

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Style

We don't know how to get dressed anymore

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By Ellen McCarthy

Dreaming that you've shown up in public buck-naked reveals a deep-seated fear of having your vulnerabilities unmasked.

At least, that's what the dream decoders say. Less clear is what it means to have that same totally exposed feeling in mixed company while wide-awake. But we seem poised to find out.

Americans are beginning to stir from their pandemic bunkers, drawn by the promise of safe socializing and — for those lucky enough to have worked remotely — the obligation to return to the office in person. There's just one problem: We've forgotten how to get dressed.

Oh, sure. Pants on one leg at a time and all that. But what if, when you pull those pants up to your waist, there is no soft ribbon of elastic to hold them in place? The muscles required to fasten buttons and other complicated garment closures atrophied many moons ago, along with our ability to make polite conversation and shower on the reg.

Not that those pants actually fit — ha! We've aged approximately 20 years in the past 15 months, all the while expanding and contracting according to our stress levels and snack stockpiles. And we hate pants now, anyway. (Who thought slim-fit khaki capris were a good idea in the first place? And God knows we have no idea what jeans we're supposed to be wearing these days.)

Which leads to our present conundrum. What happens when we have to go someplace where our current second skin — sweats and stretched-out T-shirts — might not be considered appropriate?

Panic happens. That's what.

"I think it's an excitement that is plagued with anxiety and fatigue," says Lauren A. Rothman, a personal stylist who runs the Washington firm Styleauteur. She says her clients are greeting her with an assortment of concerns: "I just don't know if that still fits. What am I going to do? Does that style still work? Is this dated? I'm a year-and-a-half older now."

Rothman's phone went dead for the first couple months of the pandemic, but lately she's as busy as ever, helping confused clients navigate their way back out into a world that seems as changed as they are.

"I'm hearing about a lot of bar and bas mitzvahs held in parking lots. What do people wear to that? There's no precedent," she says. And even for less formal settings, Rothman is facing questions about whether the old fashion rules have been rewritten. "'Is business casual dead?' 'Are sweatpants now acceptable?' People want information. They want clarity."

But clarity might not come easily. And certainly not quickly.

Last month Melissa Burton, a 38-year-old manager of a state government program in North Carolina, started going back in the office three days a week. And it has been a bumpy adjustment. For more than a year she wore what she calls her mullet uniform — "business up top, yoga pants on the bottom" — so she'd appear professional on Zoom meetings.

But Burton has now overhauled her schedule, not just for the commute but for the prep work involved in leaving the house. “I have to get dressed. Do hair, makeup, accessories. Find all the matching pieces,” she says.

And she’s not sure what she should be wearing. There are fewer people around, so it doesn’t seem like the attire should be as button-downed as before, but it is still an office. “I’ve tried out different things. Like a T-shirt with a cardigan — in the past I wouldn’t do that,” she says. “I’m trying to be not too fancy. Just trying to see if I can get away with some things.”

Once Burton tried to get away with sweatpants and a hoodie. It was late and she didn’t expect anyone to be around. But she encountered a crowd of co-workers. Thankfully they barely recognized her with her mask up and hood on, covering undone hair. Burton had planned to stay a few hours to check some tasks off her to-do list. “But then I was like, ‘Nope, that’s my cue — it can be done later,’” she says.

Burton’s biggest complaint has been physical. Her back began hurting every day she spent in the office. At first she wondered if she needed a more ergonomic chair. Then she realized the pain persisted as she drove home. “And it hit me: ‘Oh! It’s this bra. I’m not used to this.’” Burton doesn’t make a lot of pit stops on the way home these days; she races there as fast as possible to pull the bra off and the sweats on.

Everett Sotelo’s moment of panic came just two weeks ago. The 26-year-old software engineer from Phoenix was packing for a wedding in Pennsylvania. He’d thought through all of his outfits and then, 30 hours before his plane was scheduled to take off, he actually tried them on.

“The shirt felt really tight. I was like, ‘Wait a minute, this doesn’t feel right.’ I went through a couple more. All my dress shirts felt really tight. And my pants — it was a struggle to put them on, which was something I hadn’t experienced before,” he says. “That put me in a bit of a stressful situation.”

