



Older Individuals who are Blind
Technical Assistance Center

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Lesson 15: Shopping and Caring for Clothing

Introduction

Individuals who are blind or have low vision face some unique challenges when choosing and caring for clothing. Before vision loss, it may have been simple to go to a store and pick a coordinating outfit and accessories. It wouldn't take much thought to decide that the navy slacks went with the white shirt and the navy and white striped jacket. Cleaning clothing, sorting laundry, and doing basic mending may have been equally effortless.

However, people with low vision or blindness often struggle or limit their wardrobe unnecessarily because they don't know adaptive methods for these tasks. Many people with low vision have difficulty distinguishing different colors or coordinating clothing. It may be hard to sort laundry, iron, or replace a button. This lesson covers adaptations for these challenges to help restore confidence.

Lesson Goals

- Learn methods to shop for new clothes
- Be able to identify and treat stains
- Know how to sort clothes for laundry
- Organize, label, and measure laundry products
- Adapt and set the washer and dryer
- Know methods for removing wrinkles, including safety tips for ironing
- Know adaptive methods for threading needles and doing basic mending

Shopping for Clothes

Lesson 9 covered adaptive methods for organizing and marking clothing, shoes, and accessories. Hopefully, those suggestions were helpful, and you now have a well-organized closet. Perhaps you even started using a color identifier or audio labeling system like [WayAround](#). Maintaining your organizational system will save time and frustration.

Once you have a good system in place, it's time to consider adaptive



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shopping methods and buy new clothes. Various systems are available, depending on your preference and priorities.

You may keep your wardrobe simple and wear mostly casual clothes. For example, it's not uncommon for men to keep things simple by wearing jeans or khaki pants with a Polo or T-shirt regularly. For people who know what they like and need to replace items, it can be beneficial to take a clothing item you like to a store and ask a customer service representative to help you find something that looks similar. You could also write down or use optical devices to find a brand and style number of an item you like and then do an online search to find a replacement or additional piece in a different color.

If you enjoy shopping or prefer a more extensive wardrobe, you likely want to go to a store and browse until something catches your attention. You may also be concerned about which styles and colors look best on you. You may have a friend or two that you trust to help you shop. If not, try to find a friend or family member whose opinion you trust, knowledgeable about colors and styles, and who will be honest about how an outfit looks. Professional relationships with customer service staff at your favorite stores are also helpful for shopping. Some clothing stores even employ personal shoppers who are knowledgeable and helpful. Get to know any personal shoppers at stores where you shop often.

If you like to wear certain colors, learn which colors look best on you, and take samples of those with you when you shop. Color names on tags can provide helpful information, but there are many color variations, and the names of colors change frequently. If you experienced vision loss as an adult, you probably have good memories of many colors, but colors you've never seen can be problematic.

Prices and discounts are good to know about but may be hard to determine independently. If you are shopping on a budget or going to a store for a sale, ask a staff member or personal shopper to direct you to the sections

you want. If you can't read price tags, even with a magnifier or a smartphone app like Seeing AI, ask a store representative to scan items for you to determine prices before you decide what to buy.

Shopping for clothing is a time when you'll need to use your best self-advocacy skills to get what you need. For example, if you know you look good in bluish-red but not in orangey-red, you may need to ask about the exact shade before buying something. Ask a store clerk to compare the color to one you know.

Shopping online for clothes is another way to find items that match the sizes and price ranges you want. Many store websites describe items, colors, and styles. If you are familiar with a brand or store, buying items that match and are fashionable is just a click away. If a website is hard to navigate, try choosing a store that offers ordering by phone.

Caring for Your Clothing

Wouldn't it be wonderful if clothing never got dirty, wrinkled, or stained? Some types of fabrics seem to wrinkle before you leave home. No matter how careful you are, occasionally, food will drop on a tie, shirt, or pants, or grease from a car door will get on a jacket sleeve.

Treating Stains

When mishaps occur at home where stain removers are readily available, you can locate the stain immediately using your sense of touch or functional vision. Treat the stain with a stain-removing spray, presoak, or even a little laundry detergent. Immediately treating a stain may help it from setting in permanently.

