



the  
**RAINBOW**  
connection

WE'VE LONG BELIEVED CERTAIN HUES CAN INSPIRE JOY (HELLO, YELLOW) OR CALM (NICE TO KNOW YOU, BLUE). BUT OUR REACTIONS ARE ALSO INTENSELY PERSONAL. HERE'S HOW TO HARNESS THE MOOD-LIFTING POWERS OF YOUR FAVORITE SHADES.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY mitchell feinberg

**Y**OU MAY HAVE FELT A BURST OF JOY upon seeing a vase of blazing sunflowers, been lulled by a hotel room's not-a-care-in-the-world neutrals, or experienced awe as the fleeting magic of a rainbow graced your neighborhood. If so, you know intuitively that colors evoke intense emotions. "We feel color deep in our bones," says Luanne Stovall, who teaches color and design at the College of Fine Arts at the University of Texas at Austin. "Color helps us make sense of our world."

Yet while color may be all around us, its hold remains mysterious. For centuries, artists and philosophers have grappled with how to harness its emotional power. In 1810, the poet and artist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe penned his ambitious *Theory of Colours*, an early attempt to link colors with the feelings they elicit. (He would have been a tough interior designer: "A yellow-red cloth disturbs and enrages animals. I have known men of education to whom its effect was intolerable.")

In the past decades, scientists have been trying to explain color's emotional effects. One theory: Early in our evolutionary history, color was a matter of life and death. Humans can distinguish millions of shades, which helped our long-ago ancestors discern the blush of a potential mate, the sparkle of thirst-slaking water on the horizon, or the pallor of illness descending on a loved one. Whether our evolutionary past hardwired us to respond to certain colors in specific ways has been the subject of much study (and urban legend). But the findings are often contradictory or inconclusive, says Bevil Conway, PhD, an expert on the neuroscience of color at the National Eye Institute.

For answers, scientists are now focusing on how the qualities of a color affect our emotions. Its brightness (how light it seems) and saturation (how intense the pigment is) may have more influence on mood than its hue (what it's called in the crayon box). A 2017 study in *Psychological Research* found that colors with higher saturation boosted people's heart rate, for example.

NOT READY TO GO  
FULL-THROTTLE  
PIPPY LONGSTOCKING?  
SNEAK COLOR INTO  
UNOBTRUSIVE SPOTS.

## WHY GLITTER IS IRRESISTIBLE

Adding bling to phone cases, bedecking Dorothy-worthy shoes, even getting swirled into margaritas: Glitter seems to be everywhere. Why are humans so attracted to its sparkle?

Our love for the shiny stuff goes way back. "Ancient Mayans were said to have used mica to decorate their temples to create glittering surfaces," Lee says. "Glittery things scatter light. We're drawn to light, and these little shimmering clumps reflect it in a natural way." Light bounces off glitter with the same transfixing irregularity of sun off waves, captivating our attention.

Of course, we also feel joy because we associate glitter with opulence and celebration, Lee says. (Christmas decorations, birthday parties, princesses!) So sprinkle it around, but opt for an eco-friendly version—the plastic variety may take about 1,000 years to biodegrade.

One reason humans' responses may resist simple color-coding: Our personal experiences play a huge role. "Our preferences are often based on our associations. Research shows that people like colors based on how much they like the objects they connect with those colors," says Karen Schloss, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. (Blue is popular, she explains, because it's associated with good things—the sky and the ocean. Brown is typically less favored because of its connection to substances like feces.) Context influences your feelings too. "Red is often associated with anger, but I personally feel happy when I look at the red stools in my kitchen," Schloss says. Our reaction to a color may be rooted in vivid childhood memories, Stovall adds. So while gray might seem dishwasher-dreary to many, if it was the shade of your beloved childhood tree house, it may delight you.

Ultimately, the way to enhance your mood with color may be both simple and liberating: Notice which colors move you, then splash them around. Western culture tends to avoid the bold colors that are most enlivening, says designer Ingrid Fetell Lee, author of *Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness*. We default to neutrals, like beige ("yellow with all the joy sucked out of it," as Lee calls it). We may worry that using lots of color will seem unsophisticated—like a child let loose with markers—or we may not know where to begin. "But there are ways





to gain color courage,” Lee says. Start taking small steps to brighten your life with color. Add a riotous pillow to a drab corner, or don a purple scarf on a blah day. “Even one splash of color can have a powerful effect on how you feel and on the energy you bring into your day,” Lee says. Here’s some inspiration.

### use color for joy

“When I walk down the street wearing bright pink or blue, people react to me differently,” Lee says. “They smile more. I smile back. It’s a virtuous circle. Color becomes a way to connect with other people.” For a decade, she’s been researching the “aesthetics of joy”—the idea that the qualities of physical objects can spontaneously elicit delight. “The liveliest places and items have one thing in common: bright, vivid color. Think of festivals, holidays, confetti, ice cream sprinkles.”

