

The following two articles are taken from the work of Angela Wright, a renowned UK Colour Psychologist whose extensive research has led to a much wider understanding of the effect and affect of colour on each of us.

## Colour Psychology

### Psychological Properties of Colours

How does colour psychology work? Colour is light, travelling to us in waves from the sun, on the same electro-magnetic spectrum as radio and television waves, microwaves, x-rays etc. Light is the only part of the spectrum that we can see, which perhaps explains why we take it less seriously than the invisible power of the other rays. Sir Isaac Newton demonstrated that light travels in waves, when he shone white light through a triangular prism and the different wavelengths refracted at different angles, enabling him to see the colours of the rainbow (the spectrum).

When light strikes any coloured object, the object will absorb only the wavelengths that exactly match its own atomic structure and reflect the rest - which is what we see. Turn this around and it is easy to understand how the colour of anything is a clear indication of its atomic structure or, in simple terms, what it is made of. When light strikes the human eye, the wavelengths do so in different ways, influencing our perceptions. In the retina, they are converted into electrical impulses that pass to the hypothalamus, the part of the brain governing our hormones and our endocrine system. Although we are unaware of it, our eyes and our bodies are constantly adapting to these wavelengths of light.

Colour is energy and the fact that it has a physical effect on us has been proved time and again in experiments - most notably when blind people were asked to identify colours with their fingertips and were all able to do so easily.

There are only eleven basic colour words in the English language, and yet there are literally millions of colours. Computers will give us sixteen million and the human eye can distinguish more than any machine. After the basic eleven, we borrow words, such as avocado (is that the flesh, or the skin?) and grape (is that deep purple or green?) to describe the myriad of shades, tones and tints. This inevitably creates confusion in colour communication. People often ask, "Do we all see colours the same?" Who knows? The point is that in colour psychology it does not seem to matter what we think we are looking at; the effect of colours on us is caused by their energy entering our bodies. Colour-blind people are also sensitive to colour psychology.

The eleven basic colours have fundamental psychological properties that are universal, regardless of which particular shade, tone or tint of it you are using. Each of them has potentially positive or negative psychological effects and which of these effects is created depends on the relationships within colour combinations.

There are four psychological primary colours - red, blue, yellow and green. They relate respectively to the body, the mind, the emotions and the essential balance between these three. The psychological properties of the eleven basic colours are as follows:

**RED.** Physical

Positive: Physical courage, strength, warmth, energy, basic survival, 'fight or flight', stimulation, masculinity, excitement.

Negative: Defiance, aggression, visual impact, strain.

Being the longest wavelength, red is a powerful colour. Although not technically the most visible, it has the property of appearing to be nearer than it is and therefore it grabs our attention first. Hence its effectiveness in traffic lights the world over. Its effect is physical; it stimulates us and raises the pulse rate, giving the impression that time is passing faster than it is. It relates to the masculine principle and can activate the "fight or flight" instinct. Red is strong, and very basic. Pure red is the simplest colour, with no subtlety. It is stimulating and lively, very friendly. At the same time, it can be perceived as demanding and aggressive.

---

**BLUE.** Intellectual.

Positive: Intelligence, communication, trust, efficiency, serenity, duty, logic, coolness, reflection, calm.

Negative: Coldness, aloofness, lack of emotion, unfriendliness.

Blue is the colour of the mind and is essentially soothing; it affects us mentally, rather than the physical reaction we have to red. Strong blues will stimulate clear thought and lighter, soft blues will calm the mind and aid concentration. Consequently it is serene and mentally calming. It is the colour of clear communication. Blue objects do not appear to be as close to us as red ones. Time and again in research, blue is the world's favourite colour. However, it can be perceived as cold, unemotional and unfriendly.

---

**YELLOW.** Emotional

Positive: Optimism, confidence, self-esteem, extraversion, emotional strength, friendliness, creativity.

Negative: Irrationality, fear, emotional fragility, depression, anxiety, suicide.

The yellow wavelength is relatively long and essentially stimulating. In this case the stimulus is emotional, therefore yellow is the strongest colour, psychologically. The right yellow will lift our spirits and our self-esteem; it is the colour of confidence and optimism. Too much of it, or the wrong tone in relation to the other tones in a colour scheme, can cause self-esteem to plummet, giving rise to fear and anxiety. Our "yellow streak" can surface.

