

The Wardrobe Project



A YEAR
OF BUYING
LESS AND
LIKING
YOURSELF
MORE

Emma
Edwards

FOUNDER OF THE BROKE GENERATION

The
Wardrobe
Project





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WILEY

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For Doreen

My fantastic gran, who was never ashamed of having a visible underwear line, and who proudly wore her signature homemade chambray trouser sets, sternly replying 'well, I'm comfortable' to anyone who questioned her sartorial choices. I miss you more than words.

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'Your parcel will be delivered today'

... the text message says. I immediately begin counting down the hours, jumping out of my seat at every rumble up my driveway. Maybe that's the delivery bloke. Finally, a knock at the door. I skid on my socks to the front door and hold out my hands to receive the package from the postie.

Slamming the door shut after one too many choruses of 'thanks so much!', I pace to my bedroom and start tearing the plastic open like a lion devouring prey. The fucking tape won't tear. I get angry and stomp off to find the scissors.

I grab a kitchen knife instead. After hacking into the package, I lift out and unfurl a black dress. It's crinkled from being packaged up, and it doesn't look as nice as it did online. I slip the dress on, choosing to ignore the fact I'm wearing an ill-fitting bra and underwear that's cutting me up like a Christmas ham.

Staring into the mirror, I tilt my head to one side and sigh. The dress looks nothing like I hoped it would, but I can't work out if that's because my hair is messy and I'm not sure whether I brushed my teeth today, or if it's because one of my thighs alone probably weighs more than the model wearing it in the picture on the website. Or maybe the dress just isn't that nice.

I hear three chimes coming from the other room. It's my ten-minute calendar warning for my next meeting. I take the dress off, put it back in its packaging, contort myself back into my leggings and sit down at my desk. In my head is a weird mix of disappointment and justification that I can't

quite reconcile. I join my meeting and get on with my day, but it won't be long before the next shiny thing catches my eye and promises me the world.



Hello reader, and welcome to my brain. You might relate to this story. You, too, might be one of those people who has at one point thought a new piece of clothing was the answer to all your problems—or to a bad day, a crisis of confidence or the societal pressures that magnify our manufactured flaws.

Clothes have had a power over me for as long as I can remember. They'd always be the thing I'd want to spend my money on, and a cute outfit would be the first thing to derail my budget, even once I'd got most of my financial ducks in a row—the one behaviour that always tripped me up was wanting to buy a new outfit.

Fashion is weird, right? On the one hand, we need to wear clothes for warmth, just like we need to eat food to survive, but our relationship with these things is far from utilitarian. I'm certain a good burger can begin to mend a broken heart, and an online clothes order has dragged me through all manner of life's stressors, but we don't consume these things out of necessity.

A couple of years ago, I started to realise I was on a hamster wheel when it came to my wardrobe. I was always searching for the next thing, never quite satisfied with what I had, or the way my clothes made me feel. I was searching for something, and I was searching for it on a rack.

Curious as to why I could go from living my life perfectly normally one minute to punching in my credit card information with desire surging through my body the next, I started to really look at the way I was buying clothes and the feelings I had when I was buying them—and I didn't like what I saw.

I've struggled with my confidence and self-image in varying capacities my entire life, and I'd started to realise I used clothes as a way to buffer those emotions. Hated what I saw in the mirror? I could

buy something and feel better for a bit. Buying clothes felt like I was taking control, but really, I was fuelling the fire.

And this habit got expensive. I worked out I had spent thousands in one year on clothes—which might be fine if I felt good in what I was wearing, but I didn’t. I still lusted after outfits I saw on social media and longed for the day I finally looked the way I wanted to.

So I decided to conduct an experiment—one whole year without buying clothes. It was my attempt to change my relationship with clothes, and myself, step off the wardrobe treadmill, and stop relying on new outfits to feel any semblance of confidence in the way I looked.

This book contains everything I learned from interrogating my clothing consumption habits for a whole year, and what happened afterwards. Spoiler alert: I made it to the end, and I learned a heck of a lot along the way.

