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Fashion Wasn't Designed for Everyone.

Clothing, Memory & Identity in Early-Onset Dementia — and What the Fashion Industry Is Getting Wrong

We rarely talk about this. But we should.

Walk into any high street store or scroll through a major fashion campaign and the message is consistent: clothing is designed for the young, the able-bodied, and the neurotypical. For millions of people — including those living with early-onset dementia — that gap has real, daily consequences.

The Fashion Industry Has a Demographic Problem

Fast fashion targets 16–35 year-olds. Luxury brands sell aspiration to those at peak earning power. Even 'mature' fashion lines simply scale up trends designed for younger bodies, with no meaningful accommodation for cognitive or physical difference.

The industry routinely leaves out:

- Older adults with reduced dexterity or arthritis
- People with physical disabilities or limb differences
- Individuals with sensory processing conditions such as autism or fibromyalgia
- Wheelchair users — for whom most clothing is designed as if everyone stands
- People living with Parkinson's, stroke-related motor changes, or MS
- The approximately 70,000 people in the UK with early-onset dementia — many still working, parenting, and socially active when symptoms first appear

This is not a niche market. This is a design failure.

The British Fashion Council Is Talking About Sustainability — But Who Is Left Out?

The British Fashion Council's Institute of Positive Fashion (IPF) has made genuine strides in pushing the industry toward environmental responsibility. In 2025, the BFC partnered with Copenhagen Fashion Week to roll out a new Sustainability Requirements framework — embedding minimum standards around carbon reduction, circularity, and ethical supply chains into the flagship NEWGEN emerging designer programme, with full implementation due by January 2026. It is a meaningful step, and a signal

that the BFC understands fashion's broader social responsibilities.

Yet sustainability, as the industry defines it, remains almost entirely environmental. The frameworks focus on planet — fabric waste, carbon emissions, packaging. What they do not yet address is human sustainability: designing clothing that works for people across the full spectrum of age, ability, and cognitive experience. If the BFC is serious about a responsible fashion future, inclusive design for people living with dementia, disability, and neurological difference belongs in that conversation.

What Getting Dressed Actually Involves — and Why It Breaks Down

Most of us dress without thinking. But dressing is one of the most cognitively complex activities we perform each morning — engaging memory, sequencing, executive function, sensory processing, and emotional regulation simultaneously.

For someone living with early-onset dementia, every one of these steps can become a genuine daily challenge:

- Remembering that getting dressed is the next task
- Deciding what clothing is appropriate for the weather or occasion
- Locating clothes in a wardrobe or drawer
- Identifying which item is which (shirt vs jacket vs cardigan)
- Recognising the front from the back of a garment
- Identifying the inside from the outside of clothing
- Working out which way round to put on trousers or a skirt
- Managing buttons — small, fiddly, requiring fine motor precision
- Navigating zips, particularly on jackets or trousers
- Tying shoelaces or managing buckled footwear
- Putting on socks without losing balance
- Layering clothing in the correct order (underwear before trousers, vest before shirt)
- Choosing appropriate layers for temperature regulation
- Tolerating certain textures — seams, labels, synthetic fabrics
- Managing sensory pressure of waistbands, collars, or tight cuffs
- Distinguishing similar-looking items in low light or when vision is affected
- Remembering whether you have already dressed
- Identifying when clothing is dirty and needs changing
- Putting shoes on the correct feet
- Fastening bras or other structured undergarments
- Managing overhead garments without disorientation
- Handling small accessories such as earrings, cufflinks, or belt buckles
- Remembering seasonal norms — a coat in winter, lighter layers in summer

- Feeling emotionally safe and dignified throughout the entire process

Each of these is a cognitive, sensory, or motor task. When neurological function changes, these tasks don't disappear — they become exhausting, distressing, or impossible without support.

Clothing Is Not Just Aesthetic — It Is Identity

For people with dementia, familiar clothing carries something irreplaceable: memory of who they are.

A former teacher who always wore a structured blazer. A mother whose favourite cardigan was worn at every school pick-up. A man who wore the same style of shirt to work for twenty years. These garments are not just fabric. They are autobiographical — anchoring identity when memory systems begin to fragment.

Yet the fashion industry has never treated this as its responsibility.

What Good Design Could Look Like

The innovations required are not radical. They are simply thoughtful:

- Magnetic closures** — replacing buttons — invisible, effortless, dignified
- Colour-coded garment cues** — subtle visual prompts for orientation
- Seamless construction & tag-free labelling** — reducing sensory distress
- Elasticised waistbands** — removing the need for fastenings entirely
- Natural, soft fibres** — cotton and bamboo rather than synthetics
- Clear front/back differentiation** — through cut, stitching, or contrast detail
- Adaptive layering systems** — simple, stackable, minimal decision-making
- Side-opening or wrap designs** — for easier dressing and assisted care

Centres like the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art are already exploring this space. But mainstream fashion has barely engaged.

Why This Matters for All of Us

Dementia affects 1 in 3 people over 65. Early-onset dementia affects people in their 40s and 50s — at the height of their working and social lives. Fashion has shaped conversations about gender, race, class, and sustainability. It has the platform and cultural reach to shape conversations about cognitive health too.

Inclusive design is not a charitable gesture. It is an innovation opportunity — and a long-overdue acknowledgement that human bodies and minds exist across a vast spectrum of experience, not just the one the industry has chosen to design for.

What would it look like if fashion took cognitive accessibility seriously? I'd be interested in your thoughts — particularly from anyone working in design, occupational therapy, or dementia care.

#InclusiveDesign #AdaptiveFashion #Dementia #EarlyOnsetDementia #FashionIndustry #CognitiveDiversity #DesignForAll
#Accessibility #HealthcareDesign #OccupationalTherapy #BritishFashionCouncil #Sustainability