

How to talk to someone about conspiracy theories in five simple steps

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People's first instinct when engaging with conspiracy believers is often to try and debunk their ideas with factual and authoritative information.

However, direct confrontation rarely works. [Conspiracy theories are persuasive](#), often playing on people's feelings and sense of identity. Even

if debunking conspiracy theories was effective, it's difficult to keep up with how quickly they appear and how widespread they travel. A study showed that during 2015 and 2016, the [number of propagators of Zika virus conspiracy theories](#) on Twitter twice outnumbered debunkers.

But research into how to talk with conspiracy believers is beginning to show returns. We've developed some [conversation prompts](#) to use with people you know or only meet in passing. But first, if you want to address someone's conspiracy beliefs you need to consider the root causes.

People are attracted to conspiracy theories in an attempt to [satisfy three psychological needs](#). They want more certainty, to feel in control, and maintain a positive image of their self and group. During times of crisis, such as the COVID pandemic, these needs are more frustrated and people's [desire to make sense of the world](#) becomes more urgent.

Yet, conspiracy beliefs do not seem to satisfy [these psychological needs](#) and may actually make things worse for people, increasing their uncertainty and anxiety. Conspiracy theories don't just affect people's state of mind, they can also [impact behavior](#).

For instance, people who believe in [anti-vaccine conspiracy theories](#)—such as the idea that [pharmaceutical companies](#) cover up the dangers of vaccines—reported more negative attitudes towards vaccinations and an increased feeling of powerlessness one month later. This is what makes it so important to reach out to conspiracy believers.

What we've learned

One important tool to reduce conspiracy beliefs is the power of social norms. People [overestimate how much others believe](#) in conspiracy theories, which influences how intensely they buy in themselves. A study

in 2021 found that [countering this misconception](#) with information about what people actually believe diluted the strength of anti-vaccine conspiracy beliefs among a sample of UK adults.

Inoculation is a promising route, too. Giving people [factual information in advance of exposure to conspiracy theories](#) can reduce belief in them. This approach could work well in cases like vaccination where people might not think much about the issue before it becomes important to them (for example when they need to decide whether to have their children vaccinated).

You can inoculate yourself too. [Research has found](#) that the way people think about control can reduce the likelihood they will subscribe to conspiracy theories. People who are focused on achieving goals find conspiracy theories less appealing than those who fixate on protecting what they already have. The authors of this paper argued that concentrating on shaping your future fosters a sense of control, which reduces conspiracy beliefs.

To help with those difficult discussions with conspiracy believers we developed some evidence-based [conversation starters](#).

1. Be open-minded

An [open-minded approach](#) starts with asking questions and listening. It builds understanding with the person. Listen carefully, and avoid defending your own beliefs. Ask questions like this:

"When did you first start believing in (briefly reference the conspiracy theory)? And how has this impacted you psychologically? What do these beliefs offer to you?"

2. Be receptive

Work on what psychologists call [conversational receptiveness](#) to foster empathy which can bridge the gap between the beliefs you each hold. Say things like:

"I understand that...; So what you're saying is...; How does this make you feel?; Tell me more...; I'm listening; and thank you for sharing."

3. Critical thinking

Affirm the value of [critical thinking](#).

If the person you're talking to already [perceives themselves as a critical thinker](#), redirect this skill towards a deeper examination of the [conspiracy theory](#) itself. For example:

"We probably both agree that asking questions is important. But it is key we evaluate all pieces of evidence. We need to weigh up the information and make sure we check the evidence that we agree with as well as the things we don't like or make us feel uncomfortable."

4. Conspiracy theories aren't the norm

Highlight how [conspiracy theories](#) are [not as commonplace](#) as people might think.

Readdressing [social norms](#) can help address people's need to protect a group they identify with. Such as:

"It is far more typical than you might realize for your neighbors to get vaccinated and protect themselves against COVID-19. People want to

work together to protect our community. It's about us all trying to help people with medical conditions who don't have the choice to get vaccinated. "

5. Think about what can be controlled

Encourage them to be [forward-focused](#) and inspire them to put their energy into areas of their life where they experience more control, like this:

"There are some aspects of our life that we have no control over, but there are plenty of areas where we have full agency. Let's list some examples where we have power and independence that we can then focus on."

These conversations can be difficult, but they are crucial. Using an empathetic, understanding, and open-minded approach will nurture trust. Research shows that gaining someone's confidence is important to [preventing radicalisation](#).

Reassure the person if they feel uncertain, make them feel more in control if they are worried or powerless, and help them make social connections if they feel isolated.

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