Sotelo’s been ordering takeout a lot during the pandemic. And he learned how to bake, which has been fun, except it’s really only him and his brother around to consume all the treats. And the gym shorts he wears day-to-day didn’t signal his altered dimensions.

Sotelo raced to shop that night to find something to wear. He doesn’t love the new ensemble, but at least it fits.

And finding something that fits is half the battle right now. In a February Axios-Ipsos poll, 32 percent of Americans said they’d gained weight over the past few weeks. The number was even higher in August.

Musa Tariq is among those who've added a few pounds — though unlike Sotelo he realized it a little too late. Tariq started a new job in January as head of marketing for GoFundMe. Last month the 38-year-old traveled from San Francisco to San Diego to meet members of his team in person for the first time.

“So you start thinking about, ‘What are you going to wear on your first day of school?’” says Tariq. But he didn’t begin to pack until the hour before he needed to leave for the airport, and discovered that not only were his old shirts too tight, he didn’t have anything in the bright colors that reflect his renewed optimism.

En route to San Diego he tweeted out a word of warning: “Just spent 45 mins looking at my clothes screaming ‘I have nothing to wear.’ This coming back to work thing is more stressful than I thought. Brace yourself.”

Tariq’s followers replied in solidarity. “Am so confused if I should wear sweatpants or a dress,” one tweeted. “I have no in-between clothes for this new in-between world.”

Rothman, the stylist, says this is a sentiment she’s hearing frequently. Some clients aren’t sure if or when they’ll return to the office. Should they invest in more casual wear or aim for pieces that would also work in professional settings? Should they buy clothes to fit their new shape or assume they’ll eventually return to their pre-pandemic size? And if they can’t ever envision going back to three-piece suits or four-inch heels, what are the appropriate alternatives?

“One of the things I tell my clients now is, ‘Tell me what the next six weeks look like on your calendar. I don’t want you worrying yet about fall.’ We have to have grace with ourselves and say, ‘This is a transition period,’” she says.

It feels more like limbo to Diana Rohini LaVigne, a government communications executive in Fremont, Calif. At the start of the pandemic she was working 14-hour days, seven days a week, while also overseeing her two daughters’ online education. There was no time to cook healthy meals or exercise.

Since January she’s taken a six-month sabbatical to focus on her family. It’s given her the time to start taking long walks, and reflect. When she looks in her closet, it’s not just the sizes of clothes that don’t feel right, but also the styles and fabrics.

Freed from the requirement to dress in business attire, Rohini LaVigne, who is in her mid-50s, began to wear mostly organic fabrics, like cottons and linens, and realized how much less agitating they were to her skin than synthetics. And as with Tariq, the muted colors of her old wardrobe don’t feel like they embody her spirit, at least not anymore.

“Now I feel a pull toward being authentic, being taken as truthful and legitimate,” she says. “I want to wear colors that represent who I truly am — yellows and oranges and bright canary reds.”

There is still the small matter of shopping. With two unvaccinated kids at home, she's not comfortable yet wandering into stores to try on options. So she's bought "a ton" of things online. And then sent the vast majority of them right back.

She made one recent purchase that she did find satisfying. A member of her local "Buy Nothing" group on Facebook, where people offer up items they no longer need, asked if anyone had a pair of used Torrid jeans to give away — her teenage daughter was returning to school and facing her own wardrobe challenges. Rohini LaVigne privately sent the woman a Torrid gift card so the girl could pick out a new pair of jeans.

"I just felt so connected to her daughter's need," says Rohini LaVigne. "And her daughter is in high school. The pressure must be so intense."

Even for adults the pressure can feel intense. And we certainly don't have our old shopping stamina. A typical session with Rothman generally clocks in around three hours. Now, she says, people are fatigued after two. "They're tired, they're thirsty, they're out of practice."

Out of practice — precisely. Out of practice with zippers and buttons and the specter of being seen by others in our full, three-dimensional forms.

It's enough to make you want to crawl back in bed. Where our vulnerabilities can only be unmasked in our dreams.

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What readers are saying

The comments reflect a range of perspectives on post-pandemic dressing habits. Many express a preference for comfort over traditional office attire, with some embracing casual wear like sweatpants and t-shirts as a permanent choice. Others discuss weight changes during the... [Show more](#)

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