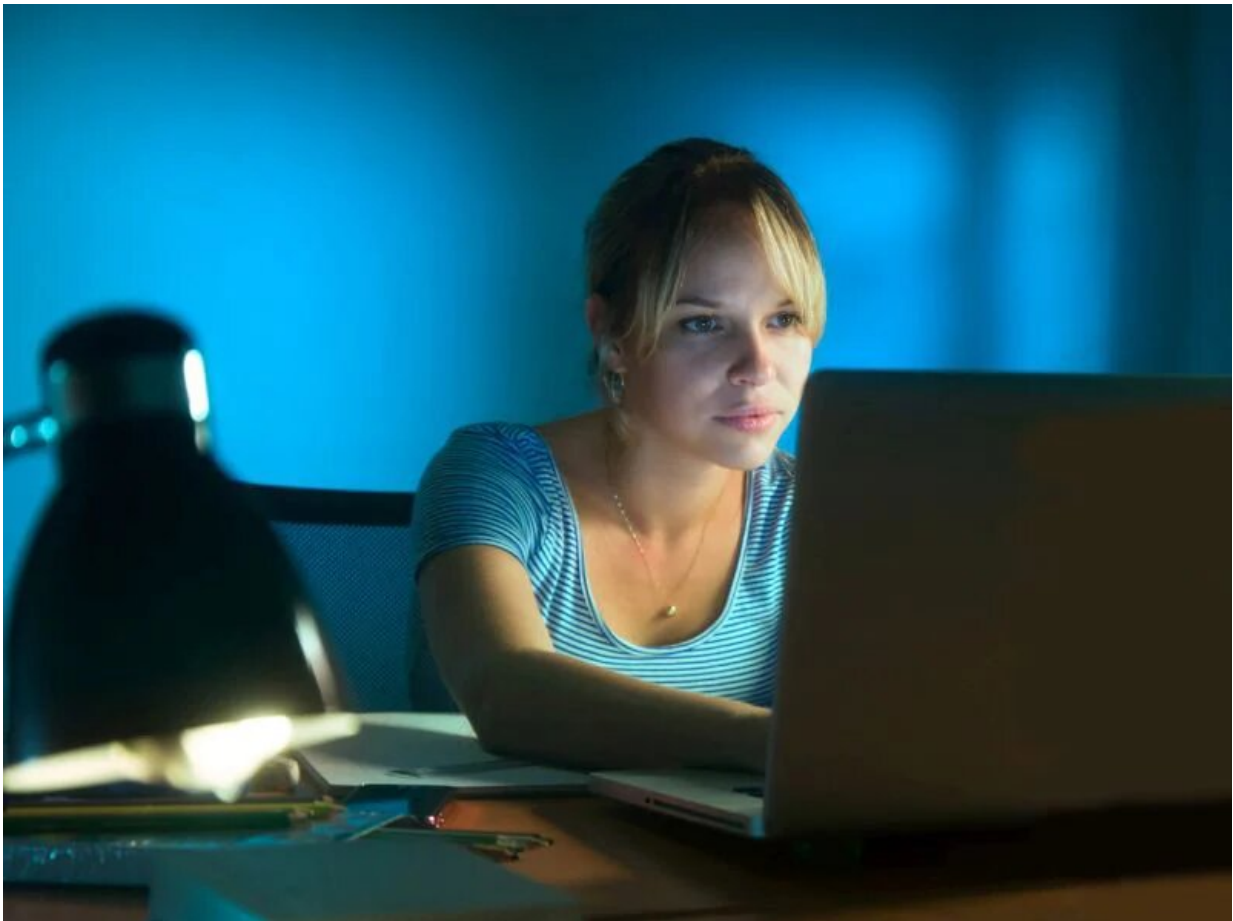


Coronavirus conspiracy theories abound, and they could cause real harm

April 23 2020, by Alan Mozes, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Whenever societies are placed under stress, conspiracy

theories blaming this or that nefarious agent for secretly fomenting the threat inevitably arise.

It's no different during the current [coronavirus](#) crisis.

Some of the evidence-free hoaxes circulating now include theories that the virus is a military bioweapon created in a Chinese lab; that it was made and even patented by tech billionaire Bill Gates; or that new 5G cellular phone towers are the real villain—either by transmitting the virus or by causing a "weakening" of the immune systems in people nearby.

In all of these conspiracies, the "powers that be" know all about this, but choose to keep silent.

For the vast majority of Americans who don't subscribe to these notions, an eye-roll is the most common response. But experts stress that while bogus, [conspiracy theories](#) can do real harm to Americans' health.

