

Everyone in our nation has, at some point, been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Having to stay and work from home, having to wear masks and get a vaccine, or even catching COVID and going to the hospital; the pandemic has affected billions of lives around the globe.

Through scientific advances we have been able to understand the presence of COVID, what it does, how it spreads, and how to counteract it. However, many people, such as the "[Disinformation Dozen](#)," have actively spread conspiracy theories that involve COVID and its vaccines.

The impact of the misinformation being spread can have devastating consequences on the people who read them. Sometimes those consequences are life-threatening. Such a thing happened to the elderly family member of Kyle, a 29 year-old man from Goldendale. The family member was exposed to misinformation and believed it.

"I never saw him wear (a mask)", said Kyle, "he definitely didn't get (the vaccine)." He believed the pandemic was a hoax, "I know I've seen him have (Facebook) posts about the people with the 'cure' making the most money. I think he also believed that the pandemic was a part of the government trying to control people's lives."

In the summer of 2021 Kyle's family member was diagnosed with COVID-19 and admitted to the hospital. It came as a huge shock to him and his family, some of which shared his views on COVID and the pandemic. "He didn't die, he made it," said Kyle, his sickness, however, had little impact on his and his family's views on COVID. "I'm fairly certain none of them got the vaccine as well, even after (he got sick)"

What would cause someone to be so affected by misinformation that even after one of their own family members nearly died from COVID, they still wouldn't get the vaccine?

Neita Cecil, the Public Information Officer for the North Central Health District, said, "If you already believe something, you will believe anything that reinforces that belief. It can also be that if you trust somebody, you will

trust what they are saying, so if your pastor says that vaccines are bad and if you trust your pastor, you will believe them. If you've got friends that spread misinformation, you might be one too. If you've got a community, you'll probably be quite like-minded."

When asked where the misinformation came from, Cecil said it was, "Facebook and other social media. The companies say they're trying to weed it out, but the mis- and disinformers find ways to get around it, using asterisks, codewords, and even creating different sites without the regulation of main companies. Parler and Gab were sites that were created after the misinformed were kicked out of Facebook. There are also some news organizations such as Breitbart, The Daily Caller, and Fox News (that spread misinformation)."

Jeff Stewart, the Managing Director of [Syneos Health](#), a medical research organization that does medical clinical trials, added his thoughts to Cecil's; "Group identity is sometimes linked to beliefs in certain things. If your group identity is linked to the belief that vaccines don't work, you will probably believe that too, and by challenging that, I am challenging your group."

Stewart talked about our likelihood to only believe new information that aligns with what we already believe, which makes it extremely difficult to challenge someone else's beliefs or to change your own. Stewart referred to this as confirmation bias, and shared its impact on forming people's opinions, "There are high-quality and low-quality studies," he said, "and if you have confirmation bias, you will usually only believe one of the two."

Cecil and Stewart talked about what to say to people that have been exposed to misinformation. Stewart said, "If you can debunk it before they have actually been exposed to it, it won't affect them." He calls this "Pre-bunking" misinformation.

Cecil advises to "Be an empathetic listener. Telling them that they're wrong won't do anything. Just listen and try to understand, and you might be able to untangle their concerns. You can also say, 'Wow, I was worried about that too until I found out this.'"

Kyle's mom is a medical assistant. She has tried to encourage her family member to become vaccinated but, so far, she's been unsuccessful.

“He was willing to take the word of Fox News and Facebook memes about the vaccine rather than my mom,” Kyle said, “It’s pretty sad, I wish he would have taken things more seriously. He wasn’t convinced, I wish he would have considered more and trusted sources like my mom. It would have been better for everyone if he’d taken it more seriously.”