Unfortunately, most clothing stains and dirt marks happen away from home. One tip is to carry a small stain stick or towelette pretreatment in your pocket or purse so you can treat a stain as soon as it occurs. To make sure you cover the entire area, use overlapping movements, and cover a larger area than you think necessary. There may also be things available to help treat stains when you are out. For example, club soda, believe it or not, will eliminate a red wine or spaghetti stain and is usually available at a

restaurant.

If you are away from home when a stain occurs and do not have a pretreatment agent with you, there are many ways to treat a stain later. If it has dried, you can locate the stain by feeling for stiffened fabric using the sense of touch. However, some stains are hard to identify by touch. When these types of stains occur, carefully note the stain's location—is it near a button or another identifying characteristic? If you keep a rustproof safety pin in your purse or pocket, you can mark a stain when it occurs, so you won't have to search for it later. Always overtreat the stained area unless the stain is visible.

Daily dirt and sweat stains can be managed by always spraying a stain remover or prewash on collars, cuffs, and shirts' underarms. If you wash clothing items every time you wear them and use this cautionary treatment, you can avoid most permanent stains.

Before trying these treatments, make sure you know the manufacturer's cleaning recommendations for the item of clothing. Any clothing items marked "dry clean only" may be damaged by some cleaning agents. Label the hangers of garments that need special cleaning and always return the garment to its hanger. You can hang the cleaning instructions with the garment or keep a list elsewhere.

Laundry

Adults who are blind or have low vision often find sorting clothes the most frustrating part of laundry. There are simple adaptations to solve those frustrations. For example, if you organize and mark your clothes, you probably know which colors you wear each day. If you sort your clothes immediately after removing them, it will save time later.

As you sort laundry, try using two or more baskets or laundry bags to separate light clothing from the dark. Set up a system based on how you like to do laundry. For example, some people separate colors from whites, so they only need two bags or baskets. Others like to divide up laundry into more categories. If you separate your clothes as you wear them, you'll save

time and avoid mistakes, like turning a white shirt into a pink one.

Another tip is to pin each pair of socks together or use sock sorters or sock locks. If you do this as soon as you remove your socks for the day, you won't need to sort them once they are clean. If you have several brown, navy, or black socks that are the same style, you could wash each color in a separate mesh bag. Even people with low vision who can separate light clothes from dark visually may find it helpful to keep colored socks that are hard to distinguish separated. Washable mesh bags can be used to separate other items to save time sorting afterward.

Another good idea is to wash all parts of the same outfit together, so all the parts will remain the same color. Washing will eventually fade colors, especially dark colors. To prevent colors like red or purple from running and staining other items, wash new clothing separately in cold water, adding a cup of white vinegar to the water. The vinegar will set the garment's red part and keep white collars or cuffs from turning pink.

Measuring Laundry Products

Labeling, organizing, and storing your laundry products in a designated place saves time and prevents mistakes on laundry day. Labeling laundry products is especially crucial because so many come in the same kind of containers as bathroom and kitchen cleaners. Confusing a prewash spray with a toilet cleaner could be costly.

Before you experienced vision loss, you may have used the cap of a liquid detergent bottle to measure the proper amount for each load. If you can no longer see the cap's markings, it might be easier to use measuring cups typically used for cooking. You can designate a different measuring cup for each load size. Put your index finger at the top of the measuring cup as you pour. When you feel the detergent touch your finger, stop pouring. If you have usable vision, try color-contrasting measuring cups. Just as it's easier to pour coffee into a white cup, it's easier to pour detergent into a contrasting-color measuring cup. It's a good idea to use a tray in case you pour a little too much.

Some people who are blind or have low vision use powdered detergent because they find it easier to scoop than pour the right amount of detergent. You could also try laundry detergent sold in single-load pods to simplify further.

Adapting Your Washer and Dryer

Start by familiarizing yourself with your washer and dryer and identify which settings you use often. Few people use every setting. Pay attention to the buttons and dials. You'll likely find that some settings do not need to be marked. For example, you may not need to mark the water temperature or load size, especially if you set these by clicking a dial. Mark only the fabric cycles (like delicate or permanent press) that you use. Use similar techniques on the dryer.

