



Resilience Wardrobe: An outfit for coping with challenges

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Abstract

This practice-based paper introduces “Resilience Wardrobe”, a narrative therapy exercise that uses wardrobe and outfit metaphors to support externalising conversations, concretise emotions through sensory detail, and invite the thickening of preferred identity stories. The practice was developed collaboratively by the authors and implemented across five individual and three group sessions (N=33; ages 18 to 45) conducted online and in person. The practice unfolds in three movements: (1) a brief “real wardrobe” warm-up; (2) an “imagined wardrobe” to scaffold values, hopes, relationships and cultural meanings through colour, texture, scent and sound; and (3) an “imagined coping outfit”, which may be animated to speak from a preferred position. An optional final step invites drawing/naming and selecting a low-cost “trace” (e.g., colour token, scent, song, small object) to keep the preferred meanings close in daily life. The paper describes two individual sessions and one group session. Across sessions, participants took up the metaphor in varied ways: through garments, environments, rest, ritual, modesty, spirituality and migration histories. Implementation notes emphasise keeping the warm-up brief, spending time in sensory scaffolding and garment “voice” when useful, and pivoting to environment/ritual when clothing metaphors feel distant. The practice is offered as a low-resource narrative scaffold that can be adapted to participants’ own meanings rather than applied towards predetermined outcomes.

Key words: metaphor; externalising; young women; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy

Narrative therapy practices have often drawn on metaphors to externalise problems and strengthen alternative stories. For instance, the “Team of Life” metaphor has been used to support young people in re-authoring their lives in collective contexts (Denborough, 2008). In a similar way, the wardrobe metaphor we have developed expands the possibilities of externalising by linking clothing and identity in ways that are culturally resonant for the young women we work with in Türkiye. In this paper we introduce a metaphor grounded in everyday practices of clothing and fashion, which supports therapeutic re-authoring through culturally situated meaning-making. By situating identity reconstruction within familiar cultural symbols, the wardrobe metaphor offers both accessibility and creativity for participants. While narrative therapy has been applied in diverse cultural contexts, there remains a need for innovative practices that resonate with participants’ lived experiences and cultural expressions. This article responds to that need by presenting the “Resilience Wardrobe” practice, which combines the therapeutic strength of narrative questions with the symbolic richness of clothing and fashion.

Narrative therapy seeks to separate people’s problems from their identities. Instead of seeking what is “lacking” or “wrong” in individuals, it enables them to discover their strengths and preferences (Morgan, 2022). It helps people rewrite their life stories, cope with their problems and develop new perspectives (Russell & Carey, 2020). Narrative therapy encourages clients to apply their own knowledge rather than relying on external expert perspectives (Kaldor, 2020). The experiences and values of young women are filled with elements that can empower them during difficult times, yet they await rich description. In line with Kaldor’s (2020) school-based narrative work, we sought to foreground preferred identity statements through culturally resonant documents and metaphors.

Origins of the idea

In Safranbolu (a district connected to the university city of Karabük in Türkiye), many young women live away from their families as students or early-career adults. Local youth and cultural centres often function as informal sites of support. When staff from one of the centres relayed interest in a psychology workshop, the first author circulated a brief online questionnaire via the centre’s WhatsApp group asking the centre users what topics they would like to explore. Responses included stress coping, self-esteem, boundary-setting, self-knowledge, gender dynamics, discipline, emotional management and spirituality; “coping with stress and difficulties” was most frequently requested. The “Resilience Wardrobe” practice was developed collaboratively by the two authors in response to these themes. The wardrobe metaphor emerged from everyday conversations at the centre where clothing and style were common topics.

The Resilience Wardrobe practice and question set were refined through repeated use in individual and group applications. The practice was conducted in five individual and three group sessions with 33 women (aged 18 to 45), mostly university students seeking psychological empowerment and ways of coping with challenges. Sessions were held online and in person.

This practice is offered as a scaffold rather than a prescriptive method: participants may take it up through garments, textures, scents, environments, rituals, rest or other personally meaningful anchors.

