

**DRESS
YOUR BEST
LIFE**

Introduction

MY STYLE STORY

We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.

—*Maya Angelou*

What if I told you fashion was a readily available, solidly reliable way to feel more in control of your life? That there are ways to match your clothing to your mood, to use accessories to conjure comfort, to reduce anxiety through color and fabric choices, to project power when you need it most? Clothes can help us maintain our cultural identity even when our environment demands we assimilate. Conversely, they can help us fit in when doing so is advantageous. With everything I've discovered about Fashion Psychology, I can't wait to help you break out of style ruts, create uniforms when useful, prevent the dreaded "I have nothing to wear" feeling, curb compulsive shopping behaviors, and avoid trends when they won't work for your lifestyle or your budget. What if I told you clothes can help you lift yourself up out of despair? Fashion is not meaningless. Far from it. Fashion is the voice we use to declare ourselves to the world.

The first time it occurred to me to practice psychology within the framework of fashion, I was twenty-one, working toward dual master's degrees (a Master of Arts and a Master of Education) in the Counseling Psychology Department at Columbia University's Teachers College. As a

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recently graduated psychology major from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, I had spent my entire life in the Midwest. But when I arrived in New York for grad school, I hit the ground running. In addition to taking classes, I quickly achieved some side-hustle success as a runway model and fashion PR assistant. Though I served up fierce “lewks” on the runway, the truth is I’m an introvert and a keen observer of those around me. I was awed by the kaleidoscope of styles I encountered on the subways and streets of my new city. As I clocked the outfits of my fellow students, other models backstage, and everyday New Yorkers, I just couldn’t get this question out of my head: *What do your clothes reveal about your psyche?* This idea was the seed from which Fashion Psychology (as I came to call it) would grow. I knew back then by instinct what I know now from academic research and clinical experience: People express their emotions, their well-being, even their trauma through their clothes. And clothes, in turn, can be a powerful tool for healing. I know this because I’ve lived it.

From the moment I set foot in Manhattan, I was home. The rhythm of the city just felt right. I was already accustomed to a rise-and-grind lifestyle, ready to balance rigorous academic demands with my creative passions. Growing up, I was a singer, studying opera and musical theater at the Cleveland School of the Arts. I had always excelled in my classes—even skipping the fifth grade—thanks to my curious mind and unending desire to please my parents. Achievement meant a lot in my family, especially to my father, a Jamaican immigrant who worked as a middle school janitor. My mom was an administrative assistant in a hospital, raising my brothers and me largely on her own, because my parents were never married. My twin brother and I shuffled back and forth between our parents’ homes—the week at our mom’s and the weekend at our dad’s. (My baby brother has a different father, whom he visited separately.) Studying hard and being onstage gave me an identity—“the performer” and “the risk taker”—that helped me distinguish myself from my shyer, more reserved siblings.

But life in the spotlight definitely created some tension between my

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peers and me. In middle school I was bullied for my appearance (I was tall and thin with glasses) by a guy who, fifteen years later, asked me out on Facebook. One girl in particular (a “best friend” who was anything but—know the type?) loved to talk about her designer clothes and would ask me pointedly about mine. I owned none. My father felt fancy labels were wasteful since, he reasoned, you could buy the same quality item—minus the brand name—for a fraction of the cost. In high school I was targeted for having an operatic voice and not a “church” voice. In college a sorority sister relentlessly made fun of me for deciding to shave my head and later, in colder weather, for experimenting with head scarves similar to the hijabs worn by Muslim women. Insecure as all of this made me, I always felt a deep urge to challenge norms with my look. Being creative with my style, utilizing whatever I had in my closet, was a major source of joy for me. It still is. Good grades and cheering audiences were external affirmations that I belonged where I was, and that I wasn’t as out of place as my bullies would have me believe.

So when I started grad school at Columbia, I followed my trusty formula. I studied hard, worked hard, and said yes to every modeling gig that came my way. In my downtime, I designed and hand-made dramatic pearl and feather jewelry and christened my line Optukal Illusion (#truth). I made some fierce new friends, and they modeled my creations for promotional photos. I also volunteered at the Barnard/Columbia Rape Crisis Anti-Violence Support Center. It was work that felt like a calling, and it would become meaningful in a way I could not have foreseen. I was what my professors might call an ambitious self-starter. Being one of only a handful of black students in my program and from a lower-middle-class background, I felt I had everything to prove.

I was motivated, focused, and firing on all cylinders. I enthusiastically approached several professors for guidance, pitching this idea I had to practice Fashion Psychology, hoping they could help me find a job. But the field, as far as I could tell at the time, didn’t seem to exist. One professor acknowledged that my résumé seemed to be a fifty-fifty split, with half

my experience rooted in the world of fashion and the other half in the world of Freud. She urged me to seek an entry-level position assisting a renowned celebrity stylist. The stylist, however, had an infamous reputation for tearing down clients before building them back up with a makeover. Her approach just didn't sit right with me. Nor did it seem forward-thinking, given the messages of self-acceptance, body positivity, and inclusivity that were beginning to bubble up in pop culture, though they hadn't yet reached critical mass in the fashion industry at the time.

Still, even though the type of work I believed in wasn't easy to find, I couldn't let go of the notion of styling from the inside out. It seemed obvious to me that you should acknowledge a client's humanity—exploring her emotional history, her family background, her self-esteem, all that personal stuff that drew me to psychology—to understand how it affected her look. I wanted to be up in everybody's business and also help them gain confidence with great clothes. People *and* fashion fascinated me in equal measure.

I began to do this combination of talk therapy and wardrobe assessment on my own, first with family friends, then with friends of friends. Word of mouth spread, and my Rolodex of clients slowly began to grow. But my road to success hasn't been smooth. My idea to create this new psychological subdiscipline continues to rattle the academic establishment, with some of my colleagues calling me a "pop psychologist." But as powerful women now say: Nevertheless, I persist. After all, you can't learn persistence without resistance. And I always remember that the people to whom I'm truly accountable are the ones I'm here to help: my clients, my students, and now you. They—and you—are my North Star.

My time at Columbia was instrumental in helping me hone my message and clarify my mission. I came to define Fashion Psychology as the study and treatment of how color, beauty, style, image, and shape affect human behavior while addressing cultural sensitivities and cultural norms. The cultural angle? My classes taught me that. I learned how a patient's racial-ethnic background is an essential contextual consideration

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in therapy—a notion that was routinely emphasized by my professors. See, my teachers were cutting-edge academics, global citizens, savvy about the latest research, “woke.” Though I was a minority in my program, the coursework seemed designed to acknowledge my reality. As future therapists, we were taught always to be aware of how different cultures respond to emotional difficulties, and how they feel about people seeking help for their problems. We were taught how a client’s cultural background could shape her view of therapy, sometimes even more than socioeconomic class. For example, in collectivist Asian cultures, an individual’s personal troubles may be perceived as a reflection on her family as a whole. Losing face, admitting weakness, seeking help for mental health issues will more often than not bring shame. Opening up to a therapist—a stranger—is simply not done.

Similarly, with African or Caribbean American individuals, like myself, there is a stigma surrounding going to therapy. Where I come from, unpacking your baggage in front of some random person is akin to blasphemy or defamation. Most of my family members would rather self-medicate than talk to somebody to expose and evaluate their trauma. In an article for *Psychology Today*, clinical psychologist Dr. Monnica T. Williams cites a 2008 study published in the *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*: “Among Blacks . . . over a third felt that mild depression or anxiety would be considered ‘crazy’ in their social circles. Talking about problems with an outsider (i.e., therapist) may be viewed as airing one’s ‘dirty laundry,’ and . . . over a quarter felt that discussions about mental illness would not be appropriate even among family.”¹

I really relate. My dad is my champion. My rock. My ride or die. But to this day, if I cry on the phone with him, he tells me to hang up, pull myself together, and call him back once I’m composed. If anything bad happens in my family, we have an unspoken rule: Don’t speak about it. Ever the rebel, I opted *not* to follow that rule when a personal crisis upended my life. A year and a half into grad school, in the spring of 2011, my then-fiancé came to New York from Ohio to visit me for the weekend.

We'd met in college. We had been dating exclusively for two years. We loved each other. And he raped me.

The weekend of my rape began and ended with clothes. Knowing my fiancé would be arriving from Ohio on a Saturday, I picked out my favorite LBD for dinner that night. We were growing apart—a fact that gnawed at me, though I tried to bury it. I was evolving in grad school, incubating in my various industries. My fiancé was still living in Ohio, working as a restaurant server, supposedly saving enough to eventually join me in the Big Apple after we were married. That was my plan, at least. Even as I strutted down catwalks and went on go-sees, I was never enticed by the “models and bottles” club scene that sucked in and spat out so many of the girls I met backstage. It was different for me. *I can't tonight, I have class tomorrow* was my go-to excuse to stay home and hang out with my own introverted self. I was on a path. And I could see it leading in only one direction: up. I had it all figured out. I went over my fantasy mentally every day, like a mantra. I even illustrated my goals on a mood board: I would be living in Manhattan, married to my college sweetheart. We would have 2.5 children and a dog. And I would have a thriving career as a psychologist in private practice. I devoted my spare time to planning my wedding. My wedding. Not our wedding. That's how caught up I was in this vision of how my life was supposed to play out. He filled a role: the groom half of a wedding cake topper on a Pinterest page. Did I truly know him? I certainly had not a single clue that my partner would become my perpetrator.

