

**How to deal
with conspiracy
narratives in
your family
and with
friends?**

TOOLKIT

RAN 

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Introduction

This toolkit is providing you with practical insights and suggestions on how to potentially work with a person who believes in conspiracy narratives. The aims of this toolkit are to explain what a conspiracy narrative exactly is, what a conspiracy narrative may offer to someone and how to help them reconsider their beliefs.

Why do we use ‘conspiracy narratives’ instead of the more common word ‘conspiracy theory’? We want to deny its legitimacy by referring to it as narratives instead of theories. Additionally, conspiracy narratives differ from genuine conspiracies, which relate to an agreement between two or more people who aim to commit an act against something or someone.

What are ‘narratives’? Narratives are stories that offer meaning, purpose and belonging. Everyone believes in narratives, be they religious or not. **Conspiracy narratives** are special in the way that they blame what is wrong with a person’s life, or the world in general, on a supposedly hidden and powerful elite and/or other groups of people (out-groups). Conspiracy narratives promise someone a life and status upgrade within the group of conspiracy believers (in-group) by downgrading others, who are supposedly misled, ignorant or dangerous.

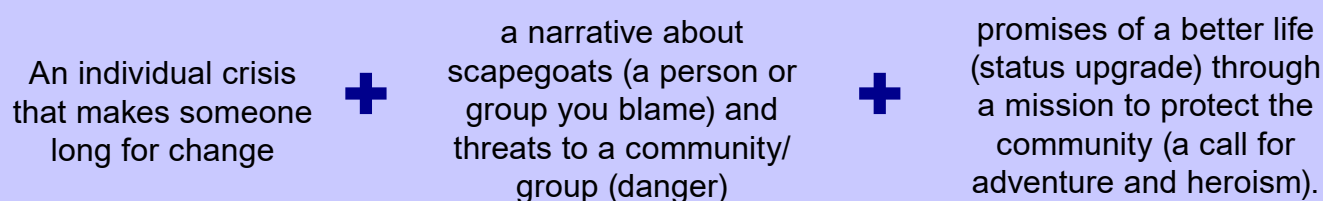
And is there a link with extremism? Similarities between extremist ideologies and conspiracy narratives are evident¹. While most conspiracy believers do not become extremists, most extremists believe in conspiracy narratives. Extremist ideologies are often based on centuries old conspiracy narratives. For example: “a hidden Jewish elite is in control of the world’s governments and therefore is also behind the supposed wars against “the white race”, Islam or “the workers”.

¹ Imhoff et al. (2022), Conspiracy mentality and political orientations across 26 countries, *Natural Human Behaviour* 6, 392–403

Tales of heroes and dragons

The basic structure and functionality of most (dangerous) conspiracy narratives follow a universal principle, drawn from one of the oldest stories on the planet: the tale of a hero who fights a dragon to rescue a community.

This basic principle of conspiracy narratives works as follows:



This principle can be applied to understand the functionality of many conspiracy narratives, such as COVID-19 related conspiracy narratives, the supposed 'great replacement', the supposed 'war against Islam' and many others.

New conspiracy narratives (such as related to the COVID-19 pandemic or recent large scale migration/refugee crises) have been becoming more visible recently through social media platforms, but please note: these narratives are mostly just updates of very old stories. The internal structure of those conspiracy narratives as well as the supposed benefits for their 'believers' remain unchanged over time: they promise to satisfy basic human needs like scapegoating, belonging, status and safety.

Understanding the science behind believing in conspiracy narratives: the bear in the forest

Anthropologists suggest that historically, homo sapiens who stayed in tight groups to fight threats spread their DNA more successfully than those who wandered into the forest by themselves, leading to a widely shared biological 'need' for community. Until today, this can make humans pick the 'truth' of their in-group over otherwise available information, especially if the information of the out-group challenges sacred values or the in-group's identity.

Neuroscientific research suggests that the 'threat perception-centre' of the human brain, the so-called 'amygdala' takes charge of our behaviours when our most valued/sacred beliefs are challenged. And just a comparison: this is the same part of the brain that reacts when we encounter a physical threat like a bear in the forest. This also means that confrontational approaches when addressing conspiracy narratives will not work, or may even backfire.

Simply put: **You cannot talk someone out of something that is essential to them and they are happy with.**

Familiar examples

Many families are struggling when someone in the family believes in a conspiracy narrative. Remember that you are not alone in this, although each situation is different. Below you can find two examples that may sound familiar. Do you wonder what you can do in these instances? In the RAN e-learning **How to deal with conspiracy narratives in relationships. For family members and friends.** you can find a step by step guide on what the most appropriate steps would be in a detailed way.

Meet Kate and her father

Kate's father is 64, married and has been retired for a few years. Since his retirement, he has lost most social connections and seems to be suffering from a lack of purpose and recognition. He is always online and has been drifting into conspiracy myth scenes. He has always been interested in politics, but now his beliefs become more and more extreme. He uses it as the basis for all his explanations.

In his last phone call with Kate he used strong anti-Semitic and extreme positions. He is an administrator of a big 'Telegram' group and gets a lot of respect from his new friends in this group, who share these views. He has lost many of his contacts and his relationship with his wife and children is suffering because of it. Kate does not know what to do.





