
How to Handle Foolish People



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Exploring the roots of stupidity and strategies to combat the ignorance of others.

Most people, at one time or another, act foolishly. However, truly ignorant individuals exhibit a lack of introspection and stubbornly cling to their opinions, regardless of how irrational they may be.

These people demonstrate unwavering self-assurance and are often completely oblivious to their own inadequacies. They craft retrospective justifications to validate their beliefs and hold onto them. Even when presented with opportunities for personal growth and change, they seem incapable of breaking free from their entrenched habits.

Reasoning with [stubborn individuals](#) can be as perplexing as it is frustrating. Many have written it off as a hopeless task. As American writer Mark Twain once cautioned, “Never argue with stupid people, they will drag you down to their level and then beat you with experience.”

To argue against stupidity only seems to reinforce it. These individuals thrive on power and control, defending their position and denying their foolishness, regardless of innumerable counterarguments.

Despite these challenges, it is still possible to sway such people towards more sensible behaviour. It all starts with understanding the roots of stupidity.

Inside the mind of a fool

From a psychological perspective, stupidity is often considered an outcome of **cognitive biases or errors in judgement**. Many prominent psychologists attribute irrational beliefs and foolish actions to our cognitive limitations. Research into human cognition and decision-making has shed light on why these biases persist. It reveals that humans are not purely rational beings; they **switch between** fast, intuitive thinking and slow, rational thinking depending on the situation.

Neuroscientists have also **weighed in**, noting that the brain's frontal lobes, responsible for rational thinking, can be overridden by the amygdala, a more primitive system for processing threats. This distinction between fast and slow decision-making implies that in emergency situations requiring quick decisions, the slower, deliberate information processing is often set aside.

Numerous cognitive biases can help explain some of the nonsensical decisions people make. For instance, individuals can be susceptible to *confirmation bias*, where they favour information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. They may also succumb to “anchoring”, becoming overly influenced by the first piece of information they receive (the anchor), even when this information turns out to be irrelevant or arbitrary.

The *overconfidence effect* is another potential factor at play, causing people to overrate their abilities, knowledge and the accuracy of their beliefs. There is also the phenomenon of *groupthink*, where groups prioritise consensus and conformity over critical evaluation, reducing their capacity for balanced judgement.

Flawed decisions could also be the result of *fundamental attribution error*. This involves incorrectly attributing others’ behaviour to internal factors, such as personality, rather than to external factors, like situational influences. Also, *availability heuristic* explains the tendency to rely on information that comes to mind quickly and easily when making decisions.

While these cognitive biases don't inherently imply stupidity, when left unaddressed, they can pose significant risks.

Managing the misguided

When individuals recognise their cognitive biases, they become more willing to participate in productive discussions and gain deeper insights into their own behaviour. Rather than trying to persuade them through rational discourse, one can encourage them to examine these biases.

Promote reflective thinking

Ignorant people need to be taught how to properly decode the information they encounter, including learning to discern whether their own observations are grounded in evidence. The task at hand is to encourage them to engage in more reflective thinking on these subjects. Increased data transparency and fact-checking efforts are required to help them recognise the inaccuracies within their misguided beliefs.

Advocate greater self-awareness

Stupid actions can be viewed as either a defiance of logic or the result of a poverty of the mind. Self-knowledge is perhaps the most effective antidote. When people acquire a degree of self-awareness, it enables them to reflect on their foolish behaviour more objectively. They will recognise that, despite their persistent belief that others are foolish, they themselves are the real fools.

Keep people grounded

In certain situations, stupidity can be interpreted as a manifestation of self-idolatry, notably in individuals exhibiting narcissistic traits. Excessively self-absorbed, these people often display a disinterest in the opinions of others. Such individuals need to attain a more grounded perspective on life and cultivate their capacity for self-evaluation. Through self-critique, they can develop empathy – another great remedy for foolishness.

Use satire as a tool

Satire has the potential to stimulate reflection and critical thinking, ideally without causing offence. This unconventional method to get people to question their assumptions focuses on critiquing concepts and actions rather than attacking individuals personally. The key challenge is to help people recognise their ideological limitations, with respect and empathy. Constructive reasoning, evidence and clear communication can persuade

individuals to consider alternative viewpoints.

Let them learn the hard way

Another approach to addressing stupidity is through paradoxical intervention. Instead of instructing individuals to avoid specific foolish activities, one may encourage them to engage in more of them. While this should be considered a last resort due to the associated risks, the hope is that when their actions lead to disastrous outcomes, their own foolishness will become evident to them. They will learn from the experience and come to realise that their singular perspective may not be entirely correct.

While it may be challenging for them to distinguish between right and wrong, it is likely easier to differentiate between sensible and foolish choices. The adverse consequences of their actions can serve as a wake-up call, instilling a degree of doubt about the wisdom of their ways.

Lead by example

An effective leader, whether in government, business or any other sector, requires a combination of intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, empathy and compassion. Additional qualities that qualify leaders to make informed decisions for the betterment of society include the capacity for critical thinking, problem-solving skills, proficiency in handling complex issues, the ability to collaborate with others and distinguish between the wise and the foolish. While such a leader may not always be able to entirely prevent people from falling victim to irrational beliefs, they can set an example that starkly contrasts with the conduct of foolish leaders.

Stupidity in a “post-truth” era

In today’s “post-truth” era we find ourselves grappling with a daily barrage of public discourse that blurs the line between fact and fantasy. We are fooled by errors and lies, and social media appears to be amplifying such stupidity. Our current age may indeed be characterised as a golden age of foolishness, as the explosive rise of social media has made human follies more visible than ever.

We tend to underestimate the number of ignorant individuals in our midst, and the influence such people can exert over large groups. The dangerous combination of power and stupidity can disrupt the lives of countless people. Unfortunately, as long as there are foolish supporters enabling such leaders,

people find themselves trapped in the morass of their own collective foolishness.

A significant counterforce against collective stupidity is the presence of institutional safeguards. Citizens must actively cultivate a robust civic culture, fostering a society where they can exert influence on their government. There needs to be laws that discourage the propagation of misinformation and legal avenues to counter fake news, especially when it causes personal harm.

At the end of the day, a broader educational initiative can prevent foolish actions and counteract overconfidence and arrogance. Although it presents a formidable challenge, education can lead people to discover and acknowledge their own ignorance, nurturing a more thoughtful and informed society that is better equipped to confront the pitfalls of stupidity

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/how-handle-foolish-people>

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About the research

["Understanding Human Stupidity in a Post-truth Area"](#) is a Working Paper.