



# Extreme Overvalued Beliefs

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# Disclosures

Mikel Matto, MD has disclosed no relevant financial interest/arrangement or affiliation with any commercial companies who have provided products or services relating to this presentation or commercial support for this presentation.

# Learning Objectives

- Differentiate between Extreme Overvalued Beliefs (EOBs), conspiracy theories, and obsessions or psychotic delusions
- Recognize the progression of EOBs and their likely impact on functioning over timeline
- Describe potential strategies for interventions in a primary care environment

# Conspiracy Theories

"... reject authoritative accounts of reality in favor of some plot involving a group of people with malevolent intent that is deliberately kept secret from the public."

# Conspiracy Theories

- Are **oppositional**
- Describe **malevolent or forbidden acts**
- Ascribe **agency** to individuals and groups rather than to impersonal or systemic forces
- Are **epistemically risky**
- Are **social constructs** that aren't just adopted by individuals but shared with social objectives in mind

# Prevalence

- 73% - conspiracy theories are currently “out of control”
- 59% - people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories “compared to 25 years ago”
- 77% - believe that social media and the Internet are responsible for these increases

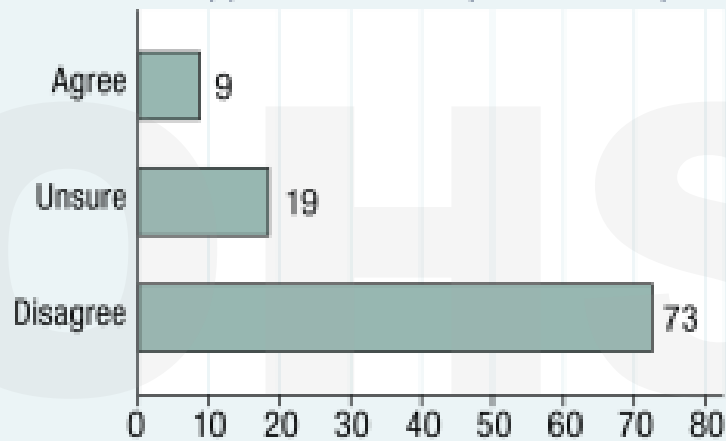
# Prevalence

- Four studies found little evidence of conspiracies' increase
  - Four distinct operationalizations of conspiracism
  - Temporal comparisons between 7 months and 55 years
  - Tens of thousands of observations from 7 countries