Meet Peter and his wife

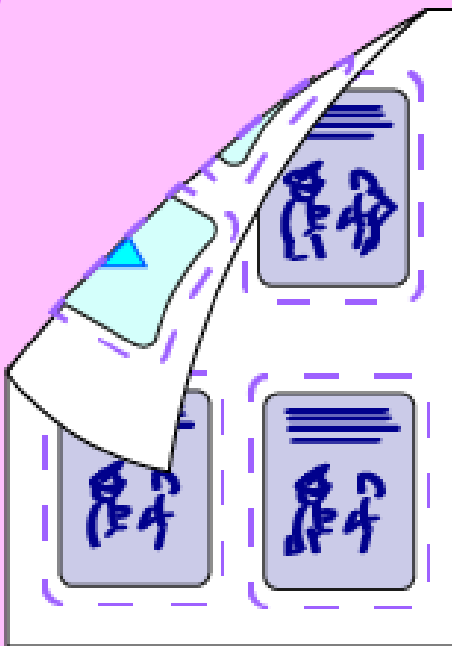
Peter is concerned about his wife. She is a nurse in a care unit for older people, but has always been sceptical of the health care system. During the COVID-19 pandemic she became more and more critical. She now spends a lot of her time on Telegram channels and on YouTube, looking for information on alternative medicine. She had participated in some 'esoteric teaching classes' in the past, but since the COVID-19 pandemic, her ideas have become radical. Some of her friends and colleagues now believe in conspiracies regarding the COVID-19 virus and the vaccines. She does not want to get vaccinated, a behaviour that could put her vulnerable patients at serious risk. Peter saw her searching for illegal fake "proof of vaccination" documents online, so she can continue working at the care unit for older people, where vaccination for staff members is mandatory. Peter does not know what to do.

Quick-Check List - What if...?

Card assignment

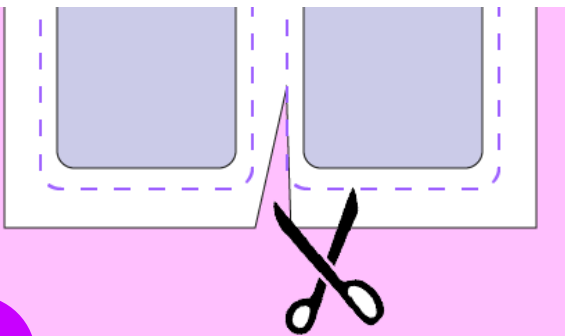
On the next four pages you can see different cards. The cards that begin with 'IF' reflect a situation. They are situations that many families find themselves in. The cards that begin with 'THEN' show a direction or solution that may be worth considering in that situation. Do you know which THEN card belongs to which IF card? You can find the answer by looking at the back of the cards. The cards with the same back belong together.

1

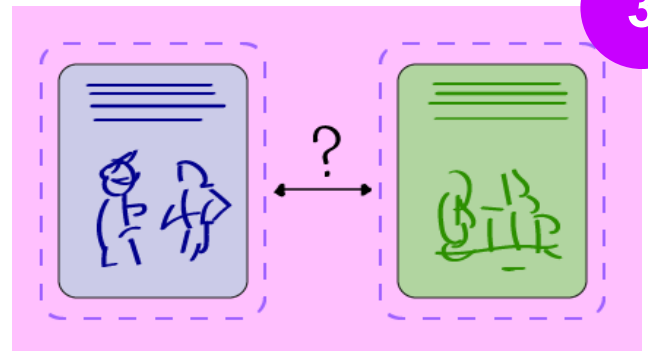


When printing these cards, choose the option 'Print on Both Sides'.

2

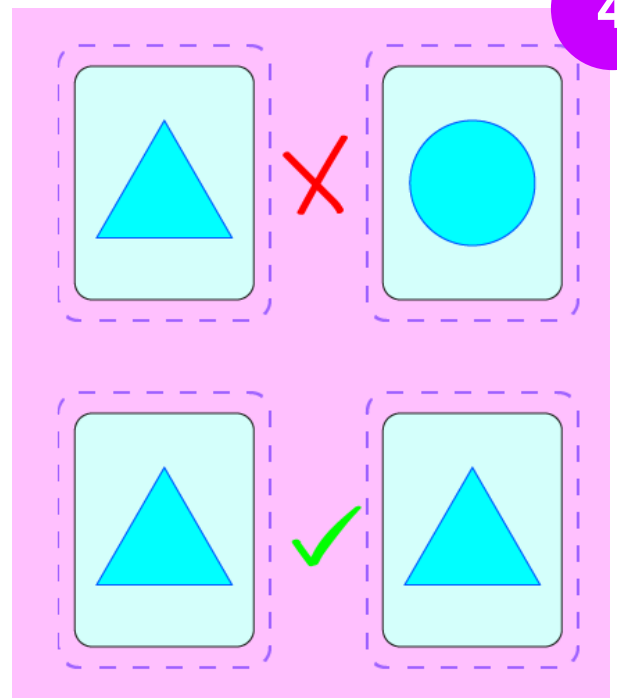


3



Match the situations with the right solutions.

4



Find the answer by looking at the back of the cards. The cards with the same back belong together.



