How to speak up without starting a showdown

Six best practices for talking to friends and family about sharing falsehoods online

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1. Be civil

Use an empathetic and respectful tone. Avoid being judgmental or simply telling someone they are wrong. If a person replies with aggressive or sarcastic language, don't respond in kind.



2. Take your time

Firing off a knee-jerk response might be tempting, but pause and take a step back. Do your homework. Research the claim and find reputable fact-checking organizations or credible expert sources to share, which research shows is key to effectively correcting misinformation online.

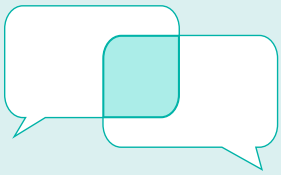
Remember: Two links are tougher to dismiss than one.



3. Find common ground

Try putting yourself in your friend or loved one's shoes. Why might they have posted this? Did they have good intentions? Consider pointing out shared concerns or feelings in your response.

Misinformation exploits our beliefs and values to elicit an emotional reaction. But you can also focus on these underlying principles to establish your own good intentions in reaching out.



4. Lay out the facts

Rather than simply posting a link to a fact-check, clearly summarize the main findings of the debunk first, then add the link.

Don't let the conversation get derailed by unwarranted attacks on fact-checking organizations. Leading with the evidence and sharing links to more than one fact-check example can help you avoid being drawn into a fight about the organization itself.



5. Public or private?

Decide how you want to post your response. Public comments can reach a bigger audience, but a private message may be more appropriate in some situations.

Tip: Even if you opt for a private message, you can still leave a comment calling the original post into question (e.g., "Hmm. I'm not sure about this one.")



6. Be patient (and persistent)

Research shows we're more likely to believe fact-checks from people we know. View fact-checking as an ongoing debate rather than a fight to "win" at all costs. Even when someone seems unconvinced, calling out problematic content over time can plant a seed of doubt and prompt loved ones to work through important questions. While one corrective reply may not stop friends and relatives from sharing misinformation, consistently speaking up can help them think twice before sharing.

Remember: Online trolls are not interested in honest debate. Don't waste your time responding to their insults or chasing their moving goalposts. Be willing to walk away.



Getting started: Some helpful phrases

- Oh, I saw this and initially thought it could be true, too. But ...
- Figuring out what's true online can be so overwhelming. But I did some digging and thought you'd want to know that it looks like this is misleading ...
- Hmm, this image/meme/article is kind of shocking, but I'm skeptical that it's real ...
- Do you know where this information came from? How did you find out about this?
- This image looks like it may not actually be what it seems. Here is a link to another version of the image, which shows something different. What do you think?
- I know we're all trying to be extra cautious because of all the bad information circulating on [insert subject]. Here is what I found ...

Resources consulted:

"What To Do If Your Family Or Friends Shares Misinformation On Facebook" (Brittany Wong, HuffPost).

"How to talk to friends and family about disinformation" (Claire Wardle, First Draft).

"PolitiFact: How to fact-check your friends and family on the coronavirus" (Daniel Funke, PolitiFact).

"Americans are fighting coronavirus misinformation on social media" (Leticia Bode and Emily Vraga, Washington Post).

"Opinion: How to Talk to Friends and Family Who Share Conspiracy Theories" (Charlie Warzel, The New York Times).