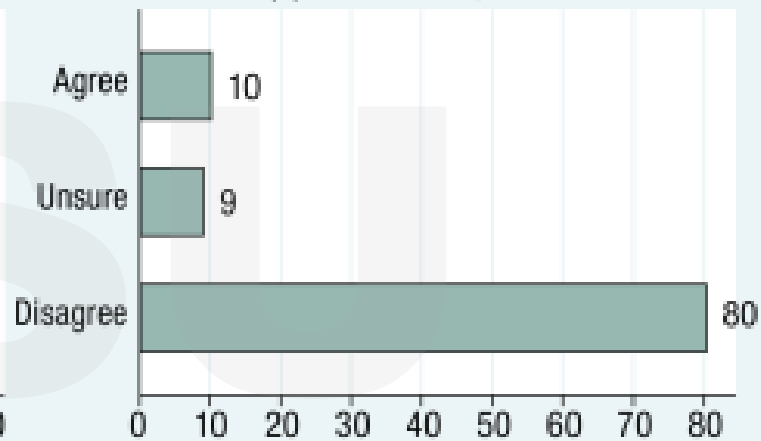




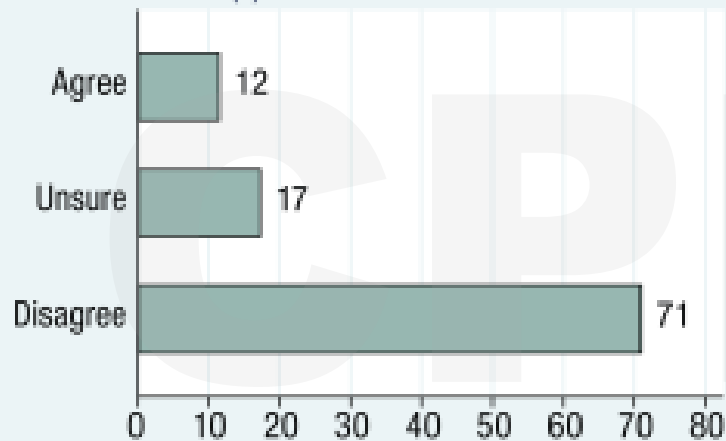
(a) Vaccinations implant microchip



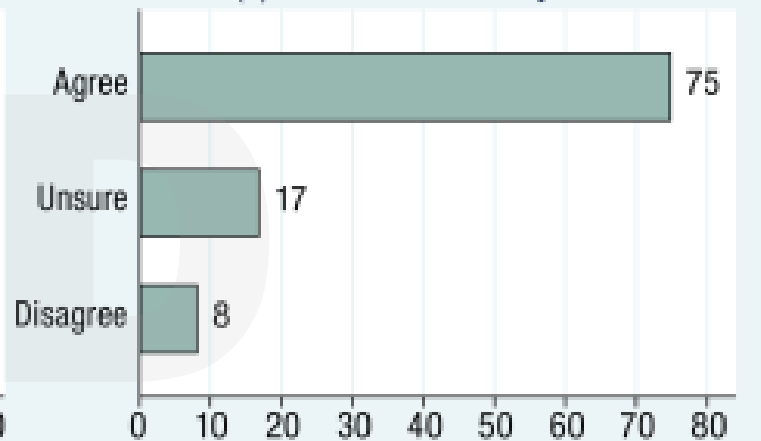
(b) Earth is flat, not round



(c) NASA did not land on Moon

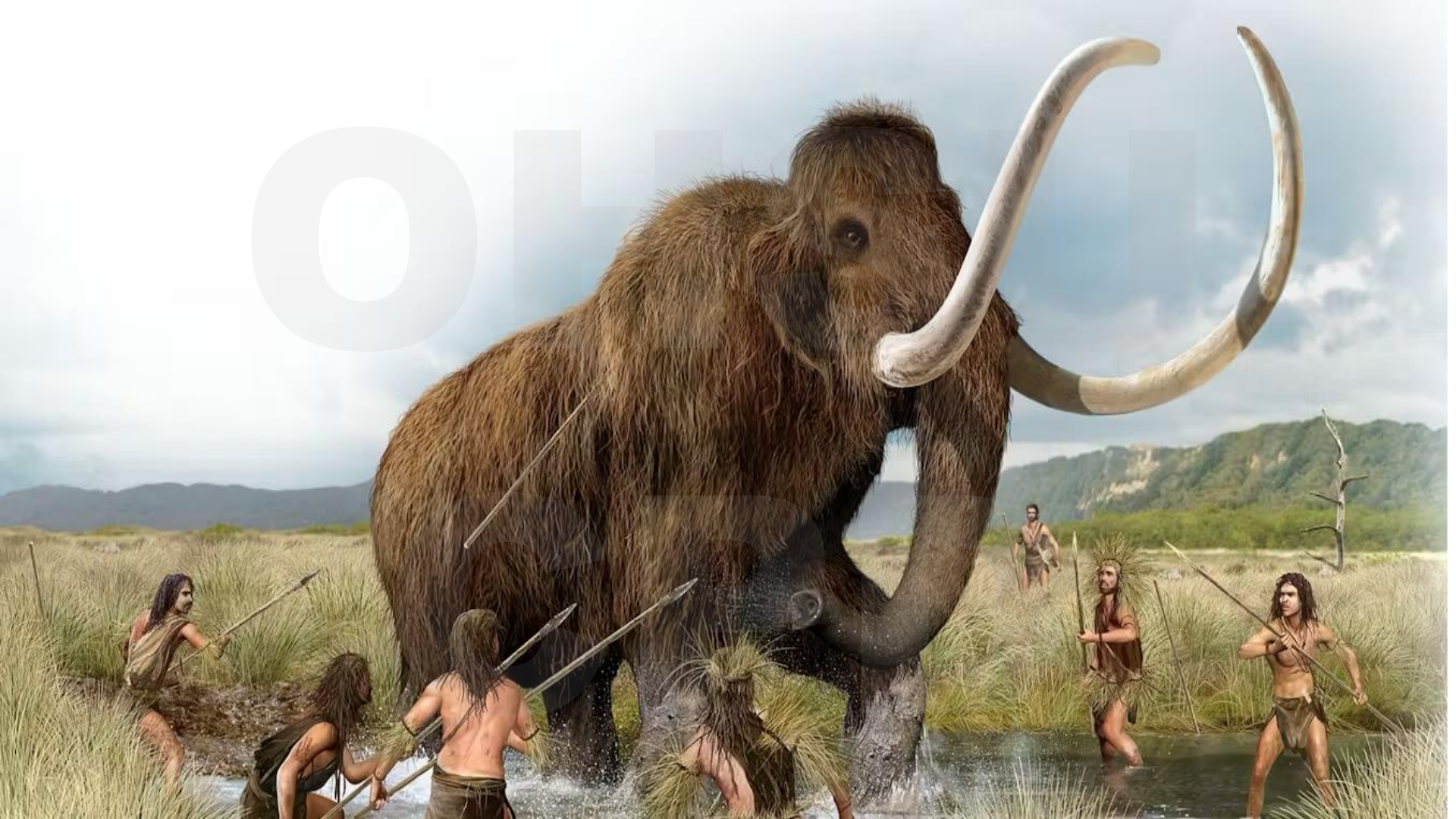


(d) Earth is billions of years old



Weighted percent

POLES 2021





# Why hold CTB?

- **Conspiracy Theories are Ego-Defensive**
  - CTB give meaning and purpose - the sense the believer is important
    - Seen in radicalization
  - CTB predict collective narcissism
    - CTB make people feel important and superior
    - Help believers defend a fragile sense of self-worth