The Resilience Wardrobe practice

Participants are invited into three movements, followed by a brief consolidation:

1. real wardrobe description (warm-up)
2. imagined wardrobe description (scaffolding values, hopes, relationships through sensory detail)

3. imagined “coping outfit” for difficult moments
4. consolidation: drawing/naming and selecting a small “trace” to recall preferred meanings in daily life.

Resilience Wardrobe questions for each movement

Real wardrobe description

- Do you ever spend time in front of your wardrobe?
- Generally, what do you feel when you stand in front of your wardrobe?
- What do you pay attention to when putting together an outfit?
- Why do you think you pay attention to this? (Could it be related to your personal history, cultural context or social expectations?)
- Do you love your wardrobe?
- What would make you love it even more?

Imaginary wardrobe description

- If you could have a wardrobe exactly the way you’d like, what would it look like?
- Would it be a large wardrobe or a small wardrobe?
- What kinds of clothes would you imagine inside?
- When you open it, what colours stand out to you?
- Is there a scent you notice? What does it remind you of?
- When you touch the clothes, what textures do you feel? Do these textures connect to any memories or feelings?
- Why do you think these colours, scents or textures matter to you? Do they remind you of values, hopes or relationships that are important in your life?

Imaginary outfit for overcoming challenges (coping outfit)

- When you think about a difficult time,

what kind of challenges or problems were you facing then? How did those challenges affect you?

- If you were to choose an outfit that made you feel good, what kind of outfit would it be?
- Do you have this outfit in your wardrobe?
- Does this outfit have a story? (When did you get it? Where did you see it? How did you come to buy it?)
- What scent is present?
- What kind of texture do you feel?
- Would you like to go somewhere or do something in this outfit? (Where would you go? What would you do? What would you say?)
- If this outfit could say something to you, what would it say?
- How did this outfit make you feel?

Consolidation

- Can you think of a small thing you might do to remember this outfit in a hard time? It could remind you not only of the good feelings but also of your strengths, the people who support you, or the values that matter to you.

In the final step, participants choose a small action or object to help recall the exercise in daily life. If participants want suggestions, practitioners may offer low-cost options (e.g., a colour token, scent, song or a small accessory) while keeping the choice with the participant.

In group sessions, drawing can support externalising by making the “coping outfit” visible and shareable. As participants respond to one another’s drawings, meanings may be elaborated collectively, supporting the thickening of preferred stories (White, 2007). Narrative practice aims to open space for alternative stories that stand in contrast to dominant problem-saturated narratives (Morgan, 2022). Questions about coping outfits encouraged participants to articulate preferred stories of strength, creativity and dignity.

This paper shares examples of individual practice with Zerrin and with Nur. The conversation with Nur shows how the outfit metaphor may be used in a goal-focused manner when participants are navigating difficult life experiences, including loss. We also share an example of a group session with nine women.

Individual conversation with Zerrin

In an online session (~30 minutes), the first author worked with Zerrin (31 years old). The conversation began with Zerrin's current wardrobe and the meanings she associated with it. Zerrin described her wardrobe as "in transition", holding a tension between past versions of herself and an evolving self-image. She wished for more colour.

Zerrin explained that she often chose black to avoid unwanted attention, particularly in contexts where hijab signalled both religious identity and modesty. Over time, black had become her default even in women-only environments. A recent experience with a navy sweater illustrates the relational meanings clothing can carry. Although she liked the sweater, Zerrin decided not to wear it, saying, "It was too elegant for them ... 'you are not worthy of this'". Moments like this may provide openings for questions about how clothing choices can be shaped by anticipated judgements and social positioning.

The conversation moved to an imagined wardrobe without constraints. Zerrin described a wardrobe "in the clouds" with floating racks, garments that change colour and form, soft lighting, floral or ocean scents and comforting fabrics – particularly cotton and honeycomb textures.

Next, Zerrin recalled a difficult experience: visiting her in-laws for the first time after marriage. In that moment, she would have chosen a loose, monochrome outfit of breathable material, free from restrictions. The colour would shift from navy to turquoise, inspired by the sea. She described a rosewater scent and the sound of waves as part of the emotional landscape tied to this outfit.

