The bright colours and lively prints of, from left to right, Marc Jacobs, Bottega Veneta, Richard Quinn autumn/winter '20/'21 collections, convey instant optimism.

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Pieces of mind

We know the effect of a mood-boosting dress or the right pair of shoes, but what about clothing that shifts our whole mental state? In a year when we're hungry for pick-me-ups, is there more feelgood power in our wardrobes than we know? By Jen Nurick.

In 2012, Hajo Adam and Adam D. Galinsky, two professors and psychologists from Bath in England, and New York, respectively, coined the term 'enclothed cognition.' No, not a new term for the latest in augmented reality or artificial intelligence, but in fact a new way of thinking about the power of our wardrobes. Interested in the impact our clothing has on our sense of self, they conducted a study where ordinary people were dressed in lab coats and compared their behaviours when they were under the guise of either a doctor or a painter. Remarkably, participants who were wearing doctors garb displayed increased focus and attention compared with those wearing the painters coat. In addition to finding that we each relate to clothing based on our personal experiences, they also found that when we put on clothes, our behaviours and mental state can in fact be altered. In the realm of fashion, it's a compelling thought, but in a world irrevocably changed, can slipping on a coat to transform ourselves – say an instantly elevating Erdem brocade version – still yield such power? And can we harness this simple act to make us feel good in troubled times?

As we race towards the finish line of 2020, sifting through the rubble left behind by a global pandemic looking for worthwhile lessons, our collective consciousness is turning to why our clothes matter. Do the usual rules apply? What place do they have in a world turned upside-down? Who do they make us? While some of us readjust to life with lifted restrictions and others must stay indoors, the act of getting dressed for ourselves in quarantine has been universal, and emphasised the link between what we wear and who we are. Whether we like it or not, our clothes – in lieu of facial expressions veiled by masks – can reflect ups and downs in politics, both personal and public, and are wrapped up with our relationships, cultural zeitgeist and nuances, big or small.

Take the swearing-in ceremony of President Duda in Poland back in August, when opposition lawmakers seized the opportunity to coordinate rainbow-coloured outfits in support of Poland's LGBTQI community, or look to Paris, where Nicolas Ghesquière opened his spring/summer '21 show in September with a sweater that read 'Vote'.

It stands to reason then, that with so much coded meaning attached, clothes have an impact beyond skin deep. Professor Carolyn Mair PhD, behavioural psychologist and author →

of *The Psychology of Fashion*, believes that yes, slipping on a sunshine-yellow dress or a pair of lucky pants can genuinely help shift the mood, but explains it still requires mind over matter. "It's about the associations we create, the beliefs we create, of our experiences when we're wearing that item," Mair says, echoing the study by Adam and Galinsky. A blouse worn on a bad date or a blazer donned at a good job interview will retain those memories for us. They may be void of personal value on a mannequin, or appear lifeless on a hanger, but once embodied, our outfits become switched on and like all fashion, take on a performative function.

So even as designers resolved to boost our spirits with bold-faced visual aids for autumn/winter '19/'20 – take the disco-ball shine of Bottega Veneta's sequined dresses, the buoyancy of Richard Quinn's puff sleeves, Huishan Zhang's trailing feathers and Simone Rocha's sweetly seductive florals – their influence on us ultimately rests in the eye of the beholder. Likewise the pearlescent blouses at Christopher John Rogers or fur-ball bubble dresses shown at JW Anderson. On the surface, our reception to these clothes may seem an obvious question of taste. But Mair says there's more to unpack than preference. "Our strong beliefs and identity are processed in the same area of the brain," she says. So, while clothes with a clear feelgood factor can elicit a joyous response, each individual will react differently to them, interpreting these on a personal level. A bubble skirt to one person might hark back to parts of the 1980s they'd rather forget, or to another, perhaps born in a different generation, remind them of halcyon days of decadence, conjuring a sunnier outlook and a fervent desire to dress up.

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This potential for clothes to positively influence us underpins Los Angeles-based leisurewear brand Madhappy. Founded in 2017, Madhappy's crewnecks, T-shirts and hats, branded with phrases like 'Local optimist' and 'More than my feelings' are geared at spreading positivity and normalising conversations around mental health, going a step further and taking a more literal approach to happy clothes. Co-founder Noah Raf explains: "Brands no longer just represent a source of product but now a sense of personal values, identity and lifestyle aspirations." He says these work as touchpoints to forge greater connections with customers, and in turn better address their needs. Hoodies that hug the body or snug-fitting hats that shield us from the world are also comfortable everyday objects, and so double as easy entrées to spark conversations in creative – and digestible – ways.

Just ask Nicholas Sant & Simon Rowe of SorryImBusy, a tongue-in-cheek label born in Melbourne in 2018 focused on self-care. Their 'Slow down, relax and enjoy life!' tote bags and 'Stress less!' caps have populated Instagram feeds throughout the pandemic, and are intended as playful reminders to prioritise ourselves. "We try to maintain a light-hearted approach so it's not too difficult to navigate," says Sant of weaving messages of mental health into the label's designs. "What people are wearing has always been a major subject of small talk used to activate conversations. The topic of productivity and self-care is no different."

