


Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories

By [Kendra Cherry](#) |  Medically reviewed by [Steven Gans, MD](#) | Updated on March 16, 2020

There has been a growing interest in recent years in why people believe in conspiracy theories. Recent controversial examples of such theories include the belief that terrorist attacks and mass shootings were staged events orchestrated by the U.S. government. Other examples include the belief that the pharmaceutical industry intentionally spreads diseases or that vaccines cause illness rather than prevent them.

While it might seem like these beliefs are rare or even pathological, research has shown that they are surprisingly common. A study found that half of all Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory.

What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

A conspiracy theory can be defined as the belief that there are groups that meet in secret to plan and carry out malevolent goals.

What explains this common and often deep-rooted belief that powerful, sinister, and secretive groups are conspiring to deceive others — particularly in a day and age where we have more access to information and facts that might debunk many of these ideas? Researchers suspect that there are a number of psychological mechanisms that contribute to these beliefs, many of which may be the result of evolutionary processes.

In a world where you might feel powerless and alienated, it can be appealing to believe that there are forces plotting against your interests. Once these beliefs take root, [cognitive biases](#) and mental shortcuts reinforce and strengthen them. Many of the same factors that fuel other types of problematic thinking, such as a belief in the paranormal, also

contribute to conspiracy theories. And while such paranoid ideas are not new, the internet has helped transform the way and the speed in which they are spread.

In order to understand why people believe in these conspiracies, it is important to explore some of the psychological explanations and the potential effects these beliefs have.

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Explanations

Researchers suggest that there are a number of different reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories. Many of these explanations boil down to three key driving factors:

- A need for understanding and consistency (epistemic)
- A need for control (existential)
- A need to belong or feel special (social)

Epistemic Reasons

Epistemic explanations refer to the desire to derive certainty and understanding. The world can be a confusing place filled with events that may seem dangerous and chaotic. People are driven to explain the things that happen in the world around them. Doing so helps them build up a consistent, stable, and clear understanding of how the world works.

Factors That Increase Conspiracy Belief:

- In situations involving large-scale events, where more mundane or small-scale explanations seem inadequate
- In situations where people experience distress over uncertainty

When people encounter disparate information, it is only natural to look for explanations that connect the dots. Conspiracy theories offer explanations that provide this connection. They also suggest that the underlying causes are hidden from public view. When confusing things happen, believers can then assume that it is because they are being intentionally deceived by outside forces.

There is also a connection between conspiracy beliefs and educational levels. Lower educational status tends to be associated with higher level of conspiracy belief.

Having lower analytical abilities and less tolerance for uncertainty also play a role. As a result, people turn to conspiracy theories to provide explanations for events that seem confusing or frightening.

The [confirmation bias](#) can also play a role in the development of conspiracy belief. People are naturally inclined to seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs. So when they run across a theory that supports something that they already think is true, they are more likely to believe the information is also true.

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Existential Reasons

There is also evidence that people turn to conspiracy theories as a way of feeling safer and more in control. When people feel threatened in some way, detecting sources of danger can be a way of coping with anxiety.

What The Research Suggests:

- [One study](#) found that people who feel psychologically and sociopolitically disempowered are more likely to believe in conspirac theories.
- [Another study](#) found that people are also more likely to believe in conspiracies when they are experiencing anxiety.

While researchers understand these existential motivations, there is little evidence that believing in these theories actually helps people satisfy their need to feel control and autonomy. In fact, by believing in these theories, people may actually be less likely to engage in actions that would potentially boost their sense of control (such as voting or participating in political activity).

So while people may be drawn to conspiracy theories as a way of making sense of the world and feeling more in control of their own destiny, the long-term effects may actually leave people feeling more disempowered than ever before.

Social Reasons

People can also be motivated to believe in conspiracy due to social reasons. Some researchers have hypothesized that by believing in conspiracies that cast out-groups as the opposition, people are able to feel better about themselves and their own social group. Those who believe in the conspiracy feel that they are the “heroes” of the story, while those who are conspiring against them are “the enemy.”

People Believe In Conspiracies When:

- They are on the “losing” side of a political issue
- They have a lower social status due to income or ethnicity
- They have experienced social ostracism
- They are prejudiced against “enemy” groups they perceive as powerful

Such findings suggest that conspiracy belief might arise as a sort of defense mechanism. When people feel disadvantaged, they are motivated to find ways to boost their own self-perceptions. Blaming others by linking them to malevolent plots provides a scapegoat on which to lay blame, thus improving how conspiracy believers view themselves.

The belief in conspiracies is also rooted in what is referred to as collective narcissism. This is the belief that your own social group is better, yet less appreciated, by other people.

People who feel that they or their social group have been victimized are also less likely to believe in government institutions and more likely to believe in conspiracies.

