

# «I don't have a thing to wear»

We've all uttered those words with despair. So why are our fashion choices sometimes the source of such anxiety, and how can we use what we wear to express ourselves better? BY LORNA V PHOTOGRAPHY LAURA McCLUSKEY

Philippa is a busy professional who admits to frequently feeling that she has nothing to wear – even though she has three wardrobes bursting with clothes. When she has an important event coming up, she has to buy something new she adores, such as the pair of skinny black jeans she bought recently before a series of public speaking events.

'It's as if the new pair of perfectly fitting black trousers give me a new confidence,' says Philippa. 'They are like Dumbo's black magic feather. Now I have trousers that really suit me, I can forget worrying about what I look like and concentrate on the job in hand. I can fly. I know this is just a game I'm playing and I can do the job in hand perfectly well without Dumbo's black magic feather. I know that the old black trousers might not have the very latest cut but still fit, and that no one except me would even tell them apart.'

In our celebrity-consumerist culture, what we wear, what we don't wear, and what we want to wear is a complex issue that goes way beyond the 'women love shopping and shoes' cliché. 'Clothes show who we are, and who we aspire to be,' says Californian psychoanalytic psychotherapist Tracey Cleantis. She believes that whenever we buy something we are purchasing a psychological quality. 'Ask yourself what qualities you gain through buying a particular brand. It's always about "this is who I am" or "this is who I am trying to become". So even if someone says, "I just want something comfortable", this signifies that clothing for this person can be a cocoon.'

When there's a fit between our subconscious and what we wear, we tend to

feel good. When we're staring at a wardrobe wondering what to wear, something's amiss. 'When clients say they've got nothing to wear, I wonder which aspect of their personality doesn't relate to their wardrobe, which part of them purchased it, and what's changed so that it no longer fits,' says Cleantis.

## I dress, therefore I am

Psychologist Jennifer Baumgartner focuses on helping clients change how they dress from a psychological perspective, drawing on her fashion background working with brands such as Armani. Baumgartner, author of *You Are What You Wear* (Da Capo Lifelong), believes that how we dress is bound up with our deeper selves, how we feel about our bodies, how >>>

«Ask yourself what qualities you gain from buying a brand»

## «I fell in love with 1940s vintage clothing»

Fleur de Guerre, 30, copywriter

I usually dress in vintage 1940s clothes, but rather than going for a glamour pastiche vibe, I favour a more authentic period look. So on a day-to-day basis I'll wear 1940s-style trousers and a blouse, or in summer I live in vintage house-dresses. They come in great novelty prints, the more colourful the better. I'm a big fan of 1940s colour combinations that you don't often see today, such as blue and orange.

I was into alternative fashion when I was a teenager and as I entered my early twenties, I got into rockabilly, and that's when I discovered the Forties look, which I fell in love with.

I usually wear my house-dresses wrapped tight around the middle to give my figure definition. One of the reasons I've decided to get fit recently is that it gives you a natural girdle!

There are some vintage looks that can be a bit frumpy, so I steer clear of those – I still want to look sexy. Men can sometimes be a bit intimidated by my look, but women tend to love it – I think I definitely dress for my female friends. We love to compare finds; there's a huge thrill in discovering really great vintage pieces.

[diaryofavintagegirl.com](http://diaryofavintagegirl.com)





## «I love clothes that have a history»

Kath Hibbert, 30, journalist and author

I like to wear clothes rather than have them wear me. I wouldn't want my outfit to be the first thing people notice about me. Comfort and practicality are important – I like to look stylish, but I also want to know that if I had to climb a wall for some reason, my clothes wouldn't stop me.

When I was living for free while researching my book, we used to find clothes thrown away all the time. People would leave rubbish bags open so anyone could help themselves – often clothes were brand new.

At one point, I was living with a tattoo artist who painted a beautiful design on a T-shirt of mine. I love it when clothes have a history and aren't just the product of some focus group who are trying to get you to spend money. Even before I tried living for free, I always used to wear my clothes until they were falling apart. I love it when you've worn something for so long that it becomes almost like a second skin.

*'Free: Adventures On The Margins Of A Wasteful Society' by Katharine Hibbert (Ebury Press)*

>>> we were brought up and the messages we internalised. 'Where there is resistance to change, this comes from defences and insecurities,' she says. 'If someone feels that having expensive designer items makes them look better, what is the root of where they learned that? Why does money equal internal success? If wearing designer labels is an unhealthy cognitive choice, why do they need the crutch of it?'

### Shopping stress

Some women might stick to the same style because they're afraid of trying something new, others because that style still works on every level (so they look timeless), or because the clothes are evocative of happy periods (that trusted LBD that's seen a lot of fun).

Most of the experts agree that a degree of anxiety about shopping and personal style is perfectly understandable. Yes, there are more important things out there that we could all be worrying about, but stressing about fashion isn't a sign of impending shallowness.

'When we're shopping and we can't see anything we like, the experience becomes emotionally laden and anxiety provoking,' says clinical psychologist Dr Roni Cohen-Sandler. 'It forces us to question who we are.' It seems that not finding anything to wear isn't about negative psychological traits, but a rejection of what the retailers might be pushing at us, whether that's black lace, teenage dresses, or voluminous maxis that make us look like tents.

