

Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat is defined as a phenomenon in which a person's concern about confirming a negative stereotype of one or more of the groups with which they personally identify can lead that person to underperform. Stereotype threat often arises in academia during course discussions, on assignments, or assessments. Stereotype threat can also happen in the workplace. Stereotype threat can impact anyone but students who are from underrepresented groups are especially vulnerable to its effects (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016).

Steps You Can Take to Counteract Stereotype Threat

1. Understand the definition and impact of stereotype threat and its impact on students.

- Awareness of the existence of stereotype threat helps to reduce its influence on performance. When a student who is aware of stereotype threat experiences anxiety in an academic setting, she can disassociate the anxiety from her ability, attribute it to stereotype threat, and reduce its effects on her performance (Johns & Schmader, 2004).
- Over time, stereotype threat can cause students to perform below their ability on tests and assignments, which in turn confirms their feelings and perceptions of inferiority. Stereotype threat can cause students to disengage from the learning process and feel they do not belong. In extreme cases, it can cause students to leave their areas of study (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012).
- The strength of the stereotype threat often depends on how the task is framed. If task directions remind students of a stereotype, participants are more likely to underperform on the task. For example, when women are reminded of the negative stereotypes about women's aptitude for math and science prior to engaging in a task, they are more likely to underperform on a subsequent test. This negative stereotype threat can be prompted by such things as asking a student to indicate their gender or ethnicity prior to taking the test. For example, one study (Steele and Aronson, 1995) found that simply asking Black students to indicate their race before taking a standardized test caused them to get fewer answers correct, answer fewer items, spend more time on the questions they did answer, and feel significantly more anxiety. Similarly, women performed worse than men on a difficult math exam if they were told that the test showed gender differences favoring men but showed no difference in scores if not primed in that way (Steele, 1997).
- The videos listed below provide explanations of stereotype threat.
 - [Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat and Higher Education](#) Russell McClain, Associate Dean for Diversity & Inclusion, University of Maryland, Baltimore, Carey School of Law (11:15)
 - [Unconscious Bias: Confronting Stereotypes](#) Ismini Vasileiou, Associate Professor in Information Systems/Subject Group Lead and Associate Head in Teaching and Learning, De Montfort University, Leicester (8:26)

2. Foster a Growth Mindset

Research shows how powerful having a growth mindset can be. When students have a growth mindset, they will be more likely to counteract the effects of stereotype threat because they will attribute their success or lack of success to effort rather than innate ability. For ideas on how to help students foster a growth mindset see *2F Online PG_Mindset_Assignments*.

3. Provide Growth-Centered Feedback

When providing feedback: Assure students that you are providing critical feedback because you have high standards. Then, explain exactly how the students' work did not meet those standards using the clear criteria from the assignment. Finally, share your confidence that the student can meet those standards (Yeager et al., 2014).

4. Foster a sense of belonging

When students learn that academic struggles and thoughts of “not belonging” are common, their academic and mental health outcomes are improved (Walton & Cohen, 2011). You can help foster a sense of belonging by sharing your own stories of academic struggle, building peer-to-peer relationships where students feel comfortable sharing their academic struggles, and helping students gain a growth mindset. For additional ideas on mitigating imposter syndrome and fostering a sense of belonging please see *2F Online PG_Imposter*.

References

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