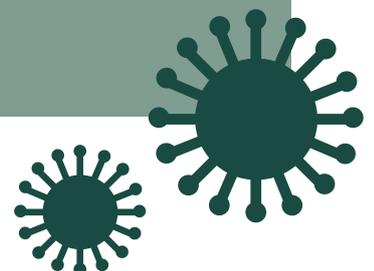


# TALKING ABOUT COVID CONSPIRACY

Among proponents of conspiracy theories - about the origins of coronavirus, the reality of Covid, the purpose of lockdowns or vaccines - people's views range from deep conviction of a global conspiracy to general unease with mainstream accounts. Like anyone else, people who quote conspiracy theories hold a mix of views that are sometimes contradictory. Those of us who encounter these claims can sense the risk that trying to give someone a more grounded account just causes them to become defensive and more attached to the conspiracy. We don't want to indulge completely unfounded claims, but we don't want to dismiss those who are trying to think independently either. And sometimes they're our friends and family so it's important that conversations take us closer to a shared picture of what's going on.

As the prospect of post-Covid life returns, everything we can do to develop a common understanding of what's happened during the pandemic will help ensure that fair criticisms are made and that more people are engaged with what should happen next.

During conversations and workshops with people who had adopted some of the alternative, conspiratorial Covid theories, or been engaging with those who believed them, they told us what worked and what they do and don't respond to. They critically reviewed and added to the tips that follow for having constructive conversations.



## OVERALL, THOUGHTS ON WHAT MAKES A CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATION HAD TWO COMMON ELEMENTS:

- Find an incentive for critical reflection.
- Help people work things out for themselves.

This is not about trying to win but trying to help. Begin with empathy. If the suggestions below don't fit your particular conversation, that approach may help you find your own.

“I don't want to be told what's wrong. I want help working that out.”

### 1 FIND OUT WHAT SOMEONE ACTUALLY BELIEVES

There's probably not much scope to change the mind of committed conspiracy theorists with a worldview that is tied up with their identity. And conspiracy theories tend to be irrefutable: there is nothing you can say against the conspiracy theory that could not be reinterpreted as evidence for it.

But on Covid a lot of people find themselves in the grey zone of not really believing in a particular theory, but not fully disbelieving it either. Sometimes people share a conspiracy theory because they're intrigued or want to provoke a reaction. So, it is important to find out whether the person you are speaking to is committed to what they are sharing.

Many conspiracy theories are quite harmless: focus on those that are damaging to the people who believe them. Can you do something useful?

- Establish what they believe, and whether it is attached to a worldview or group they follow.
- Find out what kind of things they've been watching and reading.
- Question how the various theories they subscribe to fit together – or not.
- Find out what *they* think the gaps are in their ideas.
- Ask what they're interested in finding out.

“Some people throw out statements that they have heard on the internet and they don't really believe it. It is provocative, it is interesting, it is different.”

#### USEFUL APPROACHES:

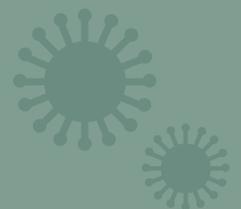
Is this Covid/flu thing something you've looked into?

You don't sound completely convinced by that. What are your other thoughts on vaccines?

Is that raising other questions for you?

#### NOT:

And surely you don't believe THAT?



## 2 DON'T OVER-REACH

You're unlikely to quickly change someone's mind with a few well-chosen facts about vaccines.

Conspiracy theories are often driven by feelings of injustice, resentment and cynicism towards governments, experts and the mainstream media. People who believe in conspiracy theories are likely to distrust such sources. If anything, ridiculing conspiracy theorists only confirms their suspicion that everyone is being brainwashed. There are useful debunking sites that can give you some help, but you're always likely to come off worse against someone who has invested hours online reading about these theories.

- Even if you are a vaccine scientist, avoid getting into an argument about every fact.
- Where you can, take the discussion private, away from social media.
- Try to give information by invitation: ask if they're interested in something you know.
- Question what they think about the reliability of the sources they have.
- Keep asking questions, not in a combative, point-scoring way – find out what *they* think the limits are to the information they are putting across.
- Don't ram points home or push someone to admit they're wrong.
- If someone recognises their idea might be wrong, don't move onto 'the next Covid thing they're wrong about' or start ridiculing some other conspiracy theory. Just leave it to them.
- Conspiracy theory material can be disconcerting with its volume of confidently-stated claims. Find people whose knowledge you respect, to discuss your own questions.

“Presenting a study from The Lancet, they might well say that scientists are all part of the conspiracy.”

“It's not about the quality of the source but what it says.”

“Online sourcing particularly is about a series of which websites do you trust.”

### USEFUL APPROACHES:

'This is taking statisticians – in government, companies and universities – a lot of debate to figure out. Shall I tell you how I've been judging it?'

'Do you think the person who made this video has access to hospital data around the world?'

'What would you have expected to happen, if the pandemic was real?'



### 3 RECOGNISE THAT CONSPIRACY THEORISTS HAVE FAMILIAR NEEDS AND FRUSTRATIONS

The underlying motives for believing in conspiracy theories are shared by most people to some degree: anxiety about a loss of control (both individually and socially), wanting to make sense of how everything fits together, the temptation to think that you are unique (in having seen through the lies), and the need to belong to a community of like-minded people. Conspiracy theories are closely related to other ways of making sense of the world.