IF a person is mostly happy with their conspiracy beliefs, the community and the status upgrade they found there



IF a conspiracy believer is articulating doubts that the conspiracy is no longer useful to 'fix their problems' around status and belonging

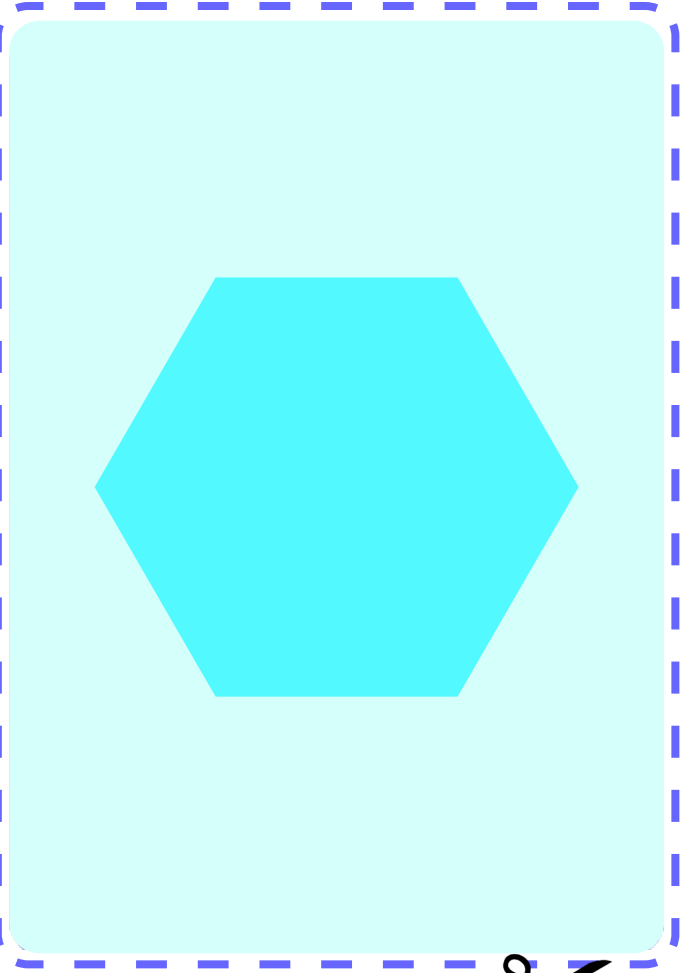
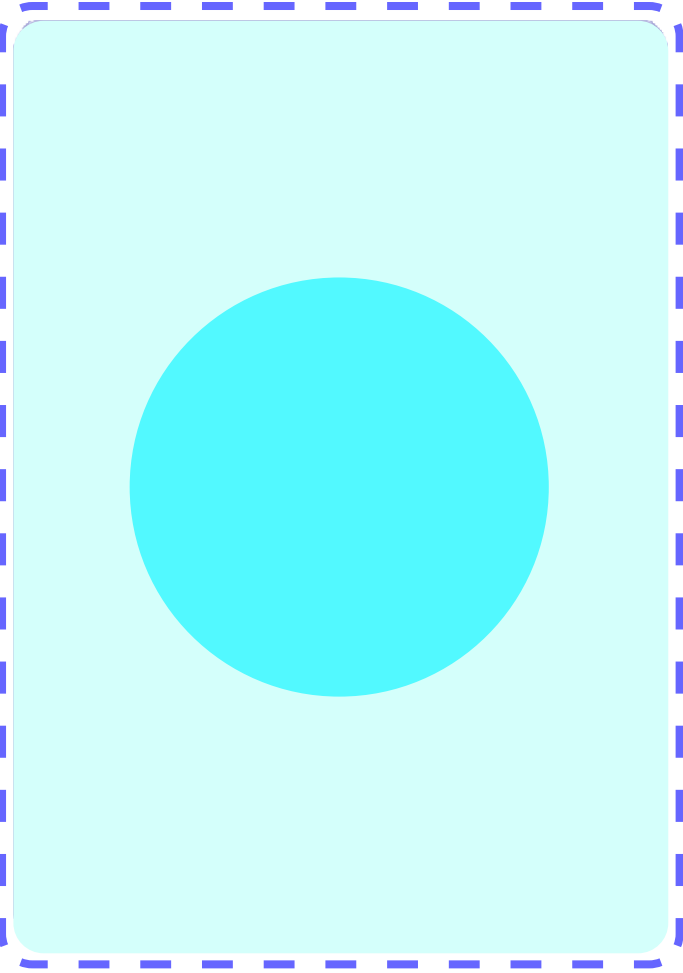
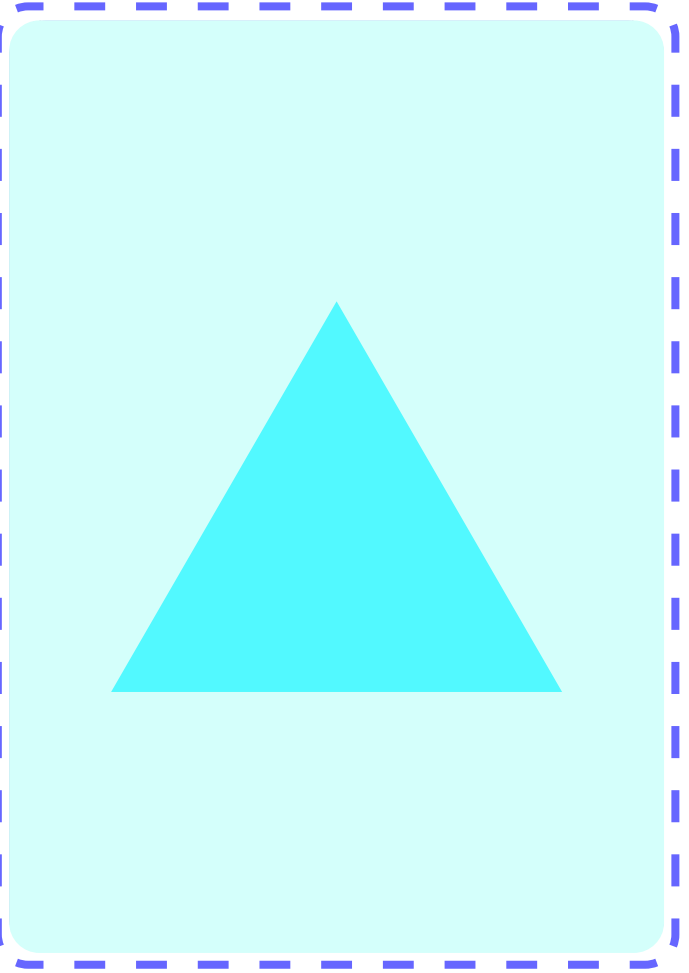
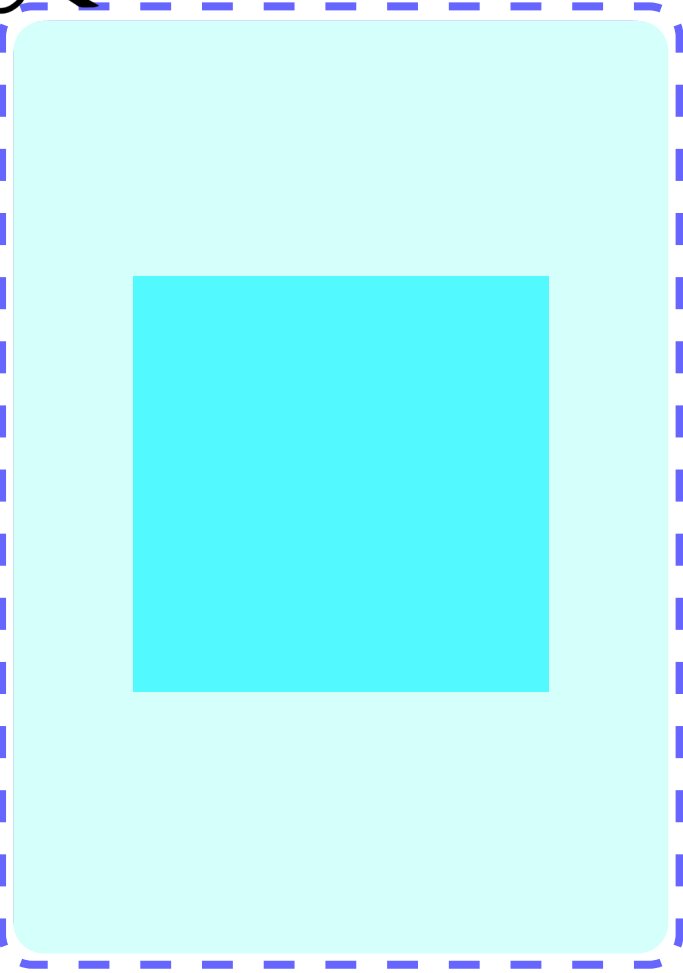


