




# "What We Wore" How-To Guide

**Organize your own clothing and fashion reflection group with this simple step-by-step guide**

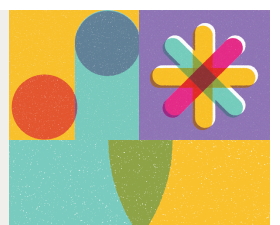
## Background

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In the fall of 2022, four University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work students began working together on a community-engagement project. After brainstorming many ideas, we discovered a shared curiosity about the power of clothing and fashion to recall memories and create connection through story-telling. We were inspired by *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, a play written by Nora and Delia Ephron based on the 1995 book of the same name by Ilene Beckerman as well as the Netflix docuseries *Worn Stories*. What is the meaning behind the things we choose to wear? Could reflecting upon this topic foster positive emotions and social connection? Through two one-hour group sessions at Vintage Senior Center in East Liberty, we explored these questions. Below is a summary of what we learned and our suggestions to whomever would like to build upon what we started.



Open discussion was interesting and  
a trip down memory lane  
-Vintage Senior Center Participant



## Initial Considerations

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Planning this activity took many hours of meetings to clarify our goals and strategies. You may wish to do things differently, and we hope you will experiment and discover what works best for your community! To help get your team brainstorming here is the step-by-step process we suggest:

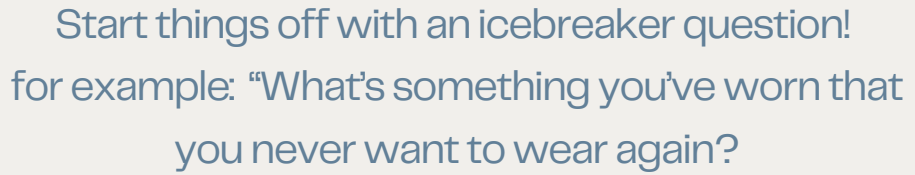
1. Establish Your Goals
2. Identify Community Partners
3. Choose a Setting
4. Select Participants
5. Consider Your Budget

## Suggested Components

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Below are the three key elements that we incorporated into our activity. Please see the appendix at the end of the document for details.

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The primary purpose of this reflection group was to bring people together to share stories.</li><li>● Sharing stories and memories is a powerful way for people to connect and interact.</li><li>● We chose fashion and clothing as the starting point for conversations about personal tastes, values, challenges, and joys.</li></ul>
Sensory Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The purpose of our sensory activity was to include other senses to stimulate memory through music, perfume, jewelry, and fabric of different textures.</li><li>● These items could be especially helpful to engage participants with cognitive impairment / dementia</li><li>● Consider the time in which your participants grew up; what sights, sounds, and smells might evoke memories from that period?</li><li>● Once you have selected a variety of items to share, consider specific question prompts to accompany each item. For example, you might pass around a piece of denim and ask participants if they remember their first pair of jeans.</li></ul>
Art Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Art Therapy promotes self-expression and insight.</li><li>● Some people express their thoughts and feelings easily through conversation; for others, expression through art may be preferable.</li><li>● Expect that some participants will not be interested in an art activity.</li></ul>



Start things off with an icebreaker question!  
for example: “What’s something you’ve worn that  
you never want to wear again?”

## Best Practices

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What works well for you will depend upon your participants and setting. Based on our experience offering this activity at a diverse urban senior center, we suggest the following best practices.

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Do wear a special outfit to create a festive atmosphere</li><li>● Do share your own memories and reflections to get the conversation going</li><li>● Do advertise your event well in advance</li><li>● Do consider the set-up of your room and how to arrange a welcoming and inclusive space</li><li>● Do use simple materials such as crayons and markers for an art activity</li><li>● Do consider the needs of participants with cognitive impairment</li><li>● Do consider adaptations for participants who may have arthritis or other limitations to art creation</li><li>● Do stay flexible with your agenda. Each group will have its own pace and preferences</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Don't plan your session to last more than 60-90 minutes</li><li>● Don't invite too many people. A group of 6-12 people will allow time for everyone to engage in conversation</li><li>● Don't distribute all of the sensory items at once. Take time to pass objects around while inviting conversation with specific questions</li><li>● Don't be surprised if sad memories are triggered as well. Have a plan for how to hold space for all emotions</li><li>● Don't allow one or a few people to monopolize the conversation. Actively engage the more quiet participants</li><li>● Don't forget that Covid-19 is still with us and consider alternative plans if the latest public health guidance limits in-person activities</li></ul>

