

INTERVIEW WITH BEN MITCHELL

Why do you think people take up smoking?

They're dealing with stuff in their lives, their problems, their stresses in life, so they tend to go, 'these guys feel the same as me, they're smoking,' and it creates this kind of psycho bubble, this fake appearance of smoking relieving stress. People smoke, they stop thinking about their worries and think that the stress is going away but in fact smoking's causing more stress internally. They get more stressed from the addiction, going 'I need to smoke, I need to smoke.' It's an addiction, chemically and psychologically, they need it and they're creating stress doing that.

That's the absurdity of it all, thinking that they're going to relieve the stress by having a smoke but they're actually causing so much stress in life because it's a time waster. By going away for ten minutes, or going out and having a five minute ciggie, it's actually causing stress in their bodies and the stress of going out there, coming back, going out there every ten to fifteen minutes, that's the thing.

What is your opinion on smoking?

I did some research. It's deep ... lung cancer, I mean cancer of everything really, rotting of the gums, the mouth, all those decrepit things that make your mouth odorous and just so unattractive. It is common sense. You almost want to laugh at the ludicrous absurdity of it because I think people don't look at the long term. They just think of the moment.

Do you remember your first experience of smoking?

My mother smoked and my dad totally didn't and so I grew up with a kind of confusion, going, 'what are you doing? Why isn't dad doing it?' You know, you follow your parents, you just follow their behaviours. I remember my mother had a distinctive smell that I knew was caused from her smoking and my father had a distinctive, cleaner smell and he looked cleaner. My mum was always robust and active but my father was the fit one, you know what I mean?

Do you think that young people still think smoking is cool?

I don't necessarily think the youth go, 'it's a cool thing' it's more that they're just like sheep, they just follow along. It's hanging out in the wrong crowds when the crowd doesn't actually know why they're smoking, they're just smoking because everyone is doing it.

I mean look at our movies stars, a lot of our youth in society are reflected from so-called 'role models', and it does encourage smoking when you've seen big stars with cigarettes and you subconsciously go, 'oh okay, that's the way they behave, I want to be like them, maybe I'll do that.'

I think people are becoming more aware that it ain't a good thing to do. It's not necessarily a cool thing, I think it's a social thing, you know what I mean? Although a lot of people still smoke, a lot more people don't want to smoke. You talk smokers and they don't actually want to smoke. It's just habit.

What do you think the worst thing about that addiction is?

It's a drug and legal, that's #&*d up. You get people smoking maybe a packet a day, \$70-\$100 a week, \$7-8,000 a year, \$24,000 in three years, that's a deposit on a house man, and people are complaining that there's no money, they don't have time to do this and do that... It's really absurd. I just look at people and go, 'you're weak' because they go, 'I can't stop, I really can't.' Hundreds of people have stopped.

You want to go university? That's a university education paid for in two to three years these days, you know, bang! No student loan, no bludging off the government. That's a holiday away seeing the world and back and again including fine restaurants. Phew.

There are bigger problems than you could ever think about. Look across the other side of the world, you know what I mean? Who are you to say, 'I can't stop?' It's a weak mentality. I look at people who smoke and some people actually want to smoke, that's fine, they actually like it, they're well aware of the consequences and they go for the motto 'life's too short'. Cool. But most people want to stop. It's a vicious cycle.

Do you think it's harder to quit as you get older?

There are social reasons for smoking, which is usually reflective of youth, and then by the time they get to X amount of age they go, 'I need to stop' but they can't. See when you're young it's management. You can actually stop, start, stop, but as you get older the events of life are bigger, stresses are bigger, well you think they're bigger. They're not really. So people then turn to such things as alcohol and cigarettes. Cigarettes are more effective because you can use it at work whereas you can't get drunk at work.

What upsets you most about smoking?

It's disrespect. We're here for a reason. People are on about saving the world, saving the children, saving the money, but they don't think about themselves and realise the happier you are, the better quality of your life, the more you can get it out, the more you can contribute to society, you know what I mean.

It's disrespectful to other people. Like, I'm sitting down, it's a beautiful day, eating my lunch and just finished shooting and then someone comes next to me and lights up. I mean, I may as well smoke. It's got four hundred or something chemicals in that thing and that guy's giving it to me. I work so hard to be healthy.

What do you think are the benefits of being smokefree?

I'm kind of a mathematical thinker so I look at things as in 'you've got X amount of time per day and you've got X amount of time per life time' and you look at what you want to create in life. What do you want to achieve? What sort of quality of life do you have? I have a list of things that move me towards that and things that eliminate or prevent me from doing that and the biggest thing is a time waster.