IF the person that considers doing an intervention (meaning: a conversation aiming at helping a conspiracy believer to reconsider their beliefs), has a strong emotional connection with the conspiracy believer



IF the conspiracy believer is aggressively promoting his opinions, which could negatively affect other members of the family, in particular minors and children







THEN it is unlikely that an intervention aiming at convincing that person to reconsider their beliefs can be successful



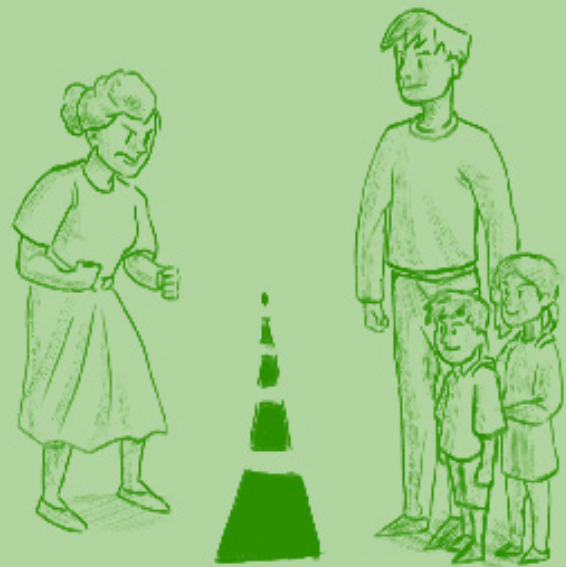
THEN a nonviolent communication based conversation (see cards 'Additional relevant tools and strategies') might lead to an openness to discuss realistic alternatives

