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Is there such a thing as dressing for your age?

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In a world of Botox and age-defying cosmetics, where 40 is the new 30 and so on ... is there really such a thing as age appropriate dressing? There was a time when the rules were strict and rigidly observed: Women over a certain age didn't show cleavage or wear mini-skirts.

But these days, we are bombarded with images of celebrities, who at 40 or 50, look better than some of us did in our 20s. And with the appropriate diet, fitness and beauty regimens, more and more women are in a position to flaunt it past 40. Question is, should they? Or should they instead do something more elegant and conservative? Like so many style questions today, there is no hard and fast rule about whether women should dress a certain way over a certain age.

So, what are the rules and who gets to break them? Simply put, there are two schools of thought when it comes to age-appropriate dressing: Those who think if you've got it, go ahead and flaunt it, and those who prefer to scale back the sass and instead opt for something a little less brazen.

IF YOU'VE GOT IT, FLAUNT IT

Even Madonna, who we all know is fabulously fit, has toned down her style in recent years, choosing a wardrobe that sometimes looks like she borrowed clothes from Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. However, the Material Girl still exhibits her youthful leanings in her stage wardrobe. Always cutting edge in each extreme, Madonna is an extreme example of a more commonplace trend.

My local Starbucks is even frequented by such women. One particular middle-aged woman is usually dressed in the most cutting-edge of designer trends: Skinny jeans, moon-boots and midriff-baring tops. Although she's got the body to pull off these looks there is a palpable debate in the air when she comes in. I can see some people thinking "fair play to her" for maintaining her body and having the gumption to choose such youthful attire.

But there are those who shake their head and give the old desperado look. Is she trying too hard? Does she look like a cougar for flaunting her body at a more advanced age? The thing I like about her is that she isn't fazed by these reactions. Me? I start questioning my wardrobe if somebody so much as looks at me sideways, so I definitely could not carry it off. But she has the attitude, and that is perhaps as important as having the body.

AGE-APPROPRIATE STYLE

At the end of the day, what women of all ages want is to look fabulous. None of us want to look like a wannabe 20-something in a 40-something body (ahem, hi Cher). There is something about looking more elegant and poised in the autumn of your life; relegating those cheap, whimsical purchases to the past and going for a more mature, polished look.

In reality, few of us have the genes (or nip/tuck budget) to look like Demi Moore when we reach our 40s. So it's more common to let some of our more youthful accoutrements pass down to the next generation and instead adopt a more mature wardrobe. This is the "safe" approach to aging. Of course there are degrees here. You can adopt a mature wardrobe that is still edgy and innovative, like Diane Keaton, or you can set new standards in refinement like Helen Mirren.

So how do you ease your wardrobe into a more mature and elegant look without becoming an old frump? Well, the first step is to eliminate (donate to youthful friends or charity) any items that reveal too much leg, cleavage or midriff and also any items that are garishly bright. Bright colours can look cheap and can age a tired face. Instead, opt for more earth tones and neutrals. If you use colours, choose block colours (i.e. solids rather than bright patterns) and be careful not to put colours that are draining too close to your face.

INTEGRITY AT ANY AGE

Whether you're 20 or 70, you should work on finding a style that reflects your personality. Clothes are a social tool -- we have no need to dress up when we're alone. Clothing is a way of portraying yourself in the world, and the biggest mistake you can make is miscommunicating who you are or simply not doing yourself justice.

Many will latch onto the decade of their lives when they felt their best. So, for instance, you'll see many women out there clinging on to the vestiges of the 1980s when they felt they were at their peak. That is a sure-fire way to date yourself both mentally and esthetically. Instead, work on trying to capture the best possible you in the present tense, whether that's a woman who dares to bare or one who opts for a more ladylike elegance.