He arrived in the afternoon. As we headed out to a restaurant near my apartment uptown, I was giddy—consumed with invitation ideas, comparing reception venues, debating color combinations, stewing over bridesmaid drama. It all spilled out of me as I blabbered a mile a minute between bites. He seemed despondent and distant. He drank more than usual. But . . . we were celebrating. I was buoyant. He seemed bored. He never was the loquacious one in the relationship, I told myself. Still, I was perplexed about what could have driven such an obvious wedge between

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us. Looking back, I think I was so busy chasing my future, I had failed to acknowledge my present. We were already over. In an essay about women and power for *New York Magazine*, author Lindy West wrote: “Women are conditioned to subsume our own needs to the needs of others and to try to make everything okay for everyone, emotionally and practically. And that becomes really insidious when women aren’t conditioned to prioritize their own safety and even their own sense of self.”² I didn’t have that awareness yet. But I agree with her now. Now that I know what true powerlessness feels like.

When we got home that night, I couldn’t take the tension anymore. I got emotional and questioned him about what was going on. He became totally agitated, which was so unlike the guy I knew. Alarm bells started going off left and right in my head. Why wouldn’t he open up about what was bothering him? This strange mix of insecurity, anxiety, and irritation in the air was almost palpable. We had history. We had shared a warm, intimate life together for years. Later that night, he initiated sex. I refused to consent unless we communicated. In his book *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence*, security expert Gavin de Becker writes, “When it comes to danger, intuition is always right in at least two important ways: 1) It is always in response to something. 2) It always has your best interest at heart.”³ That night, my intuition sought to protect me from the man I already considered to be my husband. It was confusing as hell. My intuition wasn’t enough. My fiancé raped me. My best friend violated me. The counselor in training, the mental health advocate, the empath had become the victim. According to the Centers for Disease Control, “About 1 in 4 women and nearly 1 in 10 men have experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime.”⁴ I became a statistic. I actually passed out from shock. Shut straight down.

In the middle of the night, I woke up and my fiancé started to apologize, saying that he regretted what he had done. His acknowledging the reality of what had happened made something in me snap. I ran out of the

apartment in a panic and called my parents back in Ohio. Each of them asked me what I wanted to do. I didn't want to file a report, I told them. I just wanted to finish my studies and adjust to a life without him in it. What I really wanted was to rewind time. I raged at myself. How could I not have anticipated this? I was stunned. How could I reconcile love with such brutality? I felt isolated. Who would believe that my fiancé raped me? How could I call the police and send another black man to prison?

I went back home, kicked him out of my apartment, and told him never to come near me again. I don't know where I found the strength. He packed wordlessly and left. A few hours later there was a knock at my door. I thought it was him. I didn't even hesitate to open the door. But it was the campus police. One of my parents (to this day I still don't know which one; I've never asked) had called them so I would have to file a report. I walked two officers through the details, feeling like I was floating outside my body. And then, with my ex-fiancé already on a bus back to Ohio, I officially declined to pursue the matter further. As soon as the police left, I told myself that I was going to move on with my life. I spent Sunday in bed. I didn't eat. I didn't shower. I barely moved. Then on Monday morning, I woke up and opened my closet.

On went a body-skimming 1950s-style dress, reminiscent of Audrey Hepburn's iconic Givenchy silhouettes. Church gloves. A wide-brimmed hat. Full makeup. Bold lipstick. My giant handmade feather earrings. I figured if I felt good in my outfit, I would feel good, period. In the months that followed, I kept upping the ante, fashion-wise. I wore gowns to class. Other students, in their jeans and t-shirts, gave me side-eye. I didn't care. Getting dressed in the morning was the one bright spot in my day. My apartment became my atelier, where I was in complete control. Selecting my clothes and accessories, I could tap into the creativity of my childhood, my sense of fun, of play. What some might cast as power dressing, I called dressing up my pain. I've since come to think of it as dressing from the heart. All I know is, after my rape, I clung to my clothes like a toddler to a teddy bear, like a drowning person to a life raft.

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In a series of interviews conducted by researchers for a book called *Appearance and Power*, survivors of sexual assault were asked how they chose to dress in the aftermath of their attack. More than half changed the way they dressed as a result. Some dressed to avoid attention, to self-protect, to deter comments on their appearance. Others, however, changed up their style to communicate indomitable power.⁵ That was me. Years later, I discovered even more research describing this type of behavior and read it with my mouth open, feeling like I was reading my own damn diary. At the University of Queensland Business School in Australia, marketing lecturer Dr. Alastair Tombs determined that women associate positive feelings with certain clothing items and negative feelings with others, on the basis of their previous emotional experiences and memories of wearing those items. After extensive interviews with thirty women, Tombs concluded, as he told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that “outfit choices are made to match mood and as a form of self-expression, but we’ve also found that clothing is used to control or mask emotions.”⁶ Bam! There I was: controlling, masking, and attempting to transform my emotions with my outfits. And it helped a little—it really did.

I came to define this behavior as Mood Enhancement Dress—when you use clothes to elevate or optimize your emotional state, to cheer yourself up. You know how there’s that saying “Don’t dress for the job you have, dress for the job you want”? Well, we can translate that idea into emotion. With Mood Enhancement Dress, you dress to evoke the feelings you want to feel. Wearing brighter colors to bring myself joy, tall heels to feel powerful, and makeup to feel polished and put together—these were all acts of Mood Enhancement. They were ways of investing in myself when someone I loved and trusted had just shown me he didn’t think I was worth much. It’s been said that “Looking good is the best revenge,” which today has morphed into the popular hashtag #RevengeBody. But I wasn’t dressing up for him. Not anymore and never again. I was shoring myself up to face the world. Dressing well was my first step toward reclaiming my life.

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It wasn't enough, of course. You don't need to be a shrink to figure out that recovering from intimate partner violence takes a lot more than a pencil skirt and strappy sandals. Over the course of that summer and fall, my looks got more and more outlandish, but ironically, I was increasingly withdrawn—a shell of my former self. My professors took notice. (Honestly, the way I was dressed, how could they miss me?) In a series of closed-door meetings, summoning all of my courage, I told them everything. And though they were aware of my situation, with my culture's mental health stigma baked into their curriculum, in December they advised me to take a leave of absence from my program. They had determined that I “lacked the requisite empathy to be a therapist.”

Looking back, I believe I was probably suffering from some sort of post-traumatic stress, unable to connect fully with patients or peers as I went through the motions of my daily life. This is not an excuse for what happened. It's simply important to me to clarify that deep down, beneath the surface, I knew I was still the same empathetic, sensitive, intuitive person I had always been. I was simply cut off from that part of myself. I couldn't seem to find a way to pull it up and belt it out to the back of the room. I was just five credits shy of earning my second master's degree in education for counseling psychology when I was effectively kicked out of Columbia. I walked away with my Master of Arts and was officially a trained therapist. In the years since, I've let any resentment go. I firmly believe that when faced with a closed door, you have two choices: Give up, or find a different door.

So there I was, twenty-three, and in the midst of a full-blown existential and emotional crisis. I had lost the structure of school. I had lost my fiancé. Going home to lick my wounds wasn't an option, even if I could have afforded the plane ticket back to Ohio. I felt so alone, like my insides had been hollowed out. If only I had known that I was in good company. According to a 2009 survey by the American Psychological Association, 87 percent of psychology graduate students report experiencing anxiety, 68 percent depression. It's no accident that the study of psychology is

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jokingly called “Me-Search” — because people who gravitate toward mental health professions commonly wish to address their own issues (while also helping others).⁷ And, man, did I have issues.

As with so many other people, many of the themes that have emerged in my life stem from my upbringing. As I mentioned, my father worked as a middle school custodian. But that’s not the whole story. In a way that parallels my grad student by day/model by night way of life, my dad too had a sort of double identity. When I was thirteen, he was convicted of a federal drug crime, for which he served two years in prison. My mother’s struggles with substance abuse became acute during this time. We’ve since reached a happy ending of sorts. Both of my parents have, in recent years, put themselves through college. This fills me with a pride words can’t express. But that period took its toll — on all of us. Leaving Columbia, I felt lows I hadn’t experienced since my teens, when my father was incarcerated. And yet I could no longer blame my troubles on my parents. The predicament I found myself in wasn’t my fault, but it was mine to handle alone. I was in uncharted territory.