I'm at work and I see people just race straight off their scene out the set to smoke and then they moan that they didn't learn their lines or they moan that they're not getting enough breaks. They don't even realise that these small pockets of time accumulatively could be used in such a more beneficial way.

Let's just say a light smoker would spend twenty to thirty minutes a day, and that's #*\$ all compared to some people who spend about two hours a day smoking. If you do the maths over a week, that's X amount of time you could devote to a hobby, to exercise. And people complain that they don't have enough time for those things and complain that they've got saggy arses.

It's such an anti-social thing too. They usually try and do it by themselves. It's almost like they're going, 'don't look at me, I'm dying.' It's weird.

What do you think of the physical effects of smoking?

Women pay attention to smell, the way you hold your hair. And you can tell a smoker because their body becomes so acidic, their body starts to atrophy. Their muscles, their gums start to erode, and they haven't even got to the smell yet because that's up close. But you can tell in their skin, their cells, you know. It's decrepit. You're not going to enjoy the best quality of life you could ever have because it's a drug. It's not natural.

What would your advice be to teenagers experimenting with cigarettes?

Don't start.

Look at what you really want in life. If you start to smoke you won't get that. That's a bit harsh really, but you are more than that. You're a leader man, you're here for a purpose. Find that purpose. Don't try and fill it with a wrapped up piece of paper and shove it in your mouth. Food's meant to go in there, not this stuff. You're more than that. Rise above it and don't follow those sheep. Be strong in your character because in ten years time it's your character that creates your life.

Don't fill the moment with something. Again some people just want to experiment, life's here to experiment but be careful it's addictive. You lay it out to them, the consequences. If you're doing it because someone else is doing it, that's \$@*d. You're following the sheep. Be strong. You're perfect.

How do smokers see non-smokers? Is it OK to not smoke?

I'm terrible. I might come back from my run and people are usually smoking outside and they kind of have to have a joke about it because of their insecurity. Like I run past them, and they throw a joke out there but really they're thinking, 'I wish I could be like that. I wish I could exercise. Why can't I?' I actually feel sorry for them now that I think about it.

What's hard is when people have good genes, you know what I mean? Because you see those people with great genes and they're smoking away, they're doing everything they can to abuse their bodies and they still look 100%. To me, you're still weak and I know you want to stop but you can't. You can, but you think you can't and that's weak. I'm being so judgmental!

I'm quite a judgmental person anyway but I hold it in. It's only times that I have interviews that I release it so I bite my tongue all the time on issues and I try to let it out through my work or through my training.

Do you think environments we grow up in shape smoking behaviour?

Yeah, I go back to the marae and they go on about 'te tapu te reo,' the language is sacred, and I'm thinking, "your body is sacred." That's hypocritical, you know what I mean?

It's that whole cliché of 'my people once were warriors.' Well, it was true, and they had the choice back then. But they didn't smoke, they didn't drink and when it was introduced they had the choice to do it or not. It was that integration, 'this is cool, let's have a smoke, they're doing it' and it just got out of control. Back then smoking was seen as the real upper crust thing to do.

European society goes on about, 'it's unhealthy, but it's your choice and these are the effects of what happens. Don't smoke because it will kill you.' That's fact. But Maori tend to come from a holistic spiritual point of view. It's tapu and we shouldn't do this. That's fine and I'm all up for that but don't be hypocritical.

Do you see yourself as a role model who should speak out about this?

We've got role models like Cliff Curtis, he doesn't smoke. He's clean as, and the more people like him, people out there representing this nation the better. I'm not a preacher, although I kind of am now because I'm campaigning and that's fine but I wouldn't do it if I didn't believe in it. I don't go on to my friends 'don't smoke.' I did to my Mum though because she has a direct correlation with my lineage.

I thought it was interesting what you were saying about time wasting before...

Absolutely. Life is too short, too precious to do something that's digging a grave for yourself, instead of really looking for the potential in life. We live in the wealthiest, prosperous, affluent time of our lives.

We can call someone in New York, we can watch a movie, you know what I mean? Why would you waste your precious time sitting around poisoning your lungs, heart, creating cancer, rotting your gums, decaying your body, digging it in the ground when you could live the most amazing life you've been here to live for? Why would you do that? And if you did do that don't make excuses for not having what you don't have or not spending the time with the people you want to spend it with. You're not being the best you can be.

We read that you're a fluent te reo speaker. Would you like to say anything in Maori?

No, because the funny thing I've noticed is that a lot of the people who speak Maori don't smoke, especially if they learnt it as a second language. I think this is because they've adopted an identity, a connection with themselves, no matter what language they learn really. Yeah, nah, kai te pai.