I learned so much that I created The Wardrobe Project—a movement aimed at getting women to stop looking outside of themselves for their style and confidence, and to find freedom with who they already are and what they already have.

The Wardrobe Project is now a book, a social media platform and a six-week behaviour change community program (thebrokegeneration.com/the-wardrobe-project-challenge) where we work on our clothing spending habits together.

This book will become your companion for navigating your own consumption habits when it comes to your wardrobe. Consider it a wise and witty (if I do say so myself) friend that tells you what you need to hear, without berating you or judging you.

It’s my hope that this book will help you identify patterns of unhelpful spending in your own life, step off the dopamine-powered hamster wheel of clothing consumption, and finally feel like you not only *have* enough, but that you *are* enough.

In this book you will find:

- ∞ month-by-month instalments of my own personal year without buying any clothes, including the realisations, the resistance, the breakthroughs and everything in between
- ∞ teachings about how to extract deep learnings about yourself from your own wardrobe, regardless of whether you're crackers enough to do the full year challenge yourself
- ∞ stories from real people who have gone through The Wardrobe Project group program and learned about themselves and their buying behaviour
- ∞ insights from a survey of 1500 women about their clothes-buying behaviour
- ∞ item reports, breaking down what specific items in my wardrobe taught me about my buying habits
- ∞ intention unboxings: deep dives into some of the granular reasons we find ourselves wanting to buy clothes, exploring what they mean for our relationship with our wardrobe and ourselves.

While this is a book about not buying, it is not a book about *never* buying. Make no mistake, you will not find me telling you to quit buying clothes altogether. I love a slappin' outfit as much as the next girl. But I want this book to scrub your mind of all the ways you've been *conditioned* to consume clothing—from emotional soothing and trying to be who you've been told to be, to retailer tactics, algorithmic advertising and our worsening addiction to dopamine. I want to create space for you to understand your buying patterns and rediscover the joy in your wardrobe and getting dressed. It's more than okay to enjoy clothes, but to fully do so, we have to learn to separate style from spending. When we do, it benefits our finances, our confidence and the planet.

This quote from Avery Trufelman from the podcast *Articles of Interest* comes to mind:

There is this myth that it's frivolous or unproductive to care about how you look. Clothing and fashion get trivialised a lot. But think about who, culturally, gets associated with clothing and fashion: young people, women, queers, and people of color. Groups of people who, historically, haven't been listened to, have expressed themselves on their bodies, through their style, their hair, their tattoos, their piercings and what they wear.

It's not wrong to want to look good or to find joy in clothing—it just needs to be on your terms, not via a standard that's been dictated to you by patriarchal capitalism that's profiting off your insecurities.

Oh and one final thing. This is not a fashion book. I am as far removed from the fashion industry as billionaires are from reality. You won't find me talking about runways and collections and designers and trends. This is a book about regular, schmegular style as a regular, schmegular person that will help you break free from the expensive ‘wardrobe treadmill’. This is also not a sustainability book, though the outcome of the shifts you'll experience after reading will certainly benefit the planet. More than anything, this is a book about taking back your power, changing the way you see yourself and breaking the cycle of outsourcing your identity to consumption.

Let's get started.

If you enjoy this book, head to www.thewardrobeprojectbook.com or resources on helping you start your own Wardrobe Project.

The chokehold of clothes

For as long as I can remember, clothes have been my ‘thing’. You might read that and think ‘okay, she’s into fashion’, but I wouldn’t really describe myself that way. I wasn’t ever particularly fashionable, nor would anyone describe me as a *fashion girl* in the way some people are. I was more so a product of the 90s and 00s ‘shopping’ culture. Shopping was a legitimate hobby for me back then, even if it was less high-end retail therapy and more rocking around my hometown with a fiver to spend on a studded black T-shirt from the sale rack.

