

Start with “why”: Approaching vaccine hesitancy with compassion

By: Ashlea Morgan

As a young, healthy neuroscientist working at a medical center; I hesitated to get the COVID-19 vaccine. I told myself I'd wait until all clinicians and older people got it. Though, If I'm being honest, I was scared.

According to the recent [census](#), 52 million Americans are unvaccinated. The top reasons were (4) distrust in the government, (3) distrust in vaccines, (2) safety concerns, and (1) side effect concerns. In fact, [75%](#) of those who were “definitely not” getting the vaccine believe it's riskier than getting COVID-19. As someone who gets sick easily, I, too, was one of the [25 million](#) people concerned about side effects.

Most concerns about the vaccine are reasonable and addressable, and though it will take time and effort, our next best steps to combat COVID-19 lies in compassion and conversation.

We know it's worth the effort because immunizations prevent ~2-3 million deaths a year and have the potential to save another 1.5 million lives a year with broader coverage. It is easy to acknowledge this statement but acting on it requires trust in the World Health Organization, the CDC, the NIH, and similar entities.

I trust scientific data that has been vetted and have an antenna for poorly developed studies and conclusions. Still, it's scary to put ourselves in harm's way, even temporarily, for protection we can't see. My fear drove me to learn more about the vaccine, and the lessons I learned may help others make the case for millions of vaccine-hesitant Americans.

One way to have this conversation is for vaccinated Americans who were initially vaccine-hesitant to share their stories. Here's mine: I spent weeks researching how the vaccine worked and its side effects. As a result, I started envisioning pieces of mRNA (which act like tiny Post-it Notes warning our bodies of an invader) and my cells mounting, creating potential long-lasting immune responses. I learned that the possibility of side effects was greatest while the vaccine particles floated around, after which the “Post-its” got crumpled and tossed. This helped, but I also knew the history of [medical exploitation and neglect](#) of Black Americans.

As a Black woman, I wanted to see for myself that the vaccines' safety and [high efficacy](#) held true for people with a similar background. In my research, I found that the Johnson & Johnson clinical trial had [~60,000](#) volunteers, but it was the [diversity](#) of vaccine trial volunteers (e.g., from 10+ different countries) that assuaged my concerns. I learned from the experiences of members of my community about the sore arm and flu-like symptoms I might have (which did wipe me out for 2-3 days). Fortunately, I could work from home unlike [75%](#) of Americans.

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Severe side effects of the vaccine are very [rare](#) (<[0.0011%](#) or the [odds](#) of getting struck by lightning in 2-10 years). Still, I trusted that I'd be supported if there was an issue. For some, lack of healthcare to treat even minor side effects is prohibitive, cost or otherwise. The [National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program](#) allows those harmed and their legal representatives to file vaccine injury claims. Vaccine hesitancy reduction includes policies to expand this program and provide adequate healthcare for vaccine-related illness.

Because I wasn't someone with an [allergy](#) for whom vaccine side effects were imminently life-threatening, I began to understand that getting it could spare me and those around me the worse fate of getting an [unpredictable, contagious](#), and possibly [deadly](#) illness with [long-term consequences](#).

Through my research, I also found that just [twelve](#) people are responsible for ~65% of the vaccine [disinformation](#) shared online. Disinformation and misinformation has reached 78% of people in the U.S. with 64% of unvaccinated people believing or unsure about 4+ false COVID-19 statements, [compared to 19% of vaccinated individuals](#). Although these false claims didn't reach me, they reached my parents through [Robert F. Kennedy](#). Each claim started with a kernel of truth that spiraled into unfounded conclusions.

[Dr. Brian Southwell](#), an expert on addressing mis-/dis-information, encouraged attendees of the recent Research!America meeting to offer compassion to hesitant individuals, learn what they are facing and know, empower them to seek accurate information, and embrace opportunities to translate science. Speaking openly with my parents as a trusted family member with similar political leanings and shared morality was a step towards them getting the vaccine.

As of November 2021, COVID-19 has taken [5 million lives](#), but through sustained efforts, [7.3+ billion vaccine doses](#) have been administered worldwide. And even after all my research, I was still unsure where to go. I got the vaccine only after a friend told me about a vaccination site at a [nearby Walgreens](#). To further our efforts, we need to start curiosity-driven conversations with those closest to us and share our stories of both “how” and “why”.