Why do we do stupid things ... like smoking for example? And what's to be done about it?

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We all do stupid things. The correlation is weak at best between intelligence and unintentionally harmful behaviours such as driving too fast, eating unhealthily, drinking too much alcohol, failing to protect against excessive sun exposure, and smoking cigarettes.

Stupidity arises from four main sources: 1) failure to engage in intelligent thought, 2) failure to apply that thinking at the appropriate moment, 3) distortion of that thinking by motivational factors such as wishful thinking, and/or 4) inability to resist the influence of more powerful sources of motivation.

Cigarette smoking is a good example of a behaviour that arises from all of the above sources. Each of the major theoretical approaches to understanding behaviour, such as social cognition models, learning theories, drive theory, self-regulation theories, personality theories, and dual process models account for some of the key observations about cigarette smoking; but no single approach addresses them all.

- Social cognition models can account for why tax increases and some mass media campaigns prompt quitting activity and deter smoking uptake. They can also explain the role of confidence in promoting quit attempts.
- Learning theories can explain how drugs such as varenicline help smokers to stop by blocking the pharmacological reward of nicotine. They can also explain how urges to smoke become associated with particular cues.
- Drive theory accounts for how varenicline can help smokers to stop by reducing the acquired drive (‘nicotine hunger’) that occurs when CNS nicotine concentrations are depleted and why smokers who need to smoke first thing in the morning have greater difficulty in quitting.
- Self-regulation theories can account for how greater ability to persist in the face of discomfort predicts success at stopping smoking; and quit attempts made soon after a failed attempt are much less likely to succeed.
- Personality theories can explain why impulsivity is predictive of taking up smoking.
- Dual process models can explain how smokers trying to stop can light up a cigarette, momentarily forgetting that they should not be smoking.

There are other types of theory that also have an important contribution to make in explaining cigarette smoking. For example:

- Identity theory can explain how identification and self-labels are important in starting to smoke and how identity change can promote cessation.
- Imitation theory can explain how observation of smoking behaviour can trigger automatic impulses to smoke.

A model of behaviour that can bring together these diverse approaches should provide a better guide to developing interventions aimed at combating cigarette smoking than has been available thus far. Such a model should also be able to explain observations that none of the existing theories are able to, and it should be applicable to other behaviours, regardless of whether they can be thought of as ‘stupid’.

An attempt at such a model is COM-B+PRIME1,2, 3. COM-B models behaviour in terms of a dynamic interacting system involving capability, opportunity and motivation while PRIME focuses on motivation and describes the ways in which plans provide an overarching structure to our behaviour but in order to influence responses, they need to generate momentary impulses/inhibition which requires creation of motives (feelings of want or need) through evaluations (positive and negative beliefs). COM-B+PRIME potentially provides a framework in which more specific theories of behaviour can be understood and compared and a basis for development of intervention strategies to help us use our intelligence to better effect.

References
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Professor West's research includes clinical trials of new smoking cessation treatments, studies of the acute effects of cigarette withdrawal and population studies of smoking patterns. He has published more than 300 scientific works and is co-author of the English and Scottish National Smoking Cessation Guidelines that provided the blueprint for the UK-wide network of smoking cessation services that are now an established part of the National Health Service.

Professor West is co-director of the NHS Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training, a member of the Board of Directors of QUIT, a member of the Editorial Board of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco/WHO Tobacco Treatment Database, a member of the Editorial Board of the Cochrane Collaboration Tobacco Review Group, and is Editor-in-Chief of the journal Addiction. He is also Past-President of the Society for Research in Nicotine and Tobacco.