

The psychology of conspiracy theories - Video transcript

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00:00 The appeal of **conspiracy theories**. According to a poll from **Fairly Dickinson University**, over half of **American adults** believe in at least one **conspiracy theory**, and though subscribing to **conspiracies** is more rampant in some personality types and social demographics than others, false narratives of one form or another are held by people across all racial, economic, and political backgrounds. In an age when access to information from **legitimate sources** are only a click away, why are **conspiracy theories** still so prevalent? What makes them so appealing? Well, there are quite a few **psychological factors** that lead to the belief in **conspiracy theories**. In the game of **survival**, the human mind has become hardwired to believe in **intentional causality**. If you hear a rustling noise in the bushes, it's a safer bet to believe that it's a threat rather than presume it's just the wind. Dismissing the noise may lead to danger, but believing that there is a threat means you'll take action to avoid harm, regardless if there's something actually there. So in some ways, we have evolved to air on the side of **paranoid belief**.

01:00 Another major factor is human beings' superior **pattern processing**. As a species, one of our greatest strengths is our ability to find meaningful **patterns** in the world around us and to make **causal inferences**. **Pattern processing** is at the heart of our ability to use **language**, understand and navigate our environment, and project future outcomes. But identifying **patterns** is an automatic process of the mind and therefore can lead to the formulation of false **patterns**. This is the reason we see faces in inanimate objects, create relationships between events that are really just coincidence, and is a contributing factor to why we believe in **conspiracy theories**.

01:37 There is also our tendency towards **confirmation bias**. Acknowledging that we are wrong about something is a difficult thing for most of us to admit. This is especially true of concepts and ideas that we associate with our **world view**. These are ideas that we strongly connect with, and admitting that they are incorrect can feel like we are admitting that there is something wrong with us personally. This leads us to give more weight to **evidence** that support what we already believe and ignore **evidence** that contradicts those beliefs.

02:06 There is also our innate tendency to assume that **big events have big causes**. For instance, the **president** being killed by a **single shooter** acting alone feels unbalanced. That

is why a CT **government conspiracy** with **multiple shooters** feels more plausible, despite the **evidence** otherwise.

02:22 Another contributing factor is **projection**. This is an **unconscious impulse** to deny **negative qualities** in ourselves while attributing them to others. For those who actively conspire and lie, they reflexively believe that others are acting similarly, making **conspiracies** more plausible and widespread. In general, people don't resort to lying unless they feel weak or **powerless**, which brings us to our last **conspiracy** generator. All of these factors become more exacerbated at times when we feel **powerless** or when our lives in the world around us seem **out of control**. **Fear** jumpstarts our **amygdala** and directs our brain to assess the situation, take stock of the **patterns** around us, and seek out a **remedy**. We are desperately looking for a way to restore our sense of **agency**, and we'll convince ourselves we know what is going on, even if that means reassuring ourselves with a **narrative** that has no **basis in fact**.

03:14 That said, not all **conspiracy theories** are false; some indeed turn out to be true. That is why it's always important to keep an **open mind**, weigh all the **evidence**, determine if the **sources** are **legitimate**, and be careful not to be seduced by the lured appeal of a juicy **conspiracy** just because it supports something you want to believe.

03:34 [Music]