

# 'It's torn our social fabric': How to come back from Covid-19 conspiracy theories



*ELLA BATES-HERMANS/Stuff*

Mel's relationship was destroyed by American politics, with Trump videos leading her ex-husband down a rabbit hole that ended with him believing politicians were drinking the blood of children. What help is there for those experiencing this?

**The vortex of pandemic-driven misinformation has torn apart personal relationships, at a time when social cohesion is a security issue. What's the prescription for mending national heartache? MICHELLE DUFF reports.**

It began innocently enough, with the televised debates of Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Then Mel's husband, a

happy-go-lucky guy who liked sports and going to the pub with his mates, started listening to YouTube videos of Trump and his supporters while he was gaming.

When he started advocating a hard line on immigration over dinner, Mel, whose real name we have agreed not to use because of the sensitive subject, thought it strange.

That she could probably have lived with. But over the next few months, starting from the 2020 Covid lockdown, Mel felt the tentacles of social media algorithms forcing their way into the most intimate corners of their marriage.

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"It just got darker and darker and weirder and weirder," Mel says, now.

"He didn't have a problem with Jacinda Ardern when she first got elected, but when he started agreeing with Trump he really started personal attacks on Jacinda for being a woman, all the horse jokes, saying 'women shouldn't be in charge'.

"I said, 'I'm a young woman, can't you see how making fun of a woman's appearance would make me feel self-conscious?' But he just couldn't."

He called Mel over to his computer to look at a picture of Michelle Obama. "It was zoomed in on her crotch and her dress was sort of crumpled, and people were going 'Is that the outline of penis? She's a man!'" Mel said.

"I was like 'That seems really sexist and also a bit racist?' It felt like such a desperate attempt to bring someone down, to attack someone based on their gender."

Mel tried to stay neutral, letting him have his say, sometimes until 2am. She tried reason, pointing out shonky "evidence", or challenging him on sexist social media posts.

"He'd say, 'It's just stuff I say online, that's not stuff I really believe,' and I would say, 'Well, that is you, that is your thoughts.' He wasn't really arguing an anti-vax point in the end, it was just an anti-woman, anti-vax...he went to the Brian Tamaki rallies, he called himself a "pureblood" human, he believed everything he read on Telegram."

She told him she didn't want to talk about it at all, but she says he continued to "smother" her with his increasingly radical views, including the QAnon conspiracy theory that global elites were trafficking young children and drinking their blood.

"I could see him change and his beliefs change, into this angry hateful negative person who thought everything in the world was wrong. That was definitely not the man I fell in love with."



*ROBERT KITCHIN/Stuff*

Mel's husband would attack Ardern and other women, saying women shouldn't be in charge and questioning if they were "really" men. He'd never been sexist before, she says.

## **'It's torn our social fabric'**

What should you do when a loved one gets sucked into conspiracy networks? If there's anything the past two years has taught us, it's that there is no rulebook.

The physical toll of Covid, including infections and deaths, has been meticulously reported by the Ministry of Health, with agencies also [tracking Covid-19 conspiracy theories and mis- and disinformation](#).

False or misleading information has been identified as a national security threat, prompting the NZSIS to start drawing up [guidelines to help the public recognise if someone they know](#) is mobilising to a terrorist attack. The Royal Commission has identified [improving social cohesion](#)

- that is, the way people understand, empathise with and relate to each other – as a key element to work on in the wake of the mosque attacks.

But so far the impact on our personal wellbeing – what researchers refer to as the “psychosocial” toll – has been given little attention, despite the very real effects. “The psychological impacts are much more hidden, but if we think of long Covid, this is sort of a long Covid effect – the one it’s had on friends and families and our relationships,” says clinical psychologist, Victoria University’s Dougal Sutherland.

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“It’s going to last much longer than the virus itself – these breaks in relationships may take a lot longer to heal, and I don’t think we’ve quite realised the longer-term implications of it. It’s torn our social fabric.”

In Classifications Office survey [The Edge of the Infodemic](#), respondents talked about misinformation undermining relationships with loved ones, contributing to anxiety, stress, fear and anger, speaking of division, hatred, and family breakdowns. “It is eroding our culture and way of life,” one respondent said.

But if a loved one won't stop talking about chem-trails, or hangs out in misogyny-steeped corners of the internet, or thinks you are part of some international cabal, is it worth keeping these friendships? What about when they're family, and you're worried about them – for their own personal mental health, but also where it might lead?

On the unforgiving internet, where nuance is flattened and arguments can turn quickly septic, the unfriend button is a keystroke away. But almost everyone *Stuff* spoke to said cutting people who don't agree with you out of your life should be avoided where possible, unless, like in Mel's case, the relationship is affecting your own mental health or sense of self.

For those embedded in alternative communities, where many already mistrust the state, this can be difficult. Former Green Party MP and Whākatāne District Councillor Nandor Tanczos says he "quite quickly" became a target for ridicule and hatred after making his pro-vaccination opinions known on social media early in the pandemic.



*MARK TAYLOR/Waikato Times*

Former Green Party MP Nandor Tanczos says he quickly became a lightning rod for hatred for being outspoken about vaccination, but that he tries to leave the lines of communication open.

As a long-time social activist who has always held a healthy scepticism towards Western medicine, Tanczos said he thinks some of his friends felt betrayed. "A lot of people that I know, some quite close friends, really went into a strong anti-vax stance. There were some quite tense moments with family as well.

"It's insulting, people saying 'You've sold out,' but you can't take it personally. That's the danger with polarisation – people start seeing you as a glyph for something rather than a real human person who cares about them."

