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Between Sizes

Not fitting in a ready-to-wear world

By Patricia Lynn Henley

*[Clothing sizes are] one of the ways the fashion industry uses to keep us in our place.—
Susan, 44, Sonoma*

Flip through the racks of clothes, pull out a few promising items, try them on in front of the merciless mirror of the fitting room.

And most likely, not much fits.

Shoulders too broad. Shoulders too narrow. Waist too broad. Waist too narrow. Hips and thighs—too broad, too narrow. Long legs. Short legs. Fat calves. Skinny calves. No calves to speak of. Most of us have a mental list of what's wrong with our bodies, the reasons why off-the-rack clothing doesn't match our individual physical realities.

We personalize the differences between our shapes and the available clothing choices, thinking there's something wrong with us because nothing fits. Eventually, most of us find ways of coping, but still we struggle with diet and exercise, trying to use self-control to make our bodies match what we think of as the standard sizes.

In fact, clothing sizes are a relatively new phenomenon, says Joan Jacobs Brumberg, author of *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* and a professor of history and women's studies at Cornell University. Traditionally, clothing was made at home or by professional tailors and dressmakers, based on measurements of the

individual who wanted the garment. Mass production of Civil War uniforms led to the first commercial sizing scales for men's ready-to-wear, but women's ready-to-wear took longer to develop. As late as the early 20th century, women still relied on home sewing and patterns that were adjusted to fit the wearer. That changed in the 1920s with improved mass-production techniques and national marketing efforts, as well as the rise of an urban middle class prepared to plunk down hard-earned money for the latest premade fashions.

"When clothes start to be sized by the clothing industry, you begin to think of yourself as a number. When domestic bathroom scales were introduced [after World War II], you have a weight—another number—to think about or worry about," Brumberg explains.

For women who struggle with self image and body shape, clothing sizes almost always enter into it, says Chynna Haas, support services coordinator for the University of Wisconsin Campus Women's Center.

"When we start talking about body image, we're always talking about how going shopping is always stressful."

She adds, "Modern women's fashion doesn't allow you to wear clothes that are actually flattering to your body type. It's for a body type that most women don't have. Women just kind of accept it for what it is. They try to find clothing that's flattering."

I don't really enjoy shopping because it is always a pain when nothing fits right. I have larger thighs—I always have—and so I must get pants to slip over my legs. When I zip up the pants and bend a little bit, the pants are hanging off my backside because the pant size is not right for my stomach. I usually end up having to get this larger, [and then] I risk my underwear always showing in the back. What's a girl to do? —Amy, 22, Novato

Gretchen, 38, of San Rafael, is trim, healthy, physically active, broad-shouldered—and she hates clothes shopping. "I was athletic from the day I was born, so I immediately had bigger thighs and at least one size difference top from bottom," she says. "I never wore dresses for the longest time, because I couldn't find any that fit up top and in my hips."

Gretchen says that it's not as bad now as it was when she was younger, because she's found specific clothing labels that tend to be made more for her body shape. It helps that many designers are making more separates, instead of pairing tops and bottoms in a single size. And Gretchen's income as a practicing attorney means she can shop for higher quality clothes than when she was a student, and they fit her better. But it's still frustrating to not be able to find the styles she wants in sizes that fit.

"I still want to look cute. I still want to be able to wear those cute clothes," she says. "I *should* be able to wear those cute clothes."

Being between sizes, she says, pretty much sums up her life. "No matter what, I'm always going to be between sizes because of the way my body is built. I'll always be a different size."

She adds, "I never wanted to be petite. I just wanted to be normal."

I don't think there are 'sizes.' I always try on at least two of anything, but the main thing is, no matter what the quality of the garment, if you try three of the same thing, same size, they will fit differently. Then across brands, there seems to be a different view on sizes, so even with a mail-order company that says they get manufacturing to their sizes, there's variety across items. It seems like irregular manufacturing is a bigger deal than being between a size that isn't really there except on the label.—Kathey, 62, Los Gatos

Most clothing manufacturers start with a "fit" model who has desirable measurements—usually in the middle of the size range—and then use a set of rules to grade up and down to create other sizes, says Jim Lovejoy, director of industry programs for the Textile Clothing Technology Corporation. This nonprofit has created a reference database of measurements from 10,800 people who were scanned with a three-dimensional body scanner. Unfortunately, the reality of all those measurements doesn't match with how clothing is often sized.