In the past, my reaction to tragedy, heartbreaks, or setbacks had always been to work even harder and push myself to overachieve. My mission was to make everyone proud, to steal the spotlight and thus take the heat, to make up for my parents’ missteps. I learned early that hard work could help you dig yourself out of almost any hole. My father’s sister was the first in his family to immigrate from Jamaica. She worked as a maid, cleaning floors, eventually earning enough money to bring him over to join her in the United States. I was the first person in my family to go to college, let alone an Ivy League university. So when the powers that be told me, in essence, that I didn’t belong there, it was a gut punch, not only to myself but also to my family. My father’s take? “You were born here in the States. And you’re setting us back two, three generations.” I felt like a failure. I was supposed to be better than this. I was going to be the one to save us. Instead, my disgrace radiated outward, like a ripple effect, staining my already fragile family with shame. Was this reaction fair or

merited? Is the role of family savior one I still wish to play? These are questions I continue to wrestle with in therapy to this day.

A die-hard work ethic wasn't the only thing I inherited from my family. I've been told that when my maternal grandmother attempted to speak out about her own sexual assault, she was placed in a mental institution. As a group, black women have been collectively holding this stuff in—brutal racial prejudice, sexual violence, everyday abuse or micro-aggressions—for generations. It's a devastating legacy. No wonder we "pop off." No wonder we are reluctant to seek help. Scientists working in the field of epigenetics are exploring whether we inherit trauma—theorizing that psychic wounds may be passed down genetically from one generation to the next.⁸ UC Davis biological scientist Lawrence V. Harper writes in the *Psychological Bulletin*, published by the American Psychological Association: "Currently, behavioral development is thought to result from the interplay among genetic inheritance, congenital characteristics, cultural contexts, and parental practices as they directly impact the individual. Evolutionary ecology points to another contributor, *epigenetic inheritance*, the transmission to offspring of parental phenotypic responses to environmental challenges—even when the young do not experience the challenges themselves."⁹ In other words, our lived experiences are possibly seared into our genes. Trauma, some scientists contend, may be heritable.

After my rape, I decided to break this cycle of quietly burying abuse. I spoke out so that my future daughter wouldn't be born burdened by my pain—by my grandmother's pain. And I kept talking. After opening up to my parents and professors, eventually I sought therapy. More recently, I gave a TEDx talk about it. Shame thrives in silence. So I got—and stayed—loud.

But in the immediate aftermath of my assault, there was only the practical matter of my survival to worry about. To stay in New York and keep myself afloat financially, I took a job as a nanny. It felt like a huge step backward, a defeated retreat from my goals. At first, the position seemed

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no different from cleaning floors and scrubbing toilets, just like the jobs my dad and my aunt had to take as new immigrants. But I had no resources. I knew no one outside my program. It was either nannying or working at McDonald's. If my life were a movie, however, this would be the time to cue the redemption montage set to tearjerker music. The child I cared for was a truly amazing seven-year-old boy with special needs. Being with him, nurturing him, slowing myself down for him turned out to be the best therapy I could have hoped for. Following my assault, a chasm opened up between before and after. The Dawnn I used to be became the Dawnn I would never be again. I relived that night over and over in my mind. Yet as many sexual assault survivors will tell you, when this happens to you, the world doesn't stop to notice. We are the invisible walking wounded, standing in line at coffee shops, shopping at the supermarket, staring at the pavement as we pass you in the crosswalk. "There is an unacknowledged battlefield," tweeted the singer Liz Phair about survivors of sexual violence, "and we are the undecorated veterans."¹⁰

Back at Columbia during those months when I felt so vulnerable, my sharply tailored dresses made me feel bulletproof. They were my armor. My cover. My way of telegraphing to the world that I was not simply okay, I was *fabulous*. But in addition to masking my suffering, besides wearing crisp, clean clothes to put the lie to my mess of a life, I was also trying desperately to lift myself up. This wasn't madness. It was methodical. To actually heal from my rape took time. Years. You know what? I'm still healing. Self-examination, plenty of pajama days, therapy, the support of my friends and family, my own openness—and, yes, even public speaking—about my assault: These have been the cornerstones of my rebuilding process. So was working with that little boy. (With him, I wore sweats.) We would ride the subway, pretending to be astronauts. Neither of us had any idea what we were going to be when we grew up. I see now that this meant my vision of the future was open to modification. Together we went underground. We let our imaginations take us to infinity and beyond. In the period after my rape, the contents of my closet made me

feel weighted to the earth. Clothes were the only tangible, physical things I had that connected me to the self I feared was lost forever.

“Not all storms come to disrupt your life,” tweeted the novelist Paulo Coelho. “Some come to clear your path.”¹¹ I also like this quote by author Katherine MacKenett: “Mountains do not rise without earthquakes.” I read that one on Instagram. My father, in his desperate pursuit of a better life, took risks, made certain choices, and paid the consequences. My mother, to cope with heartbreak, numbed herself with substances. (She is now in recovery.) I like to think I learned from their struggles, used what I gleaned, and transcended my history to forge a different future. I’m convinced that feeling my feelings and helping other people—showing by example that your past doesn’t determine your future—has enabled me to finally achieve what my parents always wanted: the American Dream.

Seven years after my rape, the *New York Times* called me “The Dress Doctor” and described my intersecting passions as “the relationship between attire and attitude: not just how clothes make you look, but how they make you feel.”¹² My mother has recently been driving for Lyft to make extra money. When the *Times* article came out, she overheard two passengers discussing it in the backseat of her car. Bursting with pride, she told them I was her daughter. They didn’t believe her.

Six years after I became a nanny, I became a contributor to CNBC. Nearly a decade after my professors shrugged at the idea of Fashion Psychology—a term I have since trademarked—a journalist for *New York Magazine* called it an “explosively popular tool” that helps “explain the world we live in.”¹³ If you had told me a decade ago that I would go on to give a presentation on the field for an international Women’s Empowerment Conference backed by the United Nations, I would have laughed to keep from crying.¹⁴ Over the years, client by client, I have built a reputation—and my own educational institute—through word of mouth. One chance encounter with a journalist led to TV appearances in thirty-five countries. I became the first black female psychology professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology—the famed training ground for

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designers including Calvin Klein and Michael Kors. Hired in my mid-twenties, I was also one of its youngest. In a few short years, I have built the holy grail of millennial career goals: my own brand. Now you know I had to climb through hell to get here. And dammit, I climbed in heels.

I still have my critics, of course. Some of my fellow academics doubt Fashion Psychology can be feasible in clinical practice and question its legitimacy as a scientific pursuit (more on that in chapter 1). But I am here to tell you that it *does* work and its lessons *are* actionable. For everybody. If you ask me, the doubt stems from this notion that fashion itself is superficial or frivolous. That it isn't serious. In our current climate, I can't help but wonder if anything so closely associated with femininity makes it vulnerable to slings and arrows. To venom and derision. To disbelief. And so, to marry "silly," "girly" fashion with a field as esteemed as psychology seems to be falsely elevating the former while cheapening the latter. If I may be so bold: F that. I contend that from an emotional and economic perspective, fashion is not frivolous. It is big, serious business.

And style—the way we use fashion to say something about ourselves—is one of the most important elements linking our private lives to our public personas. Our clothing is the connective tissue between the physical and the emotional. It's what protects our truest, most tender selves, like a shield from an often harsh world. When Melania Trump or Kim Kardashian wears a duster coat draped over her shoulders like a superhero's cape, obscuring her arms and her hands, she is sending a message: Look but don't touch. In our day-to-day lives and careers, we are not permitted to wear our heart on our sleeve, so to speak. In polite society, we are trained to cover up our feelings and layer our emotions. To keep it cool. But even when we succeed at hiding our feelings, we are still sending out subliminal messages with our clothes.

As I look back on my journey, I often think about the Monday morning after my rape. Why did I choose to wear one of my best outfits on a day that could reasonably be described as my worst? Why were *clothes* so essential, so inextricably bound to my will to live? I've come to realize that

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style is proof of our humanity. A tasteful, carefully considered outfit is evidence that you are a high-functioning member of society. Your clothes have the power to get you noticed or, conversely, to conceal whatever it is you wish to keep hidden. We are all walking around in some sort of pain. When you face struggles due to family issues, financial strain, or mental health challenges, you are still required to look presentable. You still have to show up at school or work. You still have to *show* up; to show yourself—or some version thereof. Getting dressed is the great equalizer. As they say, we all put our pants on one leg at a time. They also say that clothes make the man (and woman). Why not use something that's at your fingertips—a real, physical tool you already have right there, in your closet—to soothe, strengthen, and empower yourself? The idea is simple: If I can open your eyes to WHY you choose to wear what you wear, I can help you make better choices.