From a narrative perspective, these detailed sensory descriptions offered entry points to explore what Zerrin valued and hoped for in relational situations. In addition, these details can be understood as thickening an alternative story grounded in calmness, authenticity and relational presence – resources that may be available to her in future moments of difficulty.

When asked what the outfit would say if it could speak, Zerrin responded: "Be yourself. Stay calm." She said the outfit would help her feel less alone and more grounded. She named the garment "Wavekeeper". Rather than drawing, Zerrin wrote a description and attached it to her wardrobe.

Individual conversation with Nur

This individual application illustrates how the Resilience Wardrobe practice can be used in a goal- and value-oriented way when a participant is seeking steadiness, connection or comfort in a difficult moment. While the context here included loss, the focus remained on the participant's preferred meanings and practical steps that helped carry those meanings into daily life.

Nur was a 23-year-old university student studying translation and interpretation. She was living in Istanbul with a roommate; her family lived some distance away in Elbistan, Maraş. As an adolescent, Nur had received cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety. Our session took place approximately two-and-a-half years after she survived the 6 February 2023 earthquake in Maraş and lost a close friend.

Emergence of the grief

Nur: I went back to a period of time I experienced. As I just said, my family lives in Maraş, so I went back to the time of the earthquake. I was there during the earthquake. I am in that moment right now, actually not exactly at the moment of the quake but a week or two afterwards.

Şeydanur: Okay. Which part feels especially difficult when you think about it?

Nur: I had losses.

Şeydanur: Who did you lose?

Nur: I lost my friend.

Şeydanur: Would you like to talk a bit about your friend? This relates to your grief.

Nur: I don't think there's really anything I can say.

Şeydanur: I mean, would you like to tell me a bit about your friend?

Nur: I had known her since middle school. We were also distant relatives. I had known her for so many years. We were close. We didn't see each other all the time, but when we did, it was like those friends you don't need to see constantly but always feel connected to. I lost her.

Şeydanur: May she rest in peace.

Nur: That part was very hard for me. Because it was the first time I had lost someone. It was the first time I had experienced such a feeling. Thank you. May God bless you. Hopefully.

Şeydanur: That must have made it especially hard. What does this difficulty tell you about your relationship with her?

Nur: Well, what happened is this: during the earthquake, it didn't occur to me to message her. In fact, it wasn't the first quake but the second one when she was trapped under the rubble. I keep thinking I wish I had messaged her after the first one to ask how she was. That part was hard [pauses, eyes fill with tears]. And she had a twin. Thinking about that also made me feel awful, because living your whole life together and suddenly losing one of them must be incredibly hard.

Şeydanur: Do you talk to her twin, do you see her?

Nur: I saw her a little after the earthquake, then I didn't.

Şeydanur: How did it feel to see her?

Nur: At that time, I knew there was nothing I could do, but I just wanted to show her that someone else shared the same grief. I knew I couldn't do anything. If I was this devastated, losing her own sister would have been countless times harder. But I just wanted her to know that there were people around her.

Bodily representation of grief: The outfit metaphor

Şeydanur: If you were to imagine an outfit that could bring you comfort in this, what would it look like?

Nur: It would be a soft, thick, plush sweater in yellow, blue and green. It would smell like an old cedar chest.

Emergence of an alternative story

Şeydanur: If this sweater could speak, what would it say to you?

Nur: It would say, "It's going to pass. The pain won't stay as fresh as it is now".

The metaphor became a vehicle for a new story. The message "It's going to pass" reflected how Nur was relating to the sweater as a source of comfort in that moment.

From words to touch

Şeydanur: Is that really what you would need, or might it be something else?

Nur: Actually, not words – I would want a hug. A hug would help more.

A symbolic bridge for remembering

Şeydanur: What might serve as a reminder of this feeling when you feel challenged in your daily life?

Nur: Maybe a small plush keychain in blue, green and yellow – something I can carry with me.

Nur's account centred on her experience of loss following the earthquake and included expressions of regret: "I wish I had texted her". Rather than treating these expressions as defining, the conversation stayed with how Nur was relating to her loss and to the people affected by it, particularly her emphasis on "being around" for others who were grieving.