Although choice for many women can be overwhelming, Cohen-Sandler reminds us that we can turn it into something positive. 'It's wonderful that we have the option to have different identities,' she says. 'Seen this way, you can use clothing to express how you are evolving as a person. When I started out as a psychologist and had to give presenta-

### Wardrobe therapy

Jennifer Baumgartner, author of *You Are What You Wear (Da Capo Lifelong)*, suggests we look into our wardrobes and ask ourselves some searching questions. 'Work on gaining a deeper understanding to your responses to these questions,' she says. 'If there is anxiety of any sort surrounding how you dress, then you know something is wrong with your perception of your image.'

■ When you wear something revealing, are you celebrating your body, or are you looking for attention?

■ When putting together an outfit, are you dressing to create yourself or disguise yourself?

■ Do you usually opt for black? Are you trying to blend in with the crowd, or is it a hangover from

the past, for example teenage rebellion?

■ What is your wardrobe like? Is everything thrown in, or is it organised? Are there price tags still attached?

■ Does any item in your wardrobe cause you anxiety? Why?

■ What would it be like to wear the opposite of what you wear? Is there

anxiety around wearing the opposite? Ask yourself why.

■ Do you welcome suggestions from friends, partners, family members, or do you resist? If you resist, ask yourself why you do not trust someone else's view.

tions, I used to dress in a very formal way. As I got older, I realised I needed to be more myself. So now I wear cardigans or soft blazers, or a dress. I'm not casual, but I'm me and I'm happy I can do that.'

### A tool for self-discovery

Cleantis echoes this by reminding us that we love fashion because it's fun. 'There is a sense of ever evolving, ever becoming,' she says. 'But fashion is also about handing over personal expression to the fashion industry on the basis that it knows more than you about what is right. For women who love dressing but don't want to respond to fashion, there's a healthy desire for self-expression through clothing, without handing it over to another.'

If we choose to, we can treat shopping for clothes as a tool for self-discovery, a way to examine who we are right now, and what traits we most want to express. 'That moment in the dressing room is such a big moment,' says Cleantis, 'and I suggest holding on to that. Things get

triggered when we try on clothing. What do we want a garment to do?'

Philippa, who talks about her skinny black jeans, is *Psychologies* columnist Philippa Perry, author of *Couch Fiction* (Palgrave) and *How To Stay Sane* (Macmillan). She also has a skeleton wardrobe at her father's house in Warrington. 'When I'm up there I never feel short of anything to wear,' she says. 'I think it's because the wardrobe isn't stuffed and I can see what's in it. Nothing in there has been replaced for about eight years and everything is fine. I think in times gone by we all used to work with such a wardrobe and we still could, if we took the step to stop kidding ourselves we would somehow be "better" if we had new clothes. Having two bases seems to reflect the two attitudes I have towards clothes. I like to think I'm in control of my black-trouser habit, but we all kid ourselves when it comes to clothes.'

>>>



«I dress to flatter what I've got»

Annette Mostyn, 65, sculptor

I'm definitely not a fashion victim, I look at fashion for inspiration, but I'm more of a traditionalist. Above all, I look for something that suits my body – I like to dress to flatter what I've got.

I like tailored things, things that fit well and are made from good cloth. I do wear jeans and a jersey when I'm working at home, but when I go out to lunch I smarten up – I love knee-length pencil skirts, they're very flattering.

Comfort is a huge factor – clothes have to be wearable, and I'm not a fan of high heels. But even though I dress down when I'm at home, I always put on red lipstick so I'm ready in case I need to dash off anywhere. I tend to steer clear of prints, they're just not me, and never have been – I'd always choose block colours.

As I've got older I find it harder to dress up to go out. I've put aside a few nice pieces for evenings but they don't get much wear as I go out less often now. I have a long, beautifully fitting black skirt that I've had for about 30 years that keeps coming out – it's so useful, a real classic. My mother was very smart. I actually tried not to dress like her when I was young, but my style now is probably quite similar to hers.



«You'll never see me wearing a hoodie»

Ian Bruce, 27, one half of musical duo The Correspondents

I suppose I have two styles really – my on-stage persona and my day-to-day wardrobe. In both areas, I'm obsessed with tailoring, but in a contemporary rather than a vintage sense. I like classic looks that are transformed into something practical.

When I'm performing, I have a sort of futuristic matador look going on, designed by Carley Hague – she's a genius. I wear tight Spandex breeches in a black and white print, high socks, waistcoat, cape and a Victorian style-dress coat – sort of like a gothic Sergeant Pepper.

In the day, I'll usually wear a well-cut pair of trousers, nearly always a white shirt, waistcoat and jacket with a tie – you'd never see me in a hoodie.

I channel the extrovert side of me into my costumes. It can sound so pretentious when performers talk about becoming someone else on stage, but it's like any routine – the process of vocal warm-ups and putting on my costume gets me in the right frame of mind to become that alter ego that I am on stage.

[thecorrespondents.co.uk](http://thecorrespondents.co.uk)