But how substantive can a slogan be? Mair says emblazoning clothes with mantras can clarify a designer's message, but also exposes brands whose actions don't follow through with the philosophies they present. Printing slogans on product enables brands to take a stance and amplify awareness, but it also holds them accountable to disclose what's invisible in their clothes, from supply chains to the sustainability of their fabrics. "It can get risky when brands see the potential demand for clothing relating to mental health … [and] blatantly try to profit with no positive intention," echoes Sant, whose label has amassed more than 14,000 Instagram followers who represent a growing audience for fashion that puts mindfulness first.

For Samuel Krost, it was the 2018 mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida, and the subsequent March for Our Lives demonstrations, that calcified the idea for his community-led brand, Krost NY. Sweater sets that read 'Together we can' and 'Support your friends' go hand-in-hand with real partnerships with non-profit organisations focused on gun reform and climate change, as well as an online community platform, KROSTCommunity, that spotlights the brand's allies and friends. "The youth of today are some of the most courageous individuals," he says. "They want to wear their beliefs on their sleeves … I can't think of a better way to ignite conversation."

Still, clothes on their own have their limitations. A wedding dress worn on the special day may be a nostalgia-inducing reminder that we can never go back and relive it again. A beloved jacket purchased by someone else may induce comparison, or jealousy, if it can only be admired from afar. A particular colour, like red, worn to radiate feelings of passion or love, may miscommunicate anger or violence. Meanwhile, a coat may make us feel clever like a doctor or creative like a painter, but what happens once it's removed? When it comes to mental health, Mair also emphasises that for some people who experience depression, the condition can be detected in how they dress, as they may abandon their appearance early on. "They stop caring about themselves," she explains. That's why she warns "it's dangerous to be so superficial as to think that you can just dress it up and that's going to solve all your problems".

Joshua Sitt, another of Madhappy's four co-founders, knows our clothes won't do it all, which is why the company has created alternative practical safeguards. He explains: "We have hosted free events, from 2,000-plus-person block parties to mental health panels and meditation courses." The brand also has an online blog, The Local Optimist, which offers free toolkits on suicide prevention and self-love, and recently launched a free texting hotline so customers can get in touch with in-house mental health experts.

For Museum of Peace and Quiet's Ashley Lennon, whose T-shirts and crewnecks printed with the brand's namesake are almost permanently sold out, clothing can be used to initiate social enterprise or inspire personal change, even in subtle ways. "Our graphics are conscious reminders to live in peace and stay positive and optimistic despite everything going on," she says. While it's true some people may not think twice when registering someone else's T-shirt, it is possible that reading a mantra, like seeing a smile, could generate a mirror effect, or encourage positive reinforcement. SorryImBusy's Rowe echoes Lennon's approach. "We're not going to pretend that we're dramatically changing the mindset of every individual who purchases our pieces," he says. "But we do know that we create a positive impact on some people's day."

While we shouldn't underestimate the reciprocity between our clothing and our mood, Mair says it's key to rethink the way we understand fashion and how it may make us feel. "Because our clothes represent our identity, the way they are reflected in the interactions we have with other people can make us feel good or not good," she says. And the same outfit on any given day isn't always going to produce the same effect on our mood – a dress worn on a workday, for example, will feel different on the weekend.

But the act of dressing up every day can feel taxing at times and, especially now, may explain the rise in consumer demand for clothes that are both comfortable and comforting. This reality lay in plain sight at the recent 'phygital' spring/summer '21 shows held in September, where designers ushered in a new low-key luxury in line with the present moment. At Valentino, Pierpaolo Piccioli presented a collection as imaginative as it was grounded, proposing flowing sheer blouses with blue jeans, and pairing gowns with cascading sequined trims, with flats. At Miu Miu, Miuccia Prada iterated micro mini-skirts and polo shirts in different stripes and colours, dismissing any conclusions that fashion, although in the midst of sweeping change, has receded into the background. Quite the contrary, according to Prada. "Clothes are important because they define you in a second," she said.

Mair reflects that having a go-to uniform may alleviate the cognitive demands of getting dressed every day, and free up time and mental capacity to make other decisions. She adds that the pandemic has highlighted that "we can perform our jobs as well in whatever we choose to wear", and emphasises that it is the beliefs we project on our outfits that ultimately dictate our performance. That's why, Lennon says, it's important to remain attuned to the emotional responses our clothing generates, and vice versa. "We may not realise how often what we choose to wear is dictated by our mood and how much our choices have a subsequent effect on our behaviour and confidence," she says. "Fashion becomes a self-love practice when you can feel like your total and true self when wearing an item."

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Clockwise from top left: looks from Krost NY, Madhappy, Museum of Peace & Quiet, SorryImBusy.

A similar sentiment of individuality was realised in Rick Owens's spring/summer '21 collection, recently shown at Venice's now-closed Lido Casino. An army of women, all wearing a mask, approached the runway rugged up in architectural silhouettes; capes with exaggerated shoulders and sculptural ponchos that nodded to protecting ourselves in a fragile world. Now, we each face a choice, the designer explained to *Vogue* Runway: "We can think of clothes as frivolous or we can think of clothes as one of our first steps towards communicating with other people." Surely, if we are receptive to the latter, there is a real chance we can use what we wear to signify – and transform – how we feel, and in that possibility lies great power. ■