

Handout "Dealing with conspiracy ideologies in your own family"

What is a conspiracy narrative?

"A conspiracy narrative is an assumption that individuals or a group of people perceived as powerful are influencing important events in the world and thus purposefully harming the population while keeping them in the dark about their goals."

(Lamberty/Nocum: 2020; translated Beratungsstelle Extremismus)

Conspiracy narratives reduce complex facts and inadmissibly abbreviate them. They do not allow contradictions and do not tolerate other opinions. The world is divided into „good“ and „evil“. They evade a scientific approach by not confirming or refuting scientific results. They are less theories in the scientific sense even though they are often called “conspiracy theories”. They are more narratives or myths.

Conspiracy narratives are stories that offer (supposed) solutions to complex issues in our society. Everything can be explained and there are clear reasons for what is going on in our world. Everything happens by intention. There is always someone to blame for what is happening. And everything is always connected. There are no coincidences.

Why do people believe in conspiracy narratives?

Conspiracy narratives explain the world and make it understandable. This can give support and a sense of security to a person who is in a difficult situation in life and feels powerless. Being part of a conspiratorial group creates a positive self-image and gives self-efficacy when people feel they are fighting for the „good“ and protesting against the supposedly „guilty“. Here, adherents of conspiracy narratives see themselves as the few "seeing ones", as an elite group in possession of the truth. This is connected with one's own revaluation, which automatically leads to the devaluation of the "blind and stupid ones".

The fascination with conspiracy narratives also satisfies a desire to uncover puzzles and contradictions and to find explanations and solutions for them.

What does all this have to do with Corona?

We cannot see, touch or smell the Corona virus. This unsettles and overwhelms people. Events that are seen as threats to one's sense of control promote the belief in conspiracy ideologies. Especially in difficult times, a feeling of powerlessness can arise. In such moments, we tend to feel neglected and left alone. This leads to disappointments which make us believe we are a plaything of greater powers.

My mum, my grandad, my sister believes in conspiracy theories - what should I do?

Possible interventions

Perceive:

Consciously perceive the statements without commenting on them. Try not to devalue or expose the person. Criticism and doubts about common ideas are not wrong in principle. However, try to understand what is behind the statements.

Ask questions about why the person believes that a certain situation is the way he or she represents it. Questions about the sources of conspiracy narratives can also be helpful: Is there other evidence to support the theory? What other information does the site provide? Is there an author?

Avoid a discussion that revolves around facts and data. However, one's own points of view can certainly be conveyed, especially when it comes to one's own health and physical integrity. Also, when it comes to derogatory statements or misanthropic tendencies of a conspiracy narrative, you should take a clear stand. Again, try not to devalue the other person. Stick to yourself and your feelings: "It's painful for me that you see it that way." - "I don't think certain people are worth less than others."

Stay in relationship with the person and do not break off contact. But be aware of your own limits. See what is good for you and what burdens you.

Analyse:

Try to understand why the person is coming up with this issue right now. What happened before? What was the person's behaviour before? Has the language changed? How does the person spend their daily life and with which people?

Interact:

Talk to the person about their feelings and fears. Your counterpart may and should also perceive what is bothering you and what you are worried about. At the same time, you should be aware of what is bothering the person. Look for topics about which you can have a conversation far away from conspiracy narratives and the corona pandemic. This strengthens the relationship experience and helps to prevent the situation from escalating. Ask at what point you need to start worrying. Be patient with yourself and your counterpart. A single conversation is probably not enough.

Act:

Look for similarities instead of differences. Do something with the person that you used to enjoy doing together. This helps the person to realize that there is another world outside of conspiracies. A positive relationship experience makes it easier to talk about difficult issues.

Get help. This can be a brother, sister, father, friend or a professional institution. An outside perspective can help to get a different perspective and share common experiences. You do not have to deal with this issue alone. Think about strategies together. But also make sure that the situation does not escalate.

Further Literature (german only):

Raab, Marius (2019): Wie kann man Verschwörungstheorien definieren? In: AK Ruhr, a.a.O

Silberberger, Gulia/Reinhardt Rüdiger (2020): Verschwörungsideologien & Fake News erkennen und widerlegen

Katharina Nocun, Pia Lamberty (2020). Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien unser Denken bestimmen. Quadriga.

<https://www.beratungsstelleextremismus.at/thema-verschwörungstheorien/>

Podcast (german only):

<https://www.beratungsstelleextremismus.at/neue-podcastreihe-der-beratungsstelle-extremismus/>

Fact checker websites for verifying information (german only):

www.mimikama.at

www.correctiv.org/faktencheck

<https://apa.at/faktencheck/ueberblick/>