

Time to ditch the old leggings and baggy tops! *Louise Chunn* explains how wearing the right clothes could be a step towards a happier you...

How to unlock the healing power of your wardrobe

GETTING DRESSED IS A FORM OF self-expression for most women. Even if we're not always thrilled with the clothes we actually have to choose from, we can usually find something that expresses our personality, flatters us and gives the day a little extra buzz. But for some – like the one in four women in the UK who will seek treatment for depression over their lifetimes, according to the Mental Health Foundation – it's a double bind. Not only does their condition mean they're usually not concerned with their appearance, but they are enveloped by a deep, disabling mood, possibly making them feel even worse about how they appear to others.

Mental health professionals and doctors are trained to recognise the signs of depression. London-based psychotherapist Camilla Nicholls says, 'Unwashed hair or clothes, shirts buttoned-up wrong – such things can indicate feelings

of diminished self-worth. Tastes in fashion aside, a client's choice of outward covering can tell a therapist a lot about the state of their inner world.'

We might joke that someone looking a little odd or eccentric got dressed in the dark, but those suffering from depression may find that choosing what to wear is just not worth the effort, and might even stay in bed in their pyjamas.

One woman I spoke to went through a depressive stage, which resulted in her being prescribed antidepressants and offered six months of psychotherapy. 'After I came out of my depression, I realised that I had worn the same pair of trousers, shirt and cardigan day after day for months. I tried to give the cardigan away to my sister, but she wouldn't even let me give it to the charity shop. It had to go in the bin – it had come to symbolise everything that was horrible about that period,' she said.

Even low levels of depression can be picked up in the way women dress. Karen Pine, professor of psychology at the University of Hertfordshire, asked 100 women aged between 21 and 64 what they wore when they felt good about themselves, and what they chose when they didn't. The depressed clothes were what we might call 'frumpy' – baggy tops, flat shoes, nothing that revealed the shape of a woman's body or drew more than cursory attention.

Interestingly, the top item for bad feelings was jeans. Some younger women wear jeans to look their coolest; their jeans are often the most up to date and expensive part of their wardrobe, but older women regularly choose jeans as 'don't look at me' armour. Mum jeans aren't meant to evoke womanliness, or flatter many body shapes. And, as Professor Pine points out, choosing to wear clothes that you associate with feeling low 'risks creating a pattern of negativity, whereby dressing down reinforces a negative mood'.

When I explained the research to one middle-aged woman who has suffered from mild depression, she responded, 'When I am feeling down, the last thing that I want to do is dress up in any attention-seeking way. I barely even want to get out of bed, to be honest. And yes, I wear baggy clothes and old jeans, just like the professor says. But when I feel good on the inside – when I'm optimistic about the future and myself – I want people to see it, and the way I dress seems to be part of that. I may not be conscious of it, but that's how I seem to behave.'

DRESS FOR HAPPINESS

If you can read a depressed woman by her wardrobe, Professor Pine also found you could change her mood, to some extent, by making changes to what she is wearing. 'Many of the women in this study felt they could alter their mood by changing what they wore. This demonstrates the psychological power of clothing and how the right choices can influence a person's happiness. It suggests we should give more thought ▶

ILLUSTRATIONS
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