

# Stress increases beliefs that underlie disorders and conspiracy theories

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Stress increases the rigidity of the beliefs underlying psychiatric disorders, prejudices and conspiracy theories. Therefore measures aimed at reducing social stress—a basic income or better job protection—could be the most effective approach for tackling problems such as depression, psychosis, discrimination and conspiracy theories.

That is the message of a new publication in the reputable scientific journal *PNAS*, with Wageningen's professor Marten Scheffer as the lead author. Scheffer and his co-authors—the Leiden neurobiologist Sander Nieuwenhuis, University of Amsterdam psychology professor Denny Borsboom and Canadian social scientist Frances Westley—describe recent findings in their fields that demonstrate how stressful circumstances can make harmful beliefs more rigid. These insights explain why conspiracy theories and [psychiatric disorders](#) tend historically to peak during periods of crisis, in other word when there is a lot of [social stress](#).

Scheffer says the findings have far-reaching implications. "If we want to combat psychiatric disorders, prejudices and [conspiracy theories](#), we need to reduce the social stress that is associated with uncertainty about such essential factors as work and income."

## Ineffectual facts

That is very different to countering with facts, the usual reflex when trying to persuade people to change their beliefs. As the publication stresses, facts are ineffectual in changing false beliefs. "Letting an anorexia patient look in the mirror or providing proof that the US presidential election was not stolen has surprisingly little effect."

**More information:** Marten Scheffer et al, Belief traps: Tackling the inertia of harmful beliefs, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2203149119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2203149119)

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