HOW TO TALK TO FRIENDS & FAMILY WHO SHARE MISINFORMATION

AN ELECTION TIP SHEET

PEN AMERICA

You might know the feeling: You see your aunt, cousin, or friend share something on Facebook, but you doubt the information is true. And if that information is about a critical issue like COVID-19, an election, or a political candidate, you may feel compelled to respond. But what is the best way to do so? While some people create and spread *disinformation*—false information shared with the intent to deceive others—your friends and family may well spread *misinformation*, which is shared by people who may not know the information is false. They probably think the content is true, and they may feel they're sharing something important. That can make it tough to know how to confront them. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Try to verify that the content is misleading or false *before* you engage.

Suspecting that content is misleading or false is different from having confirmed it. Before you attempt to correct someone who has shared what you believe to be misinformation, try to fact-check the story yourself. You can Google keywords from the headline and confirm if the story is being reported by more than one credible outlet. In that case, it's more likely to be true. Or you can see if the story has been verified on a fact-checking website, like Politifact, Snopes, or Factcheck.org.

2. To comment or not to comment?

Once you've confirmed that the content your friend or family member shared is actually misleading or false, your first reaction might be to comment publicly on their post. This can be helpful, especially if you can link to a widely credible source; research suggests that seeing a public correction can reduce the likelihood others are swayed by the misinformation. However, your engagement with the post may also give the false content greater visibility, since social media algorithms boost any content that elicits a response. If something was just posted, you might try sending a private note politely pointing out that it's incorrect. The person behind the post might also be more receptive if they don't feel they've been called out publicly. But if a post is getting a lot of likes and comments already, a public correction could make a big difference in reducing the harm it can do.

3. Consider the perspective of the person who shared the story.

It can be embarrassing, shameful, even anger-inducing when someone calls us out for sharing false stories. We've probably all accidentally shared "fake news" at some point. So when you message someone about their post, take care to use a supportive and positive tone. Otherwise, you risk alienating the person, making them less receptive to the information you're trying to share. (Learn more about the psychology of why it can be so hard to correct people.) You might say something like, "I was curious about the thing you posted, so I did some Googling and here's what I found. . ." Providing a personal story of a time you shared false information is also a great entry point to talking with others about misinformation. However you choose to engage, do so with **empathy**.

4. Avoid escalation.

Sometimes, the conversation may not go well. Your friend or family member may get defensive, and you may feel the conversation is no longer constructive, or that the person is only becoming more resistant to hearing your message. If it seems like the conversation is moving in that direction, just remember that it can be hard for people to accept corrections, and it is tough to change attitudes—no matter how well-grounded your comments are. Offer them the tools to fact-check what they see, and take it upon yourself to proactively share factual information and resources (such as information from credible sources like the World Health Organization or your state or local Board of Elections) on your own feed. That way, you're helping to keep all your friends and family accurately informed.

5. Be a resource for others.

It's important to correct misleading or false information, whether publicly or privately. But what can you do to help *proactively*? Give your friends and family resources on misinformation and easy tools to conduct their own fact-checks going forward. You can share PEN America's tip sheets, such as our guide to verifying images and sources, or our guide on COVID-19 misinformation. You can also share information about trusted fact-checking websites and encourage others to attend a training on these subjects.