



Why Women Look "Mad" When Men Look "Serious"

And 8 ways to navigate the stereotype at work.



by LISA FELDMAN BARRETT Feb 27, 2017

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As soon as I walked into the room, I knew I had a crucial decision to make. I was the only woman in this important business meeting, surrounded by 24 male scientists. As a female scientist, I am often the only woman in the room, and I knew my ideas were at risk of being ignored. I also knew that if I asserted myself firmly, I'd be perceived as pushy or disruptive: the stereotypical, emotional woman.

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This is the frustrating emotional double standard that women face. When your feelings are visible, you confirm the stereotype of the overly emotional woman — too sensitive, even childish or lacking in self-control. But when you violate the stereotype, people may dislike



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But according to scientific evidence, the stereotype of the emotional woman is a complete myth. In general, women believe they have stronger, more frequent emotions than men do, and men agree. But when my psychology lab tracked the emotional lives of hundreds of men and women throughout the day using handheld computers, on average there were no differences by sex.

My lab's research also shows that when a woman is emotional, people think it's her fault, but when a man is emotional, people blame the situation, like he's just having a bad day. Sometimes, he's even rewarded for being a "sensitive guy" or a powerful leader. These stereotypes begin in childhood, as well-meaning adults view boys and girls differently without realizing it. Little by little, the stereotypes take root and live on in the next generation.

All women have to deal with this crap. Unfortunately, science has not discovered a cure for female stereotypes, but you can combat them to reduce their impact. Try the following techniques; some of them attack the stereotypes head-on, while others sabotage them in stealth.

1. Prime the audience. In the meeting where I found myself surrounded by 24 male scientists, I decided to make other people aware of stereotyping in advance. "As the only woman in this room," I said when introducing myself, "there'll be times today when I might assert myself a little to make my points heard. But not too much, because I know you guys are used to working with women." This makes people more conscious of talking over you or taking credit for your ideas.

2. Call it out in the moment. I used this technique in a meeting with a university administrator. Even though I was leading the meeting, he always turned and directed his



did, be prepared for some blowback. This technique can put others on the defensive, or they may view you as harsh. In my case, John called me “impulsive” and said, “You obviously just say whatever comes into your head.” I deepened my voice a bit, and in a measured tone, responded, “I can assure you, John, [pause] I’m not saying everything I’m thinking right now.” Then I waited comfortably for him to speak.

3. Learn “boy teasing.” Men constantly insult each other in jest. Humor is also an effective way to be critical, indirectly. For example, about 10 years ago, I was preparing to testify before Congress about the importance of scientific research, when a vice president called to give me advice. He said, “You should tell Congress that psychology is like mascara: it’s not strictly necessary, but it’s nice to look at.” (I’m not making this up.) Instead of criticizing him, I responded, “You know, I hadn’t thought of that. Do you mean the discount mascara or the really expensive stuff? Should it be brown or black? Waterproof? What about lipstick? Blush?” He quickly got the point. If you’re inexperienced at boy teasing, ask a trusted male friend to practice with you. It worked for me (over a good bottle of Scotch).

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4. Recognize — and publicly acknowledge — your double role. You are a woman, but also a professional in your career. Separate those roles when you’re at risk of looking like a bitch. For example, when I give critical feedback to a student in my lab, sometimes I’ll say, “As a person, I feel empathy for your situation, but as your supervisor, I must insist that you complete the assignment.”

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Grab a friend, share your best lines, and practice for the day you'll need them again. Hillary Clinton had some great retorts during her 2016 campaign, like when she was accused of not smiling enough during a national security forum. She responded, "That's what taking the office of president seriously looks like."

6. Build social capital. Let your coworkers know that you appreciate their efforts. Sincere thanks, a cup of coffee, or a small box of chocolates will assert your authority in a gentle way, which prepares them to see you as a leader when it counts. As a bonus, they'll like and trust you more. You can draw on this reserve of good will when you inevitably violate the female stereotype by simply doing your job.

7. Find a male ally. Do you know a sensible male coworker who can recognize when you're being stereotyped during meetings? Arrange with him to repeat your ideas and attribute them to you: "As Jane was just saying, we should consider renewing the contract." I used this technique during a meeting when a male colleague (call him Bob) mentioned a scientific finding from one of my research studies. People in the meeting credited the finding to him, calling it "Bob's insight." Bob corrected them because he and I had been in this situation before and discussed it.