- Consider their wider views, their worries - and even the enjoyment they get from pursuing these theories.
- Identify what you share: curiosity about world events, scepticism about official explanations, or anger at injustice.
- Take care with the label "conspiracy theory". It is not neutral. It is often used as a way to mark out certain beliefs as fundamentally flawed.
- Help them see where ideas are being questioned and debated in the mainstream discussion of the pandemic.
- Move into wider discussion about how we know what we know and what the gaps are, so that they can locate themselves in the real dilemmas or disputes about how coronavirus spreads or the effects of different measures against Covid.

“At least those people are asking questions.”

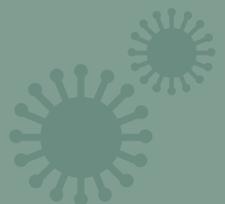
“It’s like calling someone out as a racist and that just shuts down the conversation, I guess.”

“I think in some ways conspiracy theory has become a term used in a way akin to how people use fake news - to dismiss something they do not want to become a point of focus in a conversation before it is looked into in any depth.”

#### USEFUL APPROACHES:

‘Are you trying to avoid being misled by all these different statistics? Would it help to find out which ones have been independently validated?’

‘If you were in charge, what would you do?’



## 4 TALK ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND ACTUAL CONSPIRACIES

Conspiracies do indeed happen but have different traits to conspiracy theories. Conspiracies are commonly exposed through leaks and mistakes by participants. They involve a fairly small number of people and even then, they are almost impossible to keep out of the media, even where powerful institutions have tried.

- Acknowledge the possibility of secrecy or dishonesty on the part of the authorities.
- Have a conversation about the implications of a particular conspiracy theory.
- What evidence would lead the conspiracy theorist to change their mind? A theory that is unfalsifiable is no theory at all, but a matter of blind faith. If this is so, you need to leave it there and focus on how they can take actions that are both compatible with their beliefs and not harmful or anxiety inducing.

“Taking content down can also make people think that some larger forces are controlling the messaging, confirming their theories.”

*Two well-known sources of Covid conspiracy theories, Alex Jones and David Icke, make lots of money from advertising revenue, which increases with shares, likes and clicks. Adding Covid to their conspiracy theories early in the pandemic attracted new audiences*

### USEFUL APPROACHES:

Who would have to be involved in covering it up?

What is the likelihood of so many people collaborating in the first place, or keeping the secret?

Have you experienced the incompetence of big organisations?



## 5 ENCOURAGE EQUAL SCEPTICISM

We need to acknowledge that there have been plenty of episodes of dubious official pronouncements and flawed expert advice to give people good reason to be sceptical. However, if conspiracy theorists pride themselves on being suspicious about everyone, and never taking anything at face value, then encourage them to be sceptical about their own sources.

The view of conspiracy theorists is that ordinary people are being manipulated by powerful forces behind the scenes.

While conspiracy theorists are often quite savvy about media manipulation, they are willing to cite authorities sympathetic to their position and tend to overlook the same tricks being pulled from outside the mainstream.

- Be even handed – show you're prepared to apply the same critical distance to mainstream and alternative sources and encourage them to do so.
- Consider the motives of individual conspiracy entrepreneurs and the financial incentives of the social media platforms, which profit from stoking controversy.
- Find out a little about the history of actual disinformation campaigns. For example, in the 1980s some conspiracy theories about HIV/AIDS were deliberately spread as part of a Soviet disinformation campaign.
- Talking in advance about likely kinds of misinformation about Covid can be more useful to people than debunking after the fact.
- Discuss special pleading, where techniques (scares, claims of cover up, medical-sounding terms, appeals to emotion) are used to get you to overlook holes in the facts – in all domains.
- Don't appeal to authority yourself – though it is worth explaining why you value some expert sources more than others.

**“There are real reasons why people would conjure up conspiracy theories, so it is important to have the conversation.”**

**“You can tell people that source of evidence that they base their view on is poor but ... the mainstream alternative is equally poor if not worse.”**

*Microchips are still too large for a vaccine needle and vaccines involve hundreds of independent groups and manufacturers, so Bill Gates is not planning to control the world's population by implanting a chip in the coronavirus vaccine. But there is scientific research, funded by the Gates Foundation, into potential for readable imprints under the skin via a novel method of vaccine delivery using a patch with microscopic needles, to address the need for accurate vaccination records in poorer countries.*

*There should be an important conversation about the ethics and the practicalities of this proposed research but debating whether Gates is in league with a global cabal to enslave people is not pressing for that accountability and threatens to undermine those who are.*



- Explain the process of scientific research. Conflicting results from medical research early in the pandemic, were to be expected. Some findings turned out to be important and were then confirmed, but others gave false leads, and were dropped as scientists gained better understanding of Covid and vaccines..

Above all, remember that conspiracy theories may be outlandish but their followers' frustrations about having little voice or control are not. A conversation that empowers people to think, question, complain or challenge can be much more useful than one that demolishes a 'fact'.

## USEFUL APPROACHES:

Do you know about Occam's Razor? It's the idea that simple explanations are more likely than complex ones. Doctors use it when patients come in thinking they've got Ebola or whatever's in the news, when all their family have gone down with flu.

'What's in it for the people who post shock claims about Covid?'

'The thing in science is that when people post things they get crawled over by other scientists and corrected or improved, whereas these people only seem to get fan mail that agrees with them.'



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