And what you wear is, above all, a choice—even if it's one you don't realize you are making. You may opt to look glamorous, to be comfortable, to be practically invisible, or to demand being seen. What you wear is who you are, for all intents and purposes. It's who I am too. My clothes. My armor. Dressing up not only helped me walk out the door and go to school that terrible Monday morning; it set the course for the rest of my life. I am not here to ask you to completely transform the way you dress. I don't believe in "style rules." I have none to offer. But I do know that what I wear has a major impact on how I feel. This knowledge is power. Power that's yours to possess.

Chapter 1

FASHION PSYCHOLOGY 101

Clothes . . . change our view of the world and the world's view of us.

—Virginia Woolf

Feeling anxious about what to wear or disconnected from the way you present yourself? Welcome. As a Fashion Psychologist, I find that my clients represent the full spectrum of ages, races, ethnicities, genders, and nationalities. Clients from all walks of life seek me out to address a variety of concerns, from personal development to shopping addiction to dating advice to career advancement. I counsel c-suite executives and new moms recovering from c-sections (and some women who are both!). Some people want help polishing their online profiles, others with navigating their exploding closets. One client going through a custody battle even wanted to know how to dress so that the family court judge would be sympathetic to his side. While none of your problems is unique, all of the solutions are, because they lie within you. Now let's go find them together.

Did you know your clothes are talking? Mine are too. One recent morning I had to get up to teach class after having basically pulled an all-nighter writing an article for a news site. I lay in bed and assessed my mood. I was grouchy and exhausted with a side of the midwinter blahs. I wanted to reach for my go-to comfort outfit: a matching pair of sweats. Still, I anticipated that as I would be getting up in front of my FIT students to give a lecture, I would need to adjust my attitude and seriously boost

my energy level. Fashion dilemma moment. So I added a leopard-print trench coat, some leopard heels, and you know what? I felt so much better! Combining the ease of sweats with the stylishness of the jacket and heels really did lift my spirits. And my students seemed to perceive me as on-point and au courant, appreciating my sleek spin on the popular athleisure trend. By dressing in this eye-catching way, I was sending them a message: I see you guys as creative, visually oriented, trend-savvy fashion students. I communicated to them that while I was in a position of authority (high heels), I also didn't take myself too seriously (sweats).

In this moment I was also combining two of my essential Fashion Psychology philosophies: **Mood Illustration** and **Mood Enhancement Dress**. In a nutshell, Mood Illustration is when you dress to honor or match your mood; Mood Enhancement is when you dress to change it for the better. I was honoring (or illustrating) my emotional state by self-soothing with soft, effortless sweats. And I was simultaneously amplifying my mojo (or enhancing my mood) with outerwear and shoes that popped. We'll delve deeper into these mood-based styling concepts in chapter 5. But for now, I want you to get a taste of how they apply to real life—to understand that your clothing really does connect to your emotions.

There's also a second, equally important dynamic at play when you get dressed: the one between you and other people. What I wear sends signals to you, my perceiver. And what *you* wear sends signals to me, which I interpret. This unspoken dialog happens between us as we cross paths and silently scan each other for visual clues. Whatever we infer about each other sets the stage for our social interaction. Much of this happens on an unconscious level, almost instantly. Now, if other people react strongly to your fashion statements, you may want to insist that you haven't even *said* anything. But with fashion, the message is already woven into the medium. When others look at you, size you up, and consider what you have on, they're gathering information about who you are. It's inescapable. Unavoidable. Your clothes are talking. They can't be

silenced. We watch this dialog unfold every day in the public sphere. In the era of social media, political polarization, and the rapid-fire, headline-hungry news cycle, Fashion Psychology is more relevant than ever. Obsessed with our likes and followers, we are all putting ourselves on display and reading each other 24/7. What are you wearing? Who made it? How much did you pay for it? Who are you? Where do you come from? Where do you stand?

In Fashion Psychology, politics, religion, race, gender, nationality, age, class, and culture collide, whether we're talking pussy bows or pantsuits, a black teenager's hoodie or an \$895 Balenciaga sweatshirt emblazoned with street graffiti worn by Taylor Swift. (Yep, that happened.)¹ What does a burkini trigger in us? How about Yeezy Boosts? Why did Steve Jobs wear the same outfit every day? Why did his would-be successor Elizabeth Holmes? What are rappers saying with designer logos and diamond grillz? How do we feel when Kim Kardashian matches her neon latex dress to her neon luxury car? How does Instagram influence retail? Do Kylie Jenner's selfies make young people want cosmetic surgery? I have been asked to discuss these topics and more by international heads of state, students at FIT, executives at major fashion labels, *Good Morning America*, and many others. Here's what I tell everyone: Once you understand how powerfully fashion drives perception, you can take the wheel.

But first, back to those snap judgments. One important study published in the journal *Psychological Science* revealed that we determine someone's attractiveness, likability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness within *one hundred milliseconds* of seeing them.² That's all it takes. Bolstering this point is a great quote from drag performer Trixie Mattel. "In society," she told the *New York Times Magazine*, "we are what we're dressed as."³ If you're in a police uniform, you're a cop, she explains, a person in a position of power. If you're in scrubs, you're a doctor; an intelligent, caretaking authority figure. If you're in head-to-toe Lululemon, you're a privileged wellness fan who perhaps lives a life of leisure. We rarely question what our eyes tell us, or the soundness of these

assumptions. And instinctively, we are pretty convinced our first impressions are spot-on. They aren't always. But they certainly can be. For example, when people are under stress or really going through some drama, it can seem like they're wearing their heart on their sleeve. They say your eyes are a window into your soul; I say your *clothes* are. When a depressed person wears drab, unkempt clothing, this too is an example of Mood Illustration Dress. After all, your clothing selections reflect the full range of emotions, and that includes some unhappy ones. This was the situation my client Jim* found himself in. Let's meet him.

CASE STUDY:

WHAT BECOMES OF THE BROKENHEARTED?

When I first met Jim, he was in his mid-forties and in the process of divorcing his husband, with whom he shares children. Though Jim was a very accomplished legal professional, at that moment in his life, emotional turmoil was his middle name. Despite his overwhelming personal crisis, he felt compelled to keep up appearances at work. And yet every time we met, I noticed he had missed a button or two on his dress shirt, or it would be partially untucked. When I gently addressed his rumpled appearance, his anxiety would spike and his self-esteem would plummet. It seemed to him that an untied shoelace was proof that his life was unraveling, and worse yet, that others were aware. His untidy style was an outer symptom of his inner despondency. Jim did not have the mental bandwidth to worry about the small things. Looking in the mirror was a reminder of who he had become — a divorcé, disconnected from the people he loved most, untethered to the person he used to be — so he avoided them. But ignoring his

* All Case Studies in this book have been included with the permission of my clients. In some instances, when indicated by an asterisk, I have changed their names to protect their privacy.

appearance only added to his anxiety and further diminished his sense of self-worth.

Style Rx

So how did I help Jim? I didn't tell him to go out and buy a new Ralph Lauren suit (though he could have afforded one). Instead, during our third session, I tried a bit of cognitive behavioral therapy. I asked him to put all of his focus on his shirt, taking his time to slowly and carefully fasten each button. Then I asked him to thoughtfully and methodically tuck it into his suit pants, in a 360-degree motion. Next, I asked him to check, loop by loop, to make sure his belt was fastened correctly. To his surprise, performing these **small acts of mindfulness** and self-care helped him regain a feeling of control. As he momentarily turned every ounce of his conscious attention to his attire, he was unable to think of anything else. He was forced to be present, instead of letting his thoughts spiral. And in this small way, I showed Jim that he was still capable of quieting his mind, of attending to himself and treating his appearance as a priority.

Over the months I worked with Jim, I also guided him toward **labeling his feelings**. Instead of his saying, "My life is a disaster," I encouraged him to describe his emotions more specifically: "I'm worried I'll be alone forever. I feel deep sadness when I think about missing my kids' milestones." From there, we worked to **identify concrete steps he could take to empower himself** (by making lunch plans with his brother, by signing up for complimentary personal training sessions at his new gym, etc.). Taking the time to carefully pull his appearance together offered him a tangible, actionable way to move forward through his crisis instead of being immobilized by it.



Self-expressing through clothes is not a new thing. In fact, it's a tale as old as time—or at least as old as the Middle Ages, when historians say people first started wearing clothes that designated their position in society.⁴ The fact is, we've been using clothes to declare our gender identities, our group memberships, our class, our unconscious feelings and desires for a *loooong* time. Pulitzer Prize-winning fashion critic Robin Givhan once said: "As soon as man emerged from the cave, clothes took on a social significance. I don't think there's ever been a period where a shirt was just a shirt!" Throughout history, people have used clothes to signify their tribe, their wealth or status, their position in the social hierarchy. "Those things have always been wrapped up in fashion," Givhan notes, "whether we consider the era of the French courts or even the emergence of hip-hop."⁵

Now this is some cerebral stuff! But when you boil Fashion Psychology down to its essence, we're simply looking at how clothing affects human behavior. So what does any of this have to do with what you're supposed to wear to work tomorrow? First of all, my mission is to convince you that your clothes can be utilized to make people respond to you in the way you'd like, as well as to make you feel your best. No more getting dressed on autopilot. Those days are done. (See "Have a Mindful Morning" on page 33.) Next, I want to help you define your fashion personality and home in on your signature style (aka your personal brand). I'll help you break unhealthy retail habits and bust out of style ruts—all using Fashion Psychology techniques.

