

Living with Conspiracies:

Advice for Loved Ones & Practitioners

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organization for
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About This Guide: Purpose and How to Use It

Purpose

This Guide provides practical advice for those managing the challenges of having a loved one who believes in conspiracy theories. It is intended for family members and friends whose loved one's conspiratorial thinking is placing strain on their mental health, emotional wellbeing, or relationships. It is also designed for helping professionals – like social workers, caseworkers, mental health counsellors, and psychologists – who support individuals affected by someone in their life who believes in conspiracy theories.

While the harms of conspiracy beliefs on families and relationships are increasingly recognized, there remains a shortage of practical, easy-to-use resources to help individuals understand the impacts of their loved one's beliefs, navigate their relationships, and access support. For psychosocial and helping professionals, existing resources often lack specific recommendations tailored to the distinct needs of loved ones.¹ This Guide seeks to fill that gap by offering clear, evidence-based guidance for families, friends, and practitioners.

Structure

There are three parts to this Guide:

- **Part I: Background Information** – For both loved ones and practitioners. This section explains what conspiracy theories are, why some people are drawn to them, and signs that someone might be getting involved in them.

- **Part II: Advice for Loved Ones** – For family and friends. This section offers practical suggestions for coping, communicating, and finding support when someone close to you believes in conspiracies.
- **Part III: Advice for Practitioners** – For psychosocial and helping professionals who provide mental, emotional, and wellbeing support to clients who may be impacted by a loved one's beliefs in conspiracies. It discusses practical implications, considerations, and recommendations for addressing common concerns in therapeutic or support settings.

How did we develop our recommendations?

To provide recommendations informed by research and grounded in practical realities, this Guide relies on three main sources of evidence:

- Current research on conspiracy beliefs, communication strategies, and the needs of people affected by them.
- Research about the impacts of conspiracies on loved ones carried out by researchers at the Organization for the Prevention of Violence (OPV).²
- Good practice and frontline insights from the OPV's Evolve team, a multidisciplinary intervention team providing tailored support to individuals immersed in conspiracy theories, as well as their loved ones.³

¹ Some notable exceptions include: Anti-Defamation League, "Conspiracy Theories and How to Help Family and Friends Who Believe Them," *Anti-Defamation League*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/conspiracy-theories>; Francesco Farinelli, *Conspiracy Theories and Right-Wing Extremism - Insights and Recommendations for P/CVE* (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/ran_conspiracy_theories_and_right-wing_2021_en.pdf.

² Michèle St-Amant, Michael King, Laura Stolte, and Marc-André Argentino, "Collateral: The Impact of QAnon on Loved Ones and the Potential for P/CVE Programs to Help," *Journal for deradicalization* 35, (2023), p. 33–75.

³ Organization for the Prevention of Violence, "Evolve Program: The First Two Years," September, 2021, available at <https://preventviolence.ca/publication/evolve-program-the-first-two-years/>.

Part 1: Background Information

What are conspiracy theories?

Conspiracy theories are beliefs that claim to offer explanations of political and social events, often by attributing them to the secret and harmful actions of powerful individuals or groups. Conspiracy theories often frame the world as a struggle between “good” and “evil,” and portray events as being staged or deliberately caused by these hidden plotters. For example, some falsely claim that the first moon landing by the Apollo 11 was staged to trick the public into believing the United States had won the space race with the Soviet Union.

Conspiracy theories usually rely on misleading or selective interpretations of information, while ignoring evidence that contradicts them. Today, conspiracy theories are spread widely online, where individuals and communities share content that reinforces their beliefs.⁴ Research shows that people who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others.⁵

Conspiracy theories themselves are not new. They have existed for centuries, and some with devastating effects. For example, during the 17th century, widespread belief that certain people were witches fueled mass hysteria, as well as witch hunts such as the Salem witch trials in colonial Massachusetts. Others, like the belief that the Earth is flat, may seem less harmful. More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, false claims that the Chinese government deliberately created and spread the virus to wage war against the United States led to a surge in anti-Asian hate crimes worldwide.⁶

Conspiracy theories and their believers are often highly resistant to contradictory evidence, for two main reasons.

- First, evidence that contradicts conspiracies is often dismissed as being part of the conspiracy itself.⁷ For instance, someone who believes in vaccine-related conspiracies may reject scientific studies demonstrating their safety and effectiveness, interpreting scientists as complicit in an “evil” agenda.
- Second, conspiracy theories often rely on claims that are difficult to disprove, like the idea that powerful secret groups control everything. The inability to disprove this idea can instead reinforce someone’s beliefs.

⁴ Jing Zeng, Mike S. Schäfer, and Thaianie M. Oliveira, “Conspiracy Theories in Digital Environments: Moving the Research Field Forward,” *Convergence (London, England)* 28, no. 4 (2022), p. 929–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221117474>; Benjamin J. Dow, Amber L. Johnson, Cynthia S. Wang, Jennifer Whitson, and Tanya Menon, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Search for Structure: Social Media and Conspiracy Theories,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 15, no. 9 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12636>.

⁵ Matt N. Williams, Mathew D. Marques, Stephen R. Hill, John R. Kerr, and Mathew Ling, “Why Are Beliefs in Different Conspiracy Theories Positively Correlated across Individuals? Testing Monological Network versus Unidimensional Factor Model Explanations,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 61, no. 3 (2022), p. 1011–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12518>.

⁶ Hyeouk Chris Hahm, Casey D Xavier Hall, Kana Tsurudome Garcia, Anna Cavallino, Yoonsook Ha, Yvette C Cozier, and Cindy Liu, “Experiences of COVID-19-Related Anti-Asian Discrimination and Affective Reactions in a Multiple Race Sample of U.S. Young Adults,” *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11559-1>. Karen Douglas, “COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 2 (2021): 270–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220982068>.

⁷ Napolitano, M. Giulia, “Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation,” in *The Epistemology of Fake News*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863977.003.0005>.

This does not mean conspiracy theories are true. Rather, conspiracy theories are designed to resist contradictory evidence by appealing to someone's emotions, moral values, and their desire for meaning and purpose.⁸ As a result, fact-checking and de-bunking are rarely effective, because the conspiracy theory often has an "answer" for everything. Understanding this is key, because it helps explain why these beliefs can feel so convincing to some people, and why they can be difficult to let go of.

Common conspiracies

This section describes several conspiracy theories that are especially widespread today. While this is not an exhaustive list, these examples reflect the range of ideas circulating across different ideological and political spectrums.

It is important to note that most people do not subscribe to every detail of a conspiracy. Instead, they often take bits and pieces that fit their existing views, blending them to create a personalized set of beliefs.

The "Deep State"

Many modern conspiracy theories are built on the idea that a secret, powerful group controls governments and society. This supposed hidden network is often referred to as the "Deep State." Depending on the version of the conspiracy, the Deep State may include politicians, business leaders, intelligence agencies, religious or ethnic groups, or even Hollywood celebrities. For example, some falsely blame the Jewish community for orchestrating world events such as wars, earthquakes, and terrorist attacks.

Believers claim that the "Deep State" secretly manipulates governments, influences politicians, infiltrates intelligence agencies, and controls global organizations like the United Nations or the World Bank to pursue their own agenda. The alleged intentions of the "Deep State" include, but are not limited to, restricting individual freedoms, controlling the economy, and manipulating elections to establish a single world government which serves their interests.

The precise details of the "Deep State" conspiracy vary widely, and its claims can include a range of harmful, antisemitic, or racist stereotypes. Some versions of the conspiracy claim the "Deep State" are pedophiles and sex-traffickers.⁹ Others make more fantastical claims about the identities of the "Deep State," such as claiming world leaders are shapeshifting lizards, or that extraterrestrials with superior intelligence are pulling the strings.

Despite its prevalence among many conspiracies today, there is no credible evidence to support the existence of a coordinated "Deep State."

The New World Order

Closely related to the "Deep State" is the New World Order conspiracy (often abbreviated to NWO), which makes more specific claims that this powerful group of individuals aims to establish a global totalitarian government. The conspiracy claims that through a series of orchestrated and coordinated world events, such as wars, famines, mass shootings, and other tragedies, the "Deep State" are using these events to limit individual freedoms, control the economy, and establish a single totalitarian government.

⁸ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, "Psychological Benefits of Believing Conspiracy Theories," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47, (October 2022), 101352, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101352>.

⁹ Art Jipson, "How the QAnon Movement Entered Mainstream Politics – and Why the Silence on Epstein Files Matters," *The Conversation*, July 19, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/how-the-qanon-movement-entered-mainstream-politics-and-why-the-silence-on-epstein-files-matters-261316>.

For example, some believe that this secret group orchestrated the COVID-19 pandemic to justify the enforcement of restrictions and limit individual freedoms. Others argue that international organizations like the United Nations have been infiltrated and are secretly promoting the New World Order.¹⁰

The NWO conspiracy originates from the strong anti-communist sentiments rampant in the West during the Cold War. During this time, some powerful figures and institutions, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), were accused of conspiring to establish a communist regime in the United States and abroad, although these accusations were unfounded. Instead, many of these accusations were used to intimidate alleged communists in the United States.¹¹

Today, belief in the “Deep State” and NWO conspiracies can lead to extreme beliefs and paranoia toward any individuals perceived to be part of the conspiracy. As with others, the NWO conspiracy relies heavily on antisemitic tropes which claim that Jewish people manipulate powerful institutions, such as governments and banks, with the intention of gaining power.¹² As a result, many who believe the “Deep State” and NWO conspiracies often blame Jewish people, and some may commit acts of hate or violence toward these communities.

QAnon:

QAnon is a conspiracy movement that emerged in 2017 after an anonymous user known as “Q,” who claimed to have insider information at the highest levels of the U.S. government, began posting cryptic messages on the online forum called *4chan*. An online community soon formed around these posts, which centered around the idea that world events were controlled by hidden forces who sought to implement an evil agenda.