"The fit models are typically hourglass-shaped, and the majority of the population is not that hourglass. They're more of what we call a straight shape," Lovejoy explains. "You can't just add an inch to everything or two inches and make the next size, because as people get bigger, they're different shapes."

It's a challenge to fit everyone—perhaps an impossibility.

"Most apparel brands have a target audience and they'll look to service about 80 percent of that target audience," Lovejoy says. "The biggest and the heaviest and the smallest and lightest get left out."

Adding to the confusion is the fact that there is no official standard for clothing sizes. The government adopted one in 1958, but it was rescinded in 1983 because the typical American shape had changed significantly over the years. Having no official sizing standards lets companies set their own.

There needs to be an understanding that everybody's different. There's short people, tall people, medium-size people.—Gretchen, 38, San Rafael

Most female shoppers know that the more expensive the store, the smaller the size will fit them. It's called "vanity sizing," and it's evolved to the point that a garment that would have been labeled a size 12 in the 1950s or 1960s might be an 8 today. Some brands have switched to a size range that starts with 0 or even 00, allowing some women to proudly wear a size nothing—or a size double-nothing.

Even though many consumers might yearn for a mandatory sizing system employed by all manufacturers, few would be happy if that resulted in them wearing a larger-numbered size. Most apparel companies aren't willing to risk offending their customers, so they resist the idea of industry-wide sizing standards.

Plus, many clothing manufacturers have invested in research and development to create their sizes and don't want mandated standards, because they believe that what they've developed over the years is best for their target market and they're reluctant to share that proprietary information.

"In some cases, they spent a lot of money developing their product, so they don't want a cheap import to fit as well as something they might be selling at Nordstrom's," Lovejoy says.

The good news is that several companies are funding research of their customers' actual sizes and are adjusting their products to better accommodate reality. There is now a wider range available, including different sizes of children's clothing and brands targeted at larger women or the changing shape of those over age 55. High-tech companies are eager to develop the market, and assist apparel makers in fitting a greater variety of consumers.

"There's a lot going on in technology," Lovejoy adds. "It's not perfect yet, but there's a lot going on."

Every now and then, my figure comes into fashion, and then I shop enough to get me through the lean times—like now. All the pants—slim-cut, low-waisted, what we used to call 'hip-huggers'—make me look like a bowling pin with my shirt tucked in, which is how I like to wear it. An untucked shirt is OK for some things, but not really my style, and I'm way past the bare midriff stage of life! —Lara, 54, Sacramento

Susan, 44, of Sonoma, remembers always having to hike up her pants when she was in middle school and high school. Money was tight, and at least a portion of Susan's wardrobe consisted of hand-me-downs from older, differently shaped girls in her neighborhood. But even when the family budget let her buy new things, it was hard to find something she liked.

"I hated shopping, because I couldn't find things to fit me," she says, making a familiar refrain. "My waist was too little and my hips were too big."

At times, going to school was a trial.

"The days when I could wear something that fit, I did feel better."

Now a single mom and a registered nurse, Susan says that one of the ways she's coped with feeling "between sizes" is to develop her own personal style: a sense of the ridiculous. Her hobby is clowning, so she's adapted that aspect in her everyday wardrobe. Whenever possible, she wears brightly colored and clearly mismatched socks. Her nursing tunics are covered with comical prints, the more colorfully outrageous the better. Accessories tend to be whimsical, with a dash of the happily extreme.

"It's easier for me to wear ridiculous things, because then the pressure's off. I don't have to worry if things fit," Susan says with a laugh. "I've been able to nail the ridiculous look, and to do it consistently."

It's her way of coping.

"I can succeed at it and it's fun and I get a little attention. It fits me on many levels."