Once you have a clear-eyed sense of your own ideal style and a savvier awareness of what triggers you to shop, we'll explore different, more simplified ways to approach getting dressed. My goal is to help you streamline the process to reduce stress. You'll learn to be more conscious of your mood before you set foot in your closet, to identify clearer goals for how you want to feel each day and for what reactions you hope to inspire, and then to actualize those goals by wearing items you already own. I'll give you all the tools you'll need, like a time-saving Capsule Wardrobe,

anti-anxiety jewelry, and power colors to improve your look *and* your outlook.

This book will not include “Dos & Don’ts” lists or sidebars on the perfect little black dress (which is not a solution for every sartorial situation, no matter what experts say!). Instead, I will teach you how to maintain your cultural identity anywhere, anytime, to level up your Instagram game, to prevent the dreaded “I have nothing to wear” feeling, to sidestep trends when they won’t work for your lifestyle (keep it moving, bike shorts!), and more. By sharing Case Studies featuring real people I’ve counseled (like Jim), I will illuminate how your style habits and beliefs are either helping or hurting you. And I will prove to you that you are not the only one with issues. I have lots of motivating, thought-provoking exercises up my sleeve (ahem). They’re the same ones I offer my clients, and they’ll help you get to work right away. But before I do all that, I’d like to tell you a little bit more about what I will *not* do.

WHAT ON EARTH IS A FASHION PSYCHOLOGIST?

Here’s the deal: I am a professor and a therapist with a background in and a passion for the fashion industry. I am skeptical of rules, flash-in-the-pan trends, retail therapy, and paint-by-numbers styling advice. I want to know how you *feel* in your clothes so I can help you find clothes that make you feel phenomenal. I also believe fashion can be a catalyst for social change. Whether I am chatting over tea with abaya-clad clients in Dubai or developing curriculum on “Trayvon Martin and the Hoodie Effect,” I am deeply cognizant of the way cultural stories play out through our clothes. I have always been, and remain, voraciously curious about people. How you dress is just one aspect of who you are, but it is a significant one. If you’ve got style questions, I’ve got answers. I’m just going to ask you to do some soul-searching first.

I can help you dress and feel better. But I am not a stylist, at least not in the traditional sense. A stylist, image consultant, or personal shopper

tells clients what to wear on the basis of the latest trends, what's new and now on the runways and racks, and what *she* thinks will make them look their best. In Hollywood, dressing celebrities is a full-blown industry with its own exclusive ecosystem. A star's "personal style" is generally bought and paid for, though usually not by the star. Instead, it is the creation of a team of professional artists, known as a glam squad. It is their job to bring glamorous fashion fantasies to life. My job is to improve your real life — and, yes, ideally make it a little more glamorous.

I've worked with my share of boldface names, but one reason being a celebrity stylist isn't #goals for me is the lack of inclusivity in the industry. Stylist Jason Bolden, who works with Mindy Kaling, Serena Williams, and Taraji P. Henson, among others, has described the racially charged roadblocks he's encountered on the way to the red carpet. When he has approached A-list fashion houses seeking dresses for a sample-size Oscar nominee who happens to be a minority, their answer was "Oh, no. Pass," he told *New York Magazine's* website *The Cut*. "But then I see them work with someone [white] who has no career, no fashion profile. It's bizarre."⁶

Size-ism also comes into play. Stars who do not fit into size 00 sample gowns tend to be shut out of the designer garment game. You may remember when *Saturday Night Live* comedian Leslie Jones couldn't find a designer dress to wear to the 2016 premiere of her film *Ghostbusters*. She tweeted: "It's so funny how there are no designers wanting to help me with a premiere dress for movie. Hmmm that will change and I remember everything."⁷ While fashion houses often cite legitimate reasons for producing collections in only a limited number of sizes (cost, engineering, etc.), this "You can't sit with us" mean girls shtick is starting to feel old. Not only do I not play this game, I never even set foot in the arena.

In my world, whatever body type you are, whatever skin tone, whatever nationality, whatever generation, whatever is in your bank account, I am here to help you examine your life and reimagine your relationship with your clothes. I'm laser-focused on how people use fashion either as a means of empowerment or as an emotional crutch. Stylists may be

amazingly skilled, but their primary concern is optics. They care about how their client *appears*. I care about how you *are*. In the fashion industry, the world of Instagram influencers, and in Hollywood, authenticity counts, but image counts more. My job is to help you connect what you wear on the outside with how you feel on the inside. For a stylist, the client's inner life is a secondary, incidental consideration, *if* it ever comes up at all. You would probably find it pretty inappropriate and unprofessional if your stylist started asking probing questions about your romantic situation, your past traumas, your family dynamics. Girl, that's where I begin.

A Fashion Psychologist *starts* by excavating what's beneath the surface; hence my motto "styling from the inside out." I want to know why the person sitting in front of me chooses to dress the way she does. So I ask. I ask questions about her love life, her racial-ethnic-religious-cultural background, her family history, her self-esteem, her body image, her lifestyle, her relationships, her fears and insecurities, her challenges and strengths—long before we ever consider changing a stitch of clothing. I typically meet with a client for three sessions of talk therapy before I look at her wardrobe. Now, because this is a book, I can't come and see your closet. But I can teach you to *style yourself*, using clothes and accessories you already own.

So let's get to where the rubber meets the road. How does Fashion Psychology actually work? In the following Case Study, you'll see Fashion Psychology in action and begin to understand how it can help you.

CASE STUDY:

IT AIN'T BROKE, BUT WE CAN STILL FIX IT

My client in this case was an Australian fashion editor in her mid-twenties named Tracey. She has a busy life, a vivacious personality, and is often unsure about what to wear to the various social events, celebrity interviews, and professional meetings on her agenda. I would describe her personal style as fashion forward

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and eclectic. She makes bold choices. She doesn't hesitate to wear a white faux croc-embossed bomber jacket, a blue-and-black leopard print silk t-shirt, or white snakeskin pumps — all at once. But somewhat incongruously, she favors relaxed essentials (tops, pants, jackets) in slouchy silhouettes. She is a bit all over the place.

Tracey has great style instincts but lacks a cohesive vision for who she is and how to communicate it. As a result, during the morning rush, she tends to take a “kitchen sink” approach, throwing on a bunch of trendy, disparate statement pieces all at once, then trying to balance them out with too casual basics (like worn-out, baggy boyfriend jeans). She tends to get dressed in such a flurry that she doesn't give much forethought to how everything works together, or how she will feel as her day goes on. Tracey's innate creativity and energetic personality combined with her high-pressure job (a fashion editor has to dress the part) create anxiety, leading her to lean into looks that overwhelm her. She has it going on; she just has too much of it.

As Tracey and I talked through her social calendar, I advised her on how to simplify her style for a variety of upcoming pressure-cooker situations. Let's see if you can apply some of my advice to your own life.

Performance Review

Especially in corporate environments, women often get the message that they should dress to emulate those in power. That would usually be men. Working at a magazine, Tracey could have easily pulled a “business suit” from her office fashion closet, or headed out to a fast-fashion retailer like Zara to buy something “professional”-looking for her big meeting. But after a long conversation, we determined that putting on a slick new suit with sharp shoulders and constricting trousers would hurt her more

than it would help. If she doesn't feel natural in her look, she'll feel like a fraud (#ImposterSyndrome) and her anxiety will flare.

Style Rx

I suggested Tracey wear a soft silky button-down shirt she feels great in and has worn on successful workdays in the past — one she therefore associates with feeling empowered. She already owns several such tops featuring delicate prints or piped edges, details that can subtly set you apart.

Next, we selected trim black pants with some stretch (think cigarette pants to balance out the volume on top), a classic black jacket, and pointy-toe pumps. These are all fail-safe yet comfortable components of a polished look.

My goal for Tracey was that she feel like herself in all important meetings. So I advised her to start elevating her work style ahead of time, wearing these types of outfits in the days before she sets up a meeting to lobby for a promotion. **Road test your outfits!** As I told Tracey: “You'll get used to seeing yourself as a power player, and so will anyone else who's watching. Dressing like you've already got the job — and owning that look — will program your higher-ups to visualize you in the role.”