The best way to mark these machines depends on your personal preference. A thin line of electrical tape or a raised dot at each setting may be enough if you can remember what each represents. A raised letter at the end of each line, like a P for permanent press or D for delicate, might jog your memory. If you have low vision, use color-contrasting tape and letters and improve the lighting by installing overhead or task lighting above the washer and dryer.

Some appliances may have dials or buttons that are not easy to mark or use independently. Digital washers with buttons can also be challenging if they do not revert to a default setting after each use or require vision to cycle through the selections. Depending on your amount of vision, these machines may not be accessible.

Some models make audible sounds as you set them, and some models always default to "normal" when a load of laundry is finished. Someone with limited vision can operate the audible models that default to "normal" when a laundry load is finished. Many new models connect to an app, so if the machine itself cannot be operated easily, you may be able to operate it with a smartphone. You might want to ask a vision rehabilitation professional to assess your machines and instruct in marking and using them.

Once your clothes are sorted and treated for stains and your machines are marked, it's time to do your laundry. One helpful tip is to put a towel or old sheet in front of your washer and dryer in case you drop any clothes on the floor while loading or unloading the machines. Systematically search the machine tub with your hands to make sure they are empty before adding clothes. Repeat this process when removing clothes from the machines. Check the towel on the floor for any dropped items before closing the washer or dryer.

Lesson 4 covered some strategies that can be useful with laundry. When setting a machine that uses dials, use hand-to-hand coordination by putting your index finger on the raised line or dot of the desired setting, and then turn the dial and align the pointer with your index finger. Practice your auditory skills by listening carefully for the washer to finish filling or stop spinning. Your dryer may have a loud buzzer to signal when the cycle is over. Don't forget to clean your dryer's lint trap regularly; it's easy to forget when you can't see.

Purchasing New Machines

When you need to buy a new washer or dryer, carefully examine the machine's dials and operation to make sure you can use it independently. For example, on some machines, the dials' pointers are under a plastic shield that makes them impossible to identify tactilely. As stated above, many digital models are challenging to adapt with accessible labels. A sighted individual could help by describing the panels of various machines. Before you buy a machine, you can ask the floor model to be plugged in so you can try the controls, including hearing the sounds it emits. The American Foundation for the Blind's [AccessWorld](#) magazine reviews the accessibility of a wide variety of large and small home appliances.

Alternative Laundry Solutions

Some people who are blind or have low vision decide not to do their laundry. Many busy professionals make the same choice. If the idea of handling the laundry every week is not appealing, or a physical disability or condition makes it too challenging, there are other options. Numerous

laundry services are available. Cost may be a factor, so check what's available in your local area. Some services will pick up the dirty laundry and drop it back off the next day, clean and wrinkle-free. Many laundromats have a drop-off service. People who use a housecleaning service sometimes ask the staff to do laundry while they clean. If one of these options fits your budget and lifestyle, then you can take laundry off the to-do list. However, it is still a good idea to practice adaptive methods for situations when you need to do a laundry load independently.

Adaptive Ironing Skills

Many people no longer bother to iron clothes. Products like wrinkle-removing sprays, permanent press, and synthetic fabrics make it less necessary. If you don't want to iron, there are effective alternatives. Wrinkle-releasing sprays are highly effective and can be used on most fabrics. All you have to do is spray and smooth the clothing with your hands. Some people hang clothing in the bathroom while taking a shower to allow the steam to remove minor wrinkles. Clothes steamers are a convenient alternative for an iron.

However, some people enjoy wearing clothing in fabrics that need ironing. Others like the way ironed clothing feels and looks. And we all sometimes forget to remove clothing from the dryer right away. Ironing is a skill that you may want to master, even if you don't do it regularly.

The first step is to fully explore your iron and its settings, either tactilely or visually. Notice how the temperature controls are set. If you have low vision, are you able to identify the settings? Some irons have controls that are similar to a clock face. For example, the delicate setting is at 1:00, and the cotton setting is at 6:00. If the settings are visible or easily memorized, you may not need to mark the iron. If marking would be helpful, only mark one or two settings.

