

## Patient dress code for a psychiatric unit

### Introduction

Some patients on psychiatric units may be too ill to make decisions about appropriate clothing at the time of admission. Other patients, such as those with personality disorders, may choose to dress in certain risqué or revealing clothing to cause discomfort to others. Therefore, most psychiatric units have dress codes to ensure that patients are appropriately dressed at all times. Almost all psychiatric units prohibit certain types of clothing, such as see-through items, high heels, revealing garments, and visible underwear.

Clothing policies vary from one facility to another. On some units, patients are asked to wear pajamas, robes, and slippers that are provided by the facility. On other units, patients are asked to wear their own pajamas and robes. On still other units, patients are asked to wear their own street clothes brought from home. Most problems with patient clothing occur on units where all or some of the patients wear their own street clothes.

Some facilities have a patient handbook that contains the dress code and that's given to every new admission. Other facilities may have a dress code for patients, but no written policy or handbook. It's always best to discuss all unit policies and procedures concerning the patient's behavior or appearance upon the patient's admission to the unit. All staff should ensure that the dress code is followed.

### Equipment

- Patient handbook, if available
- Optional: Pajamas, robe, and slippers

### Implementation

1. Introduce yourself to the patient.
2. Explain the unit dress code and the reasons for the dress code.
3. Review the section in the patient's handbook about appropriate clothing, if applicable to your facility.
4. Tell the patient that he'll be expected to modify the way he's dressed or change into other clothing if asked to do so by a staff member. *The appropriateness of his clothing and appearance is a staff decision.*
5. Provide pajamas, a robe, and slippers if your dress code requires the patient to wear clothing provided by the facility.
6. Secure the patient's excess possessions and valuables per facility policy if no one is available to take them home. (See the "Handling patient valuables on a psychiatric unit" procedure.)
7. Document the procedure. <sup>1</sup>

### Special Considerations

- Psychiatric patients, especially those who are severely mentally ill and those with cognitive disorders, may need to be reminded to bathe, use deodorant, brush their

teeth and hair, and change their clothing. It's appropriate for you to ask the patient, in private, to increase his efforts in achieving and maintaining cleanliness. Some patients, especially older adults and those with dementia or physical infirmities, may need assistance with daily grooming. Psychiatric units usually don't admit patients who are unable to provide self-care because of medical reasons; however, many units will admit patients who need assistance with physical appearance and tasks of daily living.

- Most units allow facial hair, such as moustaches, sideburns, and beards and any length of hair, as long as the hair appears clean.
- On most psychiatric units, a patient with tattoos isn't asked to wear clothes to cover the tattoos unless the themes of the tattoos would be considered disturbing to most people, such as with obscene or violent scenes or symbols or slogans that are evidence of hate of another race, faith, or group of people. If it isn't possible to cover the disturbing tattoos with clothing, the matter should be discussed with the entire treatment team, including the patient, so an action plan can be developed.

### Complications

When a patient doesn't adhere to the dress code, speak with him in private and explain how his appearance needs to be changed or modified according to the unit rules. Notify your supervisor, the patient's doctor, and other members of the treatment team if he refuses to change out of inappropriate clothing or comply with the dress code in other ways. In some instances, refusal to follow unit rules will result in the patient's discharge.

### Documentation

Document that the patient was oriented to all unit rules and was given a patient handbook, if available on your unit. Note the patient's response to the orientation. If the patient doesn't adhere to the unit's dress code or established rules regarding hygiene, document in what manner the patient's appearance contradicts the rules. Also include what was said during discussions with the patient, using his own words as much as possible. Note the actions that were taken by the staff to help the patient dress appropriately. If a team meeting is held about the patient's dress, document who attended the meeting and what action plan was developed.

If the patient's excess possessions were sent home or secured in the facility, document how they were handled, including who took them home or what was done to secure the items, how they were labeled, and if any staff member opened or inspected the items.

### References

1. The Joint Commission. *Comprehensive Accreditation Manual for Hospitals: The Official Handbook*. Standard RC.01.03.01. Oakbrook Terrace, Ill.: The Joint Commission, 2010.
2. The Joint Commission. *Comprehensive Accreditation Manual for Hospitals: The Official Handbook*. Standard RI.01.06.05. Oakbrook Terrace, Ill.: The Joint Commission, 2010.
3. Mohr, W.K. *Psychiatric-Mental Health Nursing: Evidence-Based Concepts, Skills and Practices*, 7th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2008.

4. Nettina, S.M. *Lippincott Manual of Nursing Practice*, 9th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2010.
5. Varcarolis, E.M., et al. *Foundations of Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing: A Clinical Approach*, 5th ed. St. Louis: Saunders, 2006.
6. Videbeck, S.L. *Psychiatric-Mental Health Nursing*, 4th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2007.

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