

# Function and fashion



## **Adaptive clothing can look good, too.**

by Shara Rutberg

“I looked like a fisherman. An industrial fisherman.” That’s how Van DiBernardo described a cooling vest he wore years ago to help regulate his body temperature.

“It was not a good look for me,” he says, laughing.



## **Coolture's simple design makes cooling vests easy to use.**

Photo courtesy of Van and Luanne DiBernardo

And the 54-year-old knows a good look when he sees it. He spent years as a globetrotting shoe designer for DKNY. After he was diagnosed with MS at 26, he tried different cooling vests designed for industrial settings to help reduce symptoms. He appreciated the cooling, but hated how they felt and looked. When he complained to his sister Luanne DiBernardo that he looked way too Field and Stream, she told him, "You're a designer. Why don't you design a better one?" After much research and innovation, they created Coolture and its Signature Cooling Vest. With a contoured cut, clean lines and high-tech fabrics, it proved way more GQ than Deadliest Catch.

Historically, adaptive clothing—apparel designed to help solve challenges and improve the quality of life for people facing mobility, sensory or cognitive challenges—has been "quite horrific," said Deborah Weinswig, founder and CEO of retail research firm Coresight Research, during a presentation at the 2018 "One Size Does Not Fit All: Inclusive Design & the Modern Consumer" conference.

The focus has been on functional, not fashionable, she said.

That's changing.

### **Big brands join in**

In recent years, not only have small, innovative companies like Coolture launched stylish adaptive clothing, big brands and retailers have stepped up, too, which is bringing down prices and increasing the availability of the clothing. The category is big business. The U.S. adaptive fashion market will reach \$44.5 million in 2019 and \$51.1 million by 2022, according to Coresight, which forecasts the global adaptive fashion market to hit \$278.2 billion this year and \$325.8 billion by 2022.

One in five Americans lives with a disability, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, providing a huge opportunity in the market. And as more manufacturers work to fill the void, people living with disabilities, like those caused by MS, will have more options for clothes that are easy to wear and that they feel good about wearing.

In 2015, Nike introduced FlyEase technology, engineering sneakers with zips in the back for easy entry and wider widths to accommodate orthotics. In 2016, Tommy Hilfiger partnered with Runway of Dreams, a nonprofit founded by Mindy Scheier, a mother of a child with muscular dystrophy, to create Tommy Adaptive, a clothing line more inclusive to children with disabilities. The next year, Tommy Adaptive expanded to include "modified mainstream" clothing for adults, too. "Inclusivity and the democratization of fashion have always been at

the core of my brand's DNA," Hilfiger said in a statement. "These collections continue to build on that vision, empowering differently abled adults to express themselves through fashion."



**Target's Cat & Jack clothing line was expanded to include sensory friendly and adaptive apparel in 2017.** Photo courtesy of Target

Target launched Cat & Jack in 2016 and expanded the line to include sensory friendly and adaptive apparel in 2017. In 2018, Target added Universal Thread, a women's lifestyle line that includes select sensory friendly and adaptive apparel items, to its own brand portfolio. The same year, Zappos debuted its adaptive clothing line, Independence Day. The retailer now has a department called Zappos Adaptive featuring its own brands and others that are designed to make life easier—and more fashionable—for people with disabilities.

These new lines include features like ultra-soft materials and heat transfer labels (instead of hanging tags) to avoid irritating skin, necklines with wider openings and more forgiving waistbands and wider legs for easier on-off, magnetic closures, denim with flattened seams to reduce pressure points, zip closures, and hidden openings for abdominal access and outerwear with zip-off sleeves.

### **Features that make things easier**

Features that make clothes easier to put on and take off are particularly helpful to people living with MS, says Kathleen Zackowski, PhD, senior director of patient management, care and rehabilitation research for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. "It may sound like a small thing, but for some people with MS, getting dressed can use all of the energy someone has for the rest of the day," she says. "More sophisticated [with external zipper but elastic

waistband] easy on-off pants are ideal for people with MS who have issues with incontinence, who have a hard time getting to the bathroom on time.”

Adaptive clothes with features like magnetic closures have been “liberating,” says Tim Hilton, 51, whose MS makes it difficult to manipulate buttons and zippers. “It’s like when a person with MS gets a scooter or a car they can drive with their hands.

With these clothes, you can get dressed by yourself and be independent again.”

Pants with wider legs or zippers up the ankles that allow them to be worn over leg braces can also be key items for people with MS. That way, the pants don’t draw attention to the equipment, Zackowski says. “Unfortunately, there’s a big problem in our society with assumptions made about the cognitive abilities of anyone who needs any kind of extra equipment to walk. These assumptions lead to misunderstandings, especially for people with MS who are not impacted cognitively,” she says.

One category designers need to address is bras, Zackowski says. “It’s a big issue for women. It’s really a personal necessity, with few adaptive options. Putting on a bra requires some strength and fine motor coordination. And adaptive bras are often expensive.”

Innovative technology, like the materials in the Coolture cooling vests and headbands, can help people with MS regulate body temperatures. “It’s an absolute lifesaver,” says Kristine Moor, 30, who has relapsing-remitting MS, of the cooling vest she wears over her clothes nearly every day in the summer to prevent overheating.

Designers are using other technology to create clothing directed at symptoms of other conditions, too, like pneumatic “hugging” compression vests for people with autism and clothing with QR codes that “speak” a description of each item for blind people.



**Rally UHC Cycling team members wear cooling vests to regulate body temperature.**

Photo courtesy of Van and Luanne DiBernardo

For nearly four years, designers, engineers, occupational therapists and people with various disabilities have gathered at Open Style Lab, a nonprofit sponsored by Parsons School of Design, to create technology-based wearable solutions for people of all abilities without compromising on style. Each summer the team produces bespoke outfits for four or five people who have disabilities ranging from nerve sensitivity to paralysis.

### **The self-confidence factor**

The power of stylish adaptive clothing goes beyond making clothes more comfortable and easier to take on and off. Wearing clothes you love that don't look "disabled" can make a big impact psychologically. "Clothing may sound trivial, but I really don't think it is," Zackowski says. "Clothes can represent the person you're seen as in public. When you wear clothing that makes you feel good, you have more confidence. There's a different mental outlook that you get from wearing clothes you like."

"It's a total confidence builder to be able to go to a function where people are going to be dressier, and be able to step up and present yourself like you used to," says Hilton, who notes what a relief it is to no longer worry about having to open and close pants or ask for help if he has to use the restroom during an event. Being able to wear stylish clothes again is also empowering, he says. "With MS, life becomes very functional, as opposed to fashionable," he says. "It's great to be able to add a touch of flair. It helps you feel 'normal' again."

Not having the proper work clothes poses a real barrier for people with disabilities in the workforce, according to a recent University of Missouri study published in the journal *Society*. The study found that workplace participation can be hindered by lack of appropriate clothing, which can increase the stigma of people living with a disability. When people wear appropriate clothing, their effectiveness is enhanced tremendously, according to the study. Researchers have recently coined the term "enclothed cognition" to describe the impact that clothes have on mood and health.

"The clothes you wear describe you," Van DiBernardo says. "And it's great to feel like you're describing yourself, not a disease."

**Shara Rutberg is a writer in Evergreen, Colorado.**

Find more [resources and support](#).