Flying Solo at a Wedding

You may feel vulnerable showing up at a wedding alone. But as I told Tracey, it is better to feel your feelings than to drown them at the open bar. As she contemplated what to wear to an upcoming summer wedding, I asked her to imagine interactions with other guests and **anticipate the kinds of comments that could unravel her confidence.** Then I advised her to dress to get the kinds of compliments she would hope to hear.

Style Rx

Tracey already owned a few dresses with sleeves, a cinched waist, and a kicky A-line skirt. These tend to be universally flattering silhouettes that satisfy most dress codes and, given their breathability, work in many climates. If the wedding calls for black tie attire, statement accessories like bold jewelry, embellished heels, and luxe outerwear can boost the formality factor.

*Next I advised her to **consider color**. Red is a sex magnet (see chapter 6). Blue is calming. Black will help you blend in. If the mother of the bride says, “Wow, that dress is a showstopper!” would Tracey hear “My, you’re looking thirsty these days”? It’s not about dressing to please others, I explained. It’s about knowing what kind of feedback might knock you off your game and dressing to avoid it.*

A Tinder Date

First dates are awkwardness bombs just waiting to detonate. Like so many of us, Tracey tends to get goofy, overshare, or clam up when she’s nervous. I explained that her clothes can pick up the slack and send clearer, more self-assured messages. Tops with sheer or delicate lace accents show a sliver of skin without being overly revealing. Anything boxy, baggy, or too fashion forward could obscure her allure. (Those who are into the Man Repeller aesthetic may disagree!)

Style Rx

*I advised Tracey to ask herself **how she wants to feel** with this person—sexy (red dress, architectural neckline; metallic heels and clutch), fun (denim on denim with statement sandals), energized (summery dress in citrus hue with white sneakers), relaxed (maxi skirt, t-shirt)—then pick from her closet accordingly.*

* * *

As you can see, I didn't suggest Tracey alter her style dramatically or max out her credit card on a special occasion investment piece. All the "new" looks I prescribed were made up of outfit elements she already owned. As you'll hear me say repeatedly, I don't do makeovers. Makeovers don't stick. They're like the style equivalent of a juice cleanse: dramatic initial results, impossible to sustain. In fact, sometimes the wardrobe changes I suggest to clients are so subtle, no one else ever even notices them!

Makeovers entertain us because they play into our deepest desires for beauty, glamour, escape, transformation. We binge-watch shows to see how clothes can create (and re-create) identities. Think of the heart-pounding "big reveal" moments on *Queer Eye*, *What Not to Wear*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, and countless others. On those shows, the subjects morph—frequently via bandage dress—from drab to fab, their new look the key to happily ever after. Glam squads with red carpet résumés swoop in, work their magic on hair, makeup, outfit, and voilà! Heretofore hidden confidence is uncovered and, usually, true love acquired.

But you know how those stories end. The effects evaporate once the director yells "Cut!" The clock strikes midnight and the star-for-a-day turns back into the wallflower dressed in rags. You're too smart to fall for that fairy-tale formula. In this day and age, we've all been forced to grow up. We are no longer willing to be spoon-fed the same tired old tropes. Today, gender is more fluid, yoga pants are more popular than jeans, and lifelong singlehood is a viable version of happily ever after.⁸ If you hit the job market after the 2008 recession, you probably care more about how to dress for an informational interview than you do for a date. Fashion Psychology is the natural next step as we evolve beyond the passé makeover mindset. I'm betting you are ready to approach your look—and your life—from a more intentional place.

My role is to help you get in touch with who you are, with how you are feeling underneath it all. If you want to rethink your look or reform

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your shopping habits, I'm down. But the first step in getting where you want to go is examining where you are coming from. Clothes are simply a vehicle to empower you on your path. Or in some cases, stumbling blocks to be cleared from it.

More things I don't do:

- Dress you according to your “body shape” or compare your body to produce. For the record, I have yet to meet a person whose self-esteem was improved by identifying as “pear-shaped.”
- Take you on *Pretty Woman*-esque shopping sprees. In fact, I rarely shop with clients at all.
- KonMari your closet. I could watch Marie Kondo fold t-shirts all day (#SparksJoy). And I do have tips about how to edit your closet and create a Capsule Wardrobe (see page 120). But your junk drawer is none of my business. And there's *no way* I'm showing you mine.

When I work with clients, we talk—*really* talk—about the psychological motivations behind their wardrobe choices. And you're about to meet a bunch of them who were brave enough to bare their secrets. I bet you'll relate to many. And I hope they'll inspire you to think more deeply about your own story and how it drives you to dress. I'm interested in helping you reconnect with your truest, most authentic self. I firmly believe you cannot look good until you *feel* good. I have a hunch that whatever is stopping you from dressing your best is an emotional wound in need of healing. Once you address it, you'll be ready to project a healthier self through your style. Here's a great first step.

HAVE A MINDFUL MORNING

Does this sound familiar? The alarm goes off. You rush through your morning routine and then it's time to confront your closet. You're already late, anxious AF, running through your mental to-do list, stressing about that combative co-worker or disapproving teacher, defeated before you get started. Soon you'll have tried on a dozen outfits, trashing your room, but none will be quite right. You'll have a mountain of clothes strewn all over the damn place, and you'll still have nothing to wear.

What if you took just a minute to lie in bed and, before your feet even hit the floor, ask yourself: How do I *feel* right now? What's on my agenda today? And most important, how do I *want* to feel for the next eight to twelve hours? Just lie there and breathe. Do your best to honor this sacred time. You've just woken up. This could still turn out to be a fantastic day! Focus on this private time and space (your bedroom, your closet, your sanctuary) with the reverence they, and you, deserve.

Doing this type of daily self-check-in has changed my life and helped me dress so much better. I set my alarm five minutes early just to lie in bed and ask myself, *How do I feel right now?* I even keep a picture of myself on my wall as a reminder to connect with myself first, before I think about plans or pleasing other people. For real! And I get it—even a minor act of mindfulness may feel ridiculous at first. But it really can pave the path to calm.

Say you woke up feeling groggy, a bit out of it, heart racing over the stressful day ahead, not your best self. This is important information. Sit with it. Acknowledge it. Now might not be the best time to squeeze into a skin-tight leather pencil skirt and trendy but itchy fuzzy sweater. Instead, maybe you reach for stretchy, forgiving leggings, a soft cashmere sweater, your favorite boyfriend jeans, or a monochromatic joggers-and-t-shirt combo you can dress up with chic loafers, a quilted handbag, and a camel coat.

Taking your emotional temperature *before you get dressed* means you are feeling your feelings instead of pushing them down or denying them. Your anxiety will diminish if you first accept it and then take positive, meaningful action. Try this every day for a week, and see if you feel more comfortable during your days.

In this moment of mindfulness, one of two things may happen:

- You may decide to stay within your comfort zone. You may feel less interested in pushing your sartorial boundaries once you realize doing so won't serve you. This is another example of **Mood Illustration Dress**: when you thoughtfully assess your emotional state and then dress to respect or match it. The goal here is not to transform or challenge yourself with clothes but to embrace, accept, and honor yourself exactly where you are.
- Creative inspiration may strike, as it so often does once we quiet our minds. (It's why we get our best ideas in the shower!) Pairing patent-leather going-out pants with a black sweater, trench coat, and leopard slip-on loafers? For work?! Go on with your bad self. This is an example of **Mood Enhancement Dress**: when you use clothing to lift up your emotions, putting yourself into a different, more optimal, or heightened state of mind.

BACK IT UP: THE HISTORY BEHIND FASHION PSYCHOLOGY

One of my idols, supermodel Veronica Webb, wrote on *The Root* that Fashion Psychology is “an idea whose time has come.”⁹ Well, Veronica, it was a long time coming! My fashion philosophies are built on the foundation of psychology's founding fathers, namely, Sigmund Freud and William

James. As Freud expert and Wesleyan University president Michael Roth remarked in an interview with *Gizmodo*: “Freud says human beings can keep no secrets. They reveal their innermost selves with their clothes, with their twitches, with their unconscious mannerisms; that whatever we do, we’re expressing things about ourselves, for people who have eyes to see and ears to hear.”¹⁰ Preach, Sigmund!

William James was a Harvard psychologist who lived in the nineteenth century, but he was as fashion-focused as an Instagram influencer. Dude was obsessed with clothes. In other words, he was highly attuned to their impact on behavior. James believed that our physical experiences or acts cause emotions, as opposed to believing that we feel an emotion (like sadness) to which we then react physically (we cry tears).¹¹ Of course those physical actions include putting on clothes. When James was traveling abroad in Berlin in 1867, writing letters home to his wife, he described the people he was hanging out with by first detailing their outfits. “James relies on the importance of dress to the social self” before offering more details about an acquaintance’s character, job, or likability, writes Cecilia A. Watson (then a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago) in her analysis of these letters. “The clothes enter first, and gradually, over the course of his description, James fills them in with pieces of the personality they express.”¹² Woomp, there it is. *The clothes enter first*. Say it with me: The. Clothes. Enter. First. They did then and they do now. Your clothes not only cause you to think, feel, and behave a certain way; they also walk into the room and tell people who you are before you ever even open your mouth.

