What Your Clothes Say About You

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It’s no news that your wardrobe says a lot about you. What you wear can inform passersby of your type of employment, as well as your ambitions, emotions and spending habits. And now it’s even launched a whole new type of psychology.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Jennifer Baumgartner literally wrote the book on this phenomenon, which she calls the “psychology of dress.” In her book, “You Are What You Wear: What Your Clothes Reveal About You,” she explains not only how psychology determines our clothing choices, but how people can overcome key psychological issues their wardrobe might be bringing to light, both in everyday life and at work.

“Shopping and spending behaviors often come from internal motivations such as emotions, experiences and culture,” says Dr. Baumgartner. “You look at shopping or storing behaviors, even putting together outfits, and people think of it as fluff. But any behavior is rooted in something deeper. What I did was look at the deeper meaning of choices, just like I would in therapy.”

We spoke with her to figure out why clothes are so revealing (of our personalities, that is), what messages they’re sending and how you can use your wardrobe to change how others perceive you—and even how you think about yourself.

Clothing can be used both as an aid and a weapon. Americans, for example, rely on clothing as an economic and social indicator because there aren’t official marks of rank such as a caste system or aristocracy, says Dr. Baumgartner.

“When you don’t have a specific system, people come up with their own,” she explains. It’s what “helps you figure out where you fit in. Especially now, with the economy, with people losing status, maintaining a sense of who we are becomes even more important. Our clothes help place us where we think we want to be. ”

She cites the Real Housewives TV series as an example. “Look at the way they focus on: money. When they fight, they use logos and designers as a way to put each other down. They’re using clothes and accessories both as a tool to know where they fit in and as a weapon against others.”

Clothes may also project a good or bad image. Have you ever been told that you can judge a man by his shoes? Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.

There’s no one piece or style that makes a person look successful. Dr. Baumgartner recommends the basics when trying to project a positive image: the little black dress, the blazer, the pumps. “With classics, history has done the work for you. It has lasted throughout time, so you already know it works,” she says. And what is it that makes a classic a classic? “It has multiple functions, and it’s appropriate for different age ranges and body types. It became a classic because it works no matter who you are.”
On the other hand, there’s no one piece or style that makes a person look unsuccessful. “Anything where it looks like you didn’t take the time or make the effort comes across badly,” says Dr. Baumgartner. “The worst clothing is the kind that tries to undo, ignore or hide where or who you are, or the kind that shows you didn’t pay attention to your body/age/situation … Any clothes that prohibit you from doing your job well send the wrong message.”

A study this year from Northwestern University examined a concept called “enclothed cognition.” Researchers define it in their report as “the systematic influence that clothes have on the wearer’s psychological processes,” meaning what your clothes are saying to you, not about you. And how they make you feel.

The researchers distributed standard white lab coats to participants, telling some that it was a doctor’s coat and some that it was a painter’s smock. All participants performed the same task, but those wearing the “doctor’s coat” were more careful and attentive. This seems to indicate that their actions were influenced by their clothing.

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