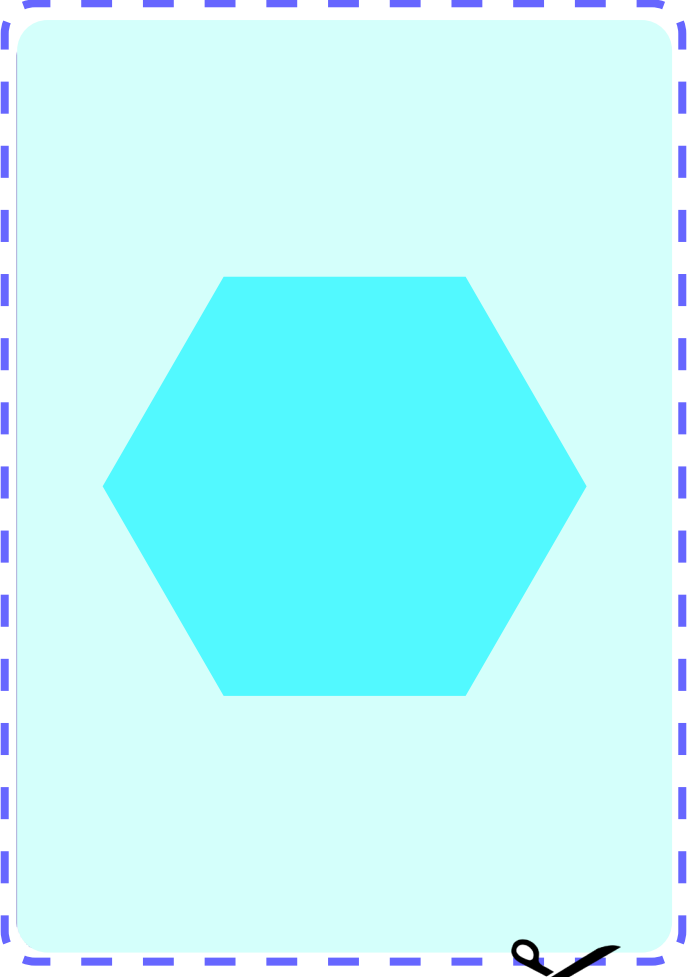
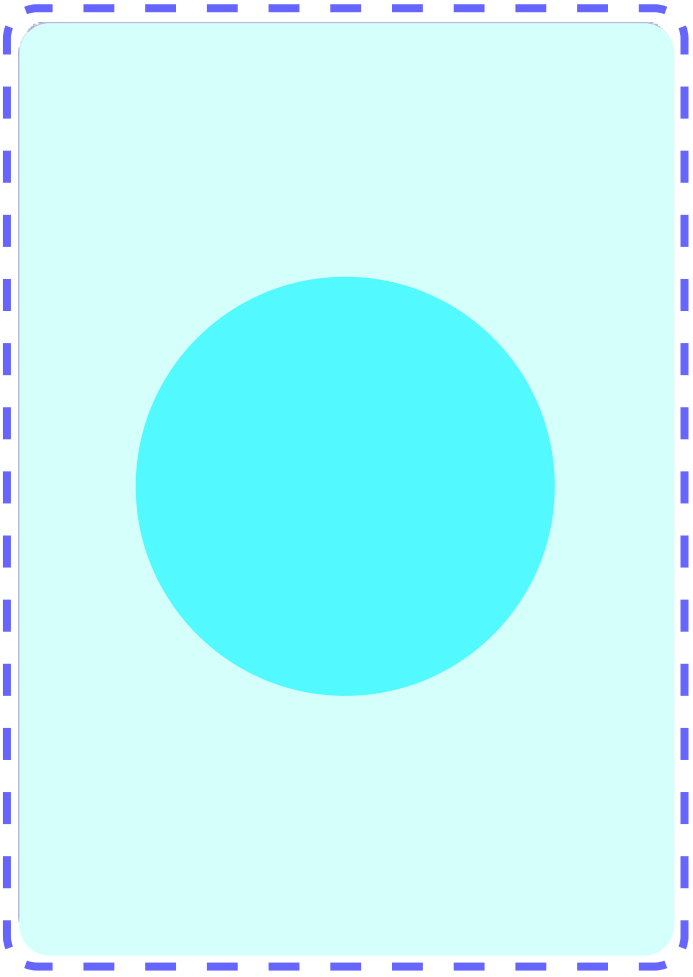
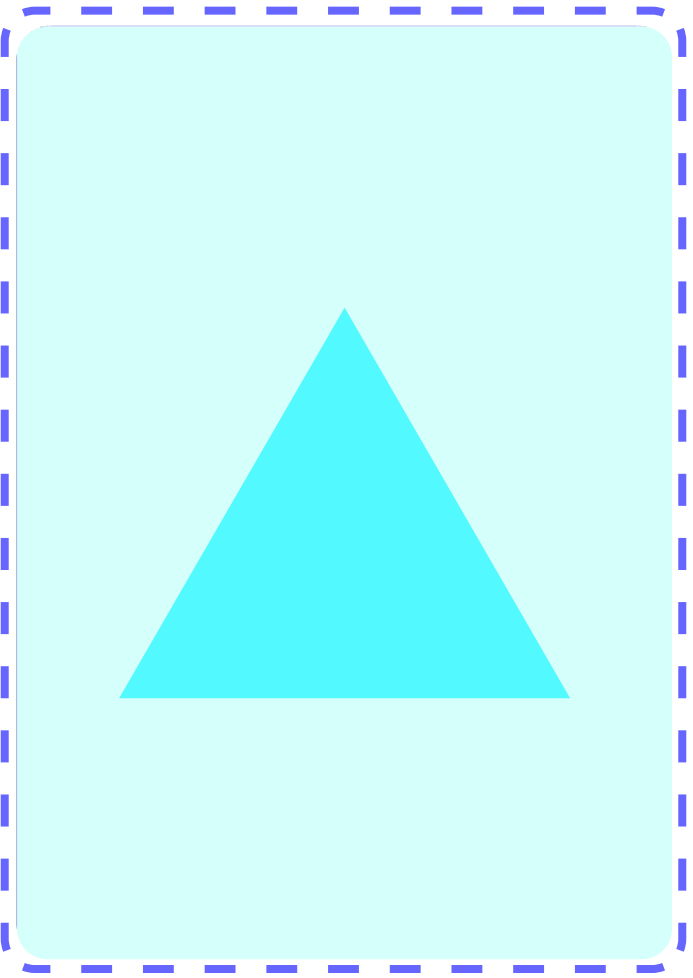
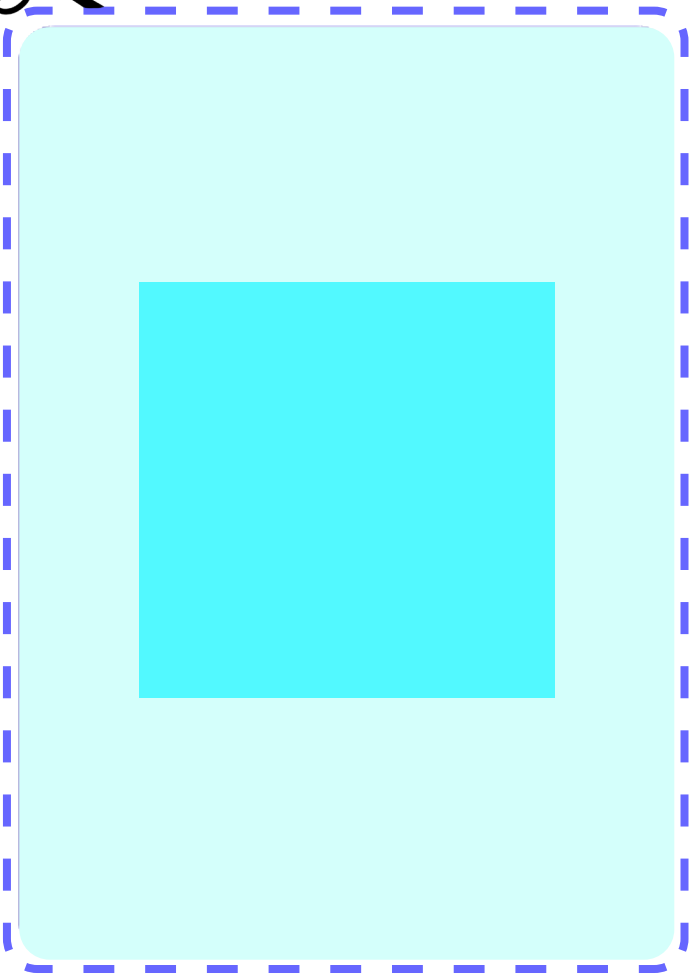


