

# Tips on countering conspiracy theories and misinformation

*Assess how willing they are to listen*



Not everyone is always prepared to adjust their beliefs and you may not want to spend time and energy talking to someone who is unlikely to change. Try to find out how willing they are to have an open and challenging conversation and only engage if you see positive signals.

*Pick your battles*



Some conspiracy theories are not worth the effort of debunking (hollow or flat earth, moon landing etc.) since they usually do not have an immediate impact on someone's actions and it is rather unlikely that they may affect society in a significant way.

*Go private*



Don't confront people publicly as this creates social pressure. Even if you're respectful, a person may get defensive in order to save face. Instead, try to talk in a private space, somewhere the person feels safe and calm.

*Do not Attack*



Try to engage in a positive, trustful dialogue. Show respect to avoid the other person feeling threatened and getting defensive.

*Ask questions*



Ask questions with a genuine tone of curiosity to show you are interested in really putting yourself in the other person's shoes. It takes two to tango, so you need to signal your openness to encourage the other person to be open too. This will also help you understand more about their beliefs - not all conspiracy theories are the same.

*Embark on a common journey to find truth*



Instead of confronting the other person in a lose-win context, try to frame the situation as two allies trying to uncover the truth. This way it's a win-win situation and admitting that someone was wrong does not have the taste of defeat.

*Avoid scientific jargon*



Using complicated scientific terms does not aid understanding and can alienate your audience. Try to find a simpler way to express the same meaning.

*Find common ground*



Many conspiracy theories are inspired by a nearby kernel of truth. Acknowledge these truthful elements (if they exist) to find points of agreement and to help establish trust.

*Acknowledge  
the  
emotional  
aspect*



Even though conspiracy theories look like they are based on arguments, people's reasons for believing in them tend to be psychological. For example, they may feel the need for certainty, control, belonging or meaning. This is why facts alone can't usually alter someone's beliefs. You also need to address the feelings that push someone towards a conspiracy theory.

*Establish  
your  
legitimacy*



When talking to someone who endorses a conspiracy theory, be aware that they may consider you to be part of it if they feel you are trying to disprove it. To avoid this, try to distance yourself from agents that are supposedly part of the conspiracy (such as big pharma in relation to vaccines, renewable energy companies in regards to climate change).

*Tailor the  
message*



Not everyone believes in the same conspiracy theory or trusts the same sources. It's important to get a sense of the other person's beliefs, the authorities they trust and the values they hold. Try to tailor your message accordingly.

*Ask for the  
sources of  
their  
information*



It's easier to discredit an unreliable source than deconstruct a vague web of beliefs. Ask for the sources, cast doubt on the motives behind them, identify inconsistencies and highlight obvious falsehoods. Utilise fact-checking websites like [snopes.com](https://snopes.com), [fullfact.org](https://fullfact.org), [sourcewatch.org](https://sourcewatch.org) and [ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org](https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org).

*Refer to  
agreement  
among  
experts*



Be clear about the existence of scientific consensus relating to issues such as climate change (1, 2) and COVID-19 (3) but do not insist too much on the need to listen to experts. Keep in mind that trust in experts may have been damaged. Refer to experts your counterpart trusts.

*State what is  
true, don't  
just reject  
their belief*



Clearly express the truth and repeat it regularly. Repetition is the basis of familiarity, and familiarity makes something more likeable and convincing. Use the Fact-Myth-Fallacy-Fact schema from The Debunking Handbook (5).

*Help them  
understand  
how the  
internet  
works*



Many people use the internet without knowing how to protect themselves from misinformation. Help them identify legitimate media and see through clickbait websites with the use of fact-checking websites. Teach them to search for the primary source of the opinion or information. Explain how social media algorithms are designed to promote specific content to each person in order to increase engagement and how this process may reinforce each person's beliefs by systematically presenting a biased version of reality.

## Take it step by step



Don't expect someone to leave the conversation a changed person. Change is a slow, continuous process. You need to be patient and allow the person time to digest the new information, reconsider their views and take ownership of the change. People need to feel in control of their own beliefs and decisions, so they are unlikely to immediately admit they were wrong.

## Help them understand statistical information



Statistics can be difficult to understand intuitively (4). To make things worse, some companies use confusing language to make their products look more favourable (e.g. an increase from 2% to 3% can be described as a 50% relative increase). Help people make sense of data by using simpler formats (e.g., absolute changes, frequencies of discrete items). A picture is worth a thousand words, so try using a simple, well-designed graph. Having trustworthy and well-explained resources can help strengthen your arguments.

## Don't overwhelm them with information



It's not easy to change a belief. It takes time and effort from both sides to come to a fruitful conclusion. Too much information can be intimidating and may evoke negative feelings. Try to keep track of the person's reactions and stop when you see them reach their limits. Focus on deconstructing one or two arguments, not their whole belief structure.

## Prebunking / Inoculation



As in medicine, prevention is better than cure. Teaching people how to fact-check claims, identify clickbait websites and bad-faith actors, as well as recognize and deconstruct flawed arguments can make them more resilient to misinformation and conspiracy theories (5). There is a lot of resources that can help you explain how to spot a conspiracy theory (6, 7) And it can be fun too, with the use of games like [goviralgame.com/en](http://goviralgame.com/en).

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## Resources:

1. Scientists Agree: Global Warming is Happening and Humans are the Primary Cause: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/global-warming-happening-and-humans-are-primary-cause>
2. Consensus on consensus: a synthesis of consensus estimates on human-caused global warming: <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/11/4/048002>
3. The John Snow Memorandum on scientific consensus regarding COVID-19: <https://www.johnsnowmemo.com/>
4. Gigerenzer, G. (2015). Risk savvy: How to make good decisions. Penguin.
5. The Debunking Handbook 2020: <http://sks.to/db2020>
6. The Conspiracy Theory Handbook: <http://sks.to/conspiracy>
7. European Commission - Identifying conspiracy theories: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en)
8. How to talk to conspiracy theorists — and still be kind: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/07/15/1004950/how-to-talk-to-conspiracy-theorists-and-still-be-kind/>
9. I've been talking to conspiracy theorists for 20 years — here are my six rules of engagement: <https://theconversation.com/ive-been-talking-to-conspiracy-theorists-for-20-years-here-are-my-six-rules-of-engagement-143132>