How to look healthier and more confident

Experts say that finding your perfect shades of color can make over your mind, too

By KATE FENNIGAN

Before the mid-19th century, those who were a member of the aristocracy or a rich merchant, you wore clothes in shades of brown. Life was so easy in those days. Then some busybody discovered synthetic dyes and everything changed. Colour flooded into clothes — colours that suited you or didn't suit you. Colours that brought out your eyes; colours that made your jawline disappear into your neck; colours that gave you a healthy glow; colours that your mother repeatedly said gave you the look of an old dishcloth and she didn't know why you were throwing yourself away like that. Which is roughly where we are today — flailing around looking for the colour to bring out our colour, wondering if success lies in a mustard-yellow shirt or shocking-pink trainers. And then deciding we should stick to grey. Or black. Yes, black. That's a good idea.

Colour psychology

Hands up, fashion journalists are guilty of adding to the spectrum confusion. Pink's back — "Purple Reign!" — "The new yellow!" In the last year, I've written about the return of brown, the joy of indigo, why camel makes you look expensive and how black is the only shade I want to wear in summer.

Sorry about that. But I've had it now, because finally, after 42 years, I've been officially told which colours suit me and which don't, which counteracts the red in my skin tone and what disturbs it to such an extent that I look — and I quote myself — "dirty".

But before I go there, why does it matter? Does it even matter? And so, to whom? I call Dr Lynda Shaw, a psychologist, to ask. And she says, wise up, you should be worrying about what people think of you, which is great because I knew I wasn't doing enough of that. "It might seem superficial because it's clothes, but all of the things that lie behind clothes — your self-esteem, anxieties when you don't feel right, people's judgements of you — are a reality," she tells me. Especially, apparently, when it comes to work. "If you are going for job interview or trying to close a sale or get some business, it's very important that people judge you favourably. And your clothes will make a difference."

She tells me about a study on first impressions done in 2013 by the University of Hertfordshire. A group of people were shown pictures of men, but they couldn't see faces and only saw the images for five seconds; unknown to them, they were comparing bespoke and off-the-peg suits.

"The people in the study rapidly made the decision that the men in bespoke were successful, more confident, had higher salaries or were more flexible," says Shaw. "Which is quite something." It is, and hopefully these people will never be in a position to hire someone solely on their appearance in just five seconds.

The power of colour

But we all know that appearance can be powerful — or powerfully misleading — and our reactions are subjective. Colour plays into this, because it has a strong visual effect on your overall image.

"Colours change things about people," says Polly Holman, an associate lecturer specialising in personal fashion styling at the London College of Fashion. "Colours that really suit you work with your natural colour palette to make you feel healthier, your features more defined and your eyes bigger" so the benefits of wearing the "right" colour are great! "Oh, huge," she says.

"You'll look healthier to other people and it will give you more confidence. Once you know you look good you hold yourself better. Your whole attitude towards yourself changes."

Holman runs through what happens if a colour isn't working on you. A colour that is too dark will throw black up on to the face. This tends to widen and drop the jawline," she says. "A colour that is too light will throw white up on to your face and make you look washed out." Her rule of thumbs is that the darker the eyes, hair and skin, the stronger the colour you can wear. The lighter your natural colour pattern, the paler and closer to pastels you should go.

"You also have to think about the temperature of colours. Are they yellow (warm) or blue-based (cool)? Yellow-based won't suit you if you have a lot of pink to your skin, but will if you are more golden-toned. Pinky skins, blue eyes and ashier hair tend to look better in blue-based colours."

Finally (it's a lot, I know), you need to look at clarity. This is easier than it sounds because it roughly comes down to fabric. "A colour on a very smooth fabric will be bright. The same colour on a texture will look softer," explains Holman. In the case of knitwear, for example, a colour on lambswool will look softer than merino wool, and on cashmere it will be softer still. A colour on a cotton shirt will look bolder than on a silk shirt. Which sounds like the ideal excuse for pale people like me to insist on luxury textiles at all times.

Holman has a self-help colour guide that she swears by. It's called the Bink Test and you only need a pair of eyes. This is what you do: stand in front of the mirror in your wildly colourful (or not) outfit and, um, blink. "When you open your eyes, if you see the colour before you see yourself, then the colour is wearing you," says Holman. "If you see yourself first then you're wearing the colour, which means it suits you."