Yellow is an undeniably happy color. “It animates and reflects light,” Lee says. “We associate brightness with cheer, and our language reflects it: ‘Look on the bright side.’ But any hue can be joyful as long as the saturation and brightness are high enough.” A 2018 study found that across cultures, humans connect bright colors with positivity.

Lee also loves brave combinations. “We know palettes with a lot of different colors can create a particularly abundant feeling of joy.” Consider rainbows, a row of sherbet buckets, a handful of neon highlighters. One hack: Ask yourself, “WWFD?” (What would Frida do?) Look at Kahlo’s or other artists’ exuberant works for color-combination inspiration, she says.

Not ready to go full-throttle Pippi Longstocking? Sneak color into unobtrusive spots. “Tuck a bright color behind a door or inside a drawer. I have yellow cabana stripes in the back of my closet,” Lee says. Or start small with consumables—put turquoise candles on your dining table, or change up the flowers in your vase when you need a lift. “These little surprises can delight you and help you get more confident using more color.”

### use color to energize

In the New York City offices of the design and architecture firm Spacesmith, natural light pours in from windows that offer sweeping harbor views. The walls in the main office gleam clean white. But in the hallways, there are unexpected bursts of color. “We call it ‘New York City parking ticket orange.’ It acts like a shot of espresso,” says Ambar Margarida, a principal at the firm.

It’s a bold example of how highly saturated colors can be instantly stimulating. Margarida experiences energizing color when she visits her native Puerto Rico. “The trees and flowers are so vibrant. It’s uplifting,” she says. At home in her apartment, a huge photograph of a green parrot, wings spread, hangs above her sofa.

Red is another go-to for energy. Studies have shown that viewing it improves alertness and athletic performance. The color of blood, fire, and lips, it rivets us: “It’s the most salient color out there,” Conway says. While warm colors, like red and orange, are classic energizers, “any bright color—red, blue, green—will be arousing when you use a lot of it,” notes Jill Morton, director of the International Color Research Institute in Honolulu.

One shot of espresso may be a pick-me-up. A whole pot can make you jittery. So add energizing colors in small doses. “It could be overwhelming to work in a bright orange room all day,” Margarida says. Use it in a vestibule, suggests Sally Augustin, PhD, an environmental psychologist. Paint the wall across from your dumbbells red, she adds: “It can give you a burst of strength every time you lift.” Or paint just one wall in your home office a bold color and swivel toward it when you need a boost.

### use color to calm

Mitra Silva, a Los Angeles–based designer of medical offices, draws on color to create what she calls “healing spaces.” She aims to help patients and staff feel relaxed and confident. Her designs look more like hotel lobbies or spas than traditional medical rooms.

To produce a peaceful vibe, Silva recommends using a pastel palette. “Pastel colors are muted, calming energies,” she says. Soft blues can work well. “Nature is healing, so bring that mood into the space. Blue is associated with the sky on a clear day, the ocean.” Adding the green of live plants can reduce stress as well.

Of course, too much subdued color can be depressing. “If you have several shades of blue in a room, use a little accent from across the color wheel, such as marigold, for contrast,” Margarida suggests.

When you’re designing a tranquil space, like a bedroom, Morton recommends considering where you find peace—think of “a favorite memory or place to vacation,” she says. Coral may remind you of lying on the beach.

### use color to rejuvenate

Changing the colors around you can be transformative. The New York City nonprofit Publicolor, a youth development program, works with underserved schools and recruits high-risk students to help paint the schools in exuberant colors: yellows, oranges, turquoises. Students who participate have higher attendance and graduation rates and fewer discipline issues, according to research cited by the group.

San Francisco artist and interior designer Lauren Geremia believes changing up your colors can give you a fresh start too: “A good reason to repaint is if you are going through a big life transition. Perhaps you are going through a breakup and want to redefine your space.” Geremia will sometimes start with monochromatic schemes, painting the walls and ceiling the same color. “It gives a cohesive feel.” To this clean canvas, add some colorful trim or “portable” color—picture frames or pillows you can switch around. She likes framing beautiful wallpaper inside floor-to-ceiling panels. Follow your fancy and go big and bold. “People hesitate to make changes, but you can always do it over,” Geremia says. “It also takes a lot of energy to want to do something and never do it.”

## WHY BLUE IS THE COLOR OF 2020

We launched a new decade in 2020 feeling very blue. When six major brands released their color of the year, half were a variation on classic dark blue. It can be a reassuring color for a tumultuous time, according to Morton. “Blue is a stable anchor in the storms that surround us,” she says. “The world may feel uncertain, but the dark blues of the evening sky and ocean depths are reminders of nature’s cycles. It is the blueness of stability.”

