stress over your dress

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How important is your wardrobe to you? If you find yourself worried sick over your clothes, here's how to ease the pressure.

Does it take you at least an hour to pick an outfit for the average school day? Are you stressed out about wearing the latest fashions? Does your closet rule your life?

If you answered yes to these questions, you need to know that caring too much about your style can be harmful to your emotional health. It's true and here's why:

Teens feel pressure to fit in with their peers

"During the teenage years, trying to fit in with a certain crowd is at an all-time high," says Lisa Boesky, a psychologist and author of *When to Worry*, who is known as "Dr. Lisa." "Sometimes clothing helps distinguish different cliques at school. Therefore, clothes, hairstyles, and accessories teens 'try on' can often help them figure out who they are and who they want to be."

That's fine, but the bad news is that tormenting yourself over having the "coolest" sneakers or the "right" jacket in order to conform or fit in with a certain crowd can add unwelcome stress to your day.

Clothes do more than cover your body

What you wear says something about who you are, what your personality is like, and what activities you like to do. The truth is that people look at other people's outfits and make judgments about them. For instance, a person who always wears jeans with holes in them and shirts that are never tucked in will be consistently viewed by others as a sloppy dresser and a messy person.

"There is a certain amount of healthy attention kids should put toward their appearance because others judge us by the way we present ourselves—it is human nature to do so," says Tony Malinda, a licensed psychotherapist in West Los Angeles, California. "It also shows

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH? BUYING STUFF JUST TO HAVE IT ISN'T HEALTHY FOR YOUR MIND—OR YOUR WALLET.

"PEOPLE JUDGE YOU BASED ON WHAT YOU WEAR, ESPECIALLY IN HIGH SCHOOL. YOU WANT TO LOOK LIKE EVERYONE ELSE TO FEEL ACCEPTED. IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE BRAND NAME, PEOPLE WILL FEEL THE NEED TO PUT YOU DOWN OR MAKE FUN OF YOU."
—Yekaterina Kozlova, 17, of Brooklyn, New York

others how we feel about ourselves."

The problem comes when teens define themselves too much by their wardrobe. According to Diane Valentine, a Connecticut certified school psychologist and diplomate on the American Board of School Neuropsychology, being obsessed with style and image leads to emotional shallowness and fragility.

"It's unlikely that a teen can develop a sense of self, if their self-esteem comes from the closet," Valentine says.

She adds that criticism or pressure over clothes coming from peers deepens the problem. "Criticism from the peer group can also devastate some teens beyond what's normal and healthy," Valentine says.

So what's a teen to do? On the one hand, everyone—including adults—defines himself or herself in some way by their clothes. On the other hand, if you find yourself stressed out all the

time about your wardrobe, it's not good for your emotional health.

Here's the bottom line: You don't need to bend over backward to look good—and that means maintaining a healthy attitude when it comes to your wardrobe. Here are tips on how to be comfortably hip and fashionable—the cheap and practical way.

① Develop a style that suits you

Your teen years are the time to figure out how you want to be perceived. Part of that means developing an image that allows you to express who you are—not who others want you to be. But how do you do that? Boesky says one way is to "take a look at how others dress—celebrities, your parents, your friends—then take only the parts you like and add your own individual flair so that you look unique."

THE PRICE IS . . . WRONG. THE PRESSURE TO BUY THE "RIGHT" CLOTHES CAN DRAIN YOUR FINANCES.

MIXING AND MATCHING. IT'S NOT JUST THE CLOTHES; ACCESSORIES ARE CONSIDERED IMPORTANT TOO.

"I FEEL THAT NO MATTER HOW I DRESS, THERE IS ALWAYS GOING TO BE THAT ONE PERSON WHO WILL GOSSIP ABOUT IT. IT IS ANNOYING."
—Keshia Megie, 17, of Brooklyn, New York

True teen tip: Fashion is a great way to stand out," says Yekaterina Kozlova, a 17-year-old high school junior from Brooklyn, New York. "No matter how ridiculous or weird you may look, it's still fashion. Don't pay attention to what people think of you. Just be yourself, and wear clothes that you love."

2 Accept your limitations
Are skinny jeans an unflattering look for you? Do hoodies make you feel dumpy? Instead of trying to cram your body into an outfit that makes you feel awkward, figure out what makes you feel the most confident and go with that fashion look instead.

"If you have a strong sense of self and a healthy body image, you'll be less affected by the opinion of others and more satisfied with wearing what you feel like wearing," Malinda says.

True teen tip: "Sometimes I will see people wearing the same things as me, but I don't wear those clothes because others are wearing them,"

Lindsey Newman, 16, of Hudson, Ohio, says. "I wear them because they are comfortable and fit me well."

3 Experiment
Keeping up with the latest fashion trends isn't just hard work—it's exhausting. And sometimes, dressing like everyone else just makes you look, well, ordinary. Here's what to do instead: "Try redefining style in such a way that its new definition is 'creativity,'" school psychologist Valentine says. "Real style is looking great in an eclectic way—not running to a department store to gobble up their offerings just because everyone else is."

True teen tip: "My friends and I go by this quote, 'Weird is good. Normal people don't make it far.' In other words, dare to be different!" says Keshia Megie, 17, of Brooklyn, New York.

4 Don't break the bank
While your hot pair of designer Juicy Couture jeans might turn a few classmates' heads,

the fact that you spent $220 for them isn't just excessive, it's downright ridiculous. That's especially true at your age, when you should be saving more money than you spend. With thrift shops and discount clothing stores like Target and H&M, there's just no need to max out your—or your parents'—budget on overpriced clothing and accessories.

▶ True teen tip: "Shop at the right times," Lindsey Newman says. "I don't go shopping unless I have a coupon or the store is having a sale. I usually only buy things at full price if I have to have them."

5 **Strike a balance**
The key to controlling your closet instead of the other way around is to define yourself by what you wear *and* by how you feel about and react to the world around you. "If you're spending more time focusing on how you look instead of focusing on how you feel on the inside, you may end up looking great, but feeling pretty awful," Boesky says. "In the end, styles are going to change, but you will always be left with yourself. It's all about finding a balance."

▶ True teen tip: If you want to get a look that works for you, don't go all out," Taiwo Aka, 15, of Brooklyn, New York, says. "Just pick colors you like. Also, research what you want to buy before you buy it."

—Alexis Burling

OPTION OVERLOAD: TEENS FACE MANY OPTIONS WHEN BUYING MERCHANDISE.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 How important are clothes to you? Do you think you have a healthy attitude about your wardrobe? Why or why not?

2 How would having a budget affect how you buy clothes? How could a budget help your wardrobe? How could it limit it?

3 One of the teens in the article advises her peers to "dare to be different" when it comes to picking clothes. How can doing that help teens feel good about themselves? Can you go too far in daring to be different? If so, how far is too far?

TRY THIS

Visit the mall or go online. While shopping, pick out clothes that you really like and write down how much the clothes cost. Don't worry about the cost. Next, find the same outfit or similar clothes on sale, at a discount store, or at a discount on a Web site. Write down the cost of the second set of clothes. Then answer these questions.

1 How much money would you save if you bought the lower-priced clothes?

2 If you did the same thing for four other outfits, what is the total amount of money you would save? What could you buy with your savings that you would really want to have?

3 Would you be OK with wearing the discounted wardrobe, or would it be difficult to wear the clothes around your peers?