# Why hold CTB?

- **Conspiracy Theories are Rationalization Tool**
  - CTB legitimizes a believer's role in the world
  - CTB endorsed to support ideological beliefs and degrade competing ideologies
  - CTB justify the societal system they are in, blaming problems on outgroup
  - Can conveniently form/choose CTB to help construe unhealthy behaviors and healthy and violence as legitimate



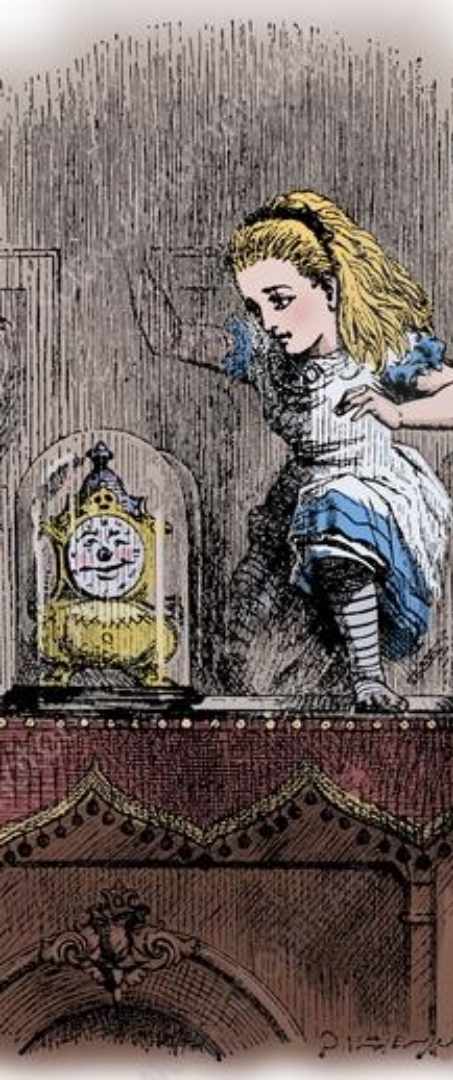
# Why hold CTB?

- **Conspiracy Theories are Entertaining**
  - CTB create an alternate reality that is cinematic, exciting
    - Good vs. evil, mystery, important actors
  - CTB turn believers into actors in these narratives
    - Detective solving a mystery
  - CTB associated with dispositional aversion to boredom and sensation-seeking



# System-Justification Theory

- **Epistemic** (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty)
- **Existential** (e.g., the desire for control and security)
- **Social** (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group)



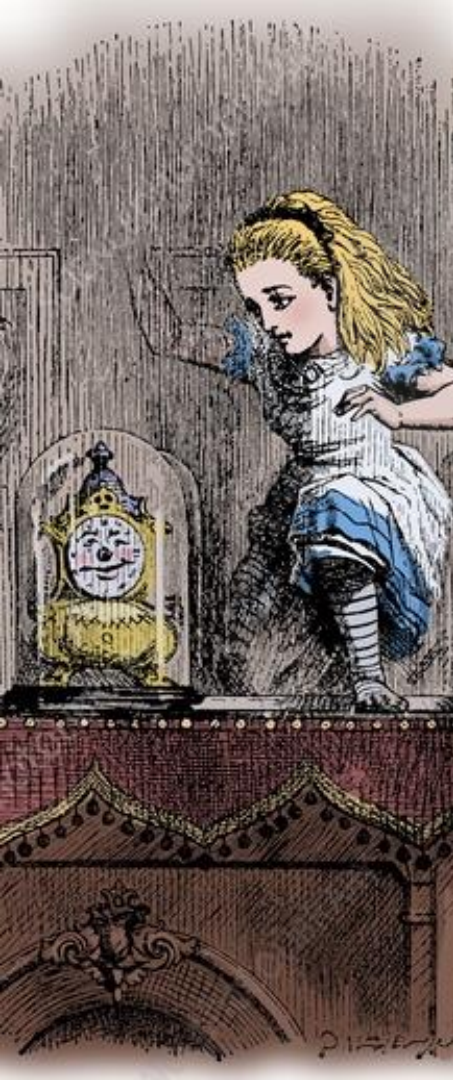
# System-Justification Theory

- **Epistemic** (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty)
  - Satisfying curiosity when information unavailable
  - Reducing uncertainty when conflicting evidence
  - Protect cherished beliefs in the face of contradiction



# System-Justification Theory

- **Existential** (e.g., the desire for control and security)
  - Feel safe and secure in their environment
  - Compensatory sense of control by CTB - the opportunity to reject official narratives and possess alternative account
  - Feel safer as a form of cheater detection in which untrustworthy people are recognized and threat they pose is reduced



# System-Justification Theory

- **Social** (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group).
  - Desire to belong and maintain positive image of self
  - Valorize the self and in-group, blame for negative outcomes to others
  - In-group is competent and moral, but sabotaged by powerful others

# Who is susceptible to CTB?

- Associated with:
  - Lower levels of analytic thinking
  - Lower levels of education
  - Low status due to ethnicity or income
  - Overestimate likelihood of co-occurring events
  - Perceive agency and intentionality where it does not exist
  - Perception of prejudice against powerful groups or perceived enemies



# Who is susceptible to CTB?

- Occurs when:
  - Anxious
  - Lack of psychological empowerment
  - Lack of sociopolitical control





# Extreme Overvalued Belief

- Is **shared** by others in a person's cultural, religious, or subcultural group.
- Is often **relished, amplified, and defended** by the possessor of the belief (and should be distinguished from obsessions/delusions).
- **Over time** grows more dominant, more refined and more resistant to challenge.
- The believer has an **intense emotional commitment** to the belief and may carry out violent behavior in its service.





