

Pregnancy stereotypes can lead to workplace accidents

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Fears of confirming stereotypes about pregnant workers as incompetent, weak or less committed to their job can drive pregnant employees to work extra hard, risking injury.

A recent Washington State University study of pregnant women in

physically demanding jobs showed that the majority, about 63%, felt this type of "stereotype threat," the fear of confirming negative assumptions about a group to which they belong. The study, published in the journal *Work & Stress*, found this threat led many women to conceal their pregnancy and overperform, even taking actions that placed their health and pregnancy at risk, such as standing for long periods or lifting heavy objects.

The study shows the need to acknowledge that these stereotypes exist and help mitigate their impacts, said Lindsey Lavaysse, lead author on the paper and recent WSU Ph.D. graduate.

"The pregnancy stereotype is a silent stressor. It is not always visible, but it really impacts women in the workplace," said Lavaysse. "Most organizations have policies for pregnancy accommodation in place, and it's a legal right, but if the organization's culture suggests there will be retaliation or that workers will be looked upon differently, then women will shy away from using accommodations that are better for their health and their safety."

Lavaysse and co-author Tahira Probst, a WSU professor of psychology, surveyed pregnant employees at three separate points in time over a two-month period, starting with a group of about 400. The subjects were at different stages in their pregnancy and worked in a variety of industries, including manufacturing, [health care](#) and retail.

The researchers looked at workplace accidents of [women](#) who reported feeling a low versus high stereotype threat. The individuals who reported a higher stereotype threat had nearly three times as many work-related accidents at the end of the two-month period compared to those who felt a relatively low stereotype threat.

Moreover, fears of confirming these stereotypes also increased over the

two-month period.

"Two months is a relatively small window of time, but in the scheme of a pregnancy that's close to one whole trimester," said Lavaysse. "As they're progressing through their pregnancy, their experience of [stereotype threat](#), a significant stressor, is also increasing."

The researchers note some limitations to the study, namely that the participants were self-selected, and many dropped out before the two months were over. However, this is the first study to establish a connection between pregnancy [stereotype threat](#) and workplace accidents.

The authors recommend further research that investigates possible variables that may mitigate some of the negative stigma around pregnancy while working and create better social support for utilizing [pregnancy](#) accommodation and maternal leave policies.

More information: Lindsey M. Lavaysse et al, Pregnancy and workplace accidents: The impact of stereotype threat, *Work & Stress* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/02678373.2020.1774937](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2020.1774937)

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