The next step is to find the water reservoir and note how to fill it. Take special note of the cord in relation to the handle. Is it located at the base of the handle or on the right or left side? Most iron cords are located at the base of the handle.

For people with vision, cordless irons are great—you can just pick up the iron by the handle and begin ironing. There isn't a cord to get in the way of what you're doing. However, this advantage is a disadvantage for most people who are blind or have low vision. Anyone with limited peripheral or central vision or poor overall vision should never reach out in space for anything, especially an iron. Even if you don't get burned, you risk knocking over the iron or, worse, knocking the iron onto the floor. Later in this section, you will learn an adaptive technique for locating a hot iron and the advantage of having a cord. For now, know that you can follow the cord with your hand up to the iron. The cord usually does not face the hot surface, so you can follow it to find the handle without fear of being burned.

Many people are set the iron on the ironing board before filling the water reservoir. However, this is not the most effective way for people who are blind or have low vision. To avoid spilling water on the ironing board or floor, set the iron on a tray on a counter and use a funnel and measuring cup to fill the reservoir. Some irons hold a third of a cup of water, and others hold a half-cup. If you use the appropriate-size cup, you will fill the reservoir completely and not spill any water. Once the reservoir is filled, set the desired temperature before plugging in the iron. Be cautious when changing the temperature on a hot iron. There is often not much space between the handle, the temperature setting, and the iron's hot surface.

For safety purposes, unless your ironing board has a heat-resistant tray built into it, set the iron on a heat-resistant pad on a counter or table instead of on the ironing board itself. Many ironing boards are wobbly, and a bump of your arm or foot could topple the iron if it is upright on the surface of the ironing board.

Keep the following suggestions in mind when buying a new board and when ironing:

- Choose an ironing board with 12 to 14-inch crossbars attached to the end of the legs. The width will help stabilize a top-heavy board.
- If you have low vision, note that items are easier to see on a solid (rather than patterned), medium-color ironing board cover.

- Always set the ironing board on tile or hardwood floors; avoid rugs and carpet.
- If you have low vision, make sure to maximize lighting and minimize shadows in your work area. Ceiling lights can sometimes cause your body to cast shadows on your work area, reducing your light as you work. Other types of lighting can cause glare and create visual discomfort.

Adaptive Ironing Techniques

Some of these suggestions will be familiar to anyone who has done lots of ironing; they are included here to provide a sequence to the process. Practice these techniques using a cold iron at first. Although you still have the muscle memory for ironing, you may feel more comfortable working with a cold iron until you gain confidence.

Unless your ironing board has a built-in, heatproof tray for the iron, place the ironing board with the wide end near a counter or table. Set the iron upright on a heat-resistant pad on the table, counter, or in the heatproof tray built into the ironing board. Keep the iron's handle facing toward the board and the ironing surface facing away from the board. As you iron, always return the iron to this location when you set it down. The cord should be plugged into an outlet that keeps the cord out of the way of your feet to avoid tripping over it or getting entangled. Consider adding a gadget to the end of your ironing board that keeps the cord off the floor.

Practice these steps for safely locating the iron. With the back of your dominant hand, trail the edge of the counter. When your hand touches the cord, trail up the cord, and grasp the handle. Do this several times to develop your confidence. If your ironing board has a built-in tray for the iron, trail the board's edge until you locate the cord, and then trail the cord to the handle. When you return the iron to its designated place, check the counter with your non-dominant hand to make sure there is plenty of room for the iron. To make sure you position the iron several inches from the edge of the table or counter, place your forearm along the edge of the

surface and set the iron down on the far side of your forearm.

Many people smooth out the wrinkles on an item before ironing it. Use a pillowcase or similarly flat item for practice. As you spread it out to smooth the wrinkles, pay attention to how it feels. Can you feel when it is smoother?

Practice the following steps with a cold iron several times before plugging it in and turning it on:

- Use the grid pattern and overlapping strokes to iron a section of a garment.
- Let the ironed area cool for a few seconds, and then use your sense of touch to see if the area is smooth. If so, continue to the next section of the garment.
- Always return the iron to its designated place before rearranging the garment.