The way in which people encounter and share these ideas should also be noted. It's easy to dismiss a story shared by a random source that you don't trust. But when multiple people in your social circle who you *do* know and trust all seem to believe the same story, it starts to seem less like a silly conspiracy and more like a trusted fact. Sharing these kinds of stories within our networks gives social credence to such conspiratorial thinking.

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Effects

While researchers have some good theories about why people believe in conspiracies, it is less clear what the ultimate effects of these beliefs are.

What researchers have found is that while these beliefs are motivated by a desire to understand, exert control, and feel socially connected, these aren't the effects people are deriving from their beliefs. Rather than fulfilling these needs, believing in conspiracies seems to reinforce feelings of confusion, isolation, disenfranchisement, and [loneliness](#). It is a destructive cycle - negative feelings contribute to the belief in conspiracies, yet the belief in conspiracies results in negative feelings.

Believing in conspiracy theories erodes people's trust in their government, their leaders, and their institutions. It also diminishes trust in science and research itself. This distrust may discourage people from participating in their social worlds. It might also cause people to stop seeing themselves as valuable contributors to society.

Rather than helping people cope with their feelings of social alienation and political disenfranchisement, conspiracy beliefs seem to create a cycle of distrust that leads to even greater disempowerment.

Risks

Believing in things that are not true poses a number of dangers, which can have real effects that impact individual behavior and ultimately have a ripple impact on society as a whole. A resurgence in Measles outbreaks in the U.S. has been largely attributed to a refusal by some individuals to vaccinate — a refusal that stems largely from the conspiratorial belief that vaccines cause autism and other health ailments.

Failing to address dangerous misbeliefs presents a potential danger to public health and even the political process itself. Faulty beliefs lead can lead people to not vaccinate, not vote, or, in some rare cases, even engage in dangerous or violent behavior.

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Overcoming Conspiracy Theory Beliefs

In the age of disinformation, finding ways to refute conspiracy beliefs seems more important than ever. Social platforms claim to be buckling down on those who peddle and profit off of conspiracies, but is it really possible to change such views once they've taken root?

One problem faced when trying to disprove conspiracy theories is that people who hold these beliefs also tend to suspect that there are factions engaged in covering up these activities. Those trying to debunk the mistaken beliefs are then viewed as simply being actors in the conspiracy itself.

While it might be tempting to simply mock conspiracy theories, especially the more ridiculous ones, this usually causes believers to dig in their heels and deepen their commitment to their belief.

Many factors that contribute to conspiratorial beliefs, such as educational background and [personality](#), are not easily or quickly changed. Researchers have found one tactic, however, that is effective — encouraging believers to pursue their goals.

People tend to take one of two approaches in the pursuit of goals.

- Those who are **"promotion-focused"** believe that they have the power and control to shape their future.
- People who are **"prevention-focused,"** on the other hand, are more focused on protecting what they already have rather than on achieving their goals.

Feeling In Control Reduces Conspiratorial Thinking

So what does this have to do with conspiracy beliefs? Researchers found that promotion-focused people were more skeptical and less likely to buy into conspiracies. Why? People who believe that the future hinges on their own actions have a great deal of personal agency and control. It is this sense of autonomy and agency that makes people less likely to believe in secret plots and nefarious plans.

What the researchers also discovered was that giving people a nudge in the direction of a more promotion-focused mindset could actually reduce belief in conspiracies. In practical terms, promoting messages that help people feel more in control can minimize conspiratorial thinking.

Write It Down

Researchers had study participants write down their aspirations, which helped them focus on their goals and what they could do to achieve them. This simple activity encourages people to take a more promotion-focused mindset and reduces conspiracy belief.

While researchers have been able to reduce conspiratorial thinking in the lab, how applicable is this in the real world? In workplace settings, managers might employ this strategy to help minimize water-cooler worries, office gossip, and interpersonal friction. Regular discussions that center on employee goals and strategies to achieve those goals can help keep workers feeling more in control and less subject to corporate whims.

In terms of public health, organizations might start by promoting messages focused on realistic things people can do to take control of their own health. Building this sort of action-oriented [mindset](#) may help discourage belief in health-related conspiracies and build greater trust between medical organizations and health consumers.

A Word From Verywell

Conspiratorial thinking can be problematic and dangerous ([Pizzagate](#), anyone?), but this does not mean that skepticism of institutions, marketing, and media messaging is not warranted. After all, not all conspiracies are false (the Tuskegee experiments and Iran-Contra are just a couple of examples).

As you [encounter information](#) from various sources, it is important to be able to distinguish between false conspiracy theories and real threats to

personal security. While it may be tempting to ridicule conspiracy believers, remember that these sort of beliefs are actually pretty common — you probably even believe in some of them. In a world where people feel the very real effects of power imbalances and distrust in [leadership](#), conspiracy theories will naturally flourish, which means discouraging this type of thinking is not always easy.

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