



# MAKING SENSE OF YOUR IAT RESULTS

## COMMON REACTIONS TO THE IMPLICIT ASSOCIATION TEST

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For some people, receiving the results of an Implicit Association Test (IAT) can bring forth a level of relief or self-reinforcement. This is particularly true when one's implicit preferences align with one's explicit beliefs. However, for many people there is disconnection between espoused beliefs and the results of the IAT. If this is your experience, you may be left wondering how to make sense of your IAT results.

This document provides a research-based typology of some common reactions to the IAT.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of what reaction(s) you may have, it is important to know that your feelings are normal and you are not alone in feeling this way. While we all have biases that may or may not align with our deeply held explicit beliefs of justice and equity, what speaks to the content of our character is how we choose to act in the face of learning about the implicit biases that we possess.

### Common Reactions to the IAT

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- **Disbelief**
    - It is common for people whose results conflict with their worldview to experience a level of disbelief and defensiveness about their results.
    - *What to do if you're experiencing disbelief:* If you are experiencing these feelings, remind yourself that our implicit biases are often different from our explicit beliefs. Therefore, regardless of your results, it is important to remember that our implicit biases are not measures of whether or not we are good people, but rather what messages and experiences we have internalized over a lifetime. Moreover, research suggests we have the capacity to alter our unwanted implicit associations.
  - **Disregard**
    - Perhaps you're questioning whether or not your score would be different if you're right or left-handed? Or maybe you're thinking that it may be possible to somehow outsmart the test? If so, rest assured that you are not the first person to have these thoughts.
    - *What to do if you're experiencing disregard:* Check the evidence—more than a decade of research exists analyzing various components of the IAT and its functioning. Although debates persist in the academic community, by and large the IAT has been found to be a reliable and valid measure of one's automatic associations.<sup>2</sup> Researchers have even assessed whether or not people are able to “fake out” the IAT.<sup>3</sup> Remind yourself that while it is sometimes easier to disregard a challenging result, learning comes from embracing and moving through discomfort in order to engage in self-reflection.
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- **Acceptance**
  - For some, it is relatively easy to come to a place of acceptance of their results.
  - *What to do if you're experiencing acceptance:* If you're able to quickly come to a place of understanding of your results and why you possess the associations that you do, the next step is to move toward action. This can be finding ways to change associations that don't align with your explicit beliefs and/or finding ways to ensure that your unwanted biases are not unintentionally yielding unwanted effects.
- **Discomfort**
  - Some individuals feeling discomfort may accept the accuracy of their IAT results, but are upset or uncomfortable with their results. Uneasiness with one's results can lead to reflection, questioning, and/or uncertainty.
  - *What to do if you're experiencing discomfort:* If you are made uncomfortable by your results, you're likely accepting the validity of the IAT. This is a major step in beginning to correct your biases. Take the time to look into what your biases indicate and realize that society shapes our biases. Also, discomfort can foster the inclination to take action.
- **Distress**
  - Feelings of distress come with elevated concern with one's results, sparking reflection on personal responsibility. This can sometimes manifest through embarrassment, guilt, shame, and/or a desire for action.
  - *What to do if you're experiencing distress:* If you are feeling distress, think of how taking action to combat these biases may change your role in harboring potentially harmful biases. Taking steps to change your biases and championing bias mitigation in your environment may also help.

## Reflection Questions

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- What feelings or reactions did you have upon learning your IAT results?
- Reflect on your life experiences that may have influenced your results. Consider your childhood and family upbringing; the neighborhoods in which you've lived; elements of your career path; media messages; your family and peer networks; etc. How might these experiences have shaped your biases, with or without your conscious awareness?
- How might knowing your IAT results affect your future actions and decisions, both in your role at your workplace and in other aspects of your life?

## Citations

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1. Clark, P., & Zygmont, E. (2014). A Close Encounter with Personal Bias: Pedagogical Implications for Teacher Education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 83(2), 147-161.
2. Greenwald, A. G., & Nosek, B. A. (2001). Health of the Implicit Association Test at Age 3. *Zeitschrift für Experimentelle Psychologie*, 48(2), 85-93.
3. Steffens, M. C. (2004). Is the Implicit Association Test Immune to Faking? *Experimental Psychology*, 51(3), 165-179.