QAnon is what some researchers consider to be a “super conspiracy” because it incorporates many long-standing conspiracies – such as those about the Illuminati, the claim that 9/11 was an “inside job,” or the belief that former President John F. Kennedy Jr. faked his own death – into one story.¹³

At its core, the QAnon conspiracy claims that a secret, Satan-worshipping group of high-ranking members of governments, politicians, celebrities, and other powerful figures, secretly run the world through corrupt and illegal means. The QAnon conspiracy claims this group has committed a range of crimes, including rigging elections, interfering in governments and policy-making, and kidnapping children as part of a massive child sex-trafficking ring. According to the QAnon conspiracy, members of the Democratic Party in the United States were ringleaders in most of these crimes, and Donald Trump was viewed as a savior waging a war against them. Some also believe that this group cannibalizes people, engages in Satanic rituals, and performs scientific experiments on kidnapped children, including harvesting their adrenochrome – a chemical compound made from adrenaline – to stay young.

¹⁰ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “The ‘New World Order,’” accessed on August 29, 2025, available at <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/new-world-order-explainer/>.

¹¹ Myles Flores, “The New World Order: The Historical Origins of a Dangerous Modern Conspiracy Theory,” *The Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/new-world-order-historical-origins-dangerous>.

¹² Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “The ‘New World Order,’” accessed on August 29, 2025, available at <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/new-world-order-explainer/>.

¹³ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Second edition. Vol. 15, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520956520>.

Since its inception, QAnon has spread from the United States across the world, including in Canada, Europe, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. While most QAnon followers are not violent, there have been some violent incidents linked to the conspiracy. For example, in July 2020, a man who posted online about “Q,” crashed his truck through the gates of Rideau Hall in Ottawa, armed with multiple firearms, before setting out on foot to “confront” the Prime Minister.¹⁴ A year later in Iowa, a man was pulled over by police for erratic driving, whereupon police discovered the man had a rifle, ammunition, medical kits, body armour and a “hit list” of politicians and businesspeople in Washington D.C. he intended to assassinate.¹⁵ The man held beliefs consistent with QAnon, including the belief that politicians were involved in the sexual abuse and trafficking of children.

Beyond public violence, QAnon has caused significant personal harm to families and relationships.¹⁶ For many, a loved one’s belief in QAnon can result in family ruptures, isolation, and the end of friendships, marriages, or romantic partnerships.¹⁷ Recent evidence also suggests that loved ones of QAnon followers may experience more severe symptoms of some mental illnesses than those without.¹⁸

The Great Reset:

The “Great Reset” is a conspiracy theory which became popularized in 2020. At its core, the Great Reset conspiracy is similar to QAnon, and claims a secret group of powerful figures orchestrated the COVID-19 pandemic to seize control of society and strip away individual freedoms.¹⁹ Adherents of this conspiracy believe that public health mandates like lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and mandatory vaccines, were a way to enslave people through manipulation, coercion, and biological control.

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- 14** Leyland Cecco, “Armed Man Who Broke into Trudeau Residence Charged with Threatening to Kill or Injure PM,” *The Guardian*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/06/canada-justin-trudeau-armed-man-gate-police>.
- 15** Seamus Hughes, Camden Carmichael, and Clara Braun, *Snapshot of U.S. Federal Cases Against Violent QAnon Adherents* (Omaha, NE: Reports, Projects, and Research, 2024), <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/ncitereportsresearch/76>.
- 16** Cecilia Saixue Watt, “The QAnon orphans: people who have lost loved ones to conspiracy theories,” *The Guardian*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-loved-ones>; Travis M. Andrews, “QAnon Is Tearing Families Apart,” *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/14/qanon-families-support-group/>; Audie Cornish, “How QAnon-Like Conspiracy Theories Tear Families Apart,” NPR, January 15, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/957371294/how-qanon-like-conspiracy-theories-tear-families-apart>; David Gilbert, “How QAnon Is Tearing Families Apart,” *Vice News*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dy8ayx/how-qanon-is-tearing-families-apart>; Marissa Melton, “As QAnon Strains Relationships, Loved Ones Try to Show a Way Out,” *VOA News*, July 18, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/usa-qanon-strains-relationships-loved-ones-try-show-way-out/6208393.html>.
- 17** Jane Lytvynenko, “Friends and Family Members of QAnon Believers Are Going Through A ‘Surreal Goddamn Nightmare,’” *BuzzFeed News*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/qanon-families-friends>.
- 18** Sophia Moskalenko, B. S. Burton, J. Fernández-Garayzabal González, and Mia M. Bloom, “Secondhand Conspiracy Theories: The Social, Emotional and Political Tolls on Loved Ones of QAnon Followers,” *Democracy and Security* 19, no. 3 (2023), p. 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2022.2111305>.
- 19** Anti-Defamation League, “‘The Great Reset’ Conspiracy Flourishes Amid Continued Pandemic,” *ADL*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/article/great-reset-conspiracy-flourishes-amid-continued-pandemic>; Aoife Gallagher and Ciaran O’Connor, “The ‘Great Reset,’” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-explainer/the-great-reset/>; BBC Monitoring and BBC Reality Check, “What is the Great Reset – and How Did It Get Hijacked by Conspiracy Theories?” *BBC News*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-57532368>.

The theory takes its name from the World Economic Forum's *Great Reset* initiative, a global recovery plan announced in June 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The WEF is an international non-governmental organization and think tank that aims to "improve the state of the world" by engaging global leaders in business, government, civil society, and academia to address today's challenges.²⁰ The WEF's *Great Reset* initiative focused on addressing issues of sustainable development, technology, international security, fair and equitable economic recovery, and climate change in the post-COVID-19 world. However, because the initiative's proposals were broad in scope and backed by powerful public figures, including the Prince of Wales, many people became suspicious of its intentions, leading to conspiracies.

The "Great Reset" conspiracy spread widely several months later in November 2020, after a clip of then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went viral where he described the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for a "reset."²¹ Many took this as proof that world leaders had orchestrated the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to institute a tyrannical world government.

The Great Replacement:

The Great Replacement is a racist and antisemitic conspiracy that claims powerful forces are seeking to "replace" white populations in Western countries.²² While the ideas behind this conspiracy dates back to the 19th century, they continue to influence a range of extremist beliefs today.

Early versions of this conspiracy came from figures like Charles H. Pearson, an Australian politician and author, who argued in his 1893 book that declining birth rates among white Europeans would lead to their replacement by non-white populations, who had higher birth rates at the time.²³

These ideas had real-world consequences, including support across many Western countries for the eugenics movement in the early 20th century. Eugenics promoted the belief that the quality of human genetics could be "improved" through selective birth practices, which included encouraging reproduction among some groups of people, while preventing it among others. In practice, the eugenics movement was used to justify forced sterilizations and murder of largely non-white people. In the United States, federally funded programs sterilized thousands of people, often without the consent or knowledge of the patient themselves.²⁴

The popularity of these ideas continued well into the 20th century, influencing white supremacist novels like *The Turner Diaries* in 1978, depicting a violent race war. In 2011, French author Renaud Camus gave the conspiracy its modern name with the publication of *Le Grand Remplacement* ("The Great Replacement"), a book which falsely claims that non-European immigrants are overwhelming white Europeans.²⁵

²⁰ World Economic Forum, "Our Mission," accessed on September 22, 2025, available at <https://www.weforum.org/about/world-economic-forum/>.

²¹ BBC Monitoring and BBC Reality Check, "What is the Great Reset – and How Did It Get Hijacked by Conspiracy Theories?" *BBC News*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-57532368>.

²² David Bauder, "What is 'Great Replacement Theory' and How Does It Fuel Racist Violence?" *PBS News*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/what-is-great-replacement-theory-and-how-does-it-fuel-racist-violence>.

²³ Rodney Coates, "What is the 'Great Replacement Theory'? A Scholar of Race Relations Explains," *The Conversation*, March 15, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/what-is-the-great-replacement-theory-a-scholar-of-race-relations-explains-224835>.

²⁴ Lisa Ko, "Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States," *PBS*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>.

²⁵ David Bauder, "What is 'Great Replacement Theory' and How Does It Fuel Racist Violence?" *PBS News*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/what-is-great-replacement-theory-and-how-does-it-fuel-racist-violence>.

Today, the conspiracy has surfaced in debates about immigration policies, especially in Canada, the United States, and Europe. In its most extreme form, the Great Replacement conspiracy has inspired real acts of violence. For example, in 2019, the Great Replacement was cited as motivation for a mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, which killed 23 people and injured 22 others. In a manifesto posted online before the shooting, the perpetrator claimed his attack was a response to the “Hispanic invasion of Texas.”²⁶ Other more recent attacks inspired by the Great Replacement conspiracy include a mass shooting in 2022 at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, which targeted black Americans.

Other conspiracies:

Other conspiracies are also widespread and show just how diverse these beliefs can be. For example, some people claim the Earth is flat, others argue that the September 11th attacks were secretly planned by the U.S. government, and some insist that aliens are hidden at Area 51. While these examples might seem very different from one another, they all share a common thread: distrust of governments and official explanations, as well as the belief that powerful forces are hiding the “truth.”

As we have seen with QAnon, the “Deep State,” and the New World Order, different conspiracy theories often have similar core beliefs. This helps explain why people who believe in one conspiracy are more likely to believe others, creating a worldview shaped by suspicion.²⁷

Why do people believe in conspiracies?

People can be drawn into conspiracy theories for many different reasons, and sometimes without even realizing it. In fact, many of us believe at least one conspiracy theory at some point in our lives. On their own, these beliefs aren’t always harmful. They do not necessarily indicate a lack of education, and it does not mean someone is, or will ever become, violent.

