How Color Affects Our Mood

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By Rachel Grumman Bender For YouBeauty

It you think of the way we describe certain emotions (seeing red, feeling blue, green with envy), there’s no denying that color and mood are inextricably linked. Slip on a tailored LBD and you instantly feel chic and sexy or pop open a sunny yellow umbrella on a gloomy day and some of that sunniness will undoubtedly rub off on you.

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There are several reasons why colors are able to influence how we feel. "We react on multiple levels of association with colors -- there are social or culture levels as well as personal relationships with particular colors," explains Leslie Harrington, executive director of The Color Association of The United States, which forecasts color trends. "You also have an innate reaction to color. For example, when you look at red, it does increase your heart rate. It is a stimulating color. This goes back to caveman days of fire and danger and alarm."

You also have learned certain associations with color, such as red making your heart race since it’s linked with fire trucks and ambulances (in other words, alarm) or yellow having positive association simply because it was the color of your beloved grandmother’s kitchen. "As you get older, you become much more conscious of those learned reactions than the innate ones," adds Harrington.

Jeannie Mai, who hosts "How Do I Look?" on the Style Network and who recently paired up with Yoplait Light to encourage women to make simple swaps (from giving your clothes a boost of color to swapping out unhealthy eating habits), is a firm believer in the ability of clothes to boost your mood. She calls it "wearapy." "Therapists treat people with mood disorders," she says. "I use clothing and texture to enhance people’s moods and their lives.

On a bleak day it would be so easy to throw on a pair of jeans and a slouchy sweater, but I throw on something from spring -- a green mini skirt, fun fringe booties and a sweater with evening jewelry. That makes an impression on everyone around me, but it also makes me feel cute. And when you feel cute, you feel better. You can channel the different moods you want with different colors.”

Feel like changing your frame of mind for the better? Play around with these colors when picking out your clothes, makeup and accessories:

Seeing Red

Red is the hot, crazy girl of colors, evoking powerful emotions such as fear, anger and passion. "Red would be one of the most complicated colors," says Harrington. Unlike, say, yellow, which is sunny whether it’s a pale or bright version of the shade, the mood red conveys changes dramatically when you lighten it (sweet and innocent pink) or darken it (sophisticated burgundy).

Although research shows that the best way for a single gal to attract a guy’s attention is to wear red, you may be garnering attention you don’t necessarily want. "There’s a reason they call it the red light district," notes Harrington. Adds Andrew Elliot, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Rochester: "We link red to passion because red is the color we exhibit on our skin when sexually interested -- a red flush or blush."

Rather than having your outfit scream "sex kitten" (unless that’s what you’re going for), the best way to rock this passion-producing color and get into a sexier frame of mind is by carrying a red clutch, donning a bright red polish on your nails (try Essie Well Red) or lining your lips in the right red. "Red lips can be your best accessory, especially if you’re wearing all black," says Harrington. "You have to be confident to do it and have the right shade of red for your skintone."

A Calming Case of the Blues

Need to chill out after a stressful day? Slip on something blue. "Psychologically, blue is the opposite of red -- it lowers blood pressure," says Harrington. "Red picks you up and blue takes you down, but not down to depression level." That may be because if you look to nature, such as the sky and the ocean, blue conveys tranquility. That’s also what you project when wearing the shade. "I encourage women to wear blue when they want to create a calming essence," says Mai. "Wear it on a first date -- something turquoise or a light aqua sweater with a soft texture like cashmere. It makes a great a first impression and creates relaxation."

Another beneficial time to make blue your go-to hue? If you’re going for a job interview or meeting your partner’s parents for the first time. "Blue is associated with trustworthiness, strength and dependability -- hence, the blue power suit because it projects that image of dependability and trustworthiness," says Harrington.

It’s Easy Being Green

From grass to leaves to other verdant vegetation, the color green is closely linked to the environment, which can put you in a relaxed or refreshed mood. "There is some tentative evidence emerging in the literature showing that green is relaxing because it is associated with growth and nature," says Elliot. Green also looks good on every skin type and has a wide range of shades that allow you to modify your mood -- from serious and sophisticated to fresh and bright.

"Green ranges from old traditional English libraries in a dark hunter green where you can sit down, concentrate and read to a spring-like yellow-based green, which symbolizes new birth or new growth -- the beginning of something," explains Harrington.

Anything-But-Mellow Yellow

Yellow carries both positive and negative connotations -- from sunshine, which conveys a joyous, happy mood to jaundice and sickliness, according to Harrington. In Mai’s experience, wearing the bright, fun color helped her stand out and put people at ease. "Wearing yellow creates a very open atmosphere with people," she says. "When I was a reporter on Extra, if I was going to meet a celebrity who was a bit standoffish I found that wearing yellow would bring a smile to their demeanor right away. It’s an inviting color."

That said, going overkill on yellow can leave you looking like a walking banana so Harrington recommends investing in yellow accessories instead to give you that same uplifting boost, such as a bright yellow clutch, scarf or even a pale yellow blouse under a sweater or suit. But keep in mind that not everyone can pull off this bright shade. “Skin with yellow undertones have a hard time with the color,” says Harrington, “and blue undertones can only wear certain shades of yellow so it’s hard to find the shade that looks good on, compared to navy, which anyone can wear.”

Orange You Glad You Wore It

This highly popular color marries the sunniness of yellow with red’s depth. In fact, orange is the perfect substitute if you’re not comfortable seeing red. But the color is by no means ho-hum -- orange evokes action. "Orange is much more of a casual, active color—it’s big in active wear—whereas red is much more sophisticated," explains Harrington. The perky shade is your best bet when you want to rev yourself up so you can hit the gym or channel creativity for a work project. "Orange is said to stimulate enthusiasm and creativity," says Mai. "It symbolizes vitality and endurance."

It’s also the color to choose when you want to stand out without taking a big risk. That’s because orange is considered a little edgy without be too "out there." "If you’re going to buy a pocketbook and it comes in red, orange and yellow, yellow will be the biggest statement while almost everyone has a red bag," says Harrington. "Orange is in the middle. It says, ‘have a little more fun and be a little different but not too different. Because of that, you see a lot more orange colors showing up in cosmetics."

The rich color is associated with royalty and luxury, according to Mai. "Anytime you need to feel confident and regal, such as for a job interview, wear purple," she says. If you have a young-looking face and want to appear more sophisticated, make purple your go-to color to help you look more mature, suggests Mai.

Back in Black

Having a “fat day”? Slipping into something black makes you look five pounds slimmer -- instantly improving your mood. "We all know what happens when you put on black jeans versus white jeans -- it’s slimming," says Harrington. But the darkest shade of all can affect how you feel in two other distinctly different ways: Wearing black can be a downer (think funerals) or make you feel trés chic (think Audrey Hepburn in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”). Although in old movies, the villain always wore black, over the years the color has become more associated with high class -- black limousines, patent leather shoes and elegant black tie affairs, according to Harrington.

Black is clearly the go-to color when you want to look more regal and formal. "It can be very elegant"” says Mai. “Every woman needs an LBD. It plays everything else down so you stand out. It lets you shine.”