence and a feeling of well-being.

Because clothing is one's nearest environment, it is often used as an extension of one's own body. To some

older adults, clothing becomes the one part of their lives over which they can maintain some degree of control. Yet at the same time, they experience difficulty in maintaining that control when mobility becomes compromised.

The following is a list of difficulties which many older adults encounter, along with some ideas to be considered when choosing clothing.

Clothing Suggestions To Compensate For:

Diminished agility, resulting in difficulty dressing, frequent spills, and safety considerations:

- Lightweight, non-bulky fabrics; for warmth, consider napped surfaces rather than multiple layers of fabric. Fabrics with “give” such as knits. Smooth, slick fabric surfaces. Static-free, non-cling fabrics.
- Printed or textured fabrics to disguise stains.
- Fabrics with soil-release finishes, flame-retardant fabrics, water-repellent outerwear; easy-care (wash-and-wear) fabrics and garment styles.
- Garment styles with ease, but not a lot of fullness. Pant/trouser legs tapered at hemline. One-piece garments, stretchy necklines, raglan-style sleeves or large armhole openings. Long openings; front openings; elastic waists, hook-and-loop closures, large pulls on zipper tabs. Gar-

ments with short sleeves, long, close-fitting sleeves or elastic at the sleeve hem. For some individuals, wrap-style garments would be best.

- Sturdy, relatively low-heel slip-on shoes or shoes with hook-and-loop closures. Bow ties or pre-tied neckties for men; be sure to use a tie pin to secure in place. Anchor women’s decorative scarves.
- Avoid large white collars, cuffs or ruffles around bodice/shirt. Choose capes rather than coats, mittens rather than gloves. Choose tea-length hemlines for ladies’ formal wear rather than ankle or floor-length hemlines.

Arthritic pain in joints:

- Lightweight fabrics; for warmth, consider napped surfaces rather than multiple layers of fabric.
- Fabrics (such as knits) and garment styles which stretch or have gentle elasticity.
- Garment designs with front closures, hook-and-loop fasteners, elastic casings. Capes rather than coats; mittens rather than gloves. Slip-on shoes or shoes with hook-and-loop closures.

Loss of visual acuity:

- Fabrics that vary in texture to assist with garment identification though the sense of touch. Shoes and accessories arranged or tagged to be identified by touching.
- Fabrics of coordinating colors to simplify mixing and matching. Various-shaped tags sewn into garments to assist with coordination of separates.

- Patterns and prints that camouflage spots and stains. Easy-care fabrics.

Limited sense of smell:

- Easy-care garments and fabrics; washable items.
- Fabrics that do not retain or absorb odors easily (avoid pile, fuzzy or wooly surfaces, multiple layers, etc.).

Increased sensitivity of skin:

- Non-irritating fabrics and garment components; soft, smooth-surface fabrics (flannelette, cotton jersey, brushed nylon, velour, voile, etc.). Fine worsted wool rather than coarse woolen variety (worsted are often more expensive, but do not feel as scratchy).
- Fabrics without formaldehyde-type finishes (some permanent-press fabrics use formaldehyde finishing techniques).
- Fabric to which no potentially allergic finishes or dyes have been applied (for highly sensitive persons).
- Launder or dryclean all new garments before wearing. Repeated washings may help minimize some problems. Use fabric softener during laundering, and rinse clothing several times to remove all traces of detergent.
- Launder clothing in soft water.
- Avoid garments made with transparent thread as it may scratch. Avoid ruffles at collars or cuffs, snug-fitting elastic casings, snug waistlines and belts and high necklines.

Loss of bladder control:

- Highly absorbent fabrics for specially designed incontinency garments, which have holding capacity adequate for severity of problem.
- Garments or bedding with waterproof layer to prevent leakage.
- Non-odor retaining fabrics; fabrics treated with anti-bacterial finish.
- Washable, easy-care fabrics and garments.
- Garment designs to simplify dressing and undressing (see recommendations for diminished agility above). Separates rather than one-piece garments. Abdomen or leg area should be large enough to accommodate padding or urinary appliance. Tunics or long tops, wide-legged pants, inseam zippers or hook-and-loop fasteners. Gored, A-line or gentle fullness in skirt designs.