However, when these beliefs begin to negatively impact someone’s life, including their relationships, employment, education, health, or social life, this can become distressing for both the conspiracy believer and for those around them.

While it is important to recognize that anyone can be susceptible to conspiracy theories, researchers have identified several factors that make some people more vulnerable than others. These are considered risk factors, because they can increase the likelihood that conspiracies will appeal to someone, but they do not guarantee that someone will adopt these beliefs:

- **Feeling unhappy with the direction of society:** People dissatisfied with the way things are going in the world may turn to conspiracies because they provide simple explanations and clearly identify those responsible.²⁸ For example, someone frustrated with rising costs of living might believe that a shadowy group of elites are deliberately making life harder for regular people by manipulating the economy.

²⁶ Jana Vanderwee & Julian Droogan, “Testing the Link Between Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: A Linguistic Coding Approach to Far-Right Shooter Manifestos,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 17, no. 4 (2023), p. 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2023.2258952>.

²⁷ Matt N. Williams, Mathew D. Marques, John R. Kerr, Stephen R. Hill, Mathew Ling, and Edward J. R. Clarke, “Does Developing a Belief in One Conspiracy Theory Lead a Person to Be More Likely to Believe in Others?” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 55, no. 4 (2025), p. 554–64, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3153>.

²⁸ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, Caspar J. Van Lissa, Wolfgang Stroebe, Jannis Kreienkamp, Maximilian Agostini, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, et al., “Identifying Important Individual- and Country-level Predictors of Conspiracy Theorizing: A Machine Learning Analysis,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 53, no. 6 (2023), p. 1191–1203, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2968>.

- **A desire for certainty during uncertain times:** During periods of acute crisis and public anxiety – like after 9/11 – people may have a strong desire to make sense of uncertainty and chaos. For some people, this can lead to conspiratorial thinking.²⁹ Some may seek to confirm a “gut feeling” that something sinister is happening, and conspiracies validate those intuitions with clear and simple answers.³⁰ These explanations may be easier to accept than the complex factors that lead to these events in the first place.
- **Suspicion and distrust:** People who already feel deep distrust toward the government, powerful groups, or even those around them, may be more drawn to conspiracy theories.³¹ Conspiracies can be appealing because they seem to confirm these suspicions, offering a story that explains injustice, uncertainty, or deception. For example, someone who distrusts the government may be less likely to believe the results of an election.
- **Looking for patterns where they don't exist:** People who seek to find patterns where none exist may be more drawn to conspiratorial thinking.³² This is because conspiracies are self-rewarding and can make the person feel as though their suspicions were right all along. For example, someone may perceive several major weather events or natural disasters in the same year, like hurricanes or wildfires, as evidence that the government is using secret technology to manipulate the environment.
- **Paranoia and seeing danger everywhere:** People who feel unsafe, or perceive danger and threats everywhere, are more likely to believe in conspiracies.³³ By identifying the “good” and “bad” actors, conspiracies may offer a false sense of security, while giving clear and easy-to-understand explanations for these threats. For example, someone may take more notice of new security regulations at airports, such as facial recognition or new identification requirements, as signs of a secret plot to collect information on people to control them.

²⁹ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society* (Los Angeles, CA) 26, no. 6 (2017), p. 538–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>; Zuzanna Molenda, Ricky Green, Marta Marchlewska, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Karen M. Douglas, “Emotion Dysregulation and Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 204 (April 2023), 112042. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.112042>.

³⁰ Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personal Correlates,” *Psychological Bulletin* (United States) 149, no. 5–6 (2023), p. 259–93, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392>.

³¹ Nils Brandenstein, “Going beyond Simplicity: Using Machine Learning to Predict Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 52, no. 5–6 (2022), p. 910–30, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2859>; Lukasz Stasielowicz, “Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories? A Meta-Analysis on Personality Correlates,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 98 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2022.104229>; Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, Caspar J. Van Lissa, Wolfgang Stroebe, Jannis Kreienkamp, Maximilian Agostini, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, et al., “Identifying Important Individual- and Country-level Predictors of Conspiracy Theorizing: A Machine Learning Analysis,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 53, no. 6 (2023), p. 1191–1203, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2968>.

³² Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personal Correlates,” *Psychological Bulletin* 149, no. 5–6 (2023), p. 259–93, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392>.

³³ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society* 26, no. 6 (2017), p. 538–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>; Jan-Willem van Prooijen, “An Existential Threat Model of Conspiracy Theories,” *European Psychologist* 25, no. 1 (2020), p. 16–25, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000381>.

- **Feelings of personal or in-group superiority:** People who see themselves, or their group, as superior to others may find conspiracies more appealing.³⁴ Conspiracies often paint a struggle between “good versus evil,” where the believer and their group represent the “good and righteous,” while outsiders are labelled as “corrupt,” “amoral,” and “evil.”
- **Low self-esteem:** Feeling powerless, lonely, or isolated can contribute to low self-esteem, which can draw some people toward conspiracy theories.³⁵ This is because conspiracies offer a false sense of control, while also providing a sense of community with like-minded people. Some may even find meaning and purpose in conspiracies, as uncovering “privileged” information offers a sense of importance and excitement.³⁶
- **Appeal to emotions and moral values:** Conspiracies are designed to target people’s emotions and their sense of morality.³⁷ Conspiracy narratives typically frame the world as a battle between “good” and “evil,” where innocent people are being harmed by powerful wrongdoers. In many cases, conspiracies make claims about the most vulnerable members of society, like the claim that the “Deep State” is sex-trafficking women and children, which can trigger strong emotional reactions.³⁸ The moral urgency can make conspiracies feel true even though they lack evidence.

For more information about why and how people believe conspiracies, please consult the following resources:

- Anti-Defamation League (ADL): [“Conspiracy Theories and How to Help Family and Friends Who Believe Them”](#)
- McGill University Office for Science and Society: [“Who Is Likely to Believe in Conspiracy Theories?”](#)
- Mount Royal University Summit: [“Understanding the Conspiratorial Mind”](#)
- European Commission: [“Identifying Conspiracy Theories”](#)

What are some signs that someone is being drawn toward conspiracies?

There are some signs that may indicate a growing interest in, or belief in, conspiracy theories. It’s important to remember that the presence of some or even all of these signs does not necessarily mean a person believes in conspiracies. However, they may suggest exposure to, or engagement with, ideas that could become harmful if they begin to dominate someone’s thinking or affect their daily life.

³⁴ Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates,” *Psychological Bulletin* 149, no. 5–6 (2023), p. 259–93, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392>;

Michael Waltman, Thomas J. Socha, and Rhunette C. Diggs, “QAnon’s Ideology of Hate: As a Catalyst for Negative Transformation in Families and Close Relationships,” In *Family Communication and Cultural Transformation*, 1st ed., 57–76 (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2023).

³⁵ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, Mikey Biddlestone, Ricky Green, and Daniel Toribio-Flórez, “Engaging with Conspiracy Believers,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-024-00741-0>; Camille J. Saucier, and Nathan Walter, “Conspiracy Theories and Self-Worth: Can Self-Affirmation Help Explain the Adoption of Conspiracy Theories?” *Human Communication Research* 51, no. 3 (2025), p. 190–201. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqaf012>.

³⁶ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, “Psychological Benefits of Believing Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47, (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101352>.

³⁷ Philipp Wunderlich, “Feeling the Conspiracy—Theorising the Transformation and Collectivisation of Emotions Through Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 55, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.70001>.

³⁸ Tylor Cosgrove & Mark Bahr, “The Language of Conspiracy Theories: Negative Emotions and Themes Facilitate Diffusion Online,” *SAGE Open* 14, no. 4 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241290413>.

Language

People who believe in conspiracies often see their theories as part of a “hidden truth.” This can lead them to speak from a position of “privileged” knowledge, sometimes coming across as condescending to others. They may use language to distinguish themselves from those who don’t share their beliefs, referring to others as “naive,” “brainwashed,” “normies,” “blue-pilled,” “sheep,” or “sheeple.” Some may also use coded phrases like “trust the plan,” which can help them rationalize when conspiratorial predictions do not come true.³⁹

They may also suggest they have special insight or “secret knowledge” that distinguishes them from others.⁴⁰ Examples of this may include someone claiming to have learned a secret truth that the public is unaware of; or claiming to know how the world really works. Some talk about vague, impending events that will dramatically change society, or about “saving” loved ones from harmful or evil forces. When family and friends dismiss their warnings, they may even become frustrated and distressed.

A common feature of many conspiracy theories is the belief that major events – such as elections, wars, natural disasters, or acts of terrorism – are not random but are in fact part of a coordinated plot. In these cases, global or national events are often interpreted as proof that conspiracy is real.

Topics of conversation

In addition to specific language, people engaging with conspiratorial ideas may bring up recurring themes in conversation. These can include repeated conversations about their distrust of governments, politicians, “elites,” mainstream media, or scientific institutions.⁴¹ They might frequently reference a so-called “deep state” or hidden power structures, particularly when discussing political decisions they disagree with.⁴²

However, as politics shift, so do the key figures at the center of conspiratorial worldviews. While the specific individuals of focus may change, a consistent pattern is that conspiracy believers often support politicians or public figures who promote contrarian or “non-mainstream” political views, particularly those seen as “fighting” against the system.⁴³

Another common phrase among conspiracy believers is “do your own research.” This typically refers to information gathered from alternative news sites, forums, podcasts, or social media accounts that present themselves as revealing truths hidden by mainstream sources. However, these sources often have little to no accountability, transparency, or credibility. Despite this, believers will nonetheless express a strong distrust for “mainstream” news sources and describe those who rely on them as being “asleep,” or “following the crowd.”

³⁹ Peter L. Forberg, “‘No Cult Tells You to Think for Yourself’: Discursive Ideology and the Limits of Rationality in Conspiracy Theory QAnon.” *The American Behavioral Scientist* (Beverly Hills) 67, no. 5 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221091199>.