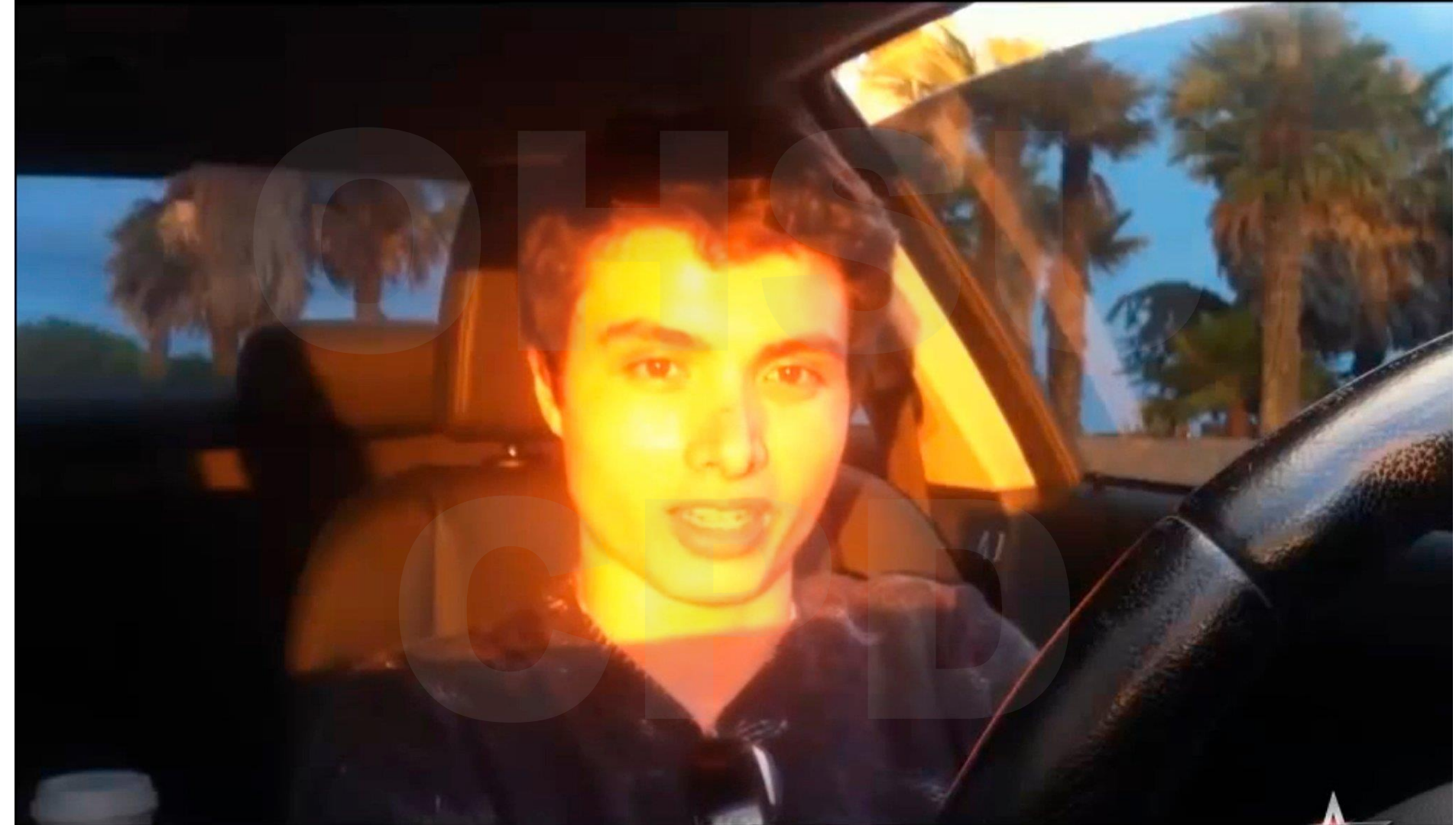
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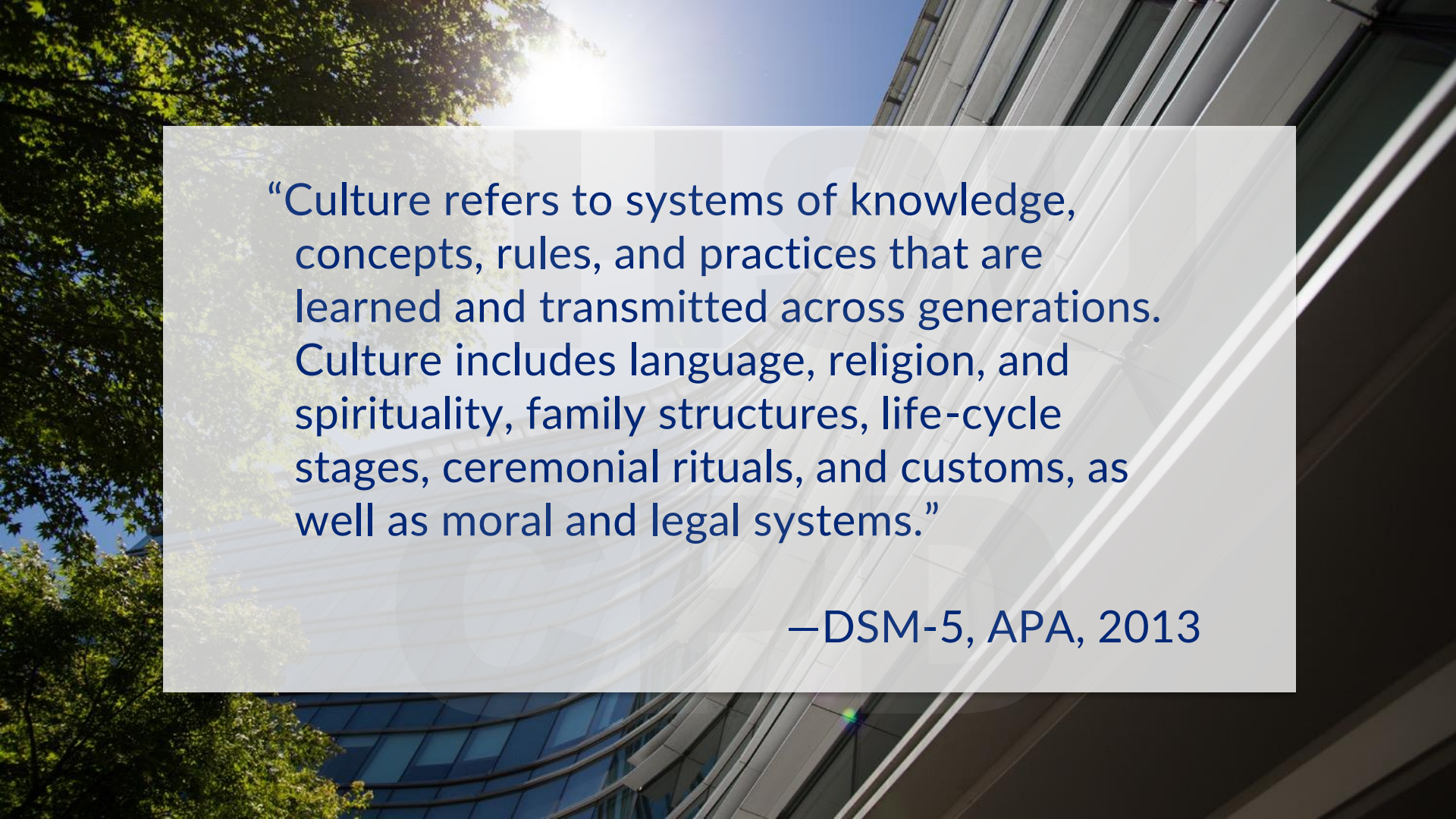












