

DRESS YOUR BEST LIFE

Feel good
and look great
every day with
these easy steps

**HARNESS THE POWER OF
CLOTHES TO TRANSFORM
YOUR CONFIDENCE**

Dawnn Karen Fashion Psychologist

**DRESS
YOUR BEST
LIFE**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dawnn Karen is a pioneer in the field of fashion psychology. A graduate of Columbia University and a former model, Karen is currently a professor in the social sciences department at the Fashion Institute of Technology, in addition to maintaining her private therapy practice, Fashion Psychology Success, and her online classes, the Fashion Psychology Institute. Dubbed the 'Dress Doctor' by *The New York Times*, Karen has been featured by *Cosmopolitan*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Glamour Italia*, *Good Morning America*, the *Daily Mail*, *Lorraine* and many others. Karen is Caribbean American and lives in New York.

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Clothes to Transform
Your Confidence

DAWNN KAREN



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To Rosa-Lee "Baby Cooper" Cooper

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**DRESS
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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

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 weekdays 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, and Other 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 and Prevention, “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.

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 reported 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, I find that 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 emigrate 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

DRESS YOUR BEST LIFE

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