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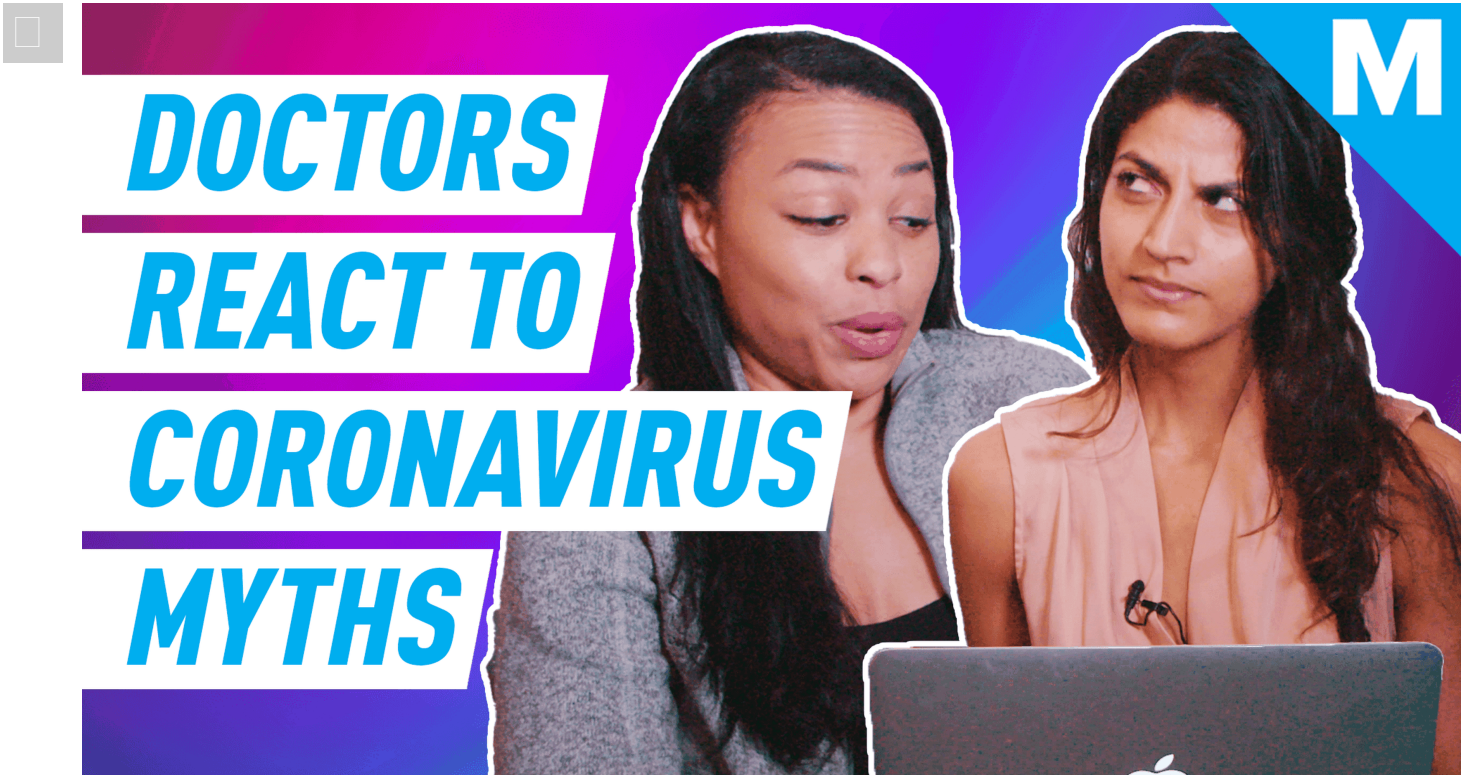
How to talk about coronavirus misinformation with the older people in your life

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Your phone pings with another message in the family group text. It's grandma, sharing a block of text clearly copy and pasted from Facebook.

"Be careful!" she writes, alongside news that you could get a ticket for driving during stay-at-home orders in Los Angeles (you can't).

Misinformation about coronavirus is circling on social media. And the same demographic that is most at risk for the virus is also especially susceptible to fake news about the coronavirus.

"Your grandma is in the crosshairs," said Jeff Hancock, a Stanford University professor of communications who studies social media and truth. "It's truly a perfect storm for older people right now."

"Your grandma is in the crosshairs."

