

The Science Behind WFH Dressing for Zoom

October 07, 2020

Mina Khan, an information-technology consultant who's been working from home in Houston since March, tried wearing sweatpants and hoodies instead of the blouses and dress pants she typically wore to the office. It didn't work.

"Eventually I shifted to dressing the way I used to before because I realized it puts me in a better mental space when I'm working," says the 26-year-old.

It turns out there's actual science to back up that feeling. Researchers studying links between clothes, brain activity and productivity have long found that dressing up for work can improve your performance. Some are now turning their attention to how these factors play out in dressing for remote work and Zoom meetings—including the unexpected rise of the nice tops/schlubby bottoms combo.

The rise of video calls has added complexity to an area of research known as "enclothed cognition," or what signals clothes send to the brain, says Dr. Adam Galinsky, co-author of the pre-pandemic research that coined the term. "In some ways, the clothes that you wear might have an even bigger impact because we can often see ourselves and what we're wearing and that sort of draws that symbolic value [attached] to it even closer to our consciousness," he says.

His research, published when he was a professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management in 2012, [used white lab coats to test the impact of clothes on psychological processes](#).

In a series of experiments, subjects competed on attention tests. The first pitted a group wearing lab coats against a group wearing street clothes—those wearing lab coats performed better. In the second and third tests, one group was told the white lab coats were doctor's coats, another was told they were painter's coats and another wore street clothes while only looking at a white lab coat. In all tests, those who thought they were wearing doctor's coats had superior results. The research showed that the combination of wearing certain clothes and their symbolic meaning led to more focused attention, Dr. Galinsky says. "That theory has held up remarkably well."

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In other research, [a 2015 study](#) found that dressing more formally for work leads to the higher levels of abstract, big-picture thinking associated with someone in a powerful position. The study's co-author Michael Slepian, associate professor of leadership and ethics at Columbia Business School, is beginning to look at whether this still holds for people working from home. "There are a lot of good reasons the findings could still apply today," says Dr. Slepian. "All you need to do is just dress a little bit more formally than you would at home normally."

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