8. Remember it's not about you. Every woman is stereotyped sometimes, by men and by other women. It feels personal, but usually it's not. Remembering this may help you to avoid justifying yourself when it's not necessary, making you look weak or defensive — you know, like an "oversensitive woman."

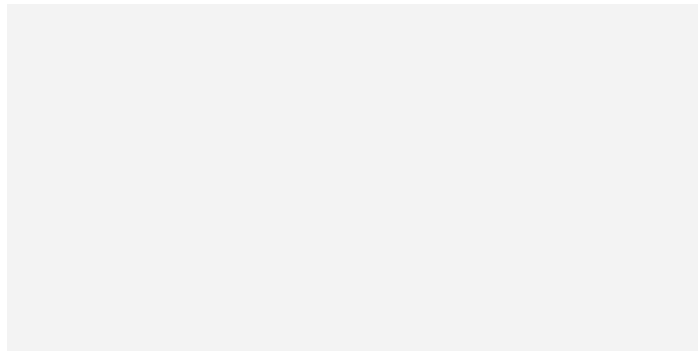
Every successful woman I've ever met was branded as an angry bitch at some point in her career, before she was accepted as a leader. These techniques won't cure the problem but they've helped lots of women. Try them out, and teach them to friends and coworkers too. Stereotyping can be really subtle sometimes, and it's helpful to be surrounded by other women who can see what you see, validate your experiences, and help you to push back.



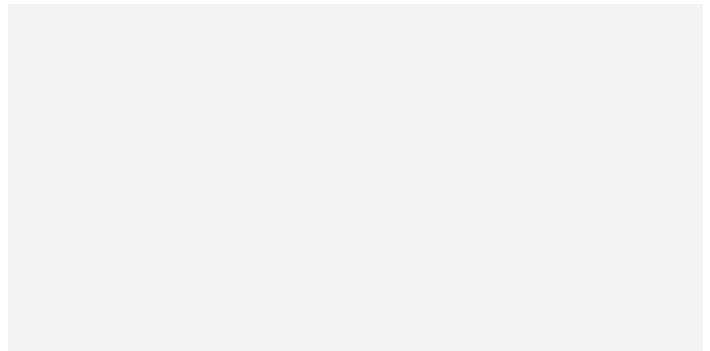
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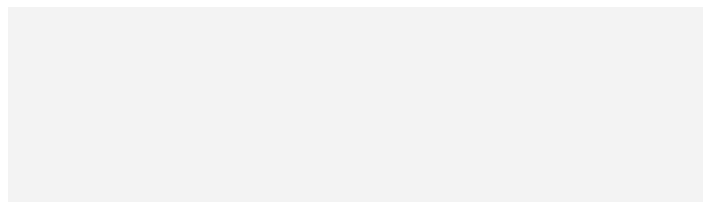
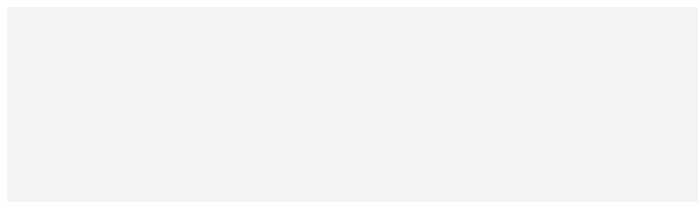


