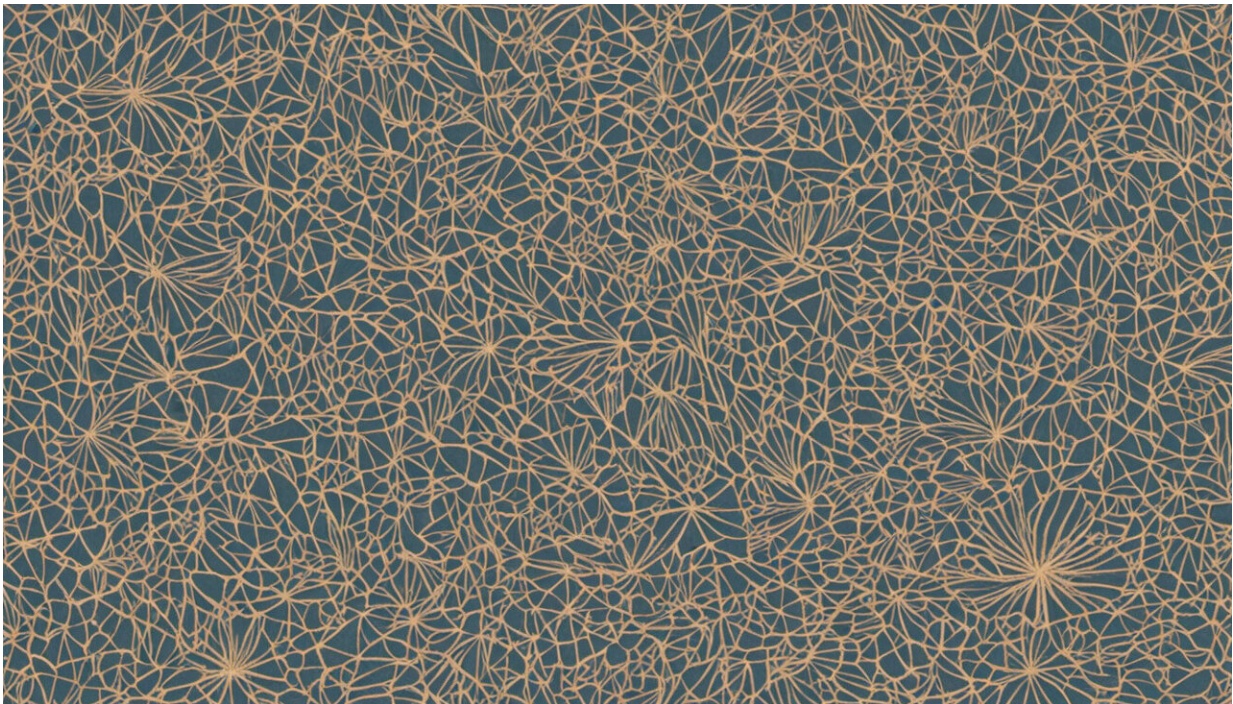


Tackling COVID disinformation with empathy and conversation

December 10 2021, by Stephan Lewandowsky, Philipp Schmid



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

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by an "infodemic" of false information and conspiracy theories since the virus first emerged nearly two years ago. Exposure to misinformation can [reduce plans](#) to get vaccinated, and may potentially put more people at risk.

This tension between those who are vaccinated and those who reject vaccines or dispute the science can [divide families](#) and [rip apart friendships](#) especially when loved ones are immersed in conspiracy theories about, for example, the origin of COVID-19 or mask wearing.

With Germany hit by a significant [fourth wave](#) of COVID infections, several German states are now trying new ways to tackle COVID denial and false [information](#) about vaccination. Building on research about disinformation, which refers to incorrect information that is deliberately spread, some states have created centers with free, confidential counseling for people who are either looking for help in dealing with [family members](#) who believe [false information](#) or just want to check facts.

German disinformation centers

For example, [a center](#) in the state of Baden-Württemberg provides telephone counseling. According to its [annual report](#) many people ask questions such as: "How can we deal with those who believe in conspiracy theories?" or "Are there conversation strategies to convince the other person that he is wrong?"

Baden-Württemberg center staff handled more than 300 requests for advice and information in 2020. The largest category was inquiries about conspiracy theories. Similar centers to counter the negative impact of conspiracy theories are in Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia.

[Studies repeatedly reveal](#) an association between the belief in conspiracy theories and the rejection of sometimes life-saving preventive measures such as vaccinations. In Germany [research has](#) linked a higher acceptance of misinformation to support for the far-right AFD party as well as a reliance on social media for news. And even before the pandemic, [studies found](#) that exposure to conspiracy theories can lead to

people making decisions that are hazardous to their health.

According to some early work on disinformation, yet to be fully reviewed, it could reduce compliance with [social distancing](#), which in turn could lead to [more cases](#).

The German centers' advice also builds on a technique known as [motivational interviewing](#). This relies on asking open-ended questions. For example, instead of trying to overwhelm a friend or family member with facts about the safety of vaccines, one should give the person space to express his or her fears by asking, "What do you think about vaccines?" Instead of saying, "No, you're wrong," or instead of mocking the other person one should present the other person's decision-making process as perfectly understandable. "Oh yes, I also read that on social media. Sounded really scary."

Rebutting false information

After demonstrating respect and empathy in this manner, one can then offer to provide facts by asking: "Would you mind if I tell you what I know about these posts on social media?" There is no guarantee of success, but failure is more likely if one takes a direct, confrontational approach—however tempting that may be.

The centers also provide [leaflets](#) to help people spot [conspiracy](#) theories. Our research has culminated in [a handbook](#), available in ten languages, on how to rebut COVID disinformation and how best to communicate the scientific knowledge about vaccines.

One promising avenue of research that we report on uses [inoculation theory](#). This gets its name because the idea of it is like a medical vaccination, it provides people with a defense against a later attack by misinformation. Inoculation involves giving people information about

how they [might be misled](#), without necessarily anticipating what exactly they will encounter later. Knowing how disinformers operate (such as by making incoherent arguments or appealing to emotion), can "inoculate" people against being swayed by misinformation.

Anyone can find themselves confronted by loved ones who suddenly embrace various [conspiracy theories](#). Initiatives such as the ones in Germany, and digital or printed guides are one way to try to treat and prevent further psychological damage of COVID-19 in families and friends.

Science-based crisis communication skills rely on empathy and critical thinking. These must play a more central role in [professional training](#) for doctors in discussing these issues with patients, but they are also available to better prepare the public for the infodemic and its potential effects.

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