⁴⁰ Anthony Lantian, Dominique Muller, Cécile Nurra, and Karen M. Douglas, “‘I Know Things They Don’t Know!’: The Role of Need for Uniqueness in Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Social Psychology* (Göttingen, Germany) 48, no. 3 (2017), p. 160–73, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000306>.

⁴¹ Andrea Sipka, Aniko Hannak, and Aleksandra Urman, “Comparing the Language of QAnon-Related Content on Parler, Gab, and Twitter,” *14th ACM Web Science Conference 2022* (New York, NY, USA), ACM, June 26, 2022, p. 411–21. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3501247.3531550>.

⁴² Marc Tuters & Tom Willaert, “Deep State Phobia: Narrative Convergence in Coronavirus Conspiracism on Instagram,” *Convergence* (London, England) 28, no. 4 (2022), p. 1214–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221118751>.

⁴³ Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, Kinga Bierwiazzonek, and Paweł Ciesielski, “An Interpretation of Meta-Analytical Evidence for the Link Between Collective Narcissism and Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101360>.

For a more in-depth discussion about communication strategies with someone who believes in conspiracies, please refer to **Part 2: Advice for Loved Ones** section of this guide.

Behaviours

Someone showing interest in conspiracy beliefs may increasingly consume media that supports those views, while rejecting information from mainstream sources. In many conspiracy worldviews, mainstream media is seen as untrustworthy or controlled, so information is instead sought from alternative outlets such as online videos, podcasts, influencers, forums, or articles created by others who share similar beliefs. This creates a media echo chamber, which reinforces and deepens conspiratorial beliefs while limiting exposure to counterfactual information.⁴⁴

Many conspiracy communities also encourage people to “do their own research,” though this typically means searching within a narrow range of biased or conspiracy-affirming sources. As someone becomes more deeply involved, they may spend increasing amounts of time online researching, collecting sources, and discussing ideas with others who share their beliefs. They may also become increasingly isolated from family and friends, especially from those who do not share their beliefs.⁴⁵ In some situations, these activities can become so time-consuming they lead to neglect of responsibilities and commitments, like parenting, work, school, household tasks, and even self-care.

Changes in social media use are also common. Some individuals may post conspiracy-related phrases, hashtags, or content. Others may leave mainstream platforms altogether, often out of concern about being monitored or censored, and move to alternative encrypted platforms like Telegram or Signal, where conspiracy content may be less moderated.⁴⁶

Although much of this activity happens online, there are also offline and in-person elements. This can include attending rallies, protests, or conventions linked to conspiracy beliefs, as well as purchasing and displaying merchandise that signals affiliation, like clothing, accessories, or stickers featuring slogans, symbols, or coded references. Others may seek to limit their engagement with institutions viewed as representing the government, like banks, schools, or hospitals. For example, some conspiracy believers may avoid hospitals when experiencing medical conditions and will instead seek out alternative “cures” online, usually from conspiratorial communities.

⁴⁴ Benjamin R. Warner & Ryan Neville-Shepard, “Echoes of a Conspiracy: Birthers, Truthers, and the Cultivation of Extremism,” *Communication Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2014), p. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2013.822407>.

⁴⁵ Justin B. Phillips, “‘I’m so Worried about My Whole Family’: Modeling r/QAnon Casualties to Better Understand the Effects of (QAnon) Conspiracy Beliefs on Families,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 42, no. 7 (2025), p. 1517–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075251328116>.

⁴⁶ Brad Hobbiger, “Why Deplatforming Just Isn’t Enough,” blog entry, Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 11, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/strategic-technologies-blog/why-deplatforming-just-isnt-enough>.

Part 2: Advice for Loved Ones

Introduction

This section of the Guide is for loved ones of people who believe in conspiracy theories. It describes how these beliefs can affect relationships, offers suggestions for communicating more effectively, and shares tips for finding support for yourself.

We start with an overview of the most frequent challenges and potential risks conspiracies can create in relationships, followed by practical advice on how to communicate with your loved one. Finally, we provide guidance on how to get help if you need it.

Impact of conspiracies on relationships

Having a loved one who believes in, or is expressing interest in, conspiracies can feel distressing, especially if you do not share these beliefs. These beliefs may seem unusual, far-fetched, or worrying. In some cases, you might find yourself agreeing with parts of what they say at first.

If you are experiencing any of these feelings, you are not alone. Conspiratorial beliefs can put significant strain on relationships, and there is a plethora of media reports and personal accounts describing how these beliefs have led to family breakdowns, isolation, and in some cases, the loss of friendships, marriages, or romantic partnerships.⁴⁷ Recent research also suggests that people with a loved one deeply involved in conspiracy thinking may experience higher levels of stress and mental health challenges compared to those without.⁴⁸

Below, we discuss some common ways that a loved one's conspiracy beliefs may impact relationships with loved ones.

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- 47** Jane Lytvynenko, "Friends And Family Members Of QAnon Believers Are Going Through A 'Surreal Goddamn Nightmare,'" *BuzzFeed News*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/qanon-families-friends>;
- Cecilia Saixue Watt, "The QAnon Orphans: People Who Have Lost Loved Ones to Conspiracy Theories," *The Guardian*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-loved-ones>;
- Travis M. Andrews, "QAnon is Tearing Families Apart," *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/14/qanon-families-support-group/>;
- Audie Cornish, "How QAnon-Like Conspiracy Theories Tear Families Apart," *NPR*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/957371294/how-qanon-like-conspiracy-theories-tear-families-apart>;
- David Gilbert, "How QAnon Is Tearing Families Apart," *Vice News*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dy8ayx/how-qanon-is-tearing-families-apart>;
- Marissa Melton, "As QAnon Strains Relationships, Loved Ones Try to Show a Way Out," *VOA News*, July 18, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_qanon-strains-relationships-loved-ones-try-show-way-out/6208393.html;
- Moskalenko, Sophia, B. S. Burton, J. Fernández-Garayzábal González, and M. M. Bloom, "Secondhand Conspiracy Theories: The Social, Emotional and Political Tolls on Loved Ones of QAnon Followers," *Democracy and Security* 19, no. 3 (2023), p. 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2022.2111305>;
- Justin B. Phillips, "'I'm so Worried about My Whole Family': Modeling r/QAnon Casualties to Better Understand the Effects of (QAnon) Conspiracy Beliefs on Families," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 42, no. 7 (2025), p. 1517–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075251328116>.
- 48** Sophia Moskalenko, B. S. Burton, J. Fernández-Garayzábal González, and M. M. Bloom, "Secondhand Conspiracy Theories: The Social, Emotional and Political Tolls on Loved Ones of QAnon Followers," *Democracy and Security* 19, no. 3 (2023), p. 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2022.2111305>.

Grief and ambiguous loss

Many people who have a loved one that believes in conspiracy theories report experiencing a type of grief commonly known as **ambiguous loss**. This type of grief is common in situations where a person is physically present but psychologically or emotionally changed, such as with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. It can feel as though you've "lost" the person you once knew, even though they are still physically present.⁴⁹

In relationships, ambiguous loss can happen when a loved one's personality, values, or worldview changes abruptly. You may feel as though you no longer recognize them, or that your bond has weakened or disappeared altogether. These changes can happen quickly or gradually, leaving loved ones feeling disconnected, confused, or heartbroken.

If you're experiencing these feelings, you are not alone. Many others in similar situations report a deep sense of loss and mourning for the relationship they once had.

Tips for coping with feelings of ambiguous loss

Finding ways to cope with ambiguous loss is important. Some strategies include:

- **Acknowledging your feelings:** Feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, frustration, or grief are completely normal. Allow yourself to acknowledge and validate your feeling, including how they are impacting your wellbeing. This could mean giving yourself permission and time to feel your emotions, keeping a journal of your thoughts and feelings, or expressing them in creative ways like drawing, painting, making music, or poetry.⁵⁰
- **Prioritize and practice self-care:** It is important to prioritize your own needs and self-care. This can be as simple as making time for comforting rituals like enjoying a cup of coffee, taking regular breaks, meditation, journaling, exercise, enjoying a hobby, or prayer. It could also mean taking a break from things that can cause stress like news feeds, social media, or taking a pause from certain social interactions or events.
- **Seeking support:** If you'd like help managing your feelings, there are many resources and services that can help. You may consider joining a local or online grief and peer support group, speaking with a trusted friend or family member, or seeking professional support from a counsellor or mental health professional who specializes in grief.⁵¹

For more resources on grief, ambiguous loss, and how it can impact you, please consider consulting the following:

- [The Canadian Grief Alliance](#)
- National Council on Family Relations Ambiguous Loss: "[Ambiguous Loss Resources](#)"

A free and popular online peer support group for loved ones of conspiracy believers is the Reddit forum known as r/QAnonCasualties:

- [r/QAnonCasualties](#)

⁴⁹ Lauren Mastroni & Robyn Mooney, "I One-Hundred Thousand Percent Blame It on QAnon: The Impact of QAnon Belief on Interpersonal Relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 41, no. 9 (2024), p. 2478–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241246124>;

Daniel Toribio-Flórez, Ricky Green, Robbie M. Sutton, and Karen M. Douglas. "Does Belief in Conspiracy Theories Affect Interpersonal Relationships?" *The Spanish Journal of Psychology* 26 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2023.8>.

⁵⁰ Alzheimer Society, "Managing Ambiguous Loss and Grief," <https://alzheimer.ca/en/help-information/im-caring-person-living-dementia/managing-ambiguous-loss-grief>.

⁵¹ Kara Fletcher, Carlos Alberto Rosas-Jiménez, and Jiaxing Li, "Love in the Age of Conspiracy: 5 Tips to Deal With Disinformation and Political Polarization in Relationships," *The Conversation*, April 3, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/love-in-the-age-of-conspiracy-5-tips-to-deal-with-disinformation-and-political-polarization-in-relationships-251797>.