I’d flip straight to the style section of my fave teen magazines, loving nothing more than those pages where the price and store would be named for each outfit. My mum tells one of her favourite stories about me when she took me to London for the first time when I was about nine. We lived about two hours away and I’d always wanted to go and experience the bright lights of a big city. Apparently, she pointed out Buckingham Palace and said ‘That’s where the Queen lives’, only to be met with my reply, ‘Okay, but where are the shops?’ At least I’d already decided I wasn’t into the monarchy, I guess.

To some degree, all of that could be put down to the consumerist interests of a girl in a small town without access to the ‘cool’ shops. Maybe I was just pulling a Kelly Clarkson, growing up in a small town and wanting to spread my wings and learn how to fly. If you know, you know.

But clothes continued to play a big role in my life and my identity as I got older. I came of age at a time when, broadly speaking, there were still ‘teenage’ sections in shops. Teenagers didn’t wear adult clothes. They wore outfits that were somewhere between adulthood and childhood, and were just watered-down versions of adult styles—you know, miniskirts but with embellishments just juvenile enough that you were clearly still a child. It’s wild to me nowadays seeing teenagers dress like a Grammy nominee just to go to non-uniform day at high school. Where are the hoodies and butterfly clips to match your blue train-track braces?! But, hey, I guess I probably wouldn’t trade my crimped frizzy hair for having to grow up in the age of smartphones and social media, so I’ll take it.

Anyway, there was something womanly to me about moving into adult clothes. Teenage ranges often capped out at age 14 or 15, and because I was always a bit on the chunky side, I probably moved into adult clothes a little bit sooner. This was where my relationship with the number on the label began. Fourteen years old, already indoctrinated into the cult of good sizes and bad sizes. Size 10: good. Size 12: Okay. Size 14: scary number. What happens after 14, you ask? Luckily my mum had those sizes covered. Size 16: mum’s good size. Size 18: mum’s okay size. Size 20: mum’s scary size.

And, no, sizes 6 and 8 do not feature in this tale because, and I can say this with absolute scientific certainty, there is not a day I have spent on god’s green earth that I have fitted into a size 6 or 8. Not even at birth.

So why am I yapping on about how much the size on the label mattered to me? Good question. I guess this paints an important picture about my relationship with clothes, and that distinction between being a fashion girl with a genuine interest in style and the art of clothing, and the girl I was: one with low self-esteem, a big ass for my age and a belief that clothes were my ticket to liking the way I looked.

The more I grew into adulthood, the more I relied on clothes to prop up my identity, my sense of self and my confidence—or perhaps it was more masking my lack of it.

In my mind, I could solve my problems by changing myself. If I'd been rejected by some guy I'd pedestalled as the best thing ever, it was probably because he didn't like the way I looked. Better get a new dress for the next night out. If I felt like I didn't fit in—which is something I've felt for most of my life—it was probably because I wasn't good enough. Better try extra hard to look *enough* tomorrow or try and be like that cool person I do deem good enough. If I admired someone, it was probably because I felt they looked better than me and exuded a confidence that I believed stemmed from that fact. Better go out and buy an outfit that makes me look like them.

There was something about the feeling of a new outfit that I loved. Something about the possibilities it presented, the way I could change how I perceived myself and, I guess, how others perceived me too. The important part here, though, wasn't the clothes themselves but the story behind them. Using clothing as a way to express yourself isn't, in itself, a bad thing—that's what fashion is meant to be all about, right? My issue was the fact that I felt broken somehow, that I had flaws I needed to fix, an undesirable body I needed to hide, and a performance I needed to put on.

Clothes felt like a costume I could put on to be someone else in an attempt to be anyone but me. Being able to change my costume meant I could change who I was. I would try to use clothing to be who I wished I was or to replicate people I deemed more worthy than me. What this meant was that I spent years and years escaping myself, trying to play dress up as someone else and forever living in this state of not only not being myself, but not knowing myself.

