



## Allyship Means Action Tip Sheets

Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences

### Combatting Stereotype Threat

#### What is stereotype threat?

“A situational phenomenon that occurs when individuals who are targets of negative stereotypes underperform due to a conscious or unconscious fear of being evaluated through the lens of these stereotypes.” Steele, 1997

#### How does it appear in our setting?

Stereotype threat can apply to anyone but it has a disproportionate impact on classes of people already impacted by oppression and bias.

- Students/learners: An Asian medical student may not want to stand out from his peers at rounds for fear of confirming the stereotype of the Asian American as the “model minority.”
- Colleagues: A midwife may feel she cannot ask a question at rounds about a complex condition for fear of confirming the stereotype that midwives are not as well-trained as physicians.
- Patients: An African American laboring patient may not express her concerns or frustrations readily for fear of confirming of the stereotype of the “angry black woman.”

These fears lead to increased cognitive load and a physiologic stress response (increased heart rate, release of cortisol, etc) **distracting people** from their work/studies and evidence shows that this often **can negatively impact actual performance**. One way to think about it is by using a running analogy. If you take two equally prepared runners, but one has to run uphill (a metaphor for dealing with the cognitive load of stereotype threat) while the other runs downhill, who will finish faster? The amount of preparation is not what needs to increase, you need to level the ground people are running on (eg, decrease the impact of stereotype threat).

## What can we do to mitigate the effect of stereotype threat?

Eliminating stereotype threat is difficult given the deep, long-standing messaging that creates the stereotypes. However, some techniques have been shown in the evidence to mitigate the impact of stereotype threat, thereby decreasing the cognitive load and improving performance.

- **Critical self-reflection:** maintain self-awareness re how our own behaviors, beliefs and biases may be influenced by stereotype threat and related attention to applying consistent standards
- **Create identity safe environments:** hire people of color, post signage that makes clear the environment is intended to be inclusive (all are welcome here, rainbow symbols, Black Lives Matter buttons, etc) and verbalize the values of inclusivity and commitment to equity in interactions; create a mission, vision and goals document that is inclusive and visible
- **Social belonging:** make explicit the sometimes unwritten norms of the environment (this is where people eat lunch, feel free to drink the coffee as long as you bring a pound in once in a while, folks usually walk around and greet each other at their desks every morning, etc) and reiterate frequently that they are an integral part of the work being done or the community they are in
- **Values affirmation:** Invite and validate the learner/patient/colleague's own work ethic and commitment to their goals
- **Support positive personal identity:** provide copious reinforcing feedback and appreciation of them as unique individuals
- **Reframe tasks:** describe difficult tasks as challenges that will take effort, share personal experiences and lessons learned from your own failures, promote a growth mindset—where high performance is a product of action and effort as opposed to innate ability
- **Actively negate stereotypes:** openly discuss stereotypes, and cite examples from the persons own performance or habits that refute the stereotype
- **Name stereotype threat as a source of anxiety, directly confronting it:** name the problem and invite the person to share whether they think stereotype threat is affecting their performance or health habits and assume responsibility for your contribution to the problem
- **Reattribution:** help people attribute setbacks or difficulties to temporary external factors rather than internal factors such as ability.

## References

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