After practicing a few times with a cold iron, begin ironing with a low setting and gradually increase the heat each time you practice. Review the techniques for plugging in appliances in Lesson 14. Many people are in the habit of securing one end of the item with their non-dominant hand while ironing. This technique is not recommended because a mistake in spatial perception can cause a serious burn. A heat-resistant ironing accessory can be used to hold a garment in place, like a form for ironing curved areas or collars. Some people wear an oven mitt or glove on their non-dominant hand for more protection.

Learning to depend wholly or partially on your other senses may feel awkward. It may take time to become comfortable with the techniques described in this lesson, and trust your sense of touch to evaluate your work. Fear of the hot iron will eventually diminish, but always be cautious and try not to get distracted when ironing.

Hand Sewing

This section will discuss adaptive techniques for organizing sewing materials, threading needles, sewing on buttons, and making minor repairs,

like fixing a garment's hem. It's a good idea to have a multicompartment sewing kit to organize and label thread, maintain needles and needle threaders, store extra buttons, and collect stabilizers. Keep your sewing tools organized together, including pin and needle cushions, adapted tape measures, straight pins, safety pins, thimbles, sewing scissors, rulers, and a magnet to find dropped pins or needles.

Begin a sewing project by organizing your materials on a tray. Set a needle stabilizer, like a large cork or a bar of soap wrapped in fabric, in the center of the tray. Put a pin cushion and needles in one corner, buttons in another, thread and needle threader in a third corner, and your scissors on the right side of the tray if you are right-handed. When you reach for a thread, a needle, a button, or the threader, trail your hand along the outside of the tray to the designated corner to locate what you need. Be careful when reaching for scissors or searching for the handle of the scissors. Always return scissors to their designated place with the blades closed.

Threading a Needle

Although there are several methods for threading a needle, this lesson will describe one method for threading an ordinary needle and threading a self-threading needle.

Dental-Floss Threader

The first method is using a dental floss threader to thread an ordinary needle. A dental floss threader is a device used with braces or dentures. They come in small, rectangular boxes with 15 or more flossers per box. You can find them with other dental products in grocery and drug stores. The threader is a little device consisting of a thin plastic string with a large loop at one end. Note that you cannot use a threader with needles that have small eyes.

Follow these steps to use a dental floss threader to thread a standard needle:

- In the center of your tray, place a bar of bath soap wrapped in thin cloth secured with a rubber band or a few straight pins on the back.

You can also use a large cork approximately three-by-one inches. If you have usable vision, wrap the soap in a dark material that will contrast with a silvery needle. This tool will be your needle stabilizer as you thread the needle.

- Choose a needle, preferably one with a fairly large eye.
- Examine the top of the needle carefully with your fingers and visualize the shape.
- Locate the needle's eye by holding the blunt end between your index finger and thumb and rotating it. Two sides of the needle flare out slightly. The flat, wider sides indicate the eye. Practice this technique until you can tell the difference. Be patient, especially if you have limited vision. This task requires well-developed tactile skills. If you have low vision, a magnifier that hangs around your neck may provide enough magnification to see the eye. You could also use a lamp with a built-in magnifier.
- Stick the sharp point of the needle into the center of the soap or cork. Make sure the eye of the needle is facing to your left or right, not facing you. The soap or cork will stabilize the needle, leaving both hands free for threading. Soap also keeps the points of needles sharp.
- With your dominant hand's index finger and thumb, grasp the floss threader near the tip opposite the loop. The closer to the end you hold it, the easier it will be to insert into the needle's eye.
- With the index finger and thumb of your non-dominant hand, create a vice around the needle's eye. Then push the tip of the threader between your thumb and index finger, through the needle's eye, to the base of the loop. This technique will let the threader dangle without falling out of the eye while you prepare to pull the thread through the loop.
- Unwind a generous portion of thread from the spool and pull at least three inches through the threader's loop. Grasp the tip of the threader and pull it through the needle's eye, continuing to pull until the three inches of thread fall free from the loop.