“Culture refers to systems of knowledge, concepts, rules, and practices that are learned and transmitted across generations. Culture includes language, religion, and spirituality, family structures, life-cycle stages, ceremonial rituals, and customs, as well as moral and legal systems.”

—DSM-5, APA, 2013



# Obsessions

“recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced, at least some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted and that in most individuals cause marked anxiety or distress”

# Obsessions vs. EOBs

	Obsessions	EOBs
Insight	Recognized	Not recognized
Reaction	Intrusion, often unpleasant	Amplified and defended
Resistance	Resisted	Not resisted
Egosyntonicity	Egodystonic	Egosyntonic



# Delusions

" false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not one ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture (e.g., it is not an article of religious faith)."

# Delusions vs. EOBs

	Delusions	EOBs
Falsity	False	Unsubstantiated but not necessarily false
Conviction	Fixed	Variable
Idiosyncrasy	Unshared	Shared, derived from others
Content	Self-referential	Beliefs about the world
Rationale	Faith in "inner" experience	Based on mistrust of mainstream sources, faith in conspiracy

# Delusions vs. EOBs

	Delusions	EOBs
Violence Risk	Via self-referentiality	Via self-relevant consequentiality

CPD



# Research detecting EOB

- Forensic psychiatrists (n=109) asked to diagnose obsession, delusion, or EOB as motive in 12 criminal vignettes
  - Strong interrater agreement for EOB (kappa=0.91)
  - Also strong for delusion (kappa=0.99) and obsession (0.98)



