dressing for self-esteem

By Michelle Vernal*

Don't let being a mum make you feel as though it's not worth the effort to keep yourself looking good, give your self-esteem a boost with a few style tips and a bit of lippy – it's an instant pick-me-up.

"You look nice today Michelle." I had just dropped my youngest son off at preschool for the morning when I received this compliment. As I headed back to my car there was a bounce in my step that matched the bounce in my freshly shampooed hair. It was one of those fabulous North Canterbury spring days and dressed in my dark green pinafore top and skinny jeans, I felt pretty darn good. I checked my lippy in the rearview mirror before reversing and heading out of the car park in the direction of … home actually, in order to write this article where my only audience is the computer and the cat.

Now it might seem a bit of a waste of time to have gone to all that effort but in actual fact it hadn't taken much at all. Blow-drying my hair and putting a bit of makeup on had added only an extra ten minutes to my morning routine. It was ten minutes I could spare and what a difference it made to my mood. It dawned on me just how much what I wear and how I present myself is related to my frame of mind. Take last week for instance when I was fighting off a bit of a head cold. Monday through Friday, I could be spotted slopping about in either tracksuit pants or a pair of ill-fitting, albeit comfy, blue jeans. I had no energy and I didn't feel like doing anything and this was reflected in my clothing.

It is a well-known fact that how we present ourselves is how people perceive us. If we are feeling confident and happy, people react to us in a positive way. The right outfit, hair and makeup can be the clincher between getting the job or not. So what happens when you've handed your notice in, shoved your stilettos and sassy suits to the back of the wardrobe in exchange for sneakers and practical pants?

Becoming a mum shifted my whole perspective away from me and onto my children. My priorities changed completely. It was no longer so important to have that gorgeous dress with the matching shoes. Besides, when would I ever wear it? I certainly couldn't see myself tottering down to preschool in it! Along with those shifting priorities, I felt a sense of loss of self. I might be at home with my children but I was still a person in my own right. By dressing in clothes that I know suit me, I'm retaining my individuality. I'm not fading into the background. When I make no effort whatsoever, it reflects how I am feeling about myself and gives off a negative vibe to other people. It's a no-win situation.

Dressing well doesn't mean dressing up, nor does it mean spending a fortune. My skinny jeans and pinafore top were both Trade Me purchases. It's about making good fashion choices. Choose clothes that accentuate your attributes and disguise the bits you're not so keen on. You can achieve this by learning how to dress to suit your particular body shape. For example, if you are pear shaped with rounded thighs and hips that are slightly wider than your shoulders, then empire-line dresses and tops look great on you. Or if you are an apple shape with a large bust, narrow hips and slim legs then go for cross-over tops and dresses in a solid block of colour. Short women look best in streamlined clothes with small detailing to flatter their petite frame. While tall girls can get away with tank top style dresses or shirts which look fantastic teemed with low slung jeans. If you have a fuller figure, floaty trousers or skirts with lots of movement divert attention from the thighs, hips and tummy. I've only scratched the surface with these tips. There's an absolute wealth of information available via the internet, your local bookstore, library and television on how to determine your body shape and what clothes will best flatter it.

Having established your shape, you now need to start with the basics – properly fitted underwear. Most mums find things heading south and a bra that is the right shape and size for you is invaluable. A whopping 70% of us are wearing the wrong-sized bra! There's no excuse for that when most lingerie shops or departments will provide you with a free fitting.

The next step is picking the brands you purchase wisely. There's no point in buying a cheap pair of trousers that will lose their shape after one or two washes because they'll cost you more in the long run. Don't be afraid to try something new but remember, you don't have to be a slave to fashion to look stylish. It is far better to wear something flattering than wear an outfit just because it's the latest look. You can always spice your outfit up by adding accessories.

It really does pay to try things on and if you have ever attempted to do this when you have your children in tow, then you will know that you need eyes in the back of your head. This is to ensure that they don't a) open the changing room door, leaving you caught literally with your pants down, and b) clamber under the gap between cubicles to say hi to the kid next door.

Best to pick a time when you can head off on your own for a couple of hours or, even better, take a friend with you and make a pact to be brutally honest with each other about the outfits you try on.

In summary, focus on the parts of your body you like and dress to emphasise these attributes. Stop comparing yourself to others and write down the compliments you receive about how you look. The latter will give you a real boost when you're having a down and out day. Most importantly, walk tall, look straight ahead and smile - you will immediately look and feel more confident.

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