

DRESSING

APPEARANCE & THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE IN HOME CARE

Waldo, NP | terminal2.org

Evidence Base: [Journal of Palliative Medicine](#) · Sabar (2024) · [terminal2.org Clinical Experience](#)

Why What You Wear Matters

Before you say a word, your appearance has already communicated. In the home — which is not a clinic, not a hospital — your clothing is part of your clinical presence. It signals respect, preparedness, and intentionality. Families in crisis are reading everything. Your wrinkled scrubs say one thing. Your clean, layered, professional appearance says another.

The Layering Principle

Home temperatures are unpredictable. Elderly and dying patients often keep homes at 78-85°F. Homes without consistent care may be cold. The rule is simple: dress in layers you can remove without chaos.

- Base layer: Professional, modest top (no tank tops, no deep necklines)
- Middle layer: Light sweater or vest you can remove easily
- Outer layer: Professional jacket for travel, left in the car or at the door
- Always have a spare change in your car or bag

"I was melting in a peacoat over a gym tank top, trying to maintain my clinical composure, while a family was navigating one of the hardest moments of their lives. Learn from the peacoat."

— Waldo, NP

Specific Guidelines

Footwear: Closed-toe, quiet shoes. Many homes are shoe-free — have clean socks or bring shoe covers. Avoid heels that click on hardwood.

Scrubs: Clean, fitted, not faded. If your agency requires scrubs, ensure they are pressed and free of stains. Scrubs with cartoon characters are inappropriate for this setting.

Scent: Minimize or eliminate cologne, perfume, and scented lotions. Patients on medications are often hypersensitive to smell. What you consider subtle may be overwhelming.

Jewelry: Minimal. Remove dangling earrings, noisy bracelets, and rings that could scratch a patient during care.

Hair: Clean and secured. Long hair should be tied back during patient care.

Nails: Short, clean, no artificial nails (infection control). Neutral or no polish.

ID badge: Visible. Families should know who you are without asking.

Therapeutic Presence Is Not Just Physical

Your appearance sets the stage, but therapeutic presence is sustained through behavior:

- Arrive on time. If you are late, call ahead. Do not arrive flustered.
- Silence your phone completely before entering the home
- Make the patient feel like they are the only person on your schedule
- Sit down. Sitting communicates "I have time for you."
- Do not wear sunglasses on your head indoors
- Do not bring food or drink into the patient's room unless offered

[Sabar et al. \(2024\). The Professional Guest. Palliative Care and Social Practice.](#)

The Car Kit

Keep these in your vehicle at all times:

Spare scrub top or professional shirt

Clean socks and shoe covers

Breath mints (not gum)

Deodorant

Hand sanitizer and tissues

Stain remover pen

Lint roller

Protein bar and water

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