Self-blame, guilt, and shame

If someone you love has started to believe in conspiracies, it is very common and normal to feel confused, shocked, or even blame yourself. These beliefs may seem out of character for your loved one, or may even appear to defy their educational background or occupation. You might think to yourself: “*I never thought they could believe something like this*”, or “*this isn’t like them*”, or “*They’re too smart for this*”. This can easily turn inward, and you may feel guilty for not noticing earlier, or wonder if you could have prevented this. You might even feel ashamed if you once agreed with some of their beliefs too.

In some cases, you might feel pressured to pretend you agree with these beliefs just to avoid fights or keep the peace. While this accommodation is totally understandable, it can also leave you feeling trapped, and sometimes it makes the other person more confident in their beliefs.

But the reality is, anyone, regardless of education, intelligence, age, or background, can believe in conspiracy theories. In fact, most people believe at least one conspiracy at some point in their lives.⁵² Conspiracies, even though they lack rational or logical reasoning, often appeal to emotions, can make someone feel important, special, or can fill a void in their lives.⁵³ Knowing this can help you understand that you did not cause this, and you probably could not have prevented it either.

If you’re feeling a sense of guilt or shame about your loved one’s beliefs, here are a few important things to remind yourself:

- Your loved one’s beliefs are not your fault, and you probably couldn’t have prevented it;
- It is not your responsibility to change your loved one’s thoughts or beliefs;
- You do not need to agree with these beliefs to maintain a relationship with them (if it is emotionally and physically safe for you to do so);
- It is normal to feel confused, sad, guilty, or ashamed in these situations;
- You are not alone – many others in similar situations feel the exact same way.

Understanding these things won’t fix everything, but it may help you process and move forward from feelings of self-blame, guilt, and shame.

For more on common conspiracies, why people may believe them, and signs that someone could be adopting these beliefs, see **Part 1: Background Information** of this guide.

⁵² Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates,” *Psychological Bulletin* 149, no. 5–6 (2023), p. 259–93, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392>.

⁵³ Karen M. Douglas, Aleksandra Cichočka, Robbie M. Sutton, Michael Butter, and Peter Knight, “Motivations, Emotions and Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, 1st ed., (Routledge, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429452734-2_3.

Conflict, relationship ruptures, and communication breakdowns

Conflicts over beliefs can also be a major source of stress.⁵⁴ Believing in conspiracies can often change relationships with family members and friends, especially with those who do not share the same beliefs. These changes can happen suddenly or gradually, and may cause tension, conflict, or even lead to ending the relationship. Many people report that loved ones who believe in conspiracies often struggle to talk about topics unrelated to their beliefs, which makes having a normal conversation challenging or impossible.⁵⁵

Loved ones may feel frustrated, emotionally drained, or unsure how to interact with the person.⁵⁶ Family gatherings and holidays may also become a source of distress and contention, leading some people to distance themselves, limit, or cut off contact with those who hold these beliefs.⁵⁷ Over time, this can lead to social isolation, communication breakdowns, or estrangement. In some cases, loved ones may also experience negative impacts on their own mental health and wellbeing.⁵⁸

Communication strategies

Talking with a loved one who believes in conspiracy theories, especially if they are a close friend or family member, can feel mentally and emotionally exhausting. Many people feel the urge to challenge these beliefs or prove them wrong. However, taking a confrontational approach often backfires, and can increase defensiveness, create arguments, or even cause the believer to dig deeper into their worldview.⁵⁹ Many loved ones report that repeatedly trying to reason or “prove them wrong” only leads to more conflict and damages the relationship.

In some cases, former believers have said that repeated attempts to prove them wrong only pushed them further into the conspiracy community.⁶⁰ Here are some better strategies:

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- 54** Cecilia Saixue Watt, “The QAnon Orphans: People Who Have Lost Loved Ones to Conspiracy Theories,” *The Guardian*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-loved-ones>; Anastasiia Carrier, “‘This Crap Means More to Him Than My Life’: When QAnon Invades American Homes,” *Politico*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/19/qanon-conspiracy-theory-family-members-reddit-forum-469485>
- 55** Michèle St-Amant, Michael King, Laura Stolte, and Marc-André Argentino, “Collateral: The Impact of QAnon on Loved Ones and the Potential for P/CVE Programs to Help,” *Journal for deradicalization* 35, (2023), p. 33–75.
- 56** Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Giuliana Spadaro, and Haiyan Wang, “Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 43 (February 2022), p. 65–69, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.013>; Michael Waltman, “QAnon’s Ideology of Hate: As a Catalyst for Negative Transformation in Families and Close Relationships,” in *Family Communication and Cultural Transformation*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220480-4>.
- 57** Justin B. Phillips, “‘I’m so Worried about My Whole Family’: Modeling r/QAnonCasualties to Better Understand the Effects of (QAnon) Conspiracy Beliefs on Families,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 42, no. 7 (2025), p. 1517–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075251328116>.
- 58** Sophia Moskalenko, B. S. Burton, J. Fernández-Garayzabal González, and M. M. Bloom, “Secondhand Conspiracy Theories: The Social, Emotional and Political Tolls on Loved Ones of QAnon Followers” *Democracy and Security* 19, no. 3 (2023), p. 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2022.2111305>; Michèle St-Amant, Michael King, Laura Stolte, and Marc-André Argentino, “Collateral: The Impact of QAnon on Loved Ones and the Potential for P/CVE Programs to Help,” *Journal for deradicalization* 35, (2023), p. 33–75.
- 59** Michalinos Zembylas, “Moving beyond Debunking Conspiracy Theories from a Narrow Epistemic Lens: Ethical and Political Implications for Education,” *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 31, no. 4 (2023), p. 741–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1948911>.
- 60** Anastasiia Carrier, “QAnon Almost Destroyed My Relationship. Then My Relationship Saved Me from QAnon: How Covid Isolation and Supporting Bernie Sanders Primed Me to be Sucked Into a Dark Conspiracy Theory,” *Politico*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/13/qanon-radicalization-bernie-sanders-supporter-503295>.

Set boundaries

The priority should be protecting your own mental and emotional wellbeing. Thinking about your own boundaries can help you decide how much you are willing to engage with your loved one, and in what ways. Boundaries are limits or rules you set for yourself to help protect your physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing in your relationships with others. For example, setting a boundary can look something like this:

"If my loved one begins to yell during our conversation today, I will ask them to lower their voice. If they continue to yell, I will end the conversation for today, and we can try again tomorrow."

Different people will need different boundaries. For some people, it may mean limiting how often you speak to someone, while for others, it may mean choosing to temporarily pause or end contact altogether.

If you want to maintain communication, it can help to agree on the topics you are willing to discuss with your loved one. For example, if conversations end in an argument anytime politics comes up, it may help to set a firm but respectful agreement with your loved one that you both will not talk about politics. Instead, try to find areas of common ground, like shared interests, activities, or memories. Setting clear and firm rules for communication, like agreeing only to talk about certain topics, and setting boundaries to protect yourself, can help reduce tension and preserve some form of relationship.⁶¹

Remain calm, but don't be dismissive

If you choose to keep communicating with your loved one, staying calm is key. Conspiracies often appeal to people's emotions – they are designed to make someone feel fear, frustration, sadness, or anger. Remaining calm helps prevent those emotions from being triggered, and also helps to keep the conversation from escalating, which can cause the other person to become defensive.

At the same time, it can be tempting to try to debunk what your loved one is saying. Debunking is the process of identifying misinformation such as conspiracies or other false claims and correcting it with accurate, evidence-based information. In some situations, debunking can be effective if done correctly.⁶²

- First, your loved one must be receptive to the conversation. If they are interrupting you or highly emotional, debunking is likely not the best approach at that time.
- Second, always lead with credible and evidence-based information. It is not effective to simply tell your loved one their beliefs are wrong – you must provide the facts instead.
- Third, avoid using too much scientific jargon and technical language – this can cause your loved one to disengage from the conversation.
- And fourth, you should always approach debunking with kindness and a willingness to engage in dialogue rather than confrontation.

⁶¹ Anastasiia Carrier, "QAnon Almost Destroyed My Relationship. Then My Relationship Saved Me from QAnon: How Covid Isolation and Supporting Bernie Sanders Primed Me to be Sucked Into a Dark Conspiracy Theory," *Politico*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/13/qanon-radicalization-bernie-sanders-supporter-503295>.

⁶² Timothy Caulfield, "Does Debunking Work? Correcting COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media" in Colleen M. Flood, Vanessa MacDonnell, Jane Philpott, et al., (eds.) *Vulnerable: The Law, Policy and Ethics of COVID-19* (University of Ottawa Press, 2020) p. 183-200; Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Ullrich Ecker, Dolores Albarracín, Michelle A. Amazeen, Panayiota Kendeou, Doug Lombardi, Eryn J. Newman, Gordon Pennycook, Ethan Porter, David G. Rand, Jason Reifler, Jon Roozenbeek, Philipp Schmid, Colleen M. Seifert, Gale M. Sinatra, Briony Swire-Thompson, Sander van der Linden, Emily K. Vraga, Thomas J. Wood, and Maria S. Zaragoza, *The Debunking Handbook* (Skeptical Science, 2020), <https://skepticalscience.com/docs/DebunkingHandbook2020.pdf>.

If all these conditions are present, debunking can sometimes be an effective challenge to conspiracies. But remember, even if all these conditions are met, debunking does not always work. Because conspiracies are rooted in emotion rather than logic, attempts to debunk can still fail, and can sometimes backfire.⁶³ Equally, being dismissive or calling their beliefs “crazy” can cause someone to shut down or pull away further.