In the context of a health crisis, conspiracy theories can lead devotees "to refuse to engage in behaviors that have been scientifically proven to be good for their health and the health of their communities," explained Joanne Miller. She's associate professor of political science and international relations at the University of Delaware.

That includes potentially life-saving behaviors such as social distancing, aimed at helping all Americans.

In cities across the United States, people who are convinced that the coronavirus pandemic is a hoax or, at the very least, exaggerated, are gathering in close-knit crowds to protest government restrictions—a sure way to help spread the virus, experts say.

Easing anxieties

And even when successful interventions against COVID-19 do arrive, conspiracy theorists may avoid them, Miller said.

"As the situation develops, the spread of conspiracy theories could lead to a resistance to taking antibody tests or getting a vaccine when one is available," she explained. Many conspiracy theorists have a general distrust of medical science to begin with, Miller noted.

For example, if a vaccine against COVID-19 is developed, conspiracy theorists might refuse it because they "believe that Bill Gates is manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines with a 'mind-control chip' in them—another current COVID-19 conspiracy theory," she said.

So why do people ignore the science and choose to believe conspiracy theories?

"Conspiracy theories often, but not always, arise as explanations for an incredibly negative, surprising event, such as a pandemic," Miller said.

"Such events often make people feel uncertain, anxious, and that they've lost some control over their lives," she explained. "And one way to reduce feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and loss of control is to tie bits and pieces of information about the event into a nice, neat conspiratorial bow."

Conspiracy theories also reject reality "in favor of some plot involving a group of people with malevolent intent that is deliberately kept secret from the public," added Dr. Joseph Pierre. He's acting chief of the Mental Health Community Care Systems of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.

Importantly, Miller said, those plotters are often pegged as powerful, criminal, and in search of political or personal gain.

Need for control

Both Miller and Pierre agreed that conspiracy theories have been around since the dawn of time. One reason is that they can "make us feel special about being privy to a secret truth that's hidden from the rest of us 'sheep,'" said Pierre.

Another is the human tendency to cite "omnipotent forces" to explain natural events, "similar to our collective need to believe in God," he said.

"And then there's the need for control, certainty and closure," he added. "[Because] most of us find that believing that bad things happen randomly for no reason to be pretty unsettling."

Miller seconded that thought.

"It's very anxiety-producing to believe the truth about the virus," she said. "That it occurred naturally, and that we don't yet know how to stop its spread. So one way to reduce that anxiety is to believe, for example, that 5G towers are spreading the virus. That gives us something to fight against."

And that fight isn't just rhetorical: This week, the *Associated Press* reported that anti-COVID-19 arsonists set fire to 5G cell towers across the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Cyprus and Belgium. Phone service was interrupted for thousands.

"It's heart-rending enough that families cannot be there at the bedside of loved ones who are critically ill," Nick Jeffery, CEO of wireless carrier Vodafone UK, said on LinkedIn, the *AP* reported. "It's even more

upsetting that even the small solace of a phone or video call may now be denied them because of the selfish actions of a few deluded conspiracy theorists."

No easy answers

Celebrities can join the conspiracy theory bandwagon, adding to its legitimacy for some.

As noted by the *AP*, actor Woody Harrelson recently shared a video purporting to show Chinese people taking down a 5G tower. That film clip turned out to be old footage of pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong pulling down a "smart lamppost" over surveillance fears.

So, what's the solution? People being what they are, Miller and Pierre agreed that there's no easy answer.

Conspiracy theorists are often suspicious of bureaucrats or scientists, so the best response to conspiracy theories is to quickly rebut them as they arise, *and* to try to engage believers in conversations aimed at reestablishing trust.

But, "it's really difficult to debunk conspiracy theories with factual information," Miller noted. "For a person who believes the [theory](#), any [factual information](#) you provide can be turned on its head and be used as additional evidence for the [conspiracy](#), [as in] 'look how deep this goes!'"

What about Facebook, Twitter and other social media banning posts citing bogus theories?

"This is a tricky one, because it's not clear where the line should be drawn," Miller said. "On the one hand, a large majority of us might agree that certain posts are conspiratorial or push other types of

misinformation and are therefore dangerous and should be taken down. But who gets to decide what's conspiratorial?"

Pierre warned that, unfortunately, "misinformation is big business, whether for profit or for political gain. We also live in a country where free speech is a core national value. Together, that makes limiting the exposure of people to misinformation very challenging."

More information: Learn more about conspiracy theories from the [University of Bristol](#).

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