How to Keep Your Wits in the Fitting Room

Many women may identify with a moment like this: you spot a shirt or a skirt that looks perfect for you - and it's even in your size. Then you take it into the fitting room. Once there, you find that something is simply not right. Maybe a pair of pants fits you in the thighs and hips - but won't button at the waist. An Oxford hugs your waist and shoulders but puckers at the bust.

Don't despair. Fit is a complicated issue that often has more to do with manufacturing than you. Understanding these issues and separating from idealized body myths can help you acquire more flattering clothing - and keep you sane in the process.

Issue #1: I hate to shop; Nothing fits.
Reality: You're not alone. Underweight women (who account for less than 2 percent of the population) shop often and enjoy it. But according to a study by the Simmons Market Research Bureau, just 42 percent of obese women say they enjoy shopping, and 54 percent of normal weight women.

Many sizing problems stem from outdated measurements. It's

helpful to understand that the ready-to-wear clothing you find in the retail environment isn't made to fit today's real woman. Many manufacturers' clothing sizes are based on a 1941 survey of a small sample of Caucasian military women. Larger or smaller sizes were adjusted from the original "fit model" template without accounting for how bodies gain weight.

Sanity tip: Release the expectation that clothing should fit you right off the rack. Enlist the services of a skilled tailor to assure your purchases are suitably adjusted to your body. Plan tailoring into your wardrobe budget, and you'll find that a $150 garment, properly proportioned, can look like a million bucks on you.

Issue #2: I'm a 6 in this store and a 14 in another.
Each manufacturer implements its own sizing system. Also, certain manufacturers prefer to target a specific image and might not pursue larger or smaller sized shoppers. Some implement vanity sizing, making shoppers believe they wear a smaller size than they do. This can be confusing and frustrating for consumers, especially when apparel from several manufacturers is sold from one store.

Sanity tip: Enlist the advice of a trusted friend, or family member to offer feedback on whether a garment is flattering to you. In the absence of an acquaintance whose judgment you value, a professional image consultant can provide the expert and personal service to have you looking your best.

Issue #3: My dress looks different on me than on the model in the ad.
Effortless beauty is an illusion of the fashion and media worlds. Effective advertising is aspirational, and often shows an idealized world in an exotic locale. What's not visible is the team of people making that image happen for a one-moment-in-time snapshot.

Add to this the fact that models are chosen for the way they photograph - not for the way they represent the average woman. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the average American woman weighs 164.3 pounds, with the average height at 5'4". The average woman's clothing size is far from a model's 2. According to The American Society for Testing and Materials,

the average American woman is a size 16.

Sanity tip: Give yourself permission to shop without regard for the sizing tag. An attractive personal appearance begins with a positive body image. Focus on being healthy and fit, and confidence will follow irrespective of size label.

Issue 4: My friend and I wear the same size, but I'm 5'8", 150 lbs and she's 5'2" 115 lbs. How is that possible?
Manufacturers' sizing hasn't always accounted for body shape. However, that's beginning to change. In 2003, the research group Tc2 conducted a national sizing survey, scanning the bodies of more than 10,000 Americans. Scanning helped retailers understand the needs - and proportions - of their consumers. Through scanning at JCPenney stores, the retailer realized that 43 percent of its shoppers were pear-shaped, 33 percent were apple-shaped and 19 were rectangle-shaped. This resulted in fit options for pants that tapered at different points above, at, and below the waist.

Sanity tip: Before shopping, identify your body type. Is your shoulder and hip line in even alignment? Wider at the shoulders; narrow at the hip? Curvy with a highly-defined waistline? Once you know your body's natural silhouette, you can mindfully shop by body type at retailers whose clothing is designed to meet a range of proportions. If you find a particular retailer whose garments fit you well, stick with that store for a consistent and flattering look.

Issue 5: I won't purchase new clothes until I'm my ideal size.
There's a difference between size and fit. Two hundred years ago, there were no "sizes." Most clothing was custom made and fit perfectly. Sizes are arbitrary numbers that can be impacted by everything from industry guidelines, social research to marketing recommendations. A great fit will look neat and polished regardless of a manufacturer-assigned sizing number.

Sanity tip: Allow yourself to look your very best right now - at your current weight and measurements. Place the emphasis on proper fitting garments - sleeves that aren't too short, pant cuffs

that don't drag on the ground, and waistlines that don't gape or pull - all elements that present a favorable first impression.

Only your closet knows for sure. No matter the issue you relate to, remember that size is just a number. The people you meet will never know your size - but they will be impressed with a well-dressed person whose appearance is impeccable.

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