There's a reason older people might seem more prone to sharing misinformation than others. According to Hancock, older people are "particularly targeted for misinformation" because they tend to have more money, more civic engagement, more free time, and less experience with technology.

Hancock says that misinformation about the coronavirus is flourishing because it is a new illness with a lot of uncertainty around it. That's manifested with fake social media posts and news items meant to prompt outrage and clicks (and therefore ad impressions) and nefarious websites selling bunk products.

MISINFORMATION HANDBOOK: EPIDEMICS

1. **Learn the basics of the disease.** What are the symptoms? How does it spread? What diseases is it similar to? This information will arm you against misinformation.

2. **Be wary of claims about the epidemic's source.** Early on, it's nearly impossible to tell where an epidemic started, especially if it's a new disease. Beware of conspiracies.

3. **Verify images and videos related to the epidemic.** The situation is ripe for out-of-context or misleading visuals. Use reverse image search to find context.

4. **Double-check case numbers, death tolls and fatality rates.** These numbers change constantly during an epidemic, and some estimates are better than others.

5. **Beware of attempts to downplay or amplify the threat of the disease.** Epidemics often get politicized. Some will try to spin the situation in their favor or create a scapegoat.

6. **Don't share prevention or treatment methods without consulting official sources.** Look to the CDC and the WHO for what you should do.

7. **Look for what's still unknown.** If the disease is new, scientists will be working to learn more about how it spreads and who's at risk. Avoid falling for alternative explanations.

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In the case of coronavirus, rumors and false news can cost lives, so don't let it spread without speaking up. Here are some tips for how to have a conversation about coronavirus misinformation with the older people in your life.

1. Start a conversation, not a monologue

When speaking about coronavirus misinformation, it's important not to be didactic or patronizing. The best way to open the conversation with a loved one is with a question about their perspectives.

"Adult children, and people in general, tend to push in with 'this is what the other person should do,'" Dr. Leslie Kernisan, a gerontologist who runs an organization called Better Health While Aging, said.

Instead, consider some opening questions to get their perspective on coronavirus news.

"Before telling them what to do, start with, 'Tell me what you're thinking about this, tell me how you see it,'" Kernisan suggests. "People are more receptive to hearing someone else when they feel they've been heard and validated themself."

2. Meet on common ground

Rather than coming in with a lecture, steer the topic toward what your friend or family member already knows about fake news or misinformation. Hancock suggests asking what they know about the phenomenon generally, perhaps by asking something like "Have you heard about fake news?"

Kernisan notes that this is an opportunity to find some stable footing for the more practical part of the conversation.

"When you learn more about what they've been thinking, that will help you figure out whether the issue is an information gap, or is it just that they have different values and priorities," Kernisan said.

3. Express that it's difficult for everyone

Infuse your conversation with some empathy. Express that identifying fake news is an issue for everyone, and something you might struggle with, too.

4. Ask to share your thoughts

Once you've heard what your loved one has to say about misinformation, ask permission to share your thoughts with them.

"You might say, 'The way I think about fake news is X,'" Hancock said. Then, you can explain "I think this message might be fake news, and here's why i think that."

"Then you're not accusing them," Hancock said.

(Here is a helpful guide to fake news around coronavirus from Poynter.)

5. Share actionable tips

This is the part of the conversation where you can talk about coronavirus fake news specifically. Hancock explains that fake news generally, including misinformation about coronavirus, has a few clear signs:

- It serves up a temptation to click.

- It contains supposed "inside information" from a friend of a friend or a friend's relative.

- That inside information is "something scary, anxiety provoking, or useful to people who are in the know."

- It has a "patina of believability," but is not entirely plausible.

Of course, the most important thing to communicate about identifying misinformation is considering the source. This is something that can and should resonate with older people.

"Older people had a lot of training in a different era of how to determine if something is valid or not," Hancock said. "They understood if it wasn't on one of the big TV networks, then they would be pretty suspicious of it. Now, one way to get at that is to say something similar: If there is no source, then it's not worth passing on. And if you don't recognize the source, then they should really think twice about sharing it because it could really be playing into the hands of the scammers and trolls."

6. Ask for their help

If your older family member is sharing information about coronavirus with you, it probably means they're trying to be of service in some way.

"What motivates your parent?" Kernisan said. "For a lot of older adults, optimizing their own health and safety is not a huge motivator, but they might be motivated by something else, like protecting the health and wellbeing of someone else."

Hancock suggests expressing gratitude for their efforts to share important information. You can even ask for them to help check the validity of sources, and enlist them to get other family and friends important safety information. Hancock's own mother has become an avid reader of Snopes.

