

## 4.1 Stereotyping: What It Is and How to Recognize It

A *stereotype* is a general, fixed notion about a person, a group, or an idea. Stereotyping is a form of labeling something or someone, of blurring or ignoring individual characteristics and assuming that all members of a group are alike. We may give people or things either negative or positive labels based on the groups to which we think they belong. Negative stereotyping often leads to avoidance and conflict. Positive stereotyping can lead to unfair expectations and disappointment. Read these four examples.

- The orange I just ate tasted sour. I won't eat oranges anymore because I don't like food that tastes sour.
- Blondes like to party. Rhonda is a blonde, so she must party a lot.
- Jeff, who lives on Magnolia Lane, always has a lot of money to spend. Sheila and Montez live on Magnolia Lane, so they must be rich, too.
- Greeks eat a lot of lamb. Theo is Greek, so he must like to eat lamb.

These statements are just a few examples of what stereotyping is and can do. Negative or positive stereotyping can keep us from getting to know each other as individuals and interfere with our relationships. Stereotyping people, things, or ideas can narrow our outlook and make us less tolerant and knowledgeable.

Often, we do not even realize that we are reacting to someone based on a stereotype. Using the following guidelines will help us recognize—and avoid—stereotyping.

1. Think carefully about characteristics you or someone else attribute to a person, a group, or an idea. Ask yourself if a whole group is being judged by what just a few members do or say.
2. Remind yourself that each person is a unique individual who might not share any of the positive or negative characteristics sometimes attributed to his or her "group."
3. Be alert to "red flags" that often signal stereotyping—words like *all*, *none*, *every*, *always*, *never* that usually are used to exaggerate or generalize and words like *dumb*, *lazy*, *cruel*, *sneaky*, *corrupt* that stir the emotions when applied to a group or a member of a group.
4. Be aware of consistent use of a positive or negative tone to refer to a person, group, or idea.