When Nur described wanting a hug rather than words, this need was taken up through the metaphor of an imagined garment. The sweater came to represent a form of closeness and comfort, allowing Nur to speak about grief in embodied and relational terms.

In this way, the garment functioned as a symbolic point of reference through which Nur could express connection, care and continuity. Rather than resolving grief, the metaphor created space for it to be held and spoken about differently.

This example illustrates how narrative practices may draw on metaphor and externalisation to support conversations that connect emotional experience with relational meaning, without defining the person through the problem or prescribing particular outcomes.

Participant reflection on practice

Şeydanur: I'm curious – what does this sense of comfort, and the outfit you chose, say about you?

Nur: Yes. It's like watching from a distance.

Şeydanur: So, could we say it creates a space? Watching from a distance, following without overwhelming, but still being there when needed – even embracing. Does that remind you of anything in your life?

Nur: My family did something like that. They watched from afar, and it made me feel comforted.

Şeydanur: What might this say about you, your relationships or how you cope?

Nur: It was helpful. It helps a person discover their own resources. Everyone's difficulty and source of strength is different. That's why it was helpful: it showed me the difficulty first, then the source.

This dialogue offers valuable insights into how the participant experienced the practice. Nur's reflection that the exercise "helps a person discover their own resources" aligns directly with a core principle of narrative therapy: the person is the expert on their own life.

Group session

The first two group sessions were conducted with young Turkish women. The third group session involved a culturally diverse group of female university students. The nine participants were from Myanmar, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Mauritania, Syria, Turkmenistan and Türkiye, with ages ranging from 17 to 28. The whole Resilience Wardrobe practice was completed in approximately 90 minutes.

The session began with a brief introduction to narrative therapy and moved to everyday clothing preferences and what shaped participants' choices. Starting with ordinary topics appeared to support engagement.

In the imagined wardrobe phase, participants described wardrobes without material limitations and elaborated on sensory elements such as shape, colours, scents, textures and sound. While some accounts focused on feelings, participants also linked clothing to values, relationships and cultural-historical contexts. For example, one participant associated her father's clothing with protection during war, connecting to family ties and collective memory. Others emphasised values such as modesty, formality or success.

In the coping outfit phase, participants recalled a difficult moment and described a garment that

could have supported them then. One described a lucky pink T-shirt for exams; another described wearing her father's shirt for security. Some emphasised solitude and sleep, describing soft, clean pyjamas as meaningful during hardship. Participants then named and drew their garments. While drawing, participants continued to add textures, colours, scents and sounds and shared reflections about how the metaphor connected with who they hoped to become.

Lessons learnt from the application

Metaphors enable the rewriting of life stories

Clothing served as an entry point into stories of luck, comfort, habit, protection and embodied coping. A conversation with Ms Sare (20) made this visible.

Sare: I have a T-shirt that I always wear during exams, especially finals. It's pink. I also wear light-coloured pants. I wear them often, almost every day. These clothes exist in my wardrobe. I don't know why I wear them – I just do.

Şeydanur: How do they make you feel?

Sare: Comfortable.

Şeydanur: Do these clothes have a story?

Sare: Well, I started wearing them for exams, and when I did well in an exam, I continued wearing them for good luck.

Şeydanur: So, they became lucky clothes for you. Since when have they been lucky?

Sare: Since my first year of school – my first year of university.

Şeydanur: Do they have a specific scent?

Sare: I don't know. My own scent. My perfume.

Şeydanur: What perfume?

Sare: A sweet fragrance.

Şeydanur: What about their texture? How does the T-shirt feel?

Sare: It's cotton. Plain pink. Just a simple cropped T-shirt.

Şeydanur: If these clothes could talk, what would they say?

Sare: "Let me go."

Şeydanur: And how does that make you feel?

Sare: It doesn't really affect me. I'll still wear them [laughs].

Şeydanur: Imagine wearing them now, during an important exam. How does that thought make you feel?

Sare: It lightens the stress of studying a bit.

Şeydanur: Would you like to keep that feeling?

Sare: Yes.

This suggests that clothing can become a symbolic resource for speaking about comfort, continuity and preferred ways of coping.

