

What is the Implicit Association Test (IAT)?

The IAT measures automatic associations in memory by looking at people's reaction time when they classify words. The IAT was developed by researchers at Harvard, and is used to identify implicit or automatic preferences and bias. This tool has been used to study bias in a range of disciplines, including gender, race, religion, sexuality, and even popularity of presidents. And the test works by asking you to pair two concepts together in a timed test.

The point of the IAT is to demonstrate that attitudes and beliefs can exist outside of our awareness, and these attitudes operate automatically and can even be contrary to the attitudes we would consciously express – that we can hold stereotypes that are powerful enough to operate without conscious control. As you can imagine, sometimes your implicit attitudes will be similar to your conscious attitudes, but at other times we may have implicit negative associations toward something or someone even when we consciously want to feel positively toward them. This often happens with attitudes toward overweight and obese persons.

Knowing about these negative attitudes and beliefs does not mean that we have no control over our behavior. In fact, it's exactly the opposite; we hope that understanding how these implicit attitudes are a part of us can ultimately help us decrease weight bias and prejudice.

One solution is to remain alert to the existence of an undesired attitude, recognizing that it may intrude in unwanted fashion into your judgments and actions. The point of the IAT is to help you increase your awareness of automatic attitudes toward obese individuals so that you can challenge negative assumptions or attitudes when they arise.