## Appendix A: Discussion Questions

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- How has being older changed your choices about what you wear?
- How has what you like to wear changed over time ?
- Do the clothes really make the “man” (person)?
- Have you ever inherited a piece of clothing or accessories? What did it feel like to wear that?
- If you had the opportunity to wear anything, what would it be and why?
- Did you ever wear a uniform that made you feel like part of a community/team?
- Have you ever been made to wear something that you didn’t want to wear or made you feel like an outsider in some way?
- Have you ever worn something that symbolizes a rite of passage or marked a significant event in your life?
- Does religion or culture play a part in what you wear?
- What parts of you do you like to express through your clothing and accessories?
- Have you ever been ridiculed for something you liked to wear?
- Has anyone ever misjudged you because of what you wear?
- Is there something you wear or have worn that makes you feel strong/powerful?
- Do you like wearing costumes? Favorites?
- Who is your fashion icon?
- What is your favorite item in your closet right now?
- What’s something you wore that made you feel beautiful or powerful?
- When did you start to dress yourself/buy your own clothes? What was that like?
- Have you ever made clothing or has anyone ever made something for you?

## Appendix B: Agenda

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Below is a sample agenda for a 60 minute activity session

### **Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)**

- Introduce yourselves and explain your purpose
- Provide emotional disclaimer such as:

*Today, we will be telling stories and reflecting on aspects of life which may be difficult or bring up challenging emotions. They may also highlight differences between us, like experiences with money, aging, health, and culture. If you feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed at any point, you are welcome to leave the room or take care of yourself in any way you need. To maintain a comfortable and respectful environment, we ask that only one person speaks at a time. Since we only have an hour and want to give everyone a chance to share, please be mindful of how long you are speaking.*

## Share Worn Stories trailer (5 minutes)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkwUWXxq2F8>
- Materials needed: Laptop, HDMI cable and connector

## First segment: Conversation (10 minutes)

- Offer icebreaker questions
- Guide conversation based on the experience of watching the documentary trailer
  - What's your favorite item or article of clothing to wear right now?
  - If you had the opportunity to wear anything, what would it be and why?
  - Did you ever wear a uniform that made you feel like part of a community/team?
  - What parts of you do you like to express through clothing and accessories?

## Second segment: Sensory Activity (15 minutes)

*We have brought several items to pass around that we hope will stimulate memories, thoughts, or emotions for you. We invite you each to share as you're comfortable. One of the things that can be so powerful about the clothes we wear is how they engage multiple senses. We appreciate clothing with our sense of sight, of course, but also we can enjoy different textures through touch. They say that smell is the sense most powerfully linked to memory, and you've probably had the experience of being transported back in time by a scent. Do you have any especially powerful memories of the feeling of something you've worn or a favorite scent you associate with an outfit or occasion?*

- Guide conversation based on the experience of the sensory items
  - Do you like wearing costumes? Do you have any favorites?
  - Have you ever made clothing or has anyone ever made something for you?
  - Have you ever worn something that symbolizes a rite of passage or marked a significant event in your life?