Not all participants chose outfits they already owned. For example, Ms Melike (21) described an imagined outfit connected to unproductive days.

Melike: On days when I feel unproductive, when I can't do what I want to do.

Şeydanur: Okay. What kind of clothing comes to mind?

Melike: I usually wear things I don't normally wear. For example, I don't wear dresses often, but I feel like wearing one during those times.

Şeydanur: What kind of dress do you picture?

Melike: A very simple dress. Really plain. With heels.

Şeydanur: What colour is it?

Melike: Maybe brown.

Şeydanur: A light brown or dark brown?

Melike: A dark brown.

Şeydanur: And the shoes? Are they also dark brown?

Melike: No, the shoes should be black or maybe burgundy.

Şeydanur: Burgundy shoes. What about the scent of this dress?

Melike: It smells like the ocean – like a fresh sea breeze.

Şeydanur: Do you mean the scent found in body sprays or the actual smell of the sea?

Melike: Sometimes body sprays are similar, but I want the real sea scent.

Şeydanur: Do you actually own such an outfit?

Melike: Not really. But it felt good to imagine it.

Şeydanur: That's great. If this outfit could talk, what would it say?

Melike: "Believe in yourself."

Şeydanur: How does it feel to hear that phrase from your outfit?

Melike: It makes me trust myself a little more.

Externalising alternative narratives

In line with White's (2007) emphasis on "thickening the story", the wardrobe practice supported participants in enriching alternative narratives by connecting their clothing choices with personal values, histories and hopes for the future.

One of the most challenging yet impactful moments was when participants imagined their clothing speaking to them. While envisioning a difficult situation often lowered their mood,

the question "What would this outfit say to you?" sparked emotional reactions. Some cried, others smiled or pondered. This shift exemplifies externalising, as problems and alternative narratives were relocated into garments rather than remaining solely internal, creating space for double-story development.

Ms Zeynep (22) imagined wearing a soft, powder-pink cotton outfit during a tough time, even associating it with tears. The imagined outfit spoke to her, saying:

You are in a difficult and tough moment right now, but I am soft. Everything transforms over time. Everything is temporary. These cotton fabrics once came from thorny fields and became soft. Let this outfit remind you to stay gentle, because if you do, you will find it easier to handle hardships.

This narrative opened space for reflections on gentleness and transformation. While it was not explored in depth due to time limits, such expressions may point to values that participants already hold close – like resilience through softness – or to new, emerging perspectives. Narrative practitioners could build on such metaphors by asking questions like: "Does this idea of transformation reflect something you already believe in or is it a new way of looking at hardship?" or "Who else in your life might agree with this message?"

Throughout the process, sensory-related questions enriched participants' imagination and helped make alternative narratives more tangible and vivid. Such sensory detail helped thicken the alternative story, turning it into a vivid and repeatable resource for resilience. For example, Ms Betül (35) imagined a long, dark blue, shiny dress and envisioned a place where she would wear it: "It could be anywhere in Bursa – perhaps Uludağ or the seaside in Mudanya." When she imagined the dress speaking, she described it saying: "Welcome back. Where have you been in all this time?" The imagined scene was not only about clothing but also about place: a return to open landscapes, fresh air and memories of freedom.

In this way, the exercise connected her preferred story to histories of place and belonging, showing how alternative narratives can be grounded not only in emotions but also in geography and personal history.

Similarly, Ms Merve (19) described an outfit she had never worn before: a bright, floral dress in shades of pink and red, a style she would not typically choose. When asked why she imagined this, she responded:

Merve: I believe in the saying that “A person should dress their best on their worst days”. I strongly believe in that.

Şeydanur: Now imagine that the dress starts speaking to you. What would it say?

Merve: I don't always think words mean much. Feelings are more important than words. Even if I were feeling awful, I know that wearing this dress would make me feel good. It doesn't need to say anything extra.

Şeydanur: What about this dress makes you feel better?

Merve: I don't know. Maybe because I initially judged it but later let go of that judgement.