He maintained relationships by reminding himself life isn't black and white and people had good reasons to question, say, Big Pharma, even if he didn't agree with their

conclusions. "For me the thing was trying to introduce evidence into those discussions."

When he has had friends who are beyond reason, he's tried to keep the relationship open regardless - saying he loves them and suggesting they reconnect again later. "Down the line if someone has gone down the rabbit hole, how are they going to get out again? It's only by having people you know and love to reach out to."

Dr Byron Rangiwai, a senior lecturer at Unitec's School of Healthcare and Social Practice, is the author of [WAKE UP, SHEEPLE! Conspiracy theories and Māori during the COVID-19 Pandemic.](#)



*LAWRENCE SMITH*

Dr Byron Rangiwai says a manaakitanga-driven approach means treating whānau with aroha and respect, and trying to understand why they have been drawn into the falsehood.

He advocates a manaakitanga-driven approach, which is to try and understand why people might believe misleading

information – such as white supremacist propaganda, psychological vulnerability and powerlessness – and continue to treat whānau and friends with aroha and respect.

Many Māori have good reason to mistrust the Government, and the sheer volume of information coming out during Covid lockdowns could be confusing. “Even just having the luxury of time to siphon through ideas, it’s quite impossible for most people to discern what’s true and what’s not.”

Cutting family and friends off is “not a Māori thing”, he says. “The relationships are there, and if they are whakapapa relationships they're ancient, they are permanent.”

He uses humour a lot to deflect, and does not join in debates. If things get sticky, he thinks about why he loves that person. “We disagree with people all the time, but we don’t block people for it.

“The pandemic has been utterly damaging to the nation’s psyche, and it’s got out of hand in terms of ruining people’s relationships. I try and engage with people with whakapapa in the front of my mind, the relationships I’ve built with people over the years. I encourage people to look past the pandemic, and what things were like before.

Sutherland says he also encourages people to take a long-term view, rather than being judgmental or trying to convince people with facts, [techniques proven to fail](#).

But if things turn abusive or become too frustrating, that may no longer be advisable and that's okay too, he says. "If your relationship is dominated by this issue and it's causing stress and tension and bad feelings, why would you want to be in that relationship?"

## **How bad does it have to get?**

What is radicalisation, and when should we be worried?

Kate Hannah is a director and investigator at The Disinformation Project, a research project into the misinformation ecosystem. She says radicalisation can be understood as a spectrum, a sliding scale of harm where a terrorist attack might be at one end.

In the anti-vax and conspiracy networks she monitors, on Telegram but also now mainstream social media, there is an increasing willingness to condone or participate in talking about violence – death threats, rape threats, or referring to public figures as witches who are going to be hung and tried. Some of this was seen by the general public for the first time at the Parliament occupation, and in stories about the gendered harassment of high-profile women.



*RYAN ANDERSON/Stuff*

Disinformation project director Kate Hannah says anti-vax and conspiracy networks have been mainstreaming extremist misogynistic beliefs, which is a problem in and of itself.

Spaces where violent and misogynistic beliefs are shared and normalised are already a social problem, Hannah says. "The idea that we are waiting for it to pop off into some terrorism, that's true, but if we look at misogyny we can already see how it's being used to target and harass high profile women. It's designed to punish and control, and it's having an effect. What are they doing to women in their own lives?

"New ideas are mechanisms of control. If someone is articulating a message about the PM to themselves and maybe their children, that does all sorts of things to their families feelings of safety and inclusion.

"There's a need for programmes to bring people out safely, when they've attached their identity to this it's hard to get

them to exit with dignity.”

Online, several New Zealand based Facebook support groups offer advice for those grappling with the impacts of misinformation on their own mental health and their relationships with partners, friends and family.

One of these, FACT Aotearoa, say they formed due to the lack of official support networks. “We’re not aware of any publicly available, formally-funded help that’s specifically about this problem,” says Stephen Judd, FACT Aotearoa spokesman “People are experiencing so much stress and strain when they’re trying to maintain relationships with those who have gone down the rabbit hole – nobody seems to know what to do.” His organisation wanted to see a model like in some German states, where there is state-funded counselling and support services specifically focusing on those impacted by conspiracy theories.

Social justice campaigner Anjum Rahman agrees there needs to be “urgent attention” in this space. A key tactic of many extremist groups was to alienate people from those they love, and entice them in further, she says. Research has shown [family engagement can help prevent radicalisation and help people back from extremist thinking](#)

“These groups want to make sure [people] are disconnected from those they trust, friends and family, because that’s a key part of being able to keep them in the thing, whatever it is

“When you’re in the space where you’ve lost trust in institutions but also family and friends and people who might help you, it’s even harder to get out.”

He Whenua Taurikura has just been set up as New Zealand’s National Centre of Research Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, [a recommendation of the Royal Commission](#). Co-director Professor Joanna Kidman said one of its key areas of focus would be how to help whānau address misinformation in family settings, and how to maintain relationships when faced with extreme views.

“A lot of international attention has been focused on how and why people engage in disinformation and conspiracy networks, but less time has been given to understanding how we might address deradicalisation or disengagement,” she said.

“There's a real need for locally-driven strategies and initiatives that will help families or communities here in Aotearoa when someone close to them gets caught up in these networks or is recruited into them.”

For Mel, there was no way through. Her husband is now her ex, and she’s glad she left.

“All indicators pointed to him moving off in this very particular direction as a person, and I wasn’t going in the same way. By the end, all the love was gone.”

“I had to move away and give myself mental space to exhale, and not have the doom and gloom in the back of my head. It was the right thing to do.”

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