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Negative Stereotypes Stick With You

By Zoë Macintosh, LiveScience Staff Writer

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Negative stereotyping wields a lingering impact on those who experience it, and in situations unrelated to the initial insult, a new study finds.

"Past studies have shown that people perform poorly in situations where they feel they are being stereotyped," said lead researcher Michael Inzlicht of the University of Toronto in Canada. "What we wanted to do was look at what happens afterwards. Are there lingering effects of prejudice? Does being stereotyped have an impact beyond the moment when stereotyping happens?"

Inzlicht and colleagues went a step beyond the usual studies which examine the effects of discrimination on subjects completing a task directly related to cognitive abilities. They also observed the impact of experiences of negative stereotypes on subjects faced with neutral tasks afterwards —those tasks that required the ability to regulate thoughts and emotions.

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"Even after a person leaves a situation where they faced negative stereotypes, the effects of coping with that situation remain," Inzlicht said. "People are more likely to be aggressive after they've faced prejudice in a given situation. They are more likely to exhibit a lack of self-control. They have trouble making good, rational decisions. And they are more likely to over-indulge on unhealthy foods."

Women and math

First, researchers asked female participants to take a math test that would determine whether they were "capable or smart in math," the scientists said in a

statement. The instructions involved researchers subtly infusing stereotypes about women and math abilities "into the air," Inzlicht said. In contrast, in a control group the researchers introduced women to the same test while being supportive and offering coping strategies to deal with the stress one could encounter when taking the exam.

After the test, the women completed tests measuring their eating impulses and aggression.

Participants were then asked to describe an ice cream flavor after eating as many samples as necessary—even though only three spoonfuls in total were privately deemed sufficient by researchers. Another test asked subjects to play a computer game that allowed them to shoot other, losing players with a loud burst of white noise if and for as long as the subject desired.