---

**GREEN.** Balance

Positive: Harmony, balance, refreshment, universal love, rest, restoration, reassurance, environmental awareness, equilibrium, peace.

Negative: Boredom, stagnation, blandness, enervation.

Green strikes the eye in such a way as to require no adjustment whatever and is, therefore, restful. Being in the centre of the spectrum, it is the colour of balance - a more important concept than many people realise. When the world about us contains plenty of green, this indicates the presence of water, and little danger of famine, so we are reassured by green, on a primitive level. Negatively, it can indicate stagnation and, incorrectly used, will be perceived as being too bland.

---

### **VIOLET.** Spiritual

Positive: Spiritual awareness, containment, vision, luxury, authenticity, truth, quality.

Negative: Introversion, decadence, suppression, inferiority.

The shortest wavelength is violet, often described as purple. It takes awareness to a higher level of thought, even into the realms of spiritual values. It is highly introvertive and encourages deep contemplation, or meditation. It has associations with royalty and usually communicates the finest possible quality. Being the last visible wavelength before the ultra-violet ray, it has associations with time and space and the cosmos. Excessive use of purple can bring about too much introspection and the wrong tone of it communicates something cheap and nasty, faster than any other colour.

---

---

### **ORANGE.**

Positive: Physical comfort, food, warmth, security, sensuality, passion, abundance, fun.

Negative: Deprivation, frustration, frivolity, immaturity.

Since it is a combination of red and yellow, orange is stimulating and reaction to it is a combination of the physical and the emotional. It focuses our minds on issues of physical comfort - food, warmth, shelter etc. - and sensuality. It is a 'fun' colour. Negatively, it might focus on the exact opposite - deprivation. This is particularly likely when warm orange is used with black. Equally, too much orange suggests frivolity and a lack of serious intellectual values.

---

---

### **PINK.**

Positive: Physical tranquillity, nurture, warmth, femininity, love, sexuality, survival of the species.

Negative: Inhibition, emotional claustrophobia, emasculation, physical weakness.

Being a tint of red, pink also affects us physically, but it soothes, rather than stimulates. (Interestingly, red is the only colour that has an entirely separate name for its tints. Tints of blue, green, yellow, etc. are simply called light blue, light green...etc.) Pink is a powerful colour, psychologically. It represents the feminine principle, and survival of the species; it is nurturing and physically soothing. Too much pink is physically draining and can be somewhat emasculating.

---

---

### **GREY.**

Positive: Psychological neutrality.

Negative: Lack of confidence, dampness, depression, hibernation, lack of energy.

Pure grey is the only colour that has no direct psychological properties. It is, however, quite suppressive. A virtual absence of colour is depressing and when the world turns grey we are instinctively conditioned to draw in and prepare for hibernation. Unless the precise tone is right, grey has a dampening effect on other colours used with it. Heavy use of grey usually indicates a lack of confidence and fear of exposure.

---

---

## **BLACK.**

Positive: Sophistication, glamour, security, emotional safety, efficiency, substance.

Negative: Oppression, coldness, menace, heaviness.

Black is all colours, totally absorbed. The psychological implications of that are considerable. It creates protective barriers, as it absorbs all the energy coming towards you, and it enshrouds the personality. Positively, it communicates absolute clarity, with no fine nuances. It works particularly well with white. It communicates sophistication and uncompromising excellence. It creates a perception of weight and seriousness (it is a myth that black clothes are slimming). Black is essentially an absence of light, since no wavelengths are reflected and it can, therefore be menacing; many people are afraid of the dark.

---

## **WHITE.**

Positive: Hygiene, sterility, clarity, purity, cleanness, simplicity, sophistication, efficiency.

Negative: Sterility, coldness, barriers, unfriendliness, elitism.

Just as black is total absorption, so white is total reflection. In effect, it reflects the full force of the spectrum into our eyes. Thus it also creates barriers, but differently from black, and it is often a strain to look at. It communicates, "Touch me not!" White is purity and, like black, uncompromising; it is clean, hygienic, and sterile. The concept of sterility can also be negative. Visually, white gives a heightened perception of space. The negative effect of white on warm colours is to make them look and feel garish.

---

## **BROWN.**

Positive: Seriousness, warmth, Nature, earthiness, reliability, support.

Negative: Lack of humour, heaviness, lack of sophistication.