Although Ms Merve did not explicitly animate her outfit, she spoke about it in ways that conveyed meaning and presence. Rather than personifying the dress, she attributed qualities and significance to it, which shaped the conversation that followed. In moments such as this, practitioners may choose to remain attentive to how meaning is already being generated within participants' narratives. If appropriate, questions like the following can be used to invite further reflection and support the thickening of alternative stories:

- What might this outfit make possible?
- Where does this meaning come from?
- How might others respond to seeing you in this?

For difficult times: Flexible, transitional and transformable solutions

In therapy, flexible, transitional and transformable solutions can be found for difficult times. When Ms Sedef (32) was asked to imagine an outfit that would make her feel good during a hard time, she responded:

I thought of a camel-coloured dress, a dress made of suede. Not too short, not too long. It has thick fabric inside but definitely not wool. A chic-looking sweat [blouse]. With thick socks and an ankle bootie [boot] on. The bootie is brown, and the sock with the sweat is something like orange that came to my mind. Nicely cut, not restricting my mobility.

After describing the outfit, her focus shifted:

I never wear the things I love during my hard times. Because I don't want to link that beautiful outfit with my hard moment, with that bad moment in my mind. Normally, in my hard times, I choose extremely mediocre outfits, outfits that I can easily discard. When I wear something mediocre, I probably don't even remember what I wore afterwards; if I think about it, I don't easily forget it.

Although Ms Sedef's account did not frame this choice as a problem, the first author noticed an initial sense of uncertainty about how this practice might unfold. Rather than interpreting the participant's preference for “mediocre” clothing as negative, the focus shifted towards understanding what this choice made possible for her during difficult moments. The first author chose to stay with what the participant brought. Rather than steering her back to the elegant outfit she first described, the first author acknowledged the possibility that her “mediocre” clothing might in fact be the one connected to her difficult moments. Continuing with this, the first author asked about the outfit's qualities, the environment she would imagine being in while wearing it, and what the outfit might say to her. This approach, drawing on the narrative practice of double

listening, enabled the seemingly ordinary clothing to become a source of new meaning. In describing what this outfit might say, Ms Sedef articulated: “Problems are temporary. You sacrificed a beautiful outfit, but now you are living a good moment, and what you wore has faded into the background.” This suggests that even a modest garment might carry symbolic potential for change and continuity during hardship. Next, Ms Sedef was invited to imagine where she would go wearing this outfit and to describe an environment in which she would feel at ease.

Dim lights, moderate-volume music, an old song playing. A place I visited recently came to mind; it was a café that wasn’t too pretentious, with plenty of glass frontage. They had placed a long table in front of the glass. They had also arranged a ton of chairs in areas facing the glass. You watch the outside. It’s dim, and as you watch, it’s raining outside – it was beautiful. I lost all sense of time that day. It was very nice.

Ms Sedef was invited to bring the “mediocre” outfit to life and have it speak, and she expressed the following:

It would say, “Temporary – problems are temporary”. It might say, “Since you didn’t wear your beautiful outfit today because something bad happened, you wore me instead, you are experiencing a beautiful moment right now, there’s nothing you can link me to. You sacrificed your beautiful outfit”, perhaps. For instance, I do have that memory (of the pleasant experience with the café) in my mind, but that day I don’t remember what I wore, because I wore something mediocre.

When asked how it felt to hear the outfit say these things, the response was:

“Next time, when you go out, dress more carefully,” [the outfit] says to me.

In this process, the imagined “mediocre” outfit became associated with messages of temporariness, ease and emotional relief. Through sensory details – light, rain, music,

atmosphere – the wardrobe metaphor supported the externalisation of hardship while allowing alternative meanings to emerge. Rather than being defined by aesthetic value, the garment functioned as a flexible and transitional resource, illustrating how clothing metaphors can hold space for coping, continuity and endurance during difficult times.

Another challenging yet meaningful moment occurred in a group session with Ms Aylin (28), who described clothing as holding little relevance during moments of intense difficulty. She explained that while dressing well mattered to her in everyday life, during times of hardship her attention narrowed and clothing receded from awareness. Rather than treating this as a limitation of the exercise, the conversation followed Aylin’s own meaning-making, shifting from clothing to environment, rest and sleep as her preferred responses to difficulty.