How this manifested in my life

Having this relationship with clothes and seeing them as a bandaid for my problems and my fractured sense of self meant shopping was a prominent part of my life and my personal finances. Before your mind jumps into 'confessions of a shopaholic' territory, picturing the classic female trope of trotting down the high street with bags stacked up each arm and a broken heart to match, that wasn't me. In fact, the

often-used female stereotype of a chaotic overspender who just needs to max out her credit card after a bad day is so far from the truth for most people.

No, my unhealthy relationship with buying clothes was much quieter than that. There weren't really big shopping sprees or designer bags. It was a deep-seated belief that clothes would make me feel better, and maybe, if I could just get it right, clothes would eventually make me good enough. The right outfit. The right capsule wardrobe. The right jeans that would make my tree trunk thighs look thinner. The right dress that flattened my belly.

I'd often fixate on certain items, feeling like once I'd seen them, I had to have them. Again, not because it was genuinely an amazing piece that I loved. No, it was much more sinister than that. The 'have to have it' compulsion came from the idea I'd be crafting in my head. The idea that this was finally it. Finally, the pair of jeans I'd been looking for. Finally, the trousers that didn't make me hate my legs. Finally, the outfit that would make me feel like I was Andy Sachs walking into the office in *The Devil Wears Prada*, turning heads with her new look that meant she was now worthy of being seen. Every shopping trip was some kind of opportunity for sartorial metamorphosis as I shifted between versions of myself trying to find confidence.

In my first book, *Good With Money*, I talk about a concept I call your 'creative director': an inner beast that comes up with the most extravagant stories and meanings about things in our lives and our finances. Mine directed a lot of plots about my clothes, too. In my head, I wasn't buying a pair of jeans, I was buying a new pair of legs. I wasn't buying a dress, I was buying a new body. I wasn't buying an outfit, I was buying a new personality. Standing in a store, a week out from payday and only \$37 in my bank account, all rational thought would fly out the window. I needed to have this thing. I'd either pull money from any savings I'd attempted to accumulate, or chuck it on a credit card and vow to pay it off next payday.

Then would come the promises of being 'done'. 'I'll just get this and then I'm done', I'd tell myself. But I was never, ever done. There

was always more. Always something else that gave me that feeling, that whisper of possibility. I could be a different person for \$54.99.

It was the same for much of my 20s, whether that was at university in the UK or living and working in Melbourne, Australia, where I ended up after starting a long-distance relationship with my now-husband.

While buying lots of clothes for nights out as a uni student isn't exactly a unique experience — after all, you're hitting the clubs multiple times a week, you *need* those poorly fitting satin dresses, right?! — for me, it was this underlying self-erasure that motivated so many of my clothing purchases. Because I felt so deeply, completely, truly less than other people, buying a new outfit simply became a cycle of normalcy. It was a way I accommodated that constant feeling in my life. Made room for it. Gave it a home in my brain and my bank statement.

That created a cycle. Feel crap. Buy clothes. Feel better. Feel crap again. Repeat. Now that sounds pretty bleak, but really, the quietness of it all, the way it was just so deeply embedded in the way I saw myself, meant it just went unnoticed. It was my normal and the normal of so many others too. And because we weren't talking a Carrie Bradshaw–style Manolo Blahnik addiction at \$400 a pop (we were talking fast-ish fashion purchases costing a few hours' pay at most), it became even easier to ignore. The amounts I was spending were, in isolation, so small that I didn't really consider the impact it would have on my finances, despite the fact my attempts to save were often trampled on by my latest insecurity and the new outfit I'd prescribed as a solution.

The effect of emotionally driven behavioural patterns on your bank balance is seldom discussed in depth in the personal finance world. In fact, that was a big reason I wrote my first book *Good With Money*, because breaking out of those behavioural traps was what finally helped me turn my finances around. My relationship with clothing was linked to my relationship with money but was also its own beast. I did a lot of work on my spending habits, which you can read about in *Good With Money*, but this co-dependency with clothes

really lingered. I'd gotten so much better from a financial sense but, ultimately, clothes were still my Achilles heel. While I wasn't spending money I didn't have anymore, nor chucking things on a credit card to deal with later, I was still always a victim to a great item of clothing. That connection between my relationship with myself and using clothes to remedy that was still there, lurking beneath my otherwise well-developed financial confidence.

