

In a pandemic of medical misinformation, how do you deal with conspiracy believers? | The Guardian

By Donna Lu

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Withholding judgment, appealing to critical thinking and restoring a sense of personal control are among techniques that may be helpful while speaking to people who believe in health-related conspiracy theories, experts suggest.

Medical misinformation has spread widely during the coronavirus pandemic, contributing to higher Covid death rates among the unvaccinated and causing frayed relationships between friends and family members with opposing views.

Writing in the Medical Journal of Australia, psychology researchers have suggested practical tips on how to talk to someone who firmly believes in health-related conspiracies.

Especially during times of social unrest or uncertainty, people may turn to conspiracies to explain large-scale events, said Dr Mathew Marques, a co-author of the paper and a lecturer at La Trobe University.

Conspiracy theories appeal to – but fail to satisfy – three universal psychological needs, according to the paper’s authors.

These include a “need to make sense of the environment around us ... [and] an existential need to reduce the threat and the vulnerability faced in everyday life”, Marques said. “We know that people, when they’re made to feel more anxious, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

[...]

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