



"Each shade has a set of inherent positive and negative qualities, which have established psychophysical effects on us regardless of our individual preferences"

Some of them can immediately tell me what colour they are, though it's very few. But I've never met anybody who couldn't tell the difference between two colours."

Seeing red

According to colour psychology, each shade has a set of inherent positive and negative qualities, which will have established psychophysical effects on us regardless of our individual preferences. For example, red is energising, motivating and stimulating, but it's also angry, overbearing and aggressive.

Onto this base we add our own perceptions, which might be based on our culture (in the west, for example, black is the colour of death, while in the east people wear white to funerals) or our personal history.

"There's a yellow I love that reminds me of a car we would always go away on holiday in," says colour psychologist Karen Haller, who does personal consultations for fashion and home. "And I know someone for whom orange means holidays because she always flies with Easyjet."

"People will always react within the psychological parameters of a colour – red will never be calming and relaxing because that's just not the character of red – but you don't know exactly how, because there are subjective factors."

"One colour might make you feel great and yet I look at it and it really irritates me."

Karen is sceptical of prescriptive use of colour in a therapeutic context – there are simply too many variables to consider as each prescription is unique to the individual. "You get people who will say, 'If you're feeling down, wear something really bright.' To me that's dangerous; it's not necessarily bright colours you need, you need the right ones for you. What are the right tones that support how you want to feel and how you want others to see you? It's much deeper than just saying 'If you're not feeling happy, wear something bright and you'll feel better'."

Vanessa Volpe is an occupational therapist who presented the findings of her Colour For Wellbeing study at last year's national Colour Congress in Newcastle. Using a series of workshops and one-to-one sessions, she focused on raising colour awareness with a group of people with mild to moderate depression, and getting them to actively consider the use of colour in their lives to improve their wellbeing.

During the research, which was part of a wider study evaluated by the Mental Health Foundation, Vanessa asked the participants to consider the rainbow spectrum, exploring their responses to each colour before deciding how to apply this to their own lives.

KEY TECHNIQUES

Vanessa believes that although each colour has inherent properties, therapy must consider the individual if it is to be effective. In order to empower her clients, she uses questions and exercises to allow them to discover their personal relationship with colour, so that they can continue to use these skills long after she stops working with them.

The techniques are easy to apply, she says. "Start out with the idea of the rainbow – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Spend some time and imagine each of those colours within themselves, picture them in your mind. Get a sense of where you're comfortable and uncomfortable with these colours. That gives you a starting point of what ones make you feel what way. You might find, 'If I consider orange, I feel very lively' or 'Actually, I really feel uncomfortable with green'.

"Look around your house, your wardrobe, your curtains, your bedding, your flooring. What colours are there and what colours are missing? You start to see where there is balance and where there is imbalance. And so you can then start making changes."

Most importantly, remember to stay true to yourself rather than relying on the overly-simplified, non-personal formulas that some colour manuals might prescribe. "You need to know yourself," says Karen. "Know how you want to feel, how you want others to see you, and wear the colours and the tones of colours that suit you and your personality. Then you'll be radiant!"

Green light

"One lady was interested in clothing so she arranged her wardrobe in spectrum order to see what colours were missing," Vanessa says. "I was encouraging a balance. Once she had put the clothes in a spectrum order she could see what was there, and she bought clothes in new colours. People can explore a new part of their personality by doing this."

"Another lady went to art classes and got a lot more out of them because she felt more confident in using colour. Other people used it in their food and ate a greater variety of colour. One lady said she didn't like her home very much and now she feels much better about it since using colour differently – her house is more relaxed and comfortable."