Aylin: In a hard moment I don’t really pay attention to my clothes. It doesn’t matter what you wear at that moment. But normally, on a daily basis, I care a lot about dressing well. Yet if something very difficult happens, at that moment I don’t see anything. I’m not aware.

Şeydanur: Uh-huh. Well, that may generally be the case. But let’s say that from now on, if you wanted to wear an outfit during a hard moment, what kind of outfit would you like? An outfit that would ease that difficult moment.

Aylin: Like, an outfit doesn’t give me anything. Whether I wear it beautifully or not, it doesn’t mean anything to me. It doesn’t make me feel much.

Şeydanur: Okay. Then, let me say this: environment. What kind of environment makes you feel good, or strengthens you more, makes it easier for you to overcome that difficulty?

Aylin: I would want that environment to be calm. A calm environment.

Şeydanur: So what would be in that environment?

Aylin: I wouldn't see any people. There would be no people. Nobody should be around at that moment. And, I mean, I wouldn't want to talk either.

Şeydanur: Okay.

Aylin: I would want to sleep.

Şeydanur : Sleep?

Aylin: Yes. Directly into sleep, I mean. For some people, for example, they might eat or dress well, or go out or do cleaning. I go straight to bed.

Şeydanur: Okay. So what do you wear during that sleep?

Aylin: I do care about sleep. I need to wear something very comfortable. Clean.

Şeydanur: When you think of sleep, you feel the need to wear clean clothes. Okay. Clean, comfortable clothes make it easier for you to sleep. Consequently, they make you feel good.

Aylin: Yes.

Şeydanur: So, is there a colour that comes to your mind? I mean, the clothes.

Aylin: I prefer light colours.

Şeydanur: Light colours. Okay. What texture comes to mind?

Aylin: It must be very soft. Soft. Something light.

Şeydanur: Does it have a scent?

Aylin: No.

Şeydanur: Okay. So this comfortable, clean outfit will take you to sleep. What would it say to you?

Aylin: It would say, "Only I can make you forget what you have experienced".

Although Aylin initially spoke about clothing as carrying little meaning during moments of hardship, she later described her sleep outfit in ways that conveyed comfort and relief. She said that this outfit carried the message "Only I can make you forget what you have experienced". In this description, the exhaustion and depletion she had been living with were acknowledged, while a different story – one connected to rest, restoration and care – began to take shape. The light colours, softness and cleanliness she emphasised became available for thickening this alternative story, linking resilience to simple, embodied practices rather than to effort or strength.

In some conversations, emotions served as entry points to richer stories that included values, such as modesty or perseverance, as well as skills participants drew on when facing challenges. In this way, the wardrobe metaphor not only evoked feelings but also made visible the broader resources that might sustain preferred identities.

When no outfit emerges

When an outfit cannot be described, describing the environment may be preferred instead, as in Ms Sedef's detailed description of dim lights in a rainy café.

In one of the group sessions, another difficulty arose in making emotions more tangible. Ms Özlem (39), who was answering the initial questions about herself, struggled to imagine a coping outfit for dealing with difficulties. The conversation proceeded as follows.

Özlem: It doesn't evoke any feeling at all. I just can't get out of the pessimistic mood.¹ Even if I wore a dress, it wouldn't make me feel good.

Şeydanur: What would matter at that moment? What is something that would comfort you and make you feel good – something that would come across as beneficial?

Özlem: It could be some sort of consolation from within.

Şeydanur: What kind of consolation?

Özlem: That they see your sadness and realise that you are upset. That a “big person” comes to take you away. I mean, I grew up with such a big person [referring to herself].

Şeydanur: And what does that “big person” say when they console you?

Özlem: They can’t really console you. They probably can’t fix it.

Şeydanur: If that big person were to say what you needed, what would they say?

Özlem: “Forget it. Forget it,” they would say. “Remember, it will pass,” they would say.

Şeydanur: What kind of outfit does this big person wear?

Özlem: Dark-coloured. I imagined something like a coat. Maybe with a cap, for instance. There’s a cap, there’s a coat. Yes, probably male.

Şeydanur: How does this cap-and-coat combination come across? How does it feel?

