

The psychology behind that tempting quarantine makeover

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Cue the montage: It's quarantine makeover time. People practicing social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic are itching to change up their looks. The evidence is all over social media: With hair salons shuttered, people have resorted to chopping at long locks with craft scissors or full-on shaving their heads, or dying their hair blue or pink with box dye. Many men, from Jim Carrey to your uncle, are growing out lumberjack beards.

For some, mere hair manipulation isn't enough. If you can keep your eyes open long enough, you could watch YouTube and TikTok videos of people piercing their own ears and noses at home, or letting equally unqualified family members do it for them. Perhaps most adventurous are those contemplating giving themselves quarantine stick-and-poke tattoos with kits they bought on Facebook.

Many people, of course, are taking their appearances into their own hands purely out of necessity. They're sick of showing up to Zoom meetings with grays, dark roots, split ends, and bangs straggling into their eyes. (If that's you,

WIRED has some tips for avoiding DIY haircut disasters.) But others, the ones on the more extreme end of the stay-at-home body modification spectrum—the drastic cuts, the wild dye jobs, the piercings and tats—give reasons that are far more emotional and nebulous. “PIERCED MY EAR AT HOME **QUARANTINE MADE ME DO IT**” screams one YouTube video title. Regardless of why you do it, though, the urge to make yourself over right here, right now isn’t just your brain reacting to simple boredom. It’s actually a much more complicated coping mechanism.

No one has actually studied mass makeovers during a prolonged global pandemic—we’re in uncharted territory here—but people like Christopher Oldstone-Moore think there’s much to glean from personal expressions of the past. Take beards. According to Oldstone-Moore, who studies gender and hair at Wright State University, beards are associated with warriors in ancient and medieval times, and, you know, manliness. At times like these, growing one can be a show of resilience. “Psychologically, it can be a sort of declaration of fortitude and heartiness,” he says. “It’s a way of saying, ‘I’m tough. I can withstand adversity.’” Makeover elements that require suffering actual physical pain, like piercings and tattoos, may be serving a similar function: thumbing your nose at a trying time just to remind yourself and others that you can.

The urge to change your appearance might also be a desire to change the one thing about your situation that’s actually changeable. According to Kim Johnson, professor emerita at the University of Minnesota, where she studied the social psychology of fashion, giving yourself a makeover after a catastrophic event is somewhat common. “Women who were sexually assaulted often change their appearance after the assault. It’s a renewed sense of control,” says Johnson. “Applied to coronavirus, the reasoning could be ‘I cannot control the virus, but I can control my appearance.’” People’s quarantine health kicks and fitness journeys could be

understood in similar ways.

For others, especially those growing out beards, the motivation for their quarantine makeover could be as simple as a way to mark the passage of a significant time. Oldstone-Moore calls this kind of facial hair a “quest beard”—it’s common among athletes heading into the playoffs, or groups of bros collectively participating in No Shave November. Often, these beards are shaved off once the playoff season is over, but other people use a more permanent dramatic change to their appearance to signal that they’ve somehow crossed a threshold. “It says ‘I’m new now, I’m not the way I used to be,’” Oldstone-Moore says. “It’s the Al Gore beard, the David Letterman beard.” People are spending a lot of time on their own, reflecting, so a few aesthetic epiphanies were bound to come along.

The stakes are also low right now. “Person-to-person contact is limited and is under control, and you can control who does and does not see you,” says Johnson. “It is a good time to experiment with appearance changes, and with being in quarantine for over a month, appearances could go back to what they were previously and no one would know.” This too has precedent: The annals of beard history show that many choose to experiment with facial hair while on vacation.

“One of the most interesting questions for me is how much of what we experiment with in this time will we latch onto and keep after this is over,” Oldstone-Moore says. “It could even lead to whole new trends.” So go ahead, style yourself like nobody’s watching.

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