THEN they should reflect carefully on what the possible negative effects are of an intervention gone wrong: for themselves and their relationship with the believer, and they should consider looking for professional support.



THEN establishing and enforcing clear boundaries, including distancing oneself from that person, could be necessary and healthy





Q&A section – Difficult questions you always wanted answers to

Why does someone become a conspiracy believer?

Simply put: People believe in conspiracy narratives to feel better. People who believe in conspiracy narratives are trying to fix a problem. In many cases, they are in some kind of personal crisis (such as financial depth, status loss, job loss or partner loss or another situation that may feel threatening), when they decide to subscribe to stories claiming for example: a small 'hidden (Jewish) elite' is running the world, 'white people' are being systematically replaced or Bill Gates is using the COVID-19 pandemic to put microchips in peoples' bodies to control them.

Putting the blame of what went wrong in people's lives on for example 'hidden elites', is a classic form of scapegoating. Thinking that they found the cause of their problems makes them feel relieved. Most conspiracy narratives also promise a caring community, belonging, safety, adventure, a status upgrade and often even heroism.

To conclude, people believe in conspiracy narratives because it makes them feel better. This is supported by the 5 pillars of the identity theory by Hilarion Petzold.

Trying to understand your family member can be hard, it helps to keep in mind what benefit ideology has for them. This can be done by thinking of the 5 pillars of identity (by Hilarion Petzold).

1. Body and health

self-image, sexuality, how comfortable am I in my own skin?

2. Social relationships

family, friends, love, colleagues, social network, society

3. Work and performance

all activities, paid or unpaid

4. Material security

income, standard of living, perceived security

5. Values and ideals

religious and political convictions, meaningfulness, art and culture

Stability is achieved, when all pillars are fulfilled. If one of these pillars is weakened, it can be balanced by others, but when several are weakened, and imbalance arises, the deficiency must be filled. This often happens in times of crisis or new life phases. Believing in conspiracy narratives can be seen as a solution to the problem.

Short assignment: Think of your family member's situation. How do these 5 pillars of identity look in their case?

Do facts matter (much)?

Conspiracy narratives are mostly not about a lack of information. Many 'believers' claim to be well informed critical thinkers who spend a lot of time researching 'facts'. Their main issue here is not challenging facts as brought forward by academic research, but the lack of trust in the established mainstream government institutions, universities or civil society organizations as a starting point.

Previous 'gatekeepers' of information (like established newspapers and TV stations) have been in a competition with partisan cable TV stations for decades. Since circa 2014, social media algorithms have strengthened political narratives with 'us vs. them' groups. Social media has allowed users to show their support to their in-group by down-grading others online. When down-grading the other, facts do not always seem that important. This happens much more frequently than before the existence of social media platforms.

The above shows that the lack of trust in established institutions causes facts to not matter as much anymore as before. Conspiracy narratives can make people feel better, more important and intelligent (see also the previous question), and if their community and social media landscape underlines these narratives as well: why would they then believe in information or facts that can ruin all that?



How can I (help someone) to remain open for other opinions and to reconsider his or her beliefs?