Instead, it can be more helpful to calmly express your own views without expecting or pressuring your loved one to agree with you. This doesn’t mean you have to accept the conspiracy, but rather, it means you are leaving space for respectful disagreement. This can be as simple as “agreeing to disagree” on sensitive topics. By respectfully stating your position without trying to convince them, you are reminding them that alternative viewpoints exist.

Ask questions, but don’t mock

If you feel safe and comfortable doing so, ask questions. Research shows that many people don’t fully understand the claims they repeat, so asking them to explain what they believe in detail might help them reflect or notice contradictions themselves.⁶⁴ When doing so, remain calm, respectful, and avoid mocking. Ridiculing, debating, or trying to “win” an argument can be counterproductive.⁶⁵ The goal isn’t to prove them wrong, but to keep the conversation open and encourage some self-reflection.

That said, even gentle and respectful questions can cause a defensive reaction. If that happens, try to stay calm, change the subject, remind them of your boundaries, or politely step away from the conversation. If the discussions become too stressful, it might be helpful to learn more about the conspiracy from trusted, factual sources like news outlets, academic research, or expert-led explainers. Having accurate information can help you understand what your loved one is referring to, can help you spot what topics trigger arguments, and prepare you for future conversations.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has produced expert-led explainers of different conspiracies and topics:

- [ISD Explainers](#)

Be patient

It can be very frustrating when someone you care about believes in conspiracy theories. Unfortunately, there is no quick or easy way to change these beliefs. In fact, research shows that most interventions aimed at trying to reduce someone’s conspiratorial beliefs rarely work once a person is deeply convinced.⁶⁶ For some people, their beliefs may never change. For others, change will occur. However, progress looks different for everyone – there is no single way out of conspiratorial thinking. For some, a specific situation may be a turning point in their beliefs, leading to a sudden cascade of changes. For others, beliefs change slowly over time, and progress may not be readily apparent.

⁶³ Boying Li, David Ji, Mengyao Fu, Chee-Wee Tan, Alain Chong, and Eric TK Lim, “Unveiling the Formation of Conspiracy Theory on Social Media: A Discourse Analysis,” *Journal of Information Technology* 39, no. 3 (2024), p. 392–416, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962231175923>.

⁶⁴ Philip M. Fernbach, Todd Rogers, Craig R. Fox, and Steven A. Sloman, “Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 6 (2013), p. 939–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612464058>.

⁶⁵ Cian O’Mahony, Maryanne Brassil, Gillian Murphy, and Conor Linehan, “The Efficacy of Interventions in Reducing Belief in Conspiracy Theories: A Systematic Review,” *PloS One* 18, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0280902>.

⁶⁶ Cian O’Mahony, Maryanne Brassil, Gillian Murphy, and Conor Linehan, “The Efficacy of Interventions in Reducing Belief in Conspiracy Theories: A Systematic Review,” *PloS One* 18, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0280902>.

Regardless, if it is possible and safe for you to do so, staying connected with your loved one, even in small or limited ways, can be helpful. Staying connected can give them exposure to people, topics, and activities outside of the conspiracy, which may help prevent them from becoming isolated in an echo chamber. In some cases, it may be necessary for your own wellbeing to distance yourself entirely from your loved one; while in other cases, it may feel possible to continue communication. It can help to talk through your options in your specific situation with someone you trust, join a peer support group or online community for families affected by conspiracy beliefs, or seek guidance from a mental health professional.

Try to boost feelings of self-worth

Some people become drawn to conspiracy theories because they feel powerless or lack a sense of purpose in their lives. This can lead to low self-esteem and a desire to feel special or important. Although it may be frustrating to engage with your loved one, research suggests that when people feel more valued and confident in themselves, they may be less likely to rely on conspiracies to give them meaning or control, especially during difficult times in their life.⁶⁷

If it feels possible and emotionally safe, you can support your loved one by continuing to be a safe place for connection, and by encouraging activities or strengths that boost their self-worth outside of the conspiracy. This could include recognizing a talent they have (like music, cooking, writing, sports, public speaking, technical skills), encouraging hobbies, or involving them in positive, real-world tasks where they feel capable and appreciated, like helping someone move houses. The goal is to help them reconnect with a sense of value that isn't tied to conspiracy content, as recent studies have discovered a relationship between a person's self-worth and the validation provided by conspiracies.⁶⁸

That said, not every relationship has these opportunities. Every situation is different, and it's okay if this approach isn't realistic or healthy in your case.

For more on how to better communicate with someone who believes conspiracies:

- University of Washington Center For An Informed Public: "[How to Talk With Family and Friends Who Believe Conspiracy Theories](#)"
- Article from The Conversation: "[How to Talk to Someone About Conspiracy Theories in Five Simple Steps](#)"
- Article from Psychology Today: "[How to Talk to the Conspiracy Theorist in Your Life](#)"

⁶⁷ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, Mikey Biddlestone, Ricky Green, and Daniel Toribio-Flórez, "Engaging with Conspiracy Believers," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-024-00741-0>.

⁶⁸ Camille J. Saucier & Nathan Walter, "Conspiracy Theories and Self-Worth: Can Self-Affirmation Help Explain the Adoption of Conspiracy Theories?" *Human Communication Research* 51, no. 3 (2025), p. 190–201. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqaf012>.

Potential risks

While most people who believe in conspiracies are not violent, some may act in ways that can put themselves or others at risk. When violence does occur, it is most often directed toward immediate family or children.⁶⁹ Some tragic examples include:

- A California man who, in 2021, kidnapped and murdered his two young children.⁷⁰ He believed a version of the “reptilian conspiracy” and thought his wife had passed down “serpent DNA” to their children.
- A man from Saskatchewan, Canada, who killed his mother and seriously injured his father.⁷¹ In the months leading up to the incident, he posted conspiracy videos online about QAnon and aliens.
- A Michigan man who fatally shot his wife and family dog before being killed during confrontation with police.⁷² Leading up to the incident, it was reported that the man had adopted QAnon-adjacent conspiracies.

Here are some signs that your loved one may be escalating their behaviour:

- Becoming increasingly paranoid, suspicious, agitated, or obsessive;
- Using language that is threatening, aggressive, or abusive;

- Talking about needing to “defend” themselves against an imminent threat;
- Showing a sudden interest in weapons, “doomsday” preparation, or stockpiling supplies;
- Claiming they must protect their family and children from an imminent threat;
- Posting violent content, or justifications for violence, online;
- Has begun writing a manifesto, a memoir, emptying or closing bank accounts, or taking other unusual steps to prepare for something drastic.

If you notice your loved one engaging in unusual, escalating, or threatening behaviours that make you or someone else feel unsafe, it’s important to take this seriously, even if the conspiracy ideas themselves seem unbelievable. Consider reaching out for support, which may include:

- Safety planning for yourself and others in the household;
- Reaching out to counsellors, psychologists, or other mental health professionals;
- Contacting crisis or domestic violence services in your area;
- Calling your local police if there is immediate danger;
- Consulting with other professionals or community supports who can help.

⁶⁹ Michael Jensen & Sheehan Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States* (University of Maryland, September, 2021), https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/START%20QAnon%20Research%20Brief_24September2021.pdf;

Milo Comerford, “Beyond Terrorism: Understanding the Diverse Violent Outcomes of Conspiracy Beliefs,” blog entry, September 5, 2023, available at <https://gnet-research.org/2023/09/05/beyond-terrorism-understanding-the-diverse-violent-outcomes-of-conspiracy-beliefs/>.

⁷⁰ Doha Madani, Andrew Blankstein, and Ben Collins, “California Dad Killed His Kids Over QAnon and ‘Serpent DNA’ Conspiracy Theories, Feds Claim,” *NBC News*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/california-dad-killed-his-kids-over-qanon-serpent-dna-conspiracy-n1276611>.

⁷¹ Dan Zakreski, “A Saskatoon Man’s Journey from High School Basketball Star to Online Conspiracy Theorist to Accused Killer,” *CBC News*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/high-school-basketball-star-to-accused-killer-1.5866314>.

⁷² Kara Berg & Hannah Mackay, “Daughter: Walled Lake Man Fell into Conspiracy Rabbit Hole Before Shooting Family,” *The Detroit News*, September 11, 2022, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/oakland-county/2022/09/11/walled-lake-man-killed-police-after-killing-wife-shooting-daughter/8058356001/>.

How and where to get help

If your relationship with someone who believes in conspiracy theories is causing you stress or emotional pain, support is available. Many mental health professionals, such as counsellors, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists are trained to help you address and learn to cope with these feelings. Therapy can be done online or in-person, and it may be individual, family-based, or in group settings.

When looking for a counsellor, ask if they have experience with family conflict, grief, communication issues, and navigating differing belief systems in relationships. Although it may be helpful, it is not necessary for your loved one to attend counselling with you. Attending counselling for yourself can offer many benefits regardless of your loved one's intentions or abilities to seek help.

If you already have a counsellor that is not familiar with how conspiracies may impact your relationship, consider sharing this guide with them.

If counselling isn't accessible or realistic for you right now, peer support can also help. There are online communities where people share what it's like to have a loved one who believes in conspiracies. Reading others' stories can make you feel less alone, and many people find advice and comfort in these spaces. One example is the subreddit **r/QAnonCasualties**, which is focused on people affected by conspiracy beliefs in their families.

Turning to a trusted friend or family member may also help if you are struggling. Sharing what you're going through in a safe environment can reduce feelings of isolation. They may even be able to help you strategize how to communicate more effectively, or what kind of boundaries are best for you.

★ *If you are experiencing an immediate crisis, contact local emergency services right away.*

Part 3: Advice for Practitioners

Introduction

This section is designed for practitioners, such as counsellors, therapists, social workers, and other frontline professionals who may work with clients whose loved ones are engaged in conspiratorial worldviews. It summarizes common issues faced by these clients, explores their unique needs, and offers best-practice and evidence-informed suggestions for support.

