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## Social-Evaluative Threat, Cognitive Load, and the Cortisol and Cardiovascular Stress Response

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### Highlights

- Social-evaluative threat (SET) led to greater cortisol reactivity than non-SET
- The non-evaluative stressor did not elicit an increase in cortisol
- Social-evaluative threat (SET) led to greater cardiovascular reactivity than non-SET
- Greater cognitive load did not lead to greater cortisol or cardiovascular reactivity
- Findings support social self-preservation theory

### Abstract

**Background.** Current evidence suggests that exposure to social-evaluative threat (SET) can elicit a physiological stress response, especially cortisol, which is an important regulatory hormone. However, an alternative explanation of these findings is that social-evaluative laboratory tasks are more difficult, or confer greater cognitive load, than non-evaluative tasks. Thus, the current experiment tested whether social-evaluative threat, rather than cognitive load, is truly an “active ingredient” in eliciting a cortisol response to stressors.

**Methods.** Healthy undergraduate students ( $N = 142$ , 65% female) were randomly assigned to one of four speech-stressor conditions in a fully-crossed two (social-evaluative threat [SET] manipulation: non-SET versus

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