If we follow the logic that people believe in conspiracy narratives to feel better than they did before, making them reconsidering their beliefs would require two things. First: A frustration or disappointment of the person with their believe or community which makes them open to new pathways (this is called a 'cognitive opening'). Second: A realistic alternative narrative or community, which 1) would accept them and 2) fulfill some of their needs, e.g. belonging, purpose, safety and status. Do keep in mind that your questions will not immediately trigger a change of mind. Your questions and arguments are like seeds that you scatter and that may one day sprout if the conditions are right. Questions might first be brushed aside immediately but may develop into slow-burners that have a major impact later on.

See the step-by step guide for further information.

What is the role of 'cognitive biases' and 'critical thinking' in promoting or countering conspiracy narratives?

Cognitive biases: Human brains do not treat all information in the same way. They select to trust information that confirms their existing beliefs, especially if this information is related to their identity and status (confirmation bias). This selection process is useful, because if humans would value all information in the same manner, it would be hard to make decisions, get anything done or to find a community. The problem arises if one is not aware of this constantly running confirmation bias and similar 'reasoning shortcuts'

Critical thinking: Critical thinking in the context of conspiracy narratives is mostly understood as reflecting critically on the information provided by **others**, not to be manipulated by the functionality of one's own brain. This requires **self-critical** thinking and reflection. Simply put: To protect oneself from manipulation one needs (to try) to understand oneself.

What is the role of online social media platforms in promoting or countering conspiracy narratives?

'Filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' refer to different information selection processes. It means that humans mostly surround themselves with others who have somewhat similar values and interests. Then, you feel a sense of connection and do not argue constantly. In the past, most people read newspapers with a specific (political) leaning or went to specific political events. Few people consumed information across the political spectrum, e.g. reading left/right/liberal leaning newspapers at the same time. This can be called a self-built 'offline filter bubble'.

Having said this, humans vary significantly in their interest and ability for openness and ambiguity. Social media platforms intensified this process. Whereas people used to create their own 'filter bubbles' in the past, this is now partly created 'for them'. Social media algorithms adjust the content one sees on social media towards this person's interest. This way, people are recommended the same kind of content all the time. Because of this, people who believe in conspiracy narratives can constantly be shown content promoting these narratives. Thus, social media has a big role in promoting conspiracy narratives and the creation of 'online filter bubbles' and 'anger chambers'.



Step by step – Guide on how you can help someone reconsider their beliefs.

An intervention (meaning a conversation aiming at helping conspiracy believers to remain open for other opinions and reconsider their beliefs) gone wrong can have negative effects on your relationship with the person. Before considering an intervention, please think about whether this is the right moment and if you are the right person to do the intervention. Maybe someone else is even more suitable.

It can help to first ask yourself questions like:

- **Why should this person listen to me and trust me?**
- **Why would they change their mind?**
- **What could go wrong?**
- **How could this affect me and my own well-being?**

When in doubt about the above questions, reaching out to other people who have a trusted relationship with the believer or to a professional with a counselling background is recommended.

General recommendations on how to have a conversation with someone that believes in conspiracy narratives:

- Listening calmly is crucial. Be gentle and patient. It builds trust. The conversation should take place in a private space and at eye level (see also nonviolent communication in 'Additional tools and strategies', you can also check the 'communication skills' in the RAN e-Learning **How to deal with conspiracy narratives in relationships. For family members and friends.**).
- During the conversation, try to foster the idea that some gaps in knowledge are inevitable in every field, and that oftentimes things happen by chance or because of incompetence and carelessness of people, without bad intentions. Try to share concrete personal examples on how you were wrong in this regard. Do not try to debunk the conspiracy narrative immediately or directly.
- Ask open-ended questions and suggest relevant books, podcasts, or videos so that the other person may take a more in-depth look at the matter (see the Socratic method in 'Additional tools and strategies'). You might ask them if they want to talk about it again the next time you get the opportunity.

Once you are planning an intervention, consider the following steps:

Step 1: Prepare to say no and to ask for help

Think of your rules for the conversation. For example: if racist, dehumanising, anti-Semitic or other unacceptable sentiments are being brought forward, then prepare to protect or distance yourself when you deem necessary by ending the conversation. If something like this happens, you may feel less overwhelmed if you are prepared for it. A possible response could be:

“I just heard you saying that “...”. It is important to me to avoid any anti-Semitic/racist/inhumane stereotypes in our conversation. Can we agree on this?”

If the answer is not “yes”, it might be best to take a break to give the other person time to think about the boundary you have set. Once you agree, the conversation can continue. If they insist on promoting anti-Semitic/racist/inhumane stereotypes, it is very unlikely the conversation will have a productive outcome for both sides.

Be aware of your own limits. This also includes accepting that your influence on others is limited and that you will not necessarily achieve more results with more effort. In such cases, consider asking for support from trusted family members or consider reaching out to a qualified professional.

Also, consider having this conversation in private without any audience. Nobody likes to get lectured and “lose face” in front of others.

Step 2: Ask yourself: Why should the other person reconsider their beliefs? What am I offering?:

Helping people change their minds on values or identity is not about facts, but about NEEDS, STATUS, TRUST and SAFETY. Ask yourself: What are you offering except saying ‘you are wrong!’?

If there is an openness to change on the side of your family member, it would be helpful if you could help to co-create an alternative new narrative of meaning and belonging and possibly an alternative life (see examples next page). People often stay in situations if there is no realistic alternative, even if they know they are bad for them. If you have nothing concrete to offer except for unwanted advice, consider reaching out to a professional for help.