James believed that by choosing the clothes you put on every day, you are choosing what information to convey about yourself to others. But here’s another thing he noticed: Clothes, he said, are like an extension of your body. Not only do they tell other people who you are, but also they tell YOU who you are, and dictate how you feel. The sensation of clothes on your skin sends you a message about how to think and act, kind of like

how your brain sends a message to your muscles to move. Anyone who has ever tried on prom, wedding, or (Lord help us all) bridesmaids' dresses understands this. Imagine how you'd react—how your posture, mood, comfort level, and attitude would change—if you tried on a long-sleeve sequined floor-length evening gown... Now imagine a slinky, revealing slip dress... Now an off-the-shoulder body-con bandage minidress... Now a linen Jackie O–style button-down shirtdress. As you envision yourself spending an evening in the various dresses, how do the fabrics and silhouettes shape your fantasies?

History shows us that clothes have captivated the world's leading intellectuals for centuries. *The Language of Fashion* is a collection of essays by French cultural critic Roland Barthes, who, in the 1960s wrote extensively on topics like hippie style and the power of jewelry. Its publisher calls it "an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the cultural power of fashion."¹³ In their book *The Social Psychology of Dress*, scholars Kim K. P. Johnson and Sharon J. Lennon look at the way clothes influence relationships: "We can use dress to identify others in terms of their social position, as well as other possible identities and group memberships they may indicate using their dress, and shape our interaction with them accordingly."¹⁴ Your Christian Louboutin heels with their unmissable red soles tell me you're wealthy, status-conscious, and proud of it. His muscle-baring tank top and track pants mean he's into fitness and possibly narcissistic. Her neat cashmere twinset and string of pearls tells me she's prim, proper, and perhaps a little bit of a control freak. Look, all of these assumptions are subjective, hypothetical, and very possibly erroneous! Two people looking at the imaginary strangers I've just described may have totally different reactions and perceptions of their personality characteristics. We are all influenced by our own histories and biases, which we then project onto others. But there's no doubt about this: Even as we pass each other on the street in silence, our clothes just had a conversation.

FASHION PSYCHOLOGY AND POLITICS: COSTUMES FOR THE WORLD STAGE

There is almost no place in the world where clothes speak louder than in Washington, DC. If, as some critics might argue, clothes are insignificant, if they truly are meaningless, superficial, and silly, why are they such a hot-button issue for the most powerful people in the world? Why do we focus so much in particular on what female politicians wear? Let's look at some examples. In an effort to discredit a claim New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made about her financial circumstances, a male journalist tweeted (in response to a photo taken of her from behind, without her knowledge or consent) that her jacket and coat "don't look like a girl who struggles."¹⁵ When Massachusetts Democrat Ayanna Pressley was elected to Congress, she asked in her victory speech, "Can a congresswoman wear her hair in braids, rock a black leather jacket and bold red lip?"¹⁶ Though not an elected official, Melania Trump has been slammed for wearing a Zara jacket with the words "I Really Don't Care Do U?" across the back to visit children separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border, and Manolo Blahnik stilettos to visit Texas after Hurricane Harvey. *Newsweek* wondered why so many women in President Trump's orbit frequently wear stilettos. "High heels thrust out the buttocks and arch the back into a natural mammalian courting—actually, copulatory—pose called 'lordosis,'" pointed out anthropologist Helen Fisher. "It is a naturally sexy posture that men immediately see as sexual readiness. [Heels] are a 'come-hither' signal."¹⁷ Clothes make the man. It seems that in politics, so do those of the women in his entourage.

Bloggers and late-night talk show hosts once again shook their heads when Mrs. Trump wore a pith helmet—a porous white hat historically associated with European colonialists—while on safari in Kenya. It was a sartorial choice CNN called "appallingly offensive to many Africans." One academic likened her headwear choice to "showing up on an Alabama cotton farm in a confederate uniform."¹⁸ I am not here to pile on. I

have never met Mrs. Trump and can only guess at her intentions. My job is to point out that in the absence of other information, our clothing choices will speak for themselves. Look, Mrs. Trump doesn't give many interviews. She doesn't show much emotion on her face, as is her right. And she is in a singular position where everyone is dying to know what she's thinking. Against the backdrop of her silence, her clothes practically shout.

One could make the case that Mrs. Trump's clothes are unfairly critiqued and deliberately misinterpreted. Ironically, this frustration is shared by her husband's former rival Hillary Clinton. In 2010, then Secretary of State Clinton was asked by a journalist to name some of her favorite fashion designers. Her response? "Would you ever ask a man that question?"¹⁹ As Mrs. Trump herself told the press in Africa, "I wish people would focus on what I do, not what I wear."²⁰ Oooh, but that's just it! What you choose to wear IS a thing that you do. Regardless of politics or party, clothes are the one area where it's impossible for people in the political sphere—and particularly for women—to mute themselves. Secretary Clinton once famously tried to draw attention away from her looks by wearing nondescript clothes, making pantsuits iconic in the process. See, even "boring" clothes still make a certain kind of statement. Writes *New York Times* fashion columnist Vanessa Friedman of Mrs. Trump: "The clothes are a symbol of the actions and the actor. Is it superficial? No more than paying attention to any kind of symbolism is . . . All clothes are costumes we assume to play ourselves."²¹ This observation applies to us all. Style is the platform for the stories you share with other people about who you are (just like Instagram!).

So what's the takeaway for you?

1. Your clothes are talking. Whether you're aware of it or not, whether you wish it were so or not, they are the costumes *you choose* to act out the story of your life.

2. They are sending messages to others that may or *may not* accurately convey what you want to say.
3. Other people will react to your clothes. Of course you can wear whatever the hell you like and deserve safety and respect no matter what. But on a practical level, think carefully about what you want from other people when picking out your outfit. How do you want them to respond to you? Do you want them to see you as authoritative or as open and approachable? Serious or fun? Do you want to show them who you are and where you're from, or do you prefer to remain more anonymous? Do you want to make a splash and get attention? Or do you feel like being left alone, going unnoticed? These desires can change day to day. Assess your mood and ask yourself these questions when you approach your closet.

HOW CLOTHES IMPACT YOUR EMOTIONS

Dressing well is both an art and a science. Maybe you just read that sentence and thought, *Hold up: Is the science of getting dressed really a thing?* Some would say no. But Fashion Psychology is grounded in legitimate scientific research. And I'm not the only expert who relies on it. Brand consultants, renowned anthropologists, and marketing executives regularly employ scientific methods and strategies to try to figure out what drives us to buy clothes. From primal mating signals to political theater, our clothes speak for us. And at the heart of our relationship to clothes is human emotion.

As we've established, what you wear impacts your mood, performance, and behavior. Let's get into some research that proves it. In 2012, Northwestern University psychologists Hajo Adams and Adam D. Galinsky published a groundbreaking study called "Enclothed Cognition." In it they concluded that "clothes systematically influence wearers' psychological processes." Through a series of tests and experiments, they found that a white lab coat is "generally associated with attentiveness and

carefulness.” When study participants were wearing a lab coat, they exhibited better attention and focus. This occurred, however, only when the subjects were told it was a *doctor’s* lab coat. When a different group was told it was a *painter’s* coat, it had no effect on their attention and focus. As Galinsky explained, “The wearer takes on the symbolic value of the clothes they wear.”²² I know someone who lives this truth every day. Let’s meet him.

CASE STUDY: JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER

I have a friend who is a high-powered judge. As an African American man in his position, he has an interesting perspective on the criminal justice system. Every day he sees those who share his race (but not his educational background or social status) meet fates dramatically different from his own. This experience influences both his emotions and his clothing choices. He tells me that when he wears his robes in the courtroom, he commands respect and carries himself accordingly. He feels strong, secure, capable. But, he confesses, when he takes off his robes to go home, his authoritative air evaporates and he feels uncomfortably vulnerable.

He thinks a lot about what to wear during his commute on the subway and in public spaces in general. He deliberately wears a suit and tie every day, even on weekends, even in his own neighborhood. Because of his job, he is hyper-aware that as a black man walking around New York City, were he to wear a hoodie or sweatpants, he could easily be mistaken for a homeless man or a thug and find himself on the other side of the bench.

What’s the universal lesson here? First of all, we must acknowledge that minorities face a second set of considerations related to their appearance while moving through public spaces. Wearing crisp, conservative attire

and European hairstyles can have a very real effect on our safety, the tenor of our social interactions, and the levels of professional success we achieve. It is my role as an educator to raise awareness about this—and to question it. And I’ll get way deeper into these topics in chapter 10. But in general, I want everyone to know it’s worthwhile to put serious thought into how you present yourself. Like a superhero’s suit, your clothes have the ability to empower you and help you command respect. Use them.