Özlem: It comes in a calm, reassuring manner. Yes. So the [coping] outfit is a cap and a coat then.

This illustrates a pathway where comfort was accessed through a relational figure and then concretised through garments.

Addressing cultural and spiritual dimensions in therapy

Inviting participants to reflect on cultural and spiritual values through their clothing choices helped to ensure that therapy remained connected to the broader social context. For example, when

Ms Zerrin (31) was asked, “How do you generally feel when you stand in front of your wardrobe?” she replied, “First, I think I define myself through the clothes there. Especially in terms of hijab. After all, we are Muslims. Our hijab also indicates our religion in a spiritual sense. That’s what comes to mind initially”. Based on this response, she was asked: “How do you choose clothes that are in accordance with hijab?” Ms Zerrin replied, “I make sure they are not too sharp. I mean, they shouldn’t be too pointed”.

Ms. Zerrin’s response provided important insight into her spiritual and social contexts. Acknowledging her values felt essential, particularly given the historical experiences of many women in Türkiye. Until the early 2000s, the public ban on hijab left deep marks on the lives of young women. Especially during women’s high-school and university years, often significant in shaping identity, these bans created difficult narratives, from social exclusion to even abandoning education. While Ms Zerrin did not indicate whether she personally experienced the ban, its effects resonated in her story, as they have for many women of similar age.

Clothing emerged as a culturally meaningful signifier within Zerrin’s story. When she spoke about hijab, it carried layered meanings: on one hand, associations with restriction and exclusion linked to Türkiye’s recent history; on the other, expressions of spiritual identity, belonging and faith. These layers were not resolved into a single meaning but existed alongside one another, allowing different stories to be held at the same time. Attending to the historical and cultural context surrounding hijab made it possible to situate experiences of constraint next to preferred accounts of self-definition and spiritual grounding. In this way, the wardrobe practice invited attention to clothing as something that is shaped not only by personal preference, but also by relational, social and cultural histories.

This understanding is consistent with recent narrative work that has conceptualised clothing and fashion as a relational and cultural site where dominant social norms are both reproduced and

resisted. For example, in the project *Threads of Identity* (Olson, 2025), clothing was explored not merely as personal expression but as a medium through which individuals negotiate gender norms, safety, belonging and survival within broader

cultural contexts. Such work highlights how attending to garments as cultural signifiers can support the externalisation of problem-saturated narratives while thickening preferred stories grounded in identity, values and community.

Considerations for practice

Keep Phase 1 brief: For some participants, extended discussion of the “real wardrobe” can become repetitive or overly concrete. This phase was best used as a short warm-up to support movement into imagined and sensory scaffolding.

Avoid predefined “good outcomes”: Rather than aiming to evoke “beautiful” or “empowering” feelings, we found it useful to hold an open stance: What meanings are emerging for this participant? What matters here? What does this make possible?

Use experience-near language: Stay close to participants’ words and descriptions. If an interpretation is offered, it can be framed explicitly as the practitioner’s wondering rather than as a statement of what the participant “is experiencing”.

Expect multiple pathways: Garment, environment, rest, ritual, relationship. As Aylin’s and Özlem’s accounts show, “clothing” may not be the most resonant metaphor. Pivoting to environment, sleep or consoling figures kept the practice aligned with the participant’s own meaning-making.

Attend to cultural, spiritual and historical layers without assumption: Clothing may carry layered meanings shaped by modesty, faith, migration histories and social surveillance. Practitioners can invite reflection while avoiding assumptions about what these layers might mean for the participant.

Be alert to material constraint and comparison: Imagining a wardrobe may highlight what someone does not own. Imagining a “wardrobes without limits” can reduce brand/material comparison and keep the practice anchored in meaning-making rather than consumption.

Group context changes what can be shared: In groups, participants may be less inclined to narrate specific hardships; the practice may be taken up through cultural sharing, playfulness and collective reflection instead. Both forms are valid; neither is inherently “richer”.

Note

¹ Due to time constraints in the group session, the practitioner moved the conversation forward to maintain balance across participants. However, additional narrative questions (e.g., “If this pessimistic mood were like a presence, how would it act towards you?”) might have further supported the externalisation of the problem.

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