

Don't fall for a conspiracy theory; here's how to protect yourself

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People are more willing to believe conspiracy theories in times of difficulty, experts say. Conspiracy theories can have serious consequences. However, experts offer steps you can take to protect yourself against them. Illustration: Newsela staff

Conspiracy theories can be dangerous. Our emotional state can make us more open to false, and potentially harmful, beliefs. People who feel scared, confused, alone and threatened are especially at risk of believing in conspiracy theories, experts say, but there are steps we can take to protect ourselves from these dangerous ideas.

The first step may be understanding where these ideas come from. A conspiracy theory is a belief that a secret, powerful organization is responsible for an event. The theories are often not supported by evidence, however many still gain popularity.

"Conspiracy theories tend to flourish in times of crisis," says Karen Douglas, a psychologist, or someone who studies the mind and behavior. Humans have a natural need for knowledge and certainty. We want to feel safe, secure and in control, and to feel good about ourselves and the groups we belong to, she adds. When these needs are not being met, "conspiracy theories might seem to offer some kind of relief," Douglas said.

A study done in August found that the coronavirus pandemic has generated more than 2,000 rumors, conspiracy theories and other false claims. As wacky as some of these ideas are, they can have serious consequences, the study said. Misinformation can lessen the effectiveness of health officials and prevent people from seeking medical treatment. Research published in May, for example, indicates that those who believe in coronavirus-related conspiracy theories are less likely to follow social distancing guidance and would be less willing to get vaccinated.

Manage Your Emotions And Think Critically

It's typically easier to prevent conspiratorial thinking than it is to correct it once someone is fully convinced by it, experts say. People who are invested in a certain belief often are not interested in changing, though there are exceptions.

Experts have strategies that they say can help you manage your emotions and protect yourself against conspiracy theories.

Turn off the news, or whatever else is making you anxious. Emotions do not just happen to us — we have a lot of control over what we feel, and when, said Jill Rathus, a psychology professor. One of the best ways to restrain intense negative feelings is to avoid or reduce whatever is causing them, she suggests.

If you are constantly scrolling on social media, try uninstalling the app from your phone or turn off notifications from social media and news apps.

Practice critical thinking. "We need to be nudged to consider whether the claims in front of us are accurate," said Nadia Brashier, a brain scientist. "So, slowing down and asking yourself, 'Is this information biased, or unlikely to be true,' can be really helpful."

Though many conspiracy-theory believers consider themselves to be critical thinkers, closely examining their evidence might help them see otherwise, Douglas adds. For example, does all the conspiracy-theory-related material come from one type of source, while non-conspiracy-theory information comes from different sources? That can be a clue that something is off.

Stay Connected Even In Isolation

Change your perspective. Is there a situation that causes negative feelings for you? Try thinking about that situation in a way that will change the emotions it causes. For example, are you struggling with staying at home for so long? Try thinking that isolation is part of the adventure. In fact, for astronauts, it is. They train to be alone in space for years. That new perspective can help reframe the experience into something more positive.

Research suggests that those who use this technique are more likely to have closer relationships with friends, fewer depression symptoms and greater life satisfaction. It can also lessen the strong emotions linked with conspiracy theories.

Connect and consult with others. Feeling isolated and disconnected, which are emotions plenty of people have struggled with during the pandemic, are primary reasons people fall for conspiracy theories, said Rathus.

Make an effort to remain connected, and remember that social distancing doesn't have to mean social isolation. Watch the same movie as a friend, even if you're in different places, or video call a

friend. Make plans to meet outdoors, if you can.

Talk It Out

If you do become intrigued with a conspiracy theory, talk to others before you decide it is valid. Think about wise people you know and trust, Jenny TeGrotenhuis, a counselor, said. Then ask yourself, "Are they following this conspiracy theory?" Check it out and see if they're thinking similarly.

Try visualizing positive outcomes. This can help keep away the intense emotions that might make you more vulnerable to harmful conspiracy theories. Picture yourself in a happier time, such as at the beach during a vacation or visiting a relative you haven't seen in months, Rathus suggests, or imagine what you'll do once it's safe to return to old routines.

Then, challenge your brain to oppose all the "what ifs." Replace, "What if the worst happens?" with something such as, "What if we have a safe, effective vaccine, and life returns to normal?"

Practice Good Self-Care Mentally And Physically

Do one task a day that makes you feel in control. It can be big or small: starting a new hobby or cleaning your room. Keeping in charge of your space and feeling more in control of your life makes you less likely to feel like other people are controlling your life, says Nathaniel Herr. He also teaches psychology.

Working on a project, such as growing a garden or tidying up your house, can also help decrease feelings of powerlessness. Doing something every day that helps us feel more competent and in control of our lives is "an incredible lift to our emotions," Rathus said.

Take good care of yourself. Eat well, exercise every day and get enough sleep. Not getting enough sleep can make us overwhelmed and grumpy the next day and leave us with spiraling thoughts.

Accept the circumstances. "There's not a lot we can control about the pandemic or wildfires or other major stressors these days, so it can be freeing to stop trying to fight these negative feelings and just accept them," Nicole Giuliani, an expert in behavior and emotions, says. Calming strategies such as deep breathing and meditation can help.

Quiz

- 1 Read the following selection from the Introduction [paragraphs 1-4].

"Conspiracy theories tend to flourish in times of crisis," says Karen Douglas, a psychologist, or someone who studies the mind and behavior. Humans have a natural need for knowledge and certainty.

Which two words would BEST replace "flourish" and "crisis" in the selection?

- (A) falter; trouble
- (B) thrive; disaster
- (C) spread; security
- (D) wither; calm

- 2 Read the following paragraphs from the section "Talk It Out."

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Which phrase from the paragraphs shows a threatened tone?

- (A) become intrigued
- (B) thinking similarly
- (C) possible outcomes
- (D) more vulnerable

- 3 How does the author point out a weakness in a conspiracy-theory believer's argument?

- (A) by showing that conspiracy theories have grown during the pandemic
- (B) by showing that conspiracy theories can lead to social distancing
- (C) by stating that conspiracy theories are quickly gaining in popularity
- (D) by stating that conspiracy theories are rarely supported by evidence

- 4 Based on the article, what is the MOST likely reason the author includes the perspective of Nicole Giuliani?

- (A) to highlight the opinion of an expert who has a suggestion for how people can approach difficult situations
- (B) to highlight the opinion of an expert who has a suggestion about how to prove that conspiracy theories are wrong
- (C) to bring attention to the opinion of an expert who thinks that some conspiracy theories are acceptable
- (D) to bring attention to the opinion of an expert who describes why it is important to get rid of negative ideas