

# Understanding the psychology of what lies behind irrational opinions

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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 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 counterarguments.

Despite these challenges, it is still possible to sway such people towards more sensible behavior. It all starts with understanding the roots of stupidity. From a psychological perspective, stupidity is often considered an outcome of cognitive biases or errors in judgment.

## **Why biases persist**

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. 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 favor information that aligns with their preexisting 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 and knowledge and the accuracy of their beliefs. There is also the phenomenon of [groupthink](#), where groups prioritize consensus and conformity over critical evaluation.

Flawed decisions could also be the result of fundamental [attribution error](#). This involves incorrectly attributing others' behavior to internal factors, such as personality, rather than to external factors, like situational influences.

Also, the [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 recognize their cognitive biases, they become more willing to participate in productive discussions and gain deeper insights

into their own behavior. Rather than trying to persuade them through rational discourse, one can encourage them to examine these biases.

**Promote reflective thinking:** People can be taught how to properly decode the information they encounter. They can learn to discern whether their own observations and beliefs are grounded in accurate evidence.

**Advocate greater self-awareness:** When people acquire self-awareness, they are able to reflect on their behavior more objectively.

**Keep people grounded:** Self-absorbed people often lack interest in the opinions of others. They need to attain a more grounded perspective on life and cultivate their capacity for self-evaluation. Empathy is another great remedy for foolishness.

**Satire as a tool:** Satire has the potential to stimulate reflection and critical thinking. It gets people to question their assumptions without attacking individuals personally.

**Let them learn the hard way:** Instead of instructing individuals to avoid specific foolish activities, one may encourage them to go ahead. It can be risky, but the hope is that when their actions lead to disastrous outcomes, they will learn from the experience.

**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 are critical thinking, problem-solving skills, proficiency in handling complex issues, and the ability to collaborate with others and distinguish between the wise and the foolish.

A leader like this can set an example that 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. The 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 will be trapped in their own collective foolishness. A significant counterforce against collective stupidity is the presence of institutional safeguards.

Citizens must cultivate a robust civic culture, fostering a society where they can exert influence on their government. There need to be laws that discourage misinformation and legal avenues to counter fake news, especially when it causes personal harm.

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.

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