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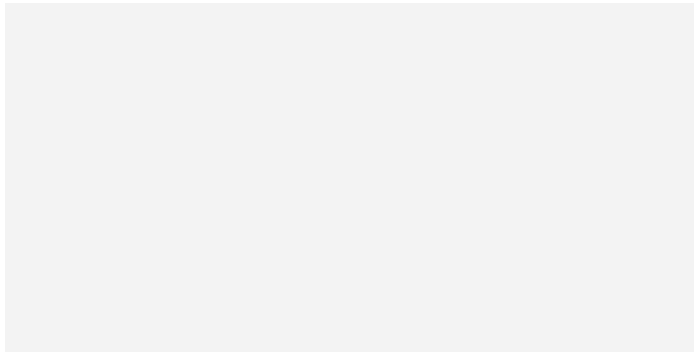
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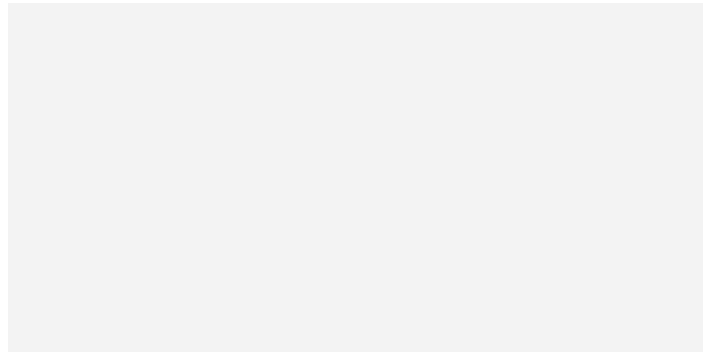




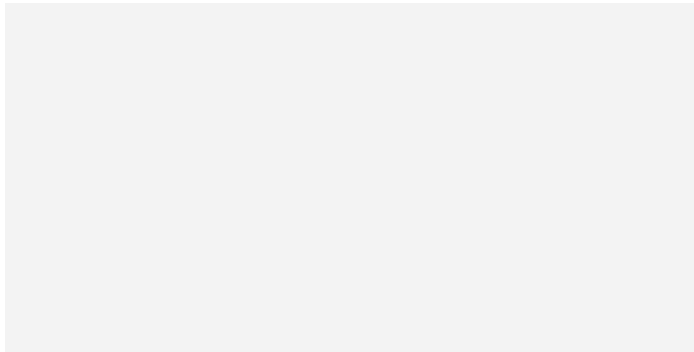
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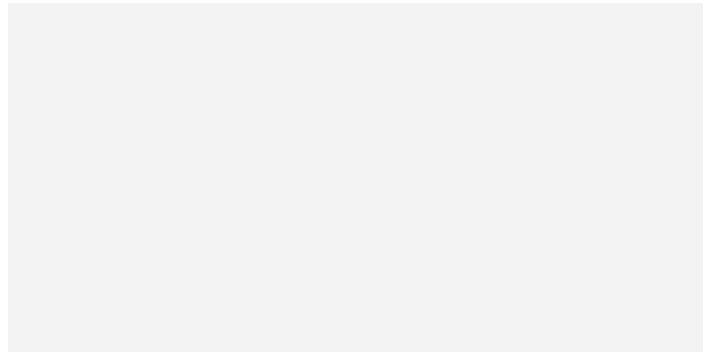
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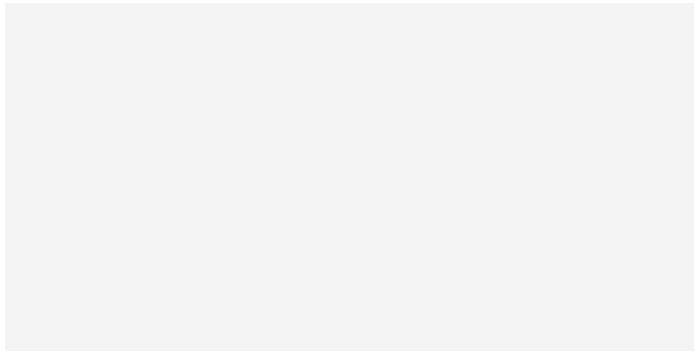
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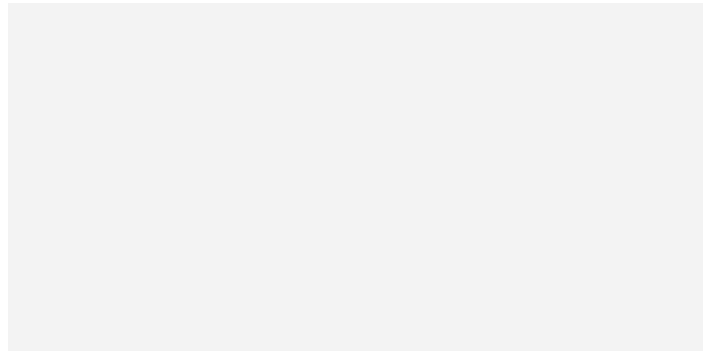
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