Brown usually consists of red and yellow, with a large percentage of black. Consequently, it has much of the same seriousness as black, but is warmer and softer. It has elements of the red and yellow properties. Brown has associations with the earth and the natural world. It is a solid, reliable colour and most people find it quietly supportive - more positively than the ever-popular black, which is suppressive, rather than supportive.

---

## Colour Psychology

### How Does It Work?

Many people think that colour is just a matter of how things look and it is often dismissed as being purely cosmetic. However, the truth is that colour is light - the source of life itself; there is nowhere that colour does not exist and our instinctive, unconscious response to it is a vital element in our survival.

It is Nature's own powerful signalling system. Scientifically, it is the first thing we register when we are assessing anything: a very simple and obvious example of that is our reaction to a fly in our home: if it is black, we will probably find it a minor irritation, but if it has yellow stripes our reaction will be different - most of us will recoil. The same instinct tells us when food is unsafe to eat and throughout the animal kingdom colour is widely used to signal sexual availability.

On a wider level, the colours of our environment affect our behaviour and mood. When yellow daffodils, bluebells and colourful crocuses appear, we immediately begin to feel livelier; when grey skies and rain or snow surround us we instinctively draw in and tend to hibernate.

In today's sophisticated world it is easy to underestimate the power of primitive instincts, as they are largely unconscious. Today we might be contemplating a packet of corn flakes or a new cold cure, rather than a primitive meal or a curative herb, but exactly the same instincts come powerfully into play. The colours of the interior environment wherein we live or work affects us in just the same way as those in the natural world always did. The colours that people wear still send out clear signals that we can all read accurately.

Science has always recognised the link between colour and mood/behaviour and there is a large body of scientific research into it. However, no one has written a monograph on the subject for over thirty years and one reason for this might be that results are so often inconclusive. It is not normally part of a psychologist's remit to study the finer points of colour harmony so colours are defined as, for example, "blue and orange" or "red and green" without much consideration of the subtleties of shade and tone. Angela Wright studied both unconscious thought processes and the dynamics of colour harmony in her exploration of colour psychology.

Everyone agrees that response to colour is subjective and assumes that it must therefore be unpredictable.

Not so.

Response is subjective but, when the study of colour harmony is combined with the science of psychology, reactions can be predicted with startling accuracy. There is no such thing as a universally attractive colour. Red, for example, might be your favourite colour but another person might hate it. You see it as exciting, friendly and stimulating, he sees it as aggressive and demanding. Blue might be perceived as calm and soothing - or as cold and unfriendly. **It is the combination of colours that triggers the response.**

The key factor that Angela Wright recognised in studying colour psychology was that, equally, there are no wrong colours; we do not respond to just one colour, but to colours in combination. You could have a grey sky on a summer day, but our reaction to that grey with the vivid colours of the summer landscape would be different from the combination of a grey sky with snow white. Even the winter landscape contains many colours.

In many ways, colour and music work the same way. As jazz pianist Thelonius Monk observed: "There are no wrong notes".

It is important to understand that there is a great difference between colour psychology and colour symbolism. Historically, what is often described as colour psychology is actually colour symbolism - the conscious associations that we are conditioned to make. For example, cultural responses to colour derive from a variety of causes: green is the sacred colour throughout Islam, being the colour of the Prophet's robe; in England it is considered unlucky, probably because of its association with decay and disease; in Ireland it is considered lucky, perhaps because when the world about us contains plenty of green this indicates the presence of water and therefore little danger of famine. There are many examples of colour symbolism: purple is associated with royalty for the simple reason that, until relatively recently, it was an extremely expensive dye and only royalty could afford it; red is the colour of blood and has associations with war.

These associations often coincide with colour psychology (red actually can trigger aggression) but they are by no means the same thing.

The key to successfully applied colour psychology is the recognition of tonal families of colour and how they relate to personality types. All the millions of shades, tones and tints can be classified into just four tonal families and great minds throughout history have also repeatedly classified humanity into four types, from Galen in early Rome (predominant bodily fluids defining a person as Choleric, Melancholic, Sanguine or Phlegmatic) to Jung in the twentieth century (determining function being predominantly Thought, Feeling, Intuition or Sensation).

When Angela Wright made the connection between these two, she was able to create, for the first time, a colour psychology system that works. It enables response to be accurately predicted; it enables creation of colour combinations that will be universally attractive. She has developed it for use in a variety of applications.

More information on Angela Wright and her work can be found at her website

[www.colour-affects.co.uk](http://www.colour-affects.co.uk)