- You can detach the thread from the spool before you tie the knot or leave it attached until you make the knot.

Self-Threading Needles

As their name indicates, self-threading needles do not require a threader. Instead of the needle being closed at the top of the eye, there is a V-shaped opening. This opening can be located by feeling for the V's two blunt points, between which the thread is pulled. As the thread is pulled down through the V, it snaps into a small round hole serving as the eye and is secured.

To thread this type of needle, put the needle's point into the stabilizer with the little hole facing your left or right. Unwind several inches of thread. With your thumbs and index fingers, grasp the middle of the thread with both hands about one inch apart. The thread between your hands will be very taut. Place the taut thread across the V and pull down. You should feel and hear the thread snap into the hole. Pull the two ends of the thread together and tie a knot.

Some people can use both hands to tie a knot, but it may be difficult without visual feedback, so you might want to try an alternative technique. Hold both ends of the thread in one hand between your thumb and index finger. Wrap the thread around your index finger at least three times. Rub or roll the thread toward the end of your index finger with the first joint of your thumb. This method will create a "snarl" of thread as it rolls off your finger. Hold the twisted thread between your thumb and index finger and pull it in the opposite direction of the needle to make a knot.

Replacing Buttons

Individuals who are blind or have low vision can sew on buttons in much the same way as individuals using vision. There are just a few adaptations to simplify the task. Start with tactilely or visually determining the style of the button. Does it have two holes, four, or a shank? Do you have the color thread you need? Are your spools of thread organized with the colors labeled? Note that high-quality polyester thread is easier to use than cotton. It may cost a little more, but it frays less than inexpensive cotton.

Sewing on buttons may be easier than expected, especially for a two-hole or shank-type button. If you have sewing experience, you are already used to sewing from the underside without looking. Start by finding the missing button's original location by feeling for threads, small holes, or worn material where the buttonhole has rubbed. Then, make the first stitch without the button. Pull the thread through the material and then drop one hole of the button over the needle. Now the button is in place before you start to sew. If the missing button was in the middle of a shirt, button up the shirt to align all the buttonholes. Then pull the needle and thread through the material and the buttonhole where the button is missing. When you unbutton the shirt, the needle and thread will be right where it needs to be to sew the new button in place. Hold the button in place, hold the button's edges, or cover the holes with your thumb using a thimble.

It may help practice on spare swatches of material to develop confidence and redevelop or strengthen your muscle memory. If the button that needs replacing is small, then practice can be especially helpful.

Many of the adaptations already covered in this section are the same for repairing hems. Set up a tray with all the necessary materials, match the thread, and thread the needle. The space between stitches will need to be tactilely determined, rather than visually, but the technique is the same.

Alternatives

Buttons will fall off, hems will come loose, seams will rip, and many people don't want to mend clothing themselves or never learned to sew. A tailor or seamstress can make alterations or repairs and replace buttons. Dry cleaners will often replace buttons, and some employ a seamstress. The dry cleaner's cost is usually less than that of a professional tailor. You may also be able to barter with a friend or family member or find a neighbor who likes to sew.

Summary

This lesson covered adaptive methods for shopping for clothing and cleaning and mending your wardrobe. People who are blind or have low

vision can do all these tasks independently with adaptive skills and equipment. Consider the methods from this lesson and determine which will be effective for you.

Suggested Activities

Try these activities to start implementing what you have learned:

- Try asking for help from a customer service staff member or personal shopper next time you shop for clothing.
- Decide how many baskets or bags you need for sorting laundry and start developing the habit of placing all clothing into its designated location when you're done wearing it.
- Mark the settings you use most often on your washer and dryer.

Resources

- Purchase tactile adhesive bumps for marking appliances, self-threading needles (with the V-shaped opening), sock-locks, WayTags (for the [WayAround](#) app), and other adaptive items from the following companies.
- [MaxiAids](#)
- [LS&S Products](#)
- [Independent Living Aids](#)
- More information can be found at [AccessWorld](#), an online publication that reviews adaptive devices and standard appliances for accessibility.