

Psychological science can help counter spread of misinformation, says new report

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Debunking, "prebunking," nudging and teaching digital literacy are several of the more effective ways to counter misinformation, according to a new report from the American Psychological Association.

Written by a panel of U.S. and international experts on the psychology of [misinformation](#), the report outlines the processes that make people susceptible to misinformation and offers solutions to combat it.

People are more likely to believe misinformation if it comes from groups they belong to or if they judge the source as credible, according to the report titled ["Using Psychological Science to Understand and Fight Health Misinformation: An APA Consensus Statement"](#). It defines misinformation as "any information that is demonstrably false or otherwise misleading, regardless of its source or intention."

The report outlines the key features of misinformation that fool people into believing and spreading it. For instance, it found that people are more likely to believe [false statements](#) that appeal to emotions such as fear and outrage. They are also more likely to believe misinformation that paints groups that they view as "others" in a negative light. And people are more likely to believe information the more it is repeated, even when it contradicts their prior knowledge. These findings suggest that it is important to stop misinformation early, the report says.

The report also describes features of social media that help misinformation spread very quickly. "Rapid publication and peer-to-peer sharing allow ordinary users to distribute information quickly to large audiences, so misinformation can be policed only after the fact (if at all)," the report says. "'Echo chambers' bind and isolate online communities with similar views, which aids the spread of falsehoods and impedes the spread of factual corrections."

As a result, "most online misinformation originates from a small minority of 'superspreaders,' but social media amplifies their reach and influence."

There are two levels on which misinformation can be stopped, according

to the report: systemic approaches, such as legislation and technology standards, and individual approaches focused on changing individual behaviors. The latter include:

- [fact-checking](#), or debunking;
- prebunking, or pre-emptive debunking to prevent people from falling for misinformation in the first place;
- nudges, such as asking people to consider the accuracy of information before sharing it, or rewarding people to be as accurate as possible;
- and [formal education](#) or [community outreach](#) to raise people's awareness about healthy online behavior and media use.

The report acknowledges that there is much more to learn, and recommends more [research funding](#) and industry cooperation to understand behaviors related to misinformation and create tools to correct it. The panel members who wrote the report spent more than a year reviewing the [scientific literature](#) to develop their recommendations. The report was commissioned by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While the panel's recommendations focus on health misinformation, they can also be used for broader topics such as politics and climate change. For instance, these findings offer direct input to one of the main issues highlighted in [APA's Health Advisory on Social Media](#) by addressing tactics that can be used to combat misinformation.

The report recommends eight steps for policymakers, scientists, media and the public to help curb the spread of misinformation and the risks it poses to health, well-being and civic life:

1. Avoid repeating misinformation without including a correction.
2. Collaborate with social media companies to understand and

- reduce the spread of harmful misinformation.
3. Use misinformation correction strategies with tools already proven to promote healthy behaviors.
 4. Leverage trusted sources to counter misinformation and provide accurate health information.
 5. Debunk misinformation often and repeatedly using evidence-based methods.
 6. Prebunk misinformation to inoculate susceptible audiences by building skills and resilience from an early age.
 7. Demand data access and transparency from [social media](#) companies for [scientific research](#) on misinformation.
 8. Fund basic and translational research into the psychology of health misinformation, including ways to counter it.

"These psychological science findings help to explain how misinformation enters our thought processes," the report states. "It is effortful and difficult for our brains to apply existing knowledge when encountering new information; when new claims are false but sufficiently reasonable, we can learn them as facts. Thus, everyone is susceptible to misinformation to some degree: We acquire it even when we know better."

More information: American Psychological Association, ["Using Psychological Science to Understand and Fight Health Misinformation: An APA Consensus Statement"](#) (2023).

Provided by American Psychological Association

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