Limited ability to adjust to temperature change:

- Fabrics and garments that help regulate exchange of heat, moisture and air between body and surrounding environment.
- Synthetic fabrics that have wicking ability (i.e., permit moisture to escape from skin surface). Fabrics that adjust to individual body heat (microfibers).
- For warmth: fabrics that trap air, such as napped or quilted fabrics, lined garments, multiple layers.
- For coolness: thin, loosely woven or knitted fabrics. Items that fit loosely, permitting air to circulate.

- Garment designs which can be layered or removed when necessary. Separates rather than single garment pieces.

Reduced energy level:

- Fabrics requiring minimal care and upkeep.
- Fabrics and garment designs which facilitate dressing and undressing (see recommendations for diminished agility above). Lightweight fabrics are especially important for those with little or no energy.

Changes in body structure:

- Fabrics with elasticity or stretch. Knits work better than most woven fabrics.
- Purchase garments as close to body proportions as possible. Alter garments to fit or to accommodate braces, prostheses or other appliances. Ask your County Agent for additional information.
- Change your appearance as time changes you. Select garment styles which flatter your body.

Wardrobe tips for women:

- Printed or surface-designed fabrics can call attention to themselves and away from the body silhouette.
- Good garment fit is critical. A garment that is too loose or too snug can add years to your appearance. Clingy and tight-fitting fabrics call attention to a body that is not as firm as it once was.

- Tunics, long tops and jacket dresses can hide a waistline which is shorter and fuller than you would like. Separates can conceal many body irregularities. Select dresses or garments without distinctive waistlines.
- Being short-waisted contributes to a matronly look. Choose clothes with some gentle fullness at the waistline if your mid-area has developed a spare tire.
- Wear belts a little narrower and a little looser than average. Waistbands should not be too tight.
- Select garments with sleeves if your arms have become flabby or wrinkled.
- Use high necklines and scarves to hide neckline wrinkles.
- Be honest with yourself about your body. The best look is one that is appropriate to your figure, the occasion, and in tune with fashion. Trying to look young is aging!

Changes to complexion and hair:

- Change make-up and skin care to accommodate complexion changes. Aging skin usually needs softer tones.
- Use a moisturizer and let your skin get plenty of natural moisture to keep it soft and smooth. Create moist rather than dry heat by increasing the humidity. Use a humidifier in your bedroom in winter.
- Use a lip liner to help keep lipstick from running into lines and wrinkles around the lips.

■ Keep hairstyle and color natural-looking. Gray hair can be beautiful; too much bluing looks artificial. If you color, go lighter rather than darker.

■ Short hairstyles are usually easier to maintain and frequently give a more youthful appearance. Update your hairstyle as you would your wardrobe, yet keep it flattering to you.

Wardrobe tips for men:

■ Select clothes that make the most of your appearance. Pleated trousers distract from a large stomach. Sufficient shoulder padding can help conceal a less-erect posture.

■ Slacks with elasticized waistband sections will stay in place for individuals on the move.

■ For a slenderizing effect, choose coats or jackets with medium length or longer lapels; semi-fitted or traditional styling rather than tapered trousers; solid or vertically patterned fabrics; medium-width ties with slender knots.

■ To broaden a slender physique, select wider lapels of medium length; double-breasted jackets; patch or flap-style pockets; patterns such as plaid, checks and herringbones; wide ties with wide knots or bow ties; coordinated fabric or knit vests.

Changes to hair color or hairline:

■ Growing hair on your face does not compensate for hair loss on the top of your head; rather, it generally calls attention to baldness. Letting the hair grow long on one

side to comb across a balding head also calls attention to the situation.

■ If you happen to be one of those men who become bald, consider it the luck of the draw. Surveys show that women are charmed by men who are bald! If you are uncomfortable with baldness, consider getting a hairpiece. A good stylist will blend your hair with the hairpiece to give you a natural appearance.

■ Update hairstyle as hairline begins to change.

■ Complement gray or white hair by wearing dark blue, blue-gray and black suits. Choose light tones of blue, green, pink or white for dress shirts. Avoid browns. Select ties with bright colors which express your personality and enhance your outfit.

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For additional
information about aging and
clothing, contact your local
County Extension Service office.

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