MIND THE GAP: DRESSING OUR FANTASY SELVES

When I work privately with clients, one of my missions is to “bridge the gap between perception and reality.” What I mean by “the gap” is the disconnect between who *we* feel we are and who others see. We’ve all heard a version of this from our loved ones. Hell, you’ve probably said it yourself: *Wear whatever you want! You do you. As long as you’re happy, it doesn’t matter what other people think.* If only things were that simple. Sometimes being misunderstood by others due to your appearance can lead to your unhappiness.

CASE STUDY: PREPARE FOR THE PERCEPTION

I once worked with a journalist named Kristen who dyed her hair purple. She viewed her look as avant-garde and fashion forward, not Manic-Panic-throwback. Yet she found that her hair color caused some people to make incorrect assumptions about her. It wasn’t quite clear to her why there was such a disparity between the way she saw herself and the way others seemed to see her. In an article about our work together, she wrote: “I style and wear [my hair] in a way that I believe is more high fashion than Hot Topic, but as soon as I leave New York City for any sort of vacation or travel, the looks I get (not to mention the comments from guys) instantly indicate that others think I’m goth, a freak, or

in the case of a recent visit to Paris: a prostitute. At the same time, I think it's a lot of fun to play with different fashion personas — and even empowering to wear something one may be afraid to try.”²³

*Kristen was experiencing what I call **Fashion Incongruence**, in which her intentions didn't match other people's perceptions. She knew full well that purple hair might draw some attention, and she welcomed it. But she was not expecting, nor did she deserve, derogatory comments. She was surprised to be so misunderstood.*

Style Rx

I explained to Kristen that some people won't accept her hair color — and that's okay. My only advice was that she think ahead about how she might want to handle unwanted comments.

Kristen decided to keep her purple hair, a choice I supported. Remember: no makeovers. But I did ask her to weigh adhering to beauty norms versus adhering to her own aesthetic. Everybody can benefit from doing this. If you want to push the envelope with your look, then find yourself in a scenario where doing so might incite questions, comments, and, worst case scenario, insults, think about what's motivating your choice and whether the consequences are worth it. If you find yourself in a situation like Kristen's, you might role-play some possible interactions and come up with some prepared responses so you feel less anxious when faced with other people's remarks. I love to wear dark-blue, deep-purple, and even black lipstick. It makes me feel like Grace Jones. The looks I get from strangers on the subway bother me less than bold lip colors please me. If an unconventional look makes you happy, then there are positive ways to respond in the face of scrutiny. For example, if someone asks a belittling question about your appearance, you might politely turn the tables with “Why do you ask?” If someone says something borderline offensive (“Nice purple hair. Are you in a band?”), take a pause and think before you reply. Often

using humor or finding common ground defuses tension. You might say, “I’m not in a band, but I *did* fake-play the clarinet for three years in middle school orchestra. How about you?”

It’s great to honor your vision, just as long as you are mindful of—and prepared for—the perception. Like it or not, how others perceive us matters, especially at work. To quote former *Seventeen* magazine editor in chief Ann Shoket: “As much as we want to think our clothes or our shoes shouldn’t matter as much as what we have to say, the truth is your look can amplify—or undermine—your best ideas . . . If you want to be seen as smart, or authoritative or creative . . . your clothes should say those things about you before you even open your mouth.”²⁴ Once again: The clothes enter first. That’s just reality.

But here’s an interesting twist: Sometimes the disconnect between perception and reality has less to do with other people and more to do with *you*. Many of us shop for the people we *wish* we were, and neglect, deny, or hate on the people we actually are. This is a recipe for low self-esteem, incongruence, and style ruts. I’ve met with many clients who shop endlessly for a fantasy version of themselves while their actual selves wear the same rotation of tired, uninspired looks (more on Repetitious Wardrobe Complex in chapter 4). Buying clothes for your fantasy self almost always leads to that dreaded “I have nothing to wear” feeling. You may have a ton of clothes, but they are for “her”: the person you long to be, the person you used to be, the lady who once wore that fuchsia sheath to her niece’s wedding. Her clothes are not for you. Maybe “she” is ten pounds lighter. Maybe “she” is you during your semester abroad in college. Maybe “she” goes to lots of fancy parties and wears glittering sequin camisoles, while you go to your kids’ soccer games and crash into bed every night by 9:30. Either way, how can you expect to find anything decent to wear in *her* closet?

If the fantasy self you shop for is an idealized younger version of yourself, you may be buying (and buying . . . and buying) clothes you associate with being in your prime, regardless of whether those clothes still suit

you. Those looks may be outdated or no longer age appropriate. Worst of all, you already own duplicates! Writer Helena Fitzgerald captures this predicament beautifully in her essay “All the Lipsticks I’ve Bought for Women I’ll Never Be”: “My lipstick purchases are governed by a part of my brain that cannot accept the difference between who I actually am, and who I imagine myself to be. I buy lipsticks for imaginary selves.”²⁵ *What Not to Wear* star Stacy London has also written about fashion as fantasy fodder. In a viral essay for Refinery 29, she described descending into near financial ruin as a result of compulsive online shopping, kicked off by a series of personal crises (spinal surgery, a breakup, depression). She described the hours she spent shopping online as “magical thinking.” During these retail binges, she would envision the fabulous parties she’d attend and the fabulous people she’d meet there—just as soon as she had the perfect bag, jewelry, or shoes to wear to them: “I realize now it was just a fantasy future, to distract me from an agonizing present.”²⁶

In these examples, women use fashion to tell themselves a story. Clothes and makeup are intertwined with who they used to be, who they wish they could be, with the way they imagine their lives might yet unfold. Their style is tied up in their past, their future, their dreams. Their actual present realities though? Not so much. You may choose to dress in a way that is body-con or loose and flowy, statement-making or quietly minimalist. But whatever you wear, *you must dress for the life you are actually living*. Only then can you improve it.

Remember: Incongruence and inauthenticity are the enemies of confidence. The key to looking and feeling better is to seek alignment between who you are, how you feel, and who the world sees. It won’t be easy at first. You may still feel clueless and lost. Do not get down on yourself. Almost everybody struggles with this! In fact, over coffee the other day, a friend asked me: What’s the most common problem people come to you with? My answer: They always feel like they don’t fit in or can’t quite get it right when it comes to clothes, no matter how much they shop. They worry they’re either too boring or too weird. If they’re older, they fear

their look is stale and irrelevant, that they are invisible. If they're younger, they worry that they look ridiculous and everyone is staring (and laughing) at them. They want me to come over and go through their closets and say, *All right, yes, no, yes, no*. But here's what I tell them: I don't have any authority to tell you yes or no because I don't know psychologically what those clothes mean to you. Who am I to tell you what's psychologically salient to you when I haven't lived your experience?

That's when I start asking questions, like: Well, tell me how you feel about this item? You've held on to this thing since 1995. What does it mean to you? Why can't you get rid of it? Why is it still here? Do you like the color? Do you like the texture? The fit? Even though it's no longer trendy, it's clearly still relevant to you. That's when the clothes start to tell the story. Maybe you won't part with your blush-pink prom dress because you love the color, the Empire waist, or the soft silk fabric. That's information you can use now! Maybe you're struggling to get rid of your work shirts even though you're now officially a full-time stay-at-home mom. Perhaps you're not ready to give up that part of your identity. Why not try pairing those work shirts with jeans for a grocery run or a PTA meeting? See how you feel.

Then my friend asked me something else: What's the best piece of advice you give clients? That's simple, but it isn't always easy to execute: Find your favorite color, pattern, fabric, shape, whatever it is that speaks to you, and wear it. Whatever you love, WEAR IT. Regardless of the weather, the occasion, what's in style—wear whatever makes you feel good. For me, it's leopard prints. Even if it's just a scarf or a skinny belt, I always feel better when I incorporate animal prints into my look. For one of my clients, it's Breton stripes. For another client, it's anything sparkly or glittery. For you it could be a leather motorcycle jacket, floral prints, or anything ocean blue. It seems obvious but it's worth saying out loud: Your clothes can enhance your life only if you put them on.

THE BOTTOM LINE

KEY TIPS AND TAKEAWAYS FROM CHAPTER 1

- **Your clothes are talking.** Style and appearance influence human behavior. Your clothes are sending messages both to you and to other people. It is essential to recognize your clothing choices as deliberate, to have a mission in mind when you get dressed, and to like what your clothes are saying.
- **No more getting dressed on autopilot!** Have a mindful morning. Your emotions are your cues for what to wear. Label your feelings with words, then look for clothes to meet your needs, whether that means honoring or lifting your mood.
- **Dress for your real life.** Wear clothes that suit who you are now — not who you used to be, or who you fantasize about becoming.
- **Wear your favorite things.** Don't save your best clothes for a rainy day or a special occasion or because you're afraid to ruin them. Carpe diem. Seize the day. Wear what you love!