

# 9 ways to talk to people who spread coronavirus myths

February 13 2020, by Claire Hooker

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The spread of misinformation about the novel coronavirus, now known as [COVID-19](#), seems greater than the spread of the infection itself.

The [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO), [government health departments](#) and [others](#) are trying to alert people to these [myths](#).

But what's the best way to tackle these if they come up in everyday conversation, whether that's face-to-face or online? Is it best to ignore them, jump in to correct them, or are there other strategies we could all use?

Public health officials expect misinformation about [disease outbreaks](#) where people are [frightened](#). This is particularly so when a disease is novel and the [science](#) behind it is not yet clear. It's also the case when we still [don't know](#) how many people are likely to become sick, have a life-threatening illness or die.

Yet [we can all contribute](#) to the safe control of the disease and to minimising its social and [economic impacts](#) by addressing misinformation when we encounter it.

To avoid our efforts backfiring, we need to know how to do this effectively and constructively.

## What doesn't work

Abundant research shows what doesn't work. Telling people [not to panic](#) or their perceptions and beliefs are incorrect can actually [strengthen their commitment](#) to their incorrect views.

Over-reactions are common when new risks emerge and these over-reactions will pass. So, it's often the best choice to not engage in the first place.

## What can I do?

If you wish to effectively counter misinformation, you need to pay more attention to your audience than to the message you want to convey. See

our tips below.

Next, you need to be trusted.

People only listen to sources they [trust](#). This involves putting in the time and effort to make sure your knowledge is correct and reliable; discussing information [fairly](#) (what kind of information would make you change your own mind?); and being honest enough to admit when you don't know, and even more importantly, when you are wrong.

Here's how all this might work in practice.

## **1. Understand how people perceive and react to risks**

We all tend to worry more about [risks we perceive to be](#) new, uncertain, dreaded, and impact a large group in a short time—all features of the new coronavirus.

Our worries increase significantly if we do not feel we, or the governments acting [for us](#), have control over the virus.

## **2. Recognise people's concerns**

People can't process information unless they see their worries being addressed.

So instead of offering facts ("you won't catch coronavirus from your local swimming pool"), articulate their worry ("you've caught colds in swimming pools before, and now you're worried someone might transmit the virus before they know they are infected").

Being heard helps people re-establish a sense of control.

### 3. Be aware of your own feelings

Usually when we want to correct someone, it's because we're worried about the harms their false beliefs will cause.

But if we are emotional, what we communicate is not our knowledge, but our disrespect for the other person's views. This usually produces a defensive reaction.

Manage your [own outrage](#) first before jumping in to correct others. This might mean saving a discussion for another day.

### 4. Ask why someone is worried

If you ask why someone is worried, you might discover your assumptions about that person are wrong.

Explaining their concerns to you helps people explore their own views. They might become aware of what they don't know or of how unlikely their information sounds.

### 5. Remember, the facts are going to change

Because there is still considerable uncertainty about how severe the epidemic will be, information and the [government's response](#) to it is going to change.

So you will need to frequently update your own views. Know where to find reliable information.

For instance, [state](#) and [federal health departments](#), the [WHO](#) and the US [Centers for Disease Control](#) websites provide authoritative and up-to-

date information.

## **6. Admit when you're wrong**

Being wrong is likely in an uncertain situation. If you are wrong, [say so early](#).

If you asked your family or employees to take avoidance measures you now realise aren't really necessary, then admit it and apologise. This helps restore the trust you need to communicate effectively the next time you need to raise an issue.

## **7. Politely provide your own perspective**

Phrases like, "here's why I am not concerned about that" or "I actually feel quite confident about doing X or Y" offer ways to communicate your knowledge without attacking someone else's views.

You can and should be explicit about what harms you worry misinformation can cause. An example could be, "I'm worried that avoiding Chinese restaurants will really hurt their business. I'm really conscious of wanting to support Chinese Australians right now."

## **8. On social media, model the behaviour you want to see**

It's harder to be effective on [social media](#), where outrage, not listening, is common. Often your goal might be to promote a reasoned, civil discussion, not to defend one particular belief over another. Use very reliable links.

## **9. Don't make it worse online**

Your online comment can unintentionally reinforce misinformation, for example by giving it more prominence. Check the [Debunking Handbook](#) for some strategies to avoid this.

Make sure your posts or comments are polite, specific, [factual](#) and very brief.

Acknowledging common values or points of connection by using phrases such as "I'm worried about my grandmother, too," or by being supportive ("It's so great that you're proactive about looking after your staff"), can help.

## **Remember why this is important**

The ability to respond to emergencies rests on having civil societies. The goal is to keep relationships constructive and dialogue open—not to be right.

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