Here is an example to make it more concrete

A conspiracy believer might have a strong need to be seen and heard, for attention and affirmation. They might enjoy arguing with non-believers, while sharing what they know. Maybe there is an organisation that offers similar activities and 'rewards' and could be an alternative to gaining affirmation from believing in the conspiracy narrative. Maybe the local sports club, political party or neighbourhood association is looking for 'promoters' and 'recruiters'? This would fit the idea of a 'realistic alternative', because it is often not about what we believe, but how believing it makes us feel. Accordingly, former extremists who were successful recruiters are sometimes now successful public speakers about a non-extremist cause. Of course, it is crucial to look at the situation of your family member: the alternative can be different for every individual.

Consider this thought experiment

What would it take for you to believe in an idea or narrative you are opposed to right now? For example: Where do you position yourself on the political spectrum? To the left, liberal, conservative or to the right? What would someone have to say or do for you to significantly move towards another set of political convictions? It would probably matter how happy or unhappy you are with your political affiliation at the moment and how easy or (socially) costly a life change would be.

Step 3: Rank the confidence of the ‘believer’

If a (somewhat) trusted relationship between you and the family member exists, you could find out if the family member is open to change by asking them: if they have any doubts about their narratives, or the group they affiliate themselves with, and what kind of evidence or information they would need to consider changing their mind. This can also be done by asking the person to rank how confident they feel about their narratives and group on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 meaning absolutely confident. If a high number is selected, this might not be the time for an effective intervention. It might be better to keep up the relationship and wait for a more appropriate time for an intervention. If you are very worried, consider reaching out to a professional counsellor to support you and your family.

Step 4: Look for common ground

Without commonalities there can be no understanding. Find out if there is something you agree upon. Are you both concerned about the safety of e.g. vaccines, about security issues related to your city, limitations of individual freedoms and civil liberties, cultural change that moves ‘too fast’ or in the wrong direction? Are you both mothers, fathers, or do you have similar interests in sports or culture? If you don’t find any common ground, you might want to consider reaching out to a professional for help.

Why is this important?

Research indicates² that people who agree on some fundamental issues are significantly more willing to listen openly to views they oppose, and to seriously consider new perspectives. In a recent research experiment in the United States, individuals from opposing political sides were selected. They were selected based on their positions on universal basic human rights (as agreed upon by the United Nations), and on etiquette rules (for example like saying “please” or “thank you” when asking or receiving something, or on not being late, or refraining from disturbing quiet settings). Political opponents who agreed on these fundamental issues were significantly more open to agree on previously opposing views.

Step 5: Stick to your own expertise

Avoid discussing issues you are not well informed about and be aware that ‘believers’ of conspiracy narratives rarely need “better” information. They usually don’t trust the information and institutions that you trust. They often claim to be well informed critical thinkers who spend a lot of time researching ‘facts’. So the main issue here is not ‘the truth’ as an end point of research, but the lack of ‘trust’ in mainstream messengers. Find out if the family member credits you or your sources as (somewhat) trusted. If he/she doesn’t trust your expertise at all, it might be better to consider reaching out to a professional for help, keep up the relationship and wait for a more appropriate time for an intervention.

² Belot M. et al. (2023), Reducing Polarization on Abortion, Guns and Immigration, an experimental study

Finding out more: Tools, strategies or support

Communication methods

Here you can find more information about relevant communication methods.

Nonviolent communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is based on the assumption that compassionate communication yields different results than uncompassionate communication. These differences have a significant impact on both individual and societal levels. NVC can be used in intimate relationships, families, schools, organizations, institutions, relationship therapy and counselling, diplomatic and business negotiations, disputes, and conflicts of any nature.



<https://www.cnvc.org/learn-nvc/what-is-nvc>

The Socratic method

The Socratic method uses questions to help others probe their own argument and see if it stands up. A good way to (help) a person to reconsider their beliefs is to make them feel like they have uncovered it themselves. That means engaging in back-and-forth questions and answers until you hit a dead end, gently pointing out inconsistencies. Studies show that people often think they know more about a policy than they let on, and the Socratic method can reveal those inconsistencies. This approach can also prevent one party from feeling attacked.

<https://teachanywhere.byu.edu/teaching-tips/the-socratic-method>

<https://www.wikihow.com/Argue-Using-the-Socratic-Method>



Deep canvassing

Deep Canvassing is a method to elicit emotionally significant experiences and encourage reflection. Canvassers use active listening to build trust, so voters can feel comfortable share their personal stories and explore alternative perspectives. At its best, it works with lots of training, trial and error, and iterative learning.

<https://www.ctctogether.org/about-deep-canvassing>

<https://callhub.io/deep-canvassing/>

<https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing>



Other resources:

- Fact and Prejudice: How to Communicate with Esoterics, Fanatics and Conspiracy Believers (Holm Gero Hümmler · Ulrike Schiesser) (will be out in March 2023)
- Spotlight on Conspiracy Narratives & Disinformation



https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/ran-media/ran-spotlight/spotlight-conspiracy-narratives_sl

Where can I get additional support?

Throughout this toolkit, we recommend to reach out to a professional who can help you, for example when you feel very worried, anxious or depressed, or if you feel like you are not the right person to intervene. There are multiple options to ask for help.

- Consider reaching out to a helpline. In this paper, you can find an overview of the many options that are available throughout the European Union:

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/inventory-pcve-hotlineshelplines-eu-february-2022_en



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