This guide will begin with a brief background on what conspiracies are, the real-world impact conspiracies can have on loved ones, followed by practical advice for supporting this client population.

For more on common conspiracies, why people may believe them, and signs that someone could be adopting these beliefs, see **Part 1: Background Information** section of this guide.

What are conspiracies?

Conspiracy theories generally involve a set of beliefs that events, situations, or phenomena are secretly controlled by powerful groups acting with hidden, often harmful intentions. These beliefs can cover a wide range of topics – from political corruption and election manipulation to secret global agendas – but they share a common thread: the idea that ordinary people are being intentionally misled by forces operating behind the scenes.

People who believe conspiracy theories are often highly resistant to anything that challenges these beliefs for two main reasons. First, any evidence that contradicts their theory is frequently dismissed as part of the conspiracy itself. For example, someone who believes in vaccine-related conspiracies may reject scientific studies demonstrating their safety and effectiveness, viewing the scientists themselves as complicit in a manipulative or “evil” agenda. Second, conspiracies often make claims that are inherently difficult or impossible to disprove. Without definitive evidence that secret groups do not exist, it is challenging to refute the theory, which can further reinforce someone’s beliefs.

This does not mean that conspiracy theories are correct. Rather, conspiracies are designed to be self-reinforcing and insulated from evidence or rational challenge. This can make these beliefs deeply entrenched, and those who believe them resistant to change. Understanding this dynamic is important, because straightforward arguments or fact-checking alone are rarely effective.

How do conspiracies impact loved ones

When a loved one adopts conspiracy beliefs, the effects and consequences often reach far beyond the individual who believes them. Loved ones may experience emotional distress, relationship breakdowns, fear, and in some cases concerns about their safety. These impacts are not always immediately recognizable but can nonetheless have a negative effect on a person’s mental, emotional, and physical health.

This section outlines what practitioners should keep in mind when supporting someone who is affected by a loved one’s conspiracy beliefs. It covers the relational and emotional issues, communication strategies, potential safety risks, as well as the needs that commonly arise in this client group.

Relational and emotional impacts

Practitioners working with clients impacted by a loved one's conspiracy beliefs may encounter a wide range of emotional, relational, and psychological challenges.⁷³ Many individuals report that a loved one's belief in conspiracies, especially when it becomes a core part of their identity, can lead to strained communication, breakdowns in trust, and, in some cases, the end of friendships, romantic relationships, marriages, or family ties.⁷⁴ Loved ones may experience self-blame, guilt, shame, confusion, isolation, helplessness, and grief for the loss of their relationship. Evidence also suggests that loved ones of conspiracy believers may experience more severe symptoms of some mental illnesses than those without.⁷⁵

Self-blame, guilt, and shame

Clients may express confusion, disbelief, and shock about how their loved one came to adopt conspiracy beliefs in the first place, claiming: "They're too smart for this" or "they have a university degree." This disbelief can quickly turn inward and lead to feelings of self-blame.

Some clients may also feel a sense of guilt for not recognizing the signs sooner, or ashamed if they once shared similar beliefs. Others might feel pressure to agree with the conspiracies simply to keep the peace. While this response is understandable, it can also make clients feel complicit or trapped in these relationships, and it can also serve to reinforce their loved one's beliefs over time.

It is important to recognize that nearly everyone believes at least one conspiracy at some point in their lives, regardless of their education, intelligence, age, or occupation.⁷⁶ Understanding this can help clients realize they did not cause their loved one's beliefs, nor could they necessarily have prevented them. For some clients, having this knowledge may feel reassuring, and can help reduce feelings of self-blame, shame, and guilt.

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- 73** Travis M. Andrews, "QAnon is Tearing Families Apart," *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/14/qanon-families-support-group/>;
Audie Cornish, "How QAnon-Like Conspiracy Theories Tear Families Apart," *NPR*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/957371294/how-qanon-like-conspiracy-theories-tear-families-apart>;
David Gilbert, "How QAnon Is Tearing Families Apart," *Vice News*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dy8ayx/how-qanon-is-tearing-families-apart>;
Marissa Melton, "As QAnon Strains Relationships, Loved Ones Try to Show a Way Out," *VOA News*, July 18, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_qanon-strains-relationships-loved-ones-try-show-way-out/6208393.html;
Sophia Moskalenko, B. S. Burton, J. Fernández-Garayzábal González, and M. M. Bloom, "Secondhand Conspiracy Theories: The Social, Emotional and Political Tolls on Loved Ones of QAnon Followers," *Democracy and Security* 19, no. 3 (2023), p. 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2022.2111305>;
Michèle St-Amant, Michael King, Laura Stolte, and Marc-André Argenti, "Qollateral: The Impact of QAnon on Loved Ones and the Potential for P/CVE Programs to Help," *Journal for deradicalization* 35, (2023): 33–75.
- 74** Jane Lytvynenko, "Friends and Family Members of QAnon Believers Are Going Through A 'Surreal Goddamn Nightmare,'" *BuzzFeed News*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/qanon-families-friends>.
- 75** Sophia Moskalenko, B. S. Burton, J. Fernández-Garayzábal González, and M. M. Bloom, "Secondhand Conspiracy Theories: The Social, Emotional and Political Tolls on Loved Ones of QAnon Followers," *Democracy and Security* 19, no. 3 (2023), p. 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2022.2111305>.
- 76** Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, "The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Psychological Correlates," *Psychological Bulletin* 149, no. 5–6 (2023), p. 259–93, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392>.

As a practitioner, maintaining an open and empathic space for your client to share and process these mixed emotions can help reduce their feelings of self-blame, guilt, and shame. It is helpful to continue to reinforce that:

- They are not responsible for the beliefs or thoughts of their loved one;
- They do not need to adopt, share, or agree with the beliefs of their loved one in order to continue a relationship with them (if it is safe for them to do so);
- Feeling confusion, grief, guilt, and shame are normal and common responses.

Helping your client to understand the psychology of conspiratorial beliefs can help them process and move forward from feelings of self-blame, guilt, and shame.

For additional information about why and how people believe conspiracies, please refer to **Part 1: Background Information** section of this guide, as well as the following resources:

- Anti-Defamation League (ADL): [“Conspiracy Theories and How to Help Family and Friends Who Believe Them”](#)
- McGill University Office for Science and Society: [“Who Is Likely to Believe in Conspiracy Theories?”](#)
- Mount Royal University Summit: [“Understanding the Conspiratorial Mind”](#)
- European Commission: [“Identifying Conspiracy Theories”](#)

Grief and ambiguous loss

Many people with a loved one who has become deeply involved in conspiracy beliefs report experiencing a form of grief known as **ambiguous loss**. This type of grief is common in situations where a person is physically present but psychologically or emotionally changed, such as with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.⁷⁷ These changes can create the sense that the client has “lost” the person they once knew, even though they remain physically present.

In the context of conspiracy beliefs, feelings of grief related to ambiguous loss may arise when a loved one’s personality, values, or core beliefs substantially shift, which can happen abruptly or gradually. Clients often describe relationships becoming strained, tense, distant, or fragmented. These changes can leave clients feeling isolated, confused, frustrated, helpless, or heartbroken as they mourn the person they once knew, or the relationship they once had.

As a practitioner, here are some helpful tips when working with clients experiencing grief and ambiguous loss related to a loved one’s conspiracy beliefs:

Validate and normalize their emotions:

- Through active listening, create a safe and nonjudgmental space where clients can share their feelings, fears, and experiences;
- Acknowledge and validate the feelings of grief, loneliness, helplessness, and sadness;
- Emphasize that these feelings are normal and understandable, and that it is common for people to feel as though they have “lost” someone even if they are physically still present;
- Avoid any judgment or surprise about their loved one’s beliefs and focus on the client’s experience and wellbeing;
- Encourage healthy expression and processing of grief, such as journaling, discussion, and reflection.

⁷⁷ Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Support emotional regulation through self-care:

- Support clients in identifying self-care strategies, like routines, pleasant activities, hobbies, or mindfulness meditation;
- Discuss different strategies to manage stress and identify triggers, such as limiting exposure to upsetting content on social media or avoiding distressing social interactions;
- Support clients in understanding that it is not their responsibility to “fix” their loved one.

Provide grief counselling to process the loss:

- When appropriate, provide support in guiding clients toward acknowledging and accepting the changes in their loved one and the relationship. Emphasize that they do not have control over their loved one’s beliefs, and that acceptance does not mean condoning the beliefs;
- Assist clients in identifying ways to adapt to the new dynamics of the relationship, including setting healthy boundaries, maintaining routines, and finding sources of support such as trusted friends or family;
- Help clients find healthy and safe ways to express their emotions. For example, writing letters to their loved one without sending them can provide an outlet to express feelings of anger, sadness, and frustration.

For more information on grief, ambiguous loss, and helping your client work through their feelings, you might consider consulting these resources and training:

- [Ambiguous Loss Information and Training](#)
- National Council on Family Relations: [“Ambiguous Loss Resources”](#)
- [Canadian Grief Alliance](#)
- Treatment Advocacy Center: [“Ambiguous Loss”](#)

Communication breakdowns and barriers

Individuals whose loved one espouses conspiracies often report significant communication breakdowns and barriers. Those who believe conspiracy theories, especially when it becomes a core part of their identity, tend to focus almost exclusively on these beliefs, making it difficult to hold meaningful conversations on other topics. Loved ones frequently describe feeling a sense of disconnection, or frustration when conversations inevitably turn to the topic of conspiracies. Some report that their relationships have fractured or ended entirely, which can have significant impacts on family dynamics, including children.⁷⁸

78 Jane Lytvynenko, “Friends And Family Members Of QAnon Believers Are Going Through A ‘Surreal Goddamn Nightmare,’” *BuzzFeed News*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janeltyvynenko/qanon-families-friends>;

Cecilia Saixue Watt, “The QAnon Orphans: People Who Have Lost Loved Ones to Conspiracy Theories,” *The Guardian*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-loved-ones>;

Travis M. Andrews, “QAnon is Tearing Families Apart,” *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/14/qanon-families-support-group/>;

Audie Cornish, “How QAnon-Like Conspiracy Theories Tear Families Apart,” *NPR*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/957371294/how-qanon-like-conspiracy-theories-tear-families-apart>;

David Gilbert, “How QAnon Is Tearing Families Apart,” *Vice News*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dy8ayx/how-qanon-is-tearing-families-apart>;

Marissa Melton, “As QAnon Strains Relationships, Loved Ones Try to Show a Way Out,” *VOA News*, July 18, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_qanon-strains-relationships-loved-ones-try-show-way-out/6208393.html;

Justin B. Phillips, “‘I’m so Worried about My Whole Family’: Modeling r/QAnonCasualties to Better Understand the Effects of (QAnon) Conspiracy Beliefs on Families,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 42, no. 7 (2025), p. 1517–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075251328116>.

