

## ***Why Do We Stereotype People?***

The process of stereotyping allows us to manage complex realities by using categories to store new information, to quickly identify things, to handle multi-sensory experiences, and to make sense of things. We may attach strong emotion to these stereotypes, even when they're false, and we often use stereotypes to justify our dislike of someone.

Rigid, limiting stereotypes create barriers to really getting to know people, but you can break free. The first step is to understand how this process of stereotyping works in your everyday life.

### ***Making Complex Reality Manageable***

When we stereotype, we form large classes and clusters for guiding our daily adjustments. We must deal with too much complexity in our environment to be completely open-minded. We don't have time to learn all about every new person or situation we encounter. Of necessity, we associate them with old categories in our mind in order to make some sense of the world.

### ***Short-Cutting with Categories***

We tend to place as much as we can into each class and cluster. Our minds tend to categorize events in the *grossest* manner compatible with the need for action. We like to solve problems as easily as possible, so we try to fit them rapidly into a satisfactory category and use this category as a means of prejudging the solution.

### ***Quickly Identifying Things***

A stereotype enables us to readily identify a related object. Stereotypes have a close and immediate tie with what we see, how we judge, and what actions we take. In fact, their whole purpose is to help us make responses and adjustments to life in a speedy, smooth, and consistent manner.

### ***Incorporating Multi-sensory Experiences***

For each of our mental categories, we have a thinking-feeling tone or flavor. Everything in that category takes on that flavor. For example, we not only know what the term *Southern belle* means, we also have a feeling tone of favor or disfavor that goes along with that concept. When we meet someone that we decide is a Southern belle, that feeling tone determines whether we like her more or less than we would if we got to know her on her own merits.

### ***Being Rational—Or Not***

Stereotypes may be more or less rational. A rational stereotype starts to grow from a kernel of truth and enlarges and solidifies with each new relevant experience. A rational stereotype can give us information that can help us to predict how someone will behave or what might happen in a situation. An irrational stereotype is one we've formed without adequate evidence or because it met an

emotional need. We notice behavior that “proves” the stereotype is true, reinforcing it—for example when the Southern belle bats her eyelashes. As for behavior that refutes the stereotype—for example, when she makes an assertive statement—we either don’t notice it at all, or we classify it as a rare exception.

### *Adding the Emotional Whammy*

Our minds are able to form irrational stereotypes as easily as rational ones, and to link intense emotions to them. An irrational idea that is engulfed by an overpowering emotion is more likely to conform to the emotion than to objective evidence. Therefore, once we develop an irrational stereotype that we feel strongly about, it’s difficult for us to change that stereotype based on facts alone. We must deal with the emotion and its ties to our deepest fears.

### *Justifying Dislike*

Sometimes we form a stereotype linked to an emotion related to fear—such as hostility, suspicion, dislike, disgust—and set up the framework for prejudice toward an entire group of people based on our experience with one or a few. When people become prejudiced toward a group, they need to justify their dislike, and any justification that fits the immediate conversational situation will do. So we grasp any real or imagined behavior that serves to “prove” the stereotype.

In summary, stereotyping is part of the human need to categorize the massive amounts of information we encounter every day. Categorizing and labeling are ways of making sense of the world and managing the stuff we must do. Stereotyping, when used in this *technical* sense, is a rational thing to do. The problems arise when we make our categories too fixed and our labels too permanent—and what most people call *stereotyping* refers to this fixed, permanent aspect. Rigid stereotyping of groups of people often leads to prejudice and discrimination.