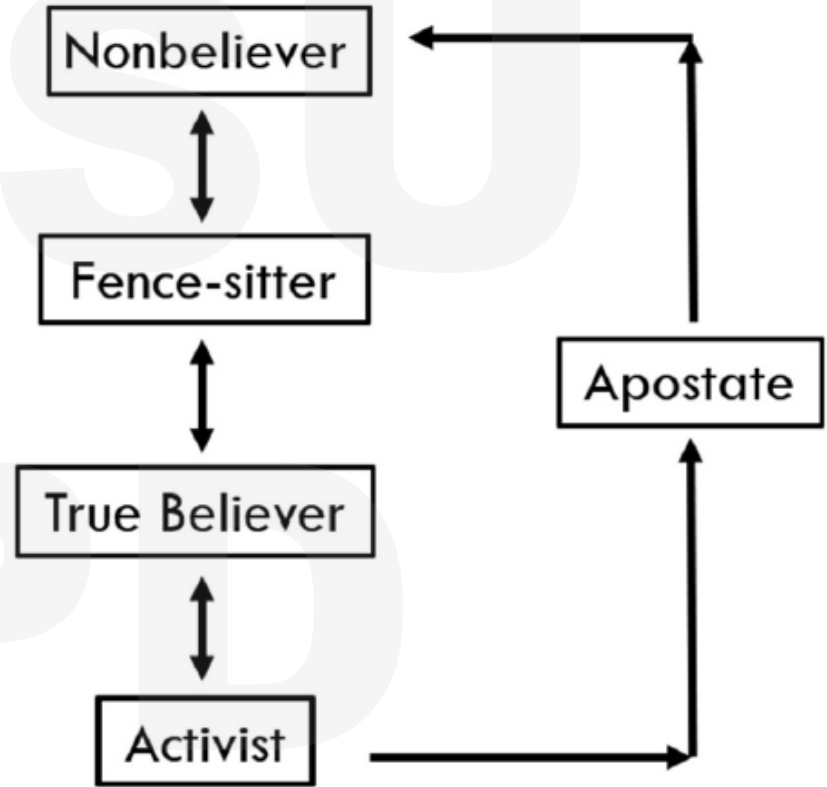
HOW MISTRUST,  
DISINFORMATION, AND  
MOTIVATED REASONING  
MAKE US BELIEVE THINGS  
THAT AREN'T TRUE

# FALSE

JOE PIERRE MD



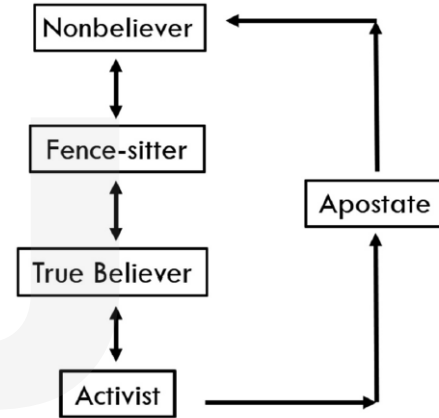
# Stages





# Stages

- **Nonbeliever**
  - Low levels of conspiracy mentality
  - Cognitive flexibility
  - Intellectual humility
  - Analytical thinking
  - **No interventions needed**

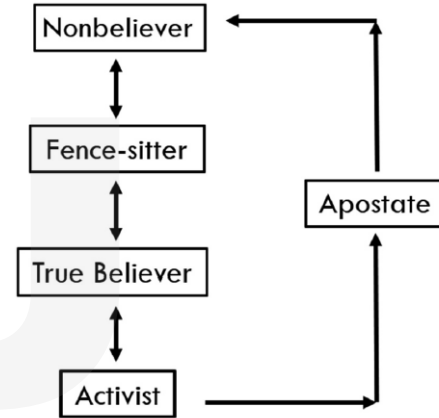




# Stages

- **Fence-Sitter**

- Shift in trusted informational sources (in person or online)
- Skeptical/mistrustful of institutions of authority
- Begin to reject authoritative account: “asking questions” and “looking for answers.”

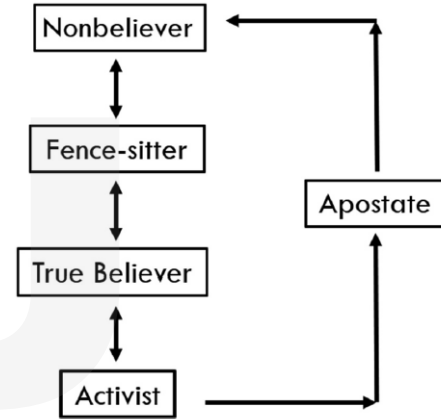




# Stages

- **Fence-Sitter**
  - Interventions

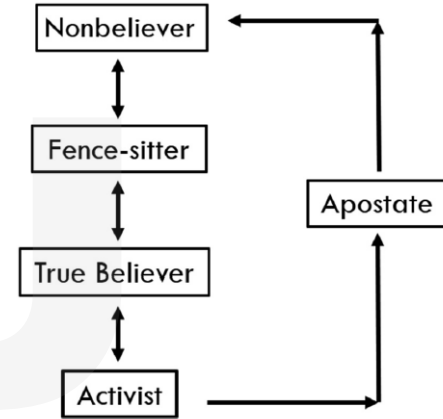
- Establish rapport
- Empathetic listening
- Mapping out trusted/mistrusted sources of information
- Challenging with alternative explanations