## Third segment: Art Activity (15 minutes)

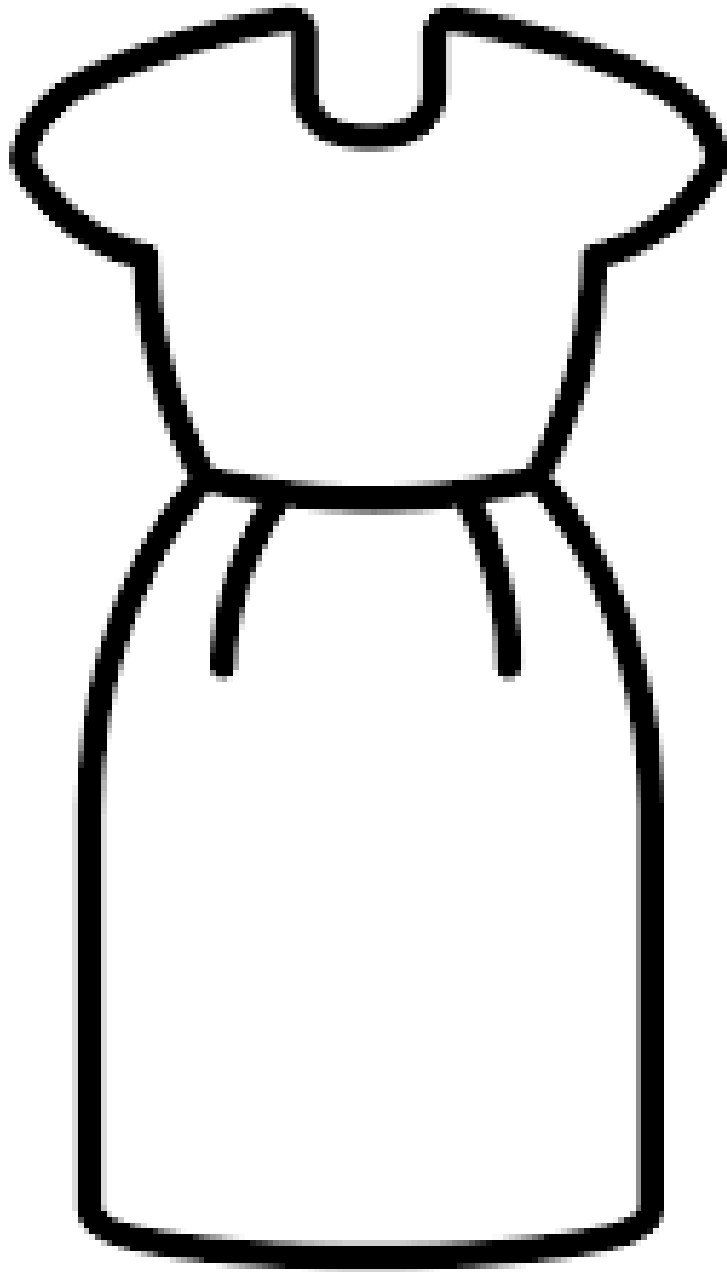
*Hopefully all this great discussion has you feeling expressive, because our final activity for the morning is to take a little time for creative expression using these markers and other materials we've brought. We have two outfit templates for you to choose from. If you're inclined to draw free hand, you can do that as well. Relax and feel creative! There is no right or wrong way to be artistic, it's all about being in the moment and expressing what feels right for you.*

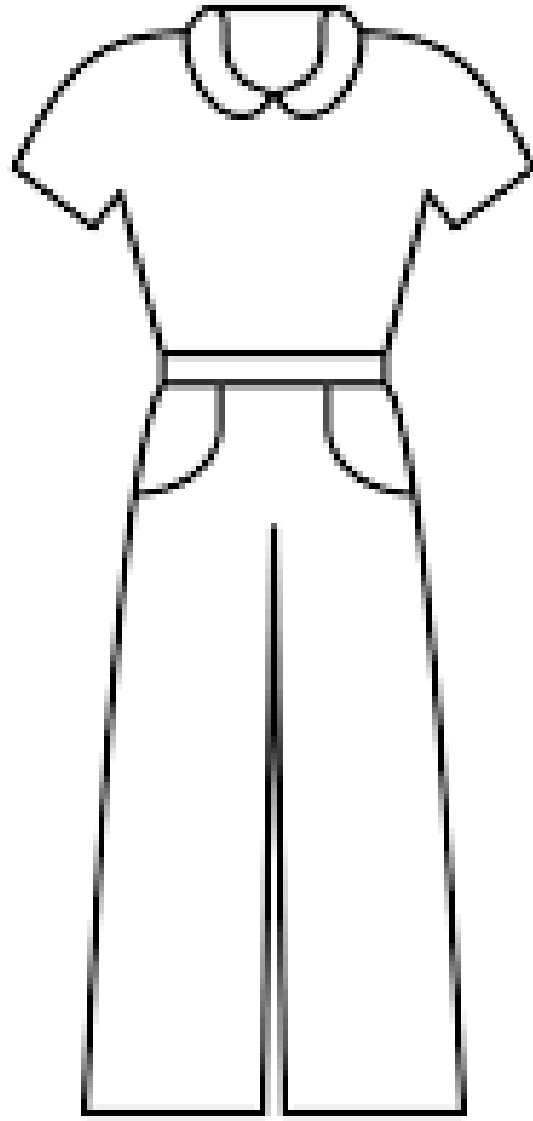
## Final segment: Conversation (10 minutes)

- Allow participants to share their creations
- Reflect on the process of the art activity

## Appendix C: Art Activity Templates

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