

# Understanding Conspiracy Theories

Area 51 is home to secret U.S. government experiments on aliens. Bigfoot is real. The moon landing was faked. These are some examples of ones many of us are familiar with. Conspiracies do occur – think Watergate or John Lennon under FBI surveillance. Conspiracy theories may or may not be true. The fact that conspiracies do sometimes occur can lend credibility to conspiracy theories. Belief in conspiracy theories does not always cause significant harm; however, some conspiracy theories promote violence as a valid and sometimes necessary response. All violent extremist beliefs function like conspiracy theories. Some examples include: the federal government is not a legitimate government elected in a democratic process, the government is excessively controlled by powerful elites, or drag queens are grooming children through library story hours. They do not respond to fact, data, or evidence. There are generally seven defining features:

## Contradiction

While there may be a consensus on the topic of a conspiracy theory, the what, why, or how may differ so greatly that some of the explanations within a theory will directly contradict another.

## Suspicion

Conspiracy theorists believe the information from official sources are attempts to deceive them, breeding doubt and mistrust of official sources.

## Bad Intentions

Conspiracy theories include an individual or group who is actively working to harm or deceive society, often to gain power or control over the public or governing institutions.

## Dedication to the Theory

Individuals may change or adjust their specific explanations should they become unsustainable, but their commitment to the theory itself remains unchanged.

## Victim-Hero Complex

People who believe in conspiracy theories see themselves as victims of those trying to control or manipulate a narrative. They see themselves as smarter and better informed than people who don't agree with their beliefs. They see themselves as a hero for not falling for those nefarious official explanations and for exposing the truth to others.

## Resistant to Facts & Evidence

By claiming that a community, society, or a government is implicit in a cover-up on the chosen issue, any attempt to present factual evidence for why the theory is wrong is seen as another effort to cover up the truth. By challenging the conspiracy theory, you inadvertently give it support.

## No Coincidences or Randomness

Things that may normally be considered as occurring by chance are instead attributed to a larger plan. Everything that happens is connected to or a result of the conspiracy.

## What may lead a loved one to believe these things?

Feeling of access to privileged information

Provides a sense of control

Simple explanation for complicated & obscure things

Feelings of political uncertainty or instability

Feelings of being threatened or undermined

Lack of trust in political system & politicians

Feeling powerless to influence political change

## What should you do if your loved one endorses these beliefs?

### DO:

#### Change the subject

Discussing it provides them the opportunity to advocate for these theories. It's okay to say, "I don't want to talk about this, but I'm happy to talk about (unrelated topic)."

#### Set boundaries

Let them know hateful, derogatory language is not acceptable in your household. If you've attempted a change of subject and they persist, set boundaries by letting them know you will leave if they don't stop. Should they continue, get up and leave the discussion.

#### Affirm their critical thinking

Conspiracy theorists believe they are critical thinkers that aren't deceived by mainstream explanations. By emphasizing their ability for critical thinking, you may be able to get them to use those perceived strengths against the conspiracy theory itself. Use the perceived strength to ask how they have investigated evidence that supports the theory.

### DON'T

#### Try to respond with facts or evidence

Discussing it provides them the opportunity to advocate for these theories. It's okay to say, "I don't want to talk about this, but I'm happy to talk about (unrelated topic)."

*If you are struggling to talk to a loved one who is endorsing conspiracy beliefs, reach out to Life After Hate for support and assistance.*

## References

Lewandowsky, S. & Cook, J. (2020). The Conspiracy Theory

Kruglanski, Arie W., Erica Molinario, Molly Ellenberg, and Gabriele Di Cicco. "Terrorism and conspiracy theories: A view from the 3N model of radicalization." *Current Opinion in Psychology* (2022): 101396.