# Stages

- **Fence-Sitter**
  - Interventions
    - Jiu Jitsu persuasion





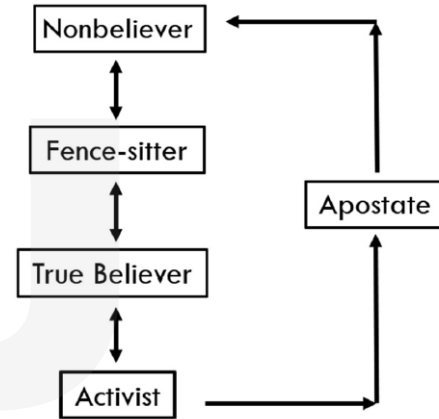
*“Honey, come look! I’ve found some information all the world’s top scientists and doctors missed.”*



# Stages

- **True Believer**

- Endorse conspiracy theories and other ideological beliefs with firm conviction
- Factual beliefs become intertwined with interrelated values and morals
  - Endorsed ideologies are “important” and “good”
  - Counter opinions are “wrong” and “bad”

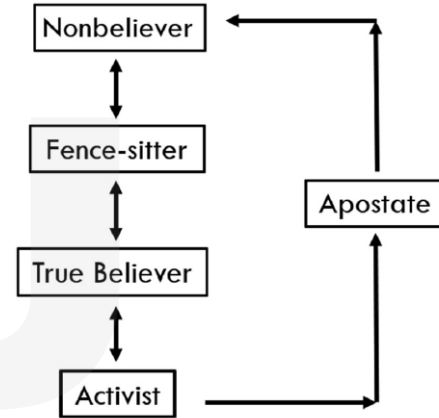




# Stages

- **True Believer**

- Preoccupied with endorsed ideology to the point of viewing it as core component of their identity
  - Affiliate with new ideological group (“family”)
  - "Quest for significance"



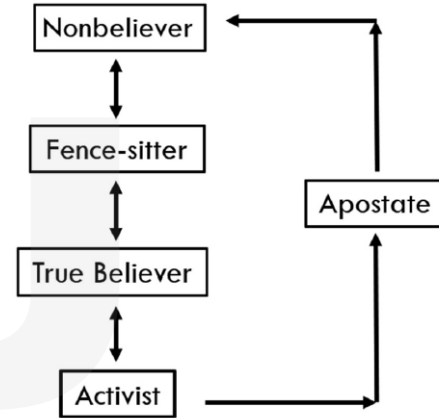


# Stages

- **True Believer**

- Level of commitment so high that cognitive dissonance is resolved by:

- “doubling down”
- “moving the goal posts”
- “circling the wagons”

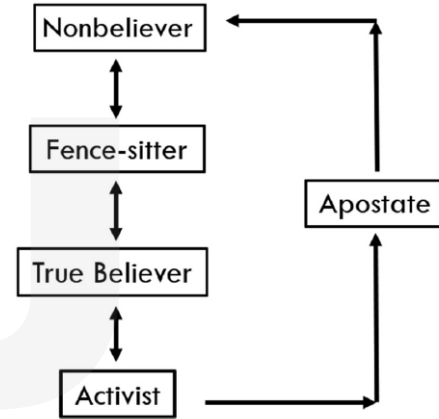




# Stages

- **True Believer**
  - Interventions

- Same as fence-sitters
- Empathy, non-judgment, non-confrontational
- Encourage disengagement & unplugging in favor of more healthy social interaction

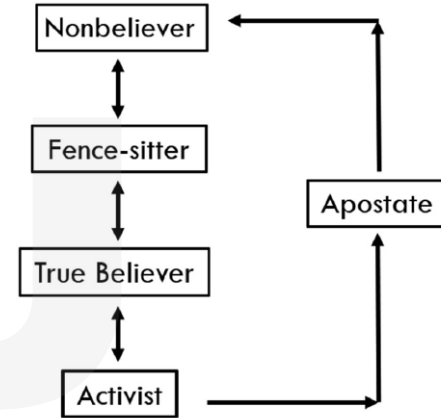


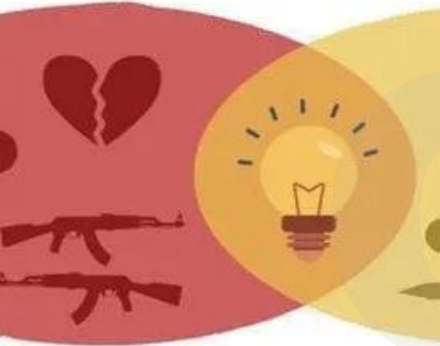


# Stages

- **Activist**

- Belief is not enough – necessary to act upon ideological beliefs
- Risk factors for violence
  - Ideological passion
  - Group identification
  - Quest for significance



