

## **How to Handle Disagreements with People Who Believe in COVID-19 Conspiracies This Holiday Season**

**December 23, 2022**

This document was prepared on December 23, 2022 by Natalie Garrison. Natalie works for North Yorkers for Disabled Persons as an Outreach Communication Facilitator, Information Referral and Resources Support. She can be reached at [natalie.nydp@gmail.com](mailto:natalie.nydp@gmail.com).

—

Unfortunately, heated arguments about world issues are very common at friend and family gatherings during the holidays. Clashing opinions about COVID-19, including whether to get vaccinated and/or boosted, continue to cause tension and divide friend groups and families.

It makes sense that we get defensive when someone invalidates our beliefs. Our beliefs about what is right and wrong are a meaningful part of our identity and can't be separated from who we are. This is true for practically everyone, including people who believe in conspiracy theories.

Conversations with people who believe in COVID-19 conspiracies can be exhausting, but we shouldn't avoid them. Discussions with friends and family around the dinner table can be very impactful. For instance, there are people who used to be vaccine hesitant and changed their minds after a solid conversation with someone that they trust and respect.

With heated arguments, the issue is usually not the topic itself, but the way that we communicate and engage with each other about the topic.

To help these conversations go more smoothly, the non-profit coalition *19 to Zero* created a Vaccine Conversation Guide for talking to friends and family about vaccines. This guide is designed to help you understand the mindset of people who believe in COVID-19 conspiracies and challenge misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines with evidence and empathy.

It's important to have reasonable expectations for yourself and not feel too disappointed if you cannot weaken someone's beliefs in conspiracy theories or persuade them to be vaccinated ([source](#)). Even before the pandemic, The World Health Organization warned that the probability of changing the mind of a very vocal science denier is very low ([source](#)).

However, there is a chance that your efforts to understand their point of view and have open conversations will strengthen your relationships and help them protect themselves and the community by staying up-to-date with their COVID-19 vaccines.

This article summarizes some of the many interesting points in the Vaccine Conversation Guide. Click [here](#) to read the full document! It's 22 pages long and available in both English and French.

## **Is *19 to Zero* a trustworthy source?**

*19 to Zero* is a not-for-profit coalition of academics, public health experts, behavioural economists, and creative professionals ([source](#)). Its goal is to shift public perceptions towards healthier behaviours by addressing misinformation and sharing insights from its research ([source](#), [source](#)).

## **Understanding and Preparing for Conversations**

### **Do you know why your friend or family member is against COVID-19 vaccines?**

There are a wide variety of reasons why people do not want to get vaccinated or boosted ([source](#)). For instance, we can't assume that everyone who does not have the COVID-19 vaccine is a conspiracy theorist. Asking about someone's reasons for not wanting the vaccine or booster and listening to their point of view is a necessary part of having an open conversation ([source](#)).

### **Understanding The Mindset of Conspiracy Believers**

This is crucial for effectively managing uncomfortable conversations ([source](#)). Research has shown a few common factors behind why people believe conspiracy theories ([source](#)).

*19 to Zero's* research found that the more strongly someone believes in conspiracy theories in general, the less likely they are to be vaccinated against COVID-19 ([source](#)).

Due to systemic discrimination against certain communities, many people have reason to distrust health care institutions and the government ([source](#)). This does not automatically make someone a conspiracy theorist ([source](#)). However, this reasonable suspicion can be escalated if that individual has lower scientific knowledge and a bias towards valuing their personal beliefs and intuition more than scientific evidence ([source](#)).

For example, vaccine hesitant Canadians are more likely to agree with statements like “Just because evidence conflicts with my current beliefs, does not mean my beliefs are wrong” or “Regardless of the topic, what you believe to be true is more important than evidence against your beliefs” ([source](#)).

Keep this in mind when speaking to someone who believes in conspiracies: Simply connecting them to a scientific paper or a trustworthy resource that explains the safety and benefits of COVID-19 vaccines are often not enough to sway their opinion ([source](#)).

Another important finding from *19 to Zero's* research is that people who believe in conspiracy theories tend to have experienced stressful life events, have greater perceived stress, and have depression ([source](#)). Also, people tend to be more open to believing in conspiracy theories if they feel less in control over their life and environment ([source](#)).

National data shows that Canadians are experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness ([source](#)). So, as the pandemic wears on, some people might be more susceptible to conspiracies ([source](#)).

There is a chance that your friends and family who endorse conspiracies and/or refuse to get vaccinated or boosted are stressed, depressed, or feel that things in their life and in the world are out of their control ([source](#)).