While some clients may wish to distance themselves entirely from their loved one, in other cases, maintaining a relationship may be desired or necessary. This may be especially true if the client lives with the conspiracy believer or is dependent on them financially or emotionally. In these circumstances, practitioners can help clients develop communication skills and strategies, set healthy and practical boundaries, and learn to regulate their emotional response during interactions.

In some cases, the client may suspect their loved one is expressing doubts about the conspiracy. Discuss with the client what changes they have observed and provide guidance on how to support their loved one during this process. The following are some suggestions for maintaining a relationship.

Avoid ridiculing and be cautious when debunking or fact-checking

When the client wishes or is required to maintain communication with their loved one, it is important to emphasize that they avoid dismissing and ridiculing their loved one's beliefs. This strategy can be counterproductive and may even backfire, leading to increased hostility and defensiveness from their loved one.⁷⁹ Instead, helping clients learn how to talk about difficult topics without being judgmental may be more effective than undermining their beliefs. Roleplaying exercises can be used to practice how to respectfully disagree with their loved one.

If the client has attempted to fact-check or debunk their loved one's beliefs, discuss whether these attempts have been productive. If appropriate, helping the client identify cognitive openings to question their loved one's conspiratorial thinking may be useful to introduce alternative or challenging viewpoints. If previous attempts to debunk have led to conflict or interpersonal tension, it may be helpful to suggest focusing on other topics of conversation unrelated to conspiracies. Since many conspiracies are rooted in emotion rather than credible sources, debunking strategies can be difficult to perform effectively and should only be done under appropriate circumstances.

Help set boundaries

Clients often struggle to establish boundaries with a loved one involved in conspiracies. Practitioners can help clients identify ways to establish healthy and practical boundaries, while still maintaining communication with their loved one. For example, finding any remaining common ground, such as shared interests, activities, or memories may be a helpful technique for redirecting conversations. Boundaries can also include establishing agreed-upon limits for interaction, such as avoiding contentious topics that may lead to conflicts like politics or current events, or agreeing to only discuss those topics on certain days and times. Where applicable, some clients may benefit from temporarily pausing interactions with their loved one altogether, especially if these interactions are becoming increasingly hostile or tense.

⁷⁹ Cian O'Mahony, Maryanne Brassil, Gillian Murphy, and Conor Linehan, "The Efficacy of Interventions in Reducing Belief in Conspiracy Theories: A Systematic Review," *PloS One* 18, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0280902>.

Encouraging acceptance

Along with addressing feelings of unresolved grief, it may be worthwhile to help clients come to terms with the fact that their loved one's beliefs may never go back to the way they were before, especially if they are deeply entrenched.⁸⁰ Accepting this fact may help reduce friction within the relationship and may even inform what kind of boundaries are most suitable. To help clients understand and accept this, it may be helpful to broadly explain how and why some people believe conspiracies, as well as why they are resistant to change, including the fact that conspiracies are designed to be insulated and difficult to falsify.⁸¹ A useful explainer of this can be found in **Part 1: Background Information** section of this Guide.

Practice keeping calm

Learning to keep calm during conversations with someone who believes in conspiracies is very useful to maintaining the relationship. Conspiracies often appeal to people's emotions – they are designed to make someone feel fear, frustration, suspicion, sadness, or anger about what is going on in the world. Remaining calm can prevent conversations from escalating, and can help break patterns where the client and their loved one repeatedly argue over conspiracy-related topics, creating opportunities to maintain connection.

As a practitioner, it may be helpful to roleplay tense, escalatory, or stressful conversations with your client in a safe environment. Doing so can help the client feel more equipped with de-escalation and emotional regulation strategies to keep calm in the moment, or to know when to remove themselves from a situation.

To further prepare clients for stressful conversations with their loved one, it may be helpful to discuss using first person statements (i.e., "I feel..."), as well as to identify triggering words or topics and how to navigate these when they come up.

Be curious

To help facilitate conversation between your client and their loved one, encourage them to ask questions to learn more about their loved one's beliefs.⁸² Examples may include asking what they feel they have gained from engaging in this new belief system, and what drew them towards it. This can allow the client to better understand the perspective of their loved one and why they became invested in this belief system. The client may be able to supplement the needs met by the conspiracy, such as finding community through shared activities outside of the conspiracy.

⁸⁰ Cian O'Mahony, Maryanne Brassil, Gillian Murphy, and Conor Linehan, "The Efficacy of Interventions in Reducing Belief in Conspiracy Theories: A Systematic Review," *PLoS One* 18, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0280902>.

⁸¹ M. Giulia Napolitano, "Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation," in *The Epistemology of Fake News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863977.003.0005>.

⁸² Rachel Bernstein, "Unique Ways to Reach Out to Loved Ones Involved in Cultic Groups," *ICSA Today*, June 26, 2025, <https://internationalculticstudies.org/icsa-insights/unique-ways-to-reach-out-to-loved-ones-involved-in-cultic-groups/>.

Potential risks

Conspiracy beliefs can spread across societies, cultures, families, and can even be passed down through generations. While most people who hold these beliefs are non-violent, some may act in ways that put themselves or others at risk.

Although violent incidents are relatively uncommon, when they do occur, they are often directed toward immediate family or children.⁸³ Some notable examples include:

- A California man who, in 2021, kidnapped and murdered his two young children.⁸⁴ He believed a version of the “reptilian conspiracy,” and believed his wife had passed down “serpent DNA” to his children.
- A man from Saskatchewan, Canada, who killed his mother and seriously injured his father.⁸⁵ In the months leading up to the incident, he posted conspiracy videos online about QAnon, and aliens.
- A Michigan man who fatally shot his wife and family dog before being killed during confrontation with police.⁸⁶ Leading up to the incident, it was reported that the man had adopted QAnon-adjacent conspiracies.

For practitioners working with clients who have a loved one that believes in conspiracies, it is important to take any reports of escalating behaviour seriously, even if the beliefs themselves may seem far-fetched. For example, clients may share that their loved one is:

- Becoming increasingly paranoid, suspicious, agitated, or obsessive;
- Uses escalating language that is threatening, aggressive, or abusive;
- Talks about needing to “defend” themselves against an imminent threat;
- Showing a sudden interest in weapons, “doomsday” preparation, or stockpiling supplies;
- Claiming they must protect their family and children from an imminent threat;
- Posting online in unusual ways, such as sharing increasingly violent content;
- Is writing a manifesto, a memoir, emptying or closing bank accounts, or otherwise preparing for something drastic.

If a client reports their loved one is showing unusual, escalating, or threatening behaviour, this should be taken seriously. It may be appropriate to consider safety planning, referrals to crisis or domestic violence services, contacting emergency services, or consultation with appropriate community supports.

83 Michael Jensen & Sheehan Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States* (University of Maryland, September, 2021), https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/START%20QAnon%20Research%20Brief_24September2021.pdf;

Milo Comerford, “Beyond Terrorism: Understanding the Diverse Violent Outcomes of Conspiracy Beliefs,” blog entry, September 5, 2023, available at <https://gnet-research.org/2023/09/05/beyond-terrorism-understanding-the-diverse-violent-outcomes-of-conspiracy-beliefs/>.

84 Doha Madani, Andrew Blankstein, and Ben Collins, “California Dad Killed His Kids Over QAnon and ‘Serpent DNA’ Conspiracy Theories, Feds Claim,” *NBC News*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/california-dad-killed-his-kids-over-qanon-serpent-dna-conspiracy-n1276611>.

85 Dan Zakreski, “A Saskatoon Man’s Journey from High School Basketball Star to Online Conspiracy Theorist to Accused Killer,” *CBC News*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/high-school-basketball-star-to-accused-killer-1.5866314>.

86 Kara Berg & Hannah Mackay, “Daughter: Walled Lake Man Fell into Conspiracy Rabbit Hole Before Shooting Family,” *The Detroit News*, September 11, 2022, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/oakland-county/2022/09/11/walled-lake-man-killed-police-after-killing-wife-shooting-daughter/8058356001/>.

Barriers for clients seeking help

Clients with a loved one involved in conspiracy beliefs may face a range of barriers when seeking support for themselves. One commonly reported challenge is finding professionals who understand the unique dynamics of conspiratorial involvement, and how this impacts relationships and family dynamics. Clients may feel that many services do not fully recognize the emotional, relational, and psychological impacts of living with or supporting someone who holds strong conspiracy beliefs.

Yet practitioners need not be experts in specific conspiracy movements to provide meaningful care. However, having an understanding about what conspiracies are, how people may fall into conspiratorial thinking, as well as why they are resistant to change, may be helpful to discuss and explore with your client. A good starting point is **Part 1: Background Information** section of this guide, which provides an overview of what conspiracies are and some evidence-based reasons why some people may be more likely to fall into conspiratorial thinking.