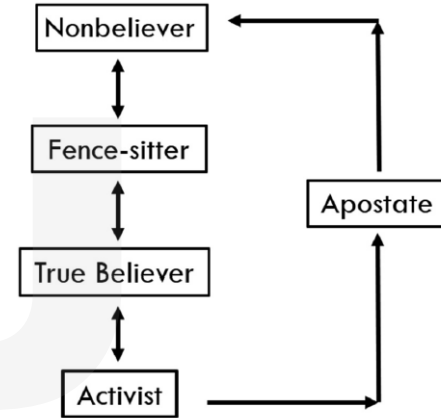


# Stages

- **Activist**

- (Risk factors for violence)

- Identity or existential threat
- Sense of grievance, unfairness, victimhood, urgency, exhausted alternative, and a foreshortened future
- Responses to “calls to action”



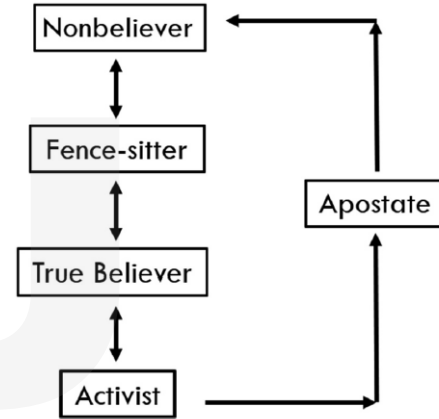


# Stages

- **Activist**

- **Interventions**

- Encourage healthy/non-violent activism
- Legal mandates
- Non-ideological social group interaction and support from apostates



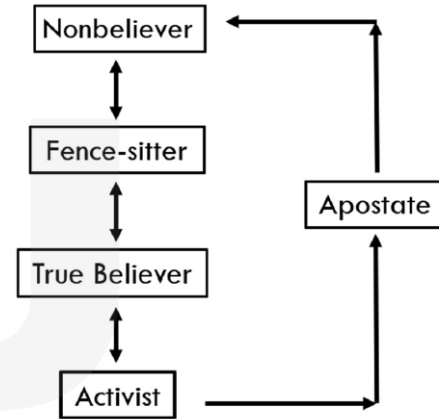


# Stages

- **Apostate**

- Abandoned or renounced belief in ideologies and conspiracy theories

- Abandoned social networks supporting them

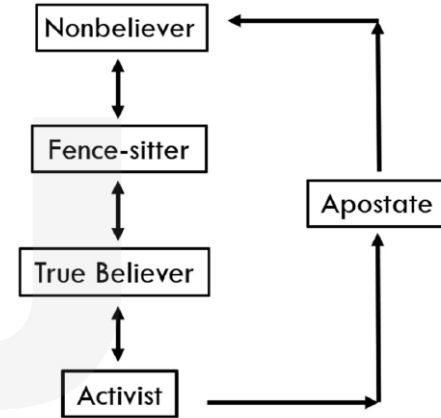




# Stages

- **Apostate**
  - Drivers

- Loss of faith in ideological leaders
- Counter-evidence and ideological contradiction stretching cognitive dissonance
- Intervention by family
- Legal repercussions



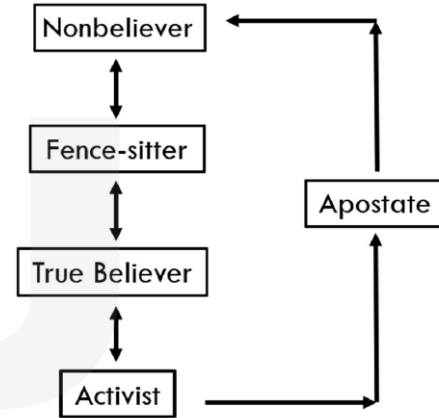


# Stages

- **Apostate**

- (Drivers)

- Physical separation from an ideological group
- Social interaction with and support from other apostates

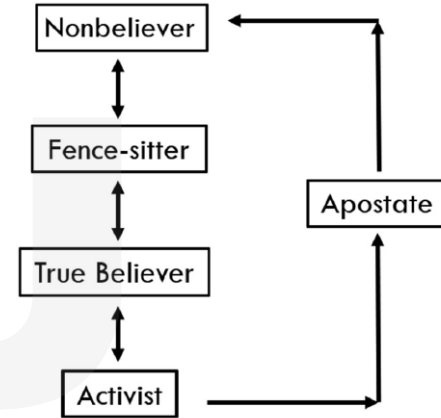




# Stages

- **Apostate**
  - (Drivers)

- Interventions that facilitate societal reintegration and provide alternatives to satisfy psychological need





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**The New York Times**

# ***Man Convicted in Pizzagate Shooting Is Killed in Confrontation With Police***

Edgar Maddison Welch, 36, of Salisbury, N.C., who was sentenced to four years in prison for the 2016 shooting at a Washington restaurant, was fatally shot after he pointed a gun at an officer during a traffic stop, the police said.

Jan. 9, 2025



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Thank you!

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