This fact does not justify their claims or make it any less frustrating to talk with them. It certainly shouldn't be thrown in their face during an argument to discredit what they are saying, but it's good to keep it in mind before and during your conversations with them. Approaching the conversation with empathy and doing your best to understand the challenges they may be facing can help you better connect with them ([source](#)).

## **Connecting and Talking**

Understanding the mindset of people who believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories is a valuable first step to connection ([source](#)). We also need to somewhat prepare what we are going to say in response to their conspiracies ([source](#)).

A 2019 study found that silence in response to misinformation can lead to even greater negativity towards behaviours that science supports ([source](#)). In other words, silence in response to misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines can lead to intensified negative feelings towards getting and staying up-to-date with COVID-19 vaccines.

## **De-bunking**

To de-bunk a belief is to point out its inaccuracy. Remember the second paragraph of this article, which mentioned how it feels like a personal attack when people invalidate our deeply-held values. There are ways to debunk information without making people feel dismissed.

A common concern is that de-bunking isn't worth it; it "backfires" and people walk away from arguments with an even stronger attachment to misinformation than they had before ([source](#)).

This concern comes from a study done in 2010 ([source](#)). That study's main author, Brendan Nyhan, later stated that this concept has been "overstated and oversold" in contexts that are not similar or relevant to the study ([source](#)). Many more studies, published after 2010, have found that de-bunking actually works to increase the accuracy of people's beliefs ([source](#)).

Canadian Health Law and Policy expert Timothy Caulfield provides these evidence-based strategies to effectively de-bunk misinformation. Click [here](#) for the source of all these strategies and more.

1. Use facts. Although facts are often not enough to change someone's mind, they can offer an alternative explanation for what caused things to be the way that they are. This can fill in the gaps in the other person's scientific understanding. Also, using facts can promote critical thinking.
2. Provide a clear, straightforward and shareable message. Studies have shown that using scientific jargon causes people to disengage with that information, even if the definitions are explained in the text.
3. Use trustworthy and independent sources. People who believe in conspiracies are more likely to trust and be persuaded by these sources. They are less likely to believe in information from a source that they perceive to have an agenda and/or a motive to make money. For example, some people may find independent doctors to be more trustworthy than public health authorities or governments.
4. Emphasize points that multiple scientists agree on and recognize that consensus can change as science evolves.
5. Don't shame or ridicule people for their beliefs. Research has found that an aggressive language style is perceived to be both less credible and less trustworthy. Also, you should communicate in a way that is authentic to who you are. If you are viewed as a unique and authentic person, this can make them see you as more trust-worthy, credible, and persuasive.

*19 to Zero's Vaccine Conversation Guide* elaborates on this tip. Mocking someone for their beliefs can make them feel like an outsider ([source](#)). This can lead them to seek support and community from others who believe in conspiracies and isolate themselves from the people who they know, trust, and love ([source](#)).

6. Make things easier for the other person to follow by framing facts within a narrative. Stories can make your point more compelling and memorable.
7. Appeal to logic and critical thinking. Point out the gaps in the logic of conspiracies.

A book that can help you with this last tip is *The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook* ([source](#)). This book provides insight into many of the common myths around COVID-19 vaccines ([source](#)). It offers both real facts and points out logic gaps in anti-vaccine arguments ([source](#)).

Click [here](#) to access this book online for free.

Another book that can help you understand and connect with people who believe in conspiracy theories is the *2020 Debunking Handbook* ([source](#)). It offers more information about how to debunk myths and promote critical thinking ([source](#)).

Click [here](#) to access this book online for free.

Other resources that can be helpful are: MediaSmarts (click [here](#)), ScienceUpFirst (click [here](#)), and the Conspiracy Theory Handbook (click [here](#)).

## Final Thoughts

Discussions about big issues, including COVID-19 vaccination, are a part of life.

Navigating these conversations can feel like tip-toeing through a minefield, but it doesn't have to be that way. Most people would prefer to have productive conversations rather than emotional arguments.

Instead of trying to avoid these conversations, it's better to prepare for them and learn to handle disagreements with evidence and empathy, even if they seem to be personally attacking you.

It's a skill to manage uncomfortable conversations with people whose beliefs clash with ours, and skills take time to develop.

This Vaccine Conversation Guide does not guarantee that you will convince anyone to stay up-to-date with COVID-19 vaccines. After all, we can only control our own behaviour. But, with practice, you will be able to handle these conversations with more confidence.

—

If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at [www.ontario.ca/coronavirus](http://www.ontario.ca/coronavirus). Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675