"Take advantage of some of their resources, they tend to have more time and more care than others," Hancock said. "They can become this really great fact-checking resource for us. We still value them sharing information with you, but to help them do it in a way where it's more overall valuable."

7. Find acceptance

A hard truth is that even if you approach a conversation about coronavirus misinformation with compassion and openness, your older relative might not

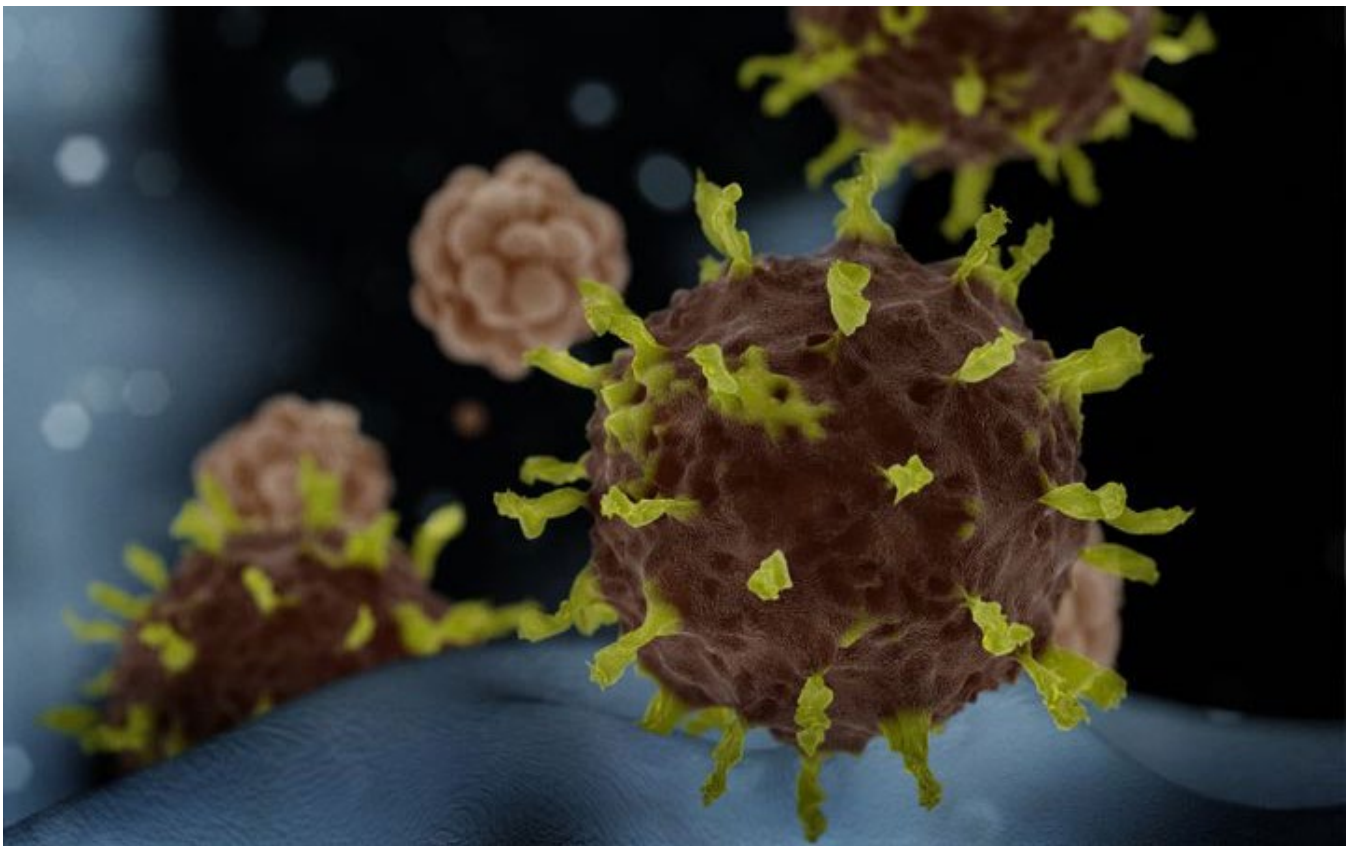come to the same conclusions as you. However, just having the conversation itself is important.

"All you can do is nudge and encourage," Kernisan said. "People get to make decisions that we don't like. What's under your control is how you show up to those conversations, and whether you're able to create moments of connections and empathy."

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