The decision to turn it around

I think the fact that I'd made so much progress with my finances but still couldn't quite kick this clothing thing really came to a head in 2022. The two years prior had been spent bouncing in and out of lockdowns where I, like many people, bought clothes online despite having absolutely nowhere to go. Unfortunately, my affinity for red wine and cheeseboards during lockdown also meant that my waistline expanded with every day we spent inside, so most of the clothes I'd bought didn't even fit by the time I could actually wear them.

Then we hit 2022, the first year without a lockdown, which meant adjusting to what we came to call the 'new normal', and grappling with who we were after two years of life being somewhat on hold. I went into lockdown an ambitious, bushy-tailed 29-year-old and emerged a burned-out 31-year-old with more question marks about herself and the meaning of life than ever before.

I spent that year reinventing myself over and over again. Grappling with my new dress size and an ever-present craving for confidence meant I leaned on my enjoyment of buying clothes as an emotional soothing technique.

That year, I also went all in on my side hustle as a freelance writer and content creator, and I hoped that leaving a job I was struggling with would help improve my sense of self-image.

This change in career path and work normalcy sparked a change in identity and a craving to be successful that lent itself perfectly to my attempts to buy my identity. The job I'd left before going into self-employment full-time was a pretty toxic environment, and my confidence was left shattered for quite some time. That, combined with the identity shift of being newly self-employed and making this big bet on myself, plus the vulnerability that comes with going out on your own and not 'quantum leaping' (to quote my least-favourite girl bosses) to exponential success created a breeding ground for my clothes-buying compulsions to reactivate. Despite what the girl bosses will tell you, diving into self-employment is *tough*.

I've lost count of the number of times I've heard someone say, 'Once I quit my job and went all in, I was making three times my salary within the first year'. Yeah, didn't happen to me, gang. Still waiting for that magical day. I'll keep you posted.

I'd see other businesswomen in matching pink suits or minimalist beige outfits, and equate that to their success. If I looked the part, I'd be the part, right? I developed this belief that if I could dress the part, cosplay as the confident, knowledgeable, expert business woman, that would be the difference between adding up whether I'd made enough to cover my expenses that month and thriving in self-employment.

Safe to say I'd had enough of the hold clothes had over me. I was sick of always buying clothes and never having anything I felt good in. I knew I was too reliant on the dopamine of having an online order delivered, and I wanted to do something radical to change it. Enter: the idea for an experiment.

There were a lot of my behaviours in 2022 that led to me wanting to commit to a full year without buying clothes. Here are some of them:

- ∞ Several bursts of listing things online. Ahhh ... my favourite revolving door. I'd decide in some frantic surge of motivation that I was going to change my life and clear out my wardrobe because, of course, if I sell stuff online for a bit of cash I can use the fact that I'd cleared out space in my wardrobe as a solid

excuse to buy more stuff. Oh, and because I made some money selling the old stuff, it feels like it's free. Classic.

