

FACT FOCUS: Unfounded theory used to dismiss COVID measures

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An unfounded theory taking root online suggests millions of people have been "hypnotized" into believing mainstream ideas about COVID-19, including steps to combat it such as testing and vaccination.

In widely shared [social media posts](#) this week, efforts to combat the disease have been dismissed with just three words: "mass formation psychosis."

"I'm not a scientist but I'm pretty sure healthy people spending hours in line to get a virus test is mass formation psychosis in action," reads one tweet that was liked more than 22,000 times.

The term gained attention after it was floated by Dr. Robert Malone on "The Joe Rogan Experience" Dec. 31 podcast. Malone is a scientist who once researched mRNA technology but is now a vocal skeptic of the COVID-19 vaccines that use it.

But psychology experts say the concept described by Malone is not supported by evidence, and is similar to theories that have long been discredited. Here's a look at the facts.

CLAIM: The concept of "mass formation psychosis" explains why millions of people believe in a mainstream COVID-19 "narrative" and trust the safety and efficacy of the vaccines.

THE FACTS: Malone highlighted the unfounded theory on a podcast hosted by comedian and commentator Joe Rogan. During the episode, Malone cast doubt on COVID-19 vaccine safety and claimed the mass psychosis has resulted in a "third of the population basically being hypnotized" into believing what Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, and mainstream news outlets say.

Malone went on to say that the phenomenon explained Nazi Germany.

"When you have a society that has become decoupled from each other and has free-floating anxiety in a sense that things don't make sense, we can't understand it, and then their attention gets focused by a leader or a

series of events on one small point, just like hypnosis, they literally become hypnotized and can be led anywhere," Malone said. He claimed such people will not allow the "narrative" to be questioned.

Crediting a professor in Belgium, Malone also said in a December blog post that this "mass hypnosis" explains millions of people becoming captivated by the "dominant narrative concerning the safety and effectiveness of the genetic vaccines."

Psychology experts say there is no support for the "psychosis" theory described by Malone.

"To my knowledge, there's no evidence whatsoever for this concept," said Jay Van Bavel, an assistant professor of psychology and neural science at New York University who recently [co-authored](#) a book on group identities. Van Bavel said he had never encountered the phrase "mass formation psychosis" in his years of research, nor could he find it in any peer-reviewed literature.

"The concept has no academic credibility," Stephen Reicher, a social psychology professor at the University of St Andrews in the U.K., wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

The term also does not appear in the American Psychological Association's [Dictionary of Psychology](#).

"Psychosis" is a [term](#) that refers to conditions that involve some disconnect from reality. According to a National Institutes of Health [estimate](#), about 3% of people experience some form of psychosis at some time in their lives.

Richard McNally, a professor of clinical psychology at Harvard University, wrote in an email that people who support COVID-19

vaccines and public health guidance are not delusional. Rather, they are "fully responsive to the arguments and evidence adduced by the relevant scientific experts."

Health officials have found the COVID-19 vaccines to be [safe and effective](#)—especially in terms of [protecting against serious illness](#).

The description of "mass formation psychosis" offered by Malone resembles discredited concepts, such as "mob mentality" and "group mind," according to John Drury, a social psychologist at the University of Sussex in the U.K. who studies collective behavior. The ideas suggest that "when people form part of a psychological crowd they lose their identities and their self-control; they become suggestible, and primitive instinctive impulses predominate," he said in an email.

That notion has been discredited by decades of research on crowd behavior, Drury said. "No respectable psychologist agrees with these ideas now," he said.

Multiple experts told the AP that while there is evidence that groups can shape or influence one's behaviors—and that people can and do believe falsehoods that are put forward by the leader of a group—those concepts do not involve the masses experiencing "psychosis" or "hypnosis."

Steven Jay Lynn, a psychology professor at Binghamton University in New York, said Malone's argument that a group can "literally become hypnotized and can be led anywhere" is premised on a myth about hypnosis.

"His claim represents a serious misunderstanding of hypnosis and doubles down on the popular misconception that hypnosis somehow transforms people into mindless robots who think what the hypnotist wants them to think and do the hypnotist's bidding," Lynn said in an

email. "The scientifically established fact is that people can easily resist and even oppose suggestions."

Before the concept of "mass formation psychosis" took off in recent days, it had percolated online in recent months.

Mattias Desmet, the professor in Belgium who Malone cited for formulating the idea, did not return requests for comment. Malone also did not return a request for comment.

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