House of Colour

To try this and I'm sure it's me, not the Bink Test, but I don't feel much worse. And it's not that I don't trust myself, but I would like to know what a professional colour analyst thinks. So I get an appointment with the 33-year-old company House of Colour, and am lucky enough to see the managing director, Helen Venables, who has been working with them for
over 20 years. A colour analysis class takes 45 minutes and costs £130. You sit in front of a long mirror, make-up free with your hair back and a white scarf around your neck, as though you’re at the hairdresser. Given that I’m doing this in a glass-walled meeting room at The Telegraph, I assume this is all rather more embarrassing than in the privacy of a House of Colour studio. But needs must.

Another thing, the lighting is artificial when we should be in natural daylight. But I spend most of my life under these terrible fluorescent lights, so perhaps it’s good to know what suits me best here. Venables’ kit is a bit like a magician’s with a folding glass-framed colour wheel made up of different swatches. The colour sphere was first devised by Johannes Itten, an artist and key associate of the Bauhaus movement, who organised colours into hue, lightness and saturation. The House of Colour wheel is a development on from this and is divided into quarters named after the four seasons.

**Colour analysis**

Autumn and summer are yellow-based; winter and spring are blue-based. She also has a square metal rail with 36 multi-toned scarves relating to each season attached on each of its four sides. First of all, Venables decides whether I’m warm or cold. She does this by holding up to my face a selection of scarves from the warm and cold spectrums and comparing the effect on my features. Even though I know I have pale skin with red cheeks and naturally light-brown hair (with unnaturally blonde highlights), I have hazel-green eyes that make me think maybe I’m warm (or just weird?).

Turns out I’m not. In one swipe the khaki, the camouflages, and the camels that I love are gone. I think of my camel knittedwear, my favourite camouflage jacket, the summer coat I just ordered from a designer. Gulp.

Three great pieces of news though: I can wear black, navy and slate grey! This is because I am winter; and this is a gobstopper. If I’d been told I didn’t suit navy I would have cried on the spot. Helen gives all the tones in the winter selection a rating of good, very good, excellent and outstanding. The rich, gem-like shades that apparently look really good against my skin, hair and eyes — my “true colours” — are a surprise to me. And not in a good way. I’m starting to feel uncomfortable. Asthenes, meaning an outstanding rating, go to indigo — fine, I like indigo — but also to turquoise, light emerald, lapis (purple), carmine red, fuchsia, raspberry and royal blue. Oh God.

“You can ignore all this,” says Helen, who is very matter-of-fact and not bossy in any way. “There are no hard rules. But these brighter colours might be what you take on holiday. You might choose a swimuit in this colour!” I find it hard to believe that lapis and royal blue will ever make it into even my holiday wardrobe, but Helen is right, the swatches of material in these colours do look better against my skin than the yellows and green-based shades of autumn and summer. So why am I feeling miserable? Why am I starting to panic?

**Chromophobia or colour snobbery?**

In her new book *The Secret Lives of Colour*, Kassia St Clair writes: “A certain distaste for colour runs through Western culture like a ladder in a stodging” Colour, she goes on to say, has been seen at different times as a distraction, a self-indulgence and a sin. She reveals that in 1830, Goethe, who was clearly wearing a black polo neck at the time, snobbishly dismissed most of the spectrum with the words, “ Savage nations, uneducated people and children have a great predilection for vivid colours.”

What I realise pretty soon after the session is that, like Goethe, I have become a massive colour snob. I don’t want to look like a TV presenter. I don’t want to look like the Queen on tour. I’m embarrassed about wearing bright colour, not because I’m scared of it, but because I’ve settled into a kind of uniform. Fashion journalists are always banging on about having a uniform: clothes that come in navy, black, grey, muted colours and neutrals. There’s a kind of accepted wisdom that good colour is not chic — unless you’re someone like Iris Apfel or the fashion writer Susie Bubble, who have made colour their “thing.” And I’ve just gone along with this. But maybe I’m hiding in neutrals. Maybe I am scared of colour. Maybe I’m scared of getting it wrong. In an industry that is always judging, navy blue, black and grey are a safe refuge, even if they don’t necessarily make your skin glow or your eyes twinkle. And that, of course, is all a bit sad and pathetic of me.

The thing is, when I get home and look more closely in my wardrobe, I actually do smooth some neutral refreshers. There is one colourful cotton dress by Preen Line that I love and do wear in summer — it’s