- ∞ I bought a Bella Freud striped red top in one of my many attempts at being the Pinterest-y capsule wardrobe girl. I thought, for some reason, that buying a fancy brand of yet another striped top would make a difference to the fact I was never going to look like that chic ideal. It didn't.
- ∞ My camera roll shows me how much I was clinging to this idea of wearing high-waisted jeans and a baggy preppy shirt because that was a style I loved so much on slimmer influencers and a couple of people I knew personally. The proportions are all off on me, and I never looked the way I wanted to, but that didn't stop me trying and trying to replicate the look!
- ∞ I bought a Zimmerman jumper at a sample sale that I didn't even want, but just wanted to buy something. Honestly, that has got to be one of my brain's great betrayals. Luckily, I sold it online for almost what I paid for it, but I honestly have no idea what I was thinking. Zimmerman doesn't even carry my size, so it didn't even fit right.
- ∞ I bought a matching blazer and shorts set from Country Road in *purple* (do not ask me why) and kept it even though it didn't feel quite right and I wasn't sure where I'd wear it. Janet from Footscray really lucked out on Facebook Marketplace the day I set that one free, let me tell you.
- ∞ I bought several items in green, which offered up a smorgasbord of mistakes. Firstly, I do not really wear green. I don't particularly like green. But, of course, that didn't stop me. I ended up with two green tops because I'd liked them in black, a green shirt because I'd bought it in pink (for the record, I don't like pink either) and a green dress because, drum roll please, they didn't have my size in the colour I wanted. *Give me strength!*
- ∞ I bought a pair of black wide-leg trousers that were a solid 6/10 (fine but nothing special), but I bought them because (ready?) they fit. Were they exactly what I wanted? No. Were

they available to me immediately? Yes. Bingo! That's all my brain needed.

- ∞ I bought an incredible red dress that I got from Net-a-Porter on sale, which was actually one of my better purchases as I still have it and still wear it. But to prove just how misguided I was at this point, after the novelty had worn off, I convinced myself I didn't like it anymore and tried to sell it. Sigh.
- ∞ I bought a pink cross-body bag, which, in and of itself isn't too bad (despite the small fact that I don't like pink), but I distinctly remember the weekend I bought it. It was one of those times I just wanted to *buy* something. I knew I shouldn't have bought it—not because it was expensive (I think it was \$38)—but I just had that craving to give someone money and get something in return. It now serves more as a piece of home decor than it does a bag, as it hangs on the end of my clothing rack, unused and unsold, despite its long-term listing on Marketplace. Spare a thought for it.

Basically, I was in a pattern of very clunky buying. I'd buy nothing for a while, largely by avoiding going to the shops or because nothing online triggered my desire to replicate the style of an influencer living in a loft apartment, then I'd buy several things at once, kind of out of nowhere. I got into the habit of ordering a few items at once online (which is really dangerous for racking up the notches of your total items purchased in a year, by the way). Something about the thrill of having several items in a package to tear open was so exciting to me. Multiple possibilities, a treasure trove of dopamine, so many chances to reinvent myself all packaged up into a squishy bundle lobbed onto my doorstep by a postie.

A lot of my purchases of this kind would happen when I shopped the sales. I was an absolute sucker for a really good sale. I'd find myself looking at one specific item, and thinking 'I'll just see what else is in the sale'. If the prices were particularly attractive, I'd then race through the site throwing things into my cart with reckless abandon, with more consideration for the price than the actual purpose of the

item in my wardrobe. That's how I'd end up with stuff in the wrong colour, or in a size that wasn't quite right but with a price tag I couldn't say 'no' to. Once I was done on my supermarket sweep-style binge, I'd open the cart, look at the total, maybe remove a few items until the price was something I could gag down, and then check out.

I came to realise that I've shopped this way for much of my life. Single-item purchases would drip money out of my account one by one, but I was often enamoured with the idea of a multi-item sale spree. Shopping in this way caused so many problems:

- ∞ I'd end up with stuff I hadn't thought through properly — accelerating my journey to regretville.
- ∞ I'd buy based on price or perceived saving, rather than whether it was what I actually wanted.
- ∞ I rarely said 'no' — I'd buy in a colour or a size that wasn't quite right, and vow to try and make it work.
- ∞ It would be more about the dopamine of the order arriving than actually building a wardrobe of things I could truly wear.
- ∞ It left me no room to understand what I wanted or needed in my wardrobe.

At one point in my life, I'd whack these kinds of splurges on my credit card for an extra layer of avoidance, but even when I'd got out of debt and sorted my money stuff out, I still found myself in the same emotional cycle of buying when it came to clothes.