

## Episode 21 – Building Vaccine Confidence & Addressing Misinformation

With Gretchen Schultz and Alex Michel

Diane (00:00):

What really makes people hesitant about vaccines? We'll find out today on this episode of Vax Matters.

Clay (00:15):

Hello, everyone, and thanks for streaming Vax Matters. Here with us today are Gretchen Schultz and Alex Michel, research associates at the John Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. Now, their work has included creating the course How to Talk to Parents about Vaccines, which we'll learn a little bit about today. They'll also help us understand why many are so hesitant to receive vaccines and how perceptions about the COVID-19 vaccine may have encouraged that feeling. Welcome to you both.

Gretchen (00:49):

Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be with you all today.

Diane (00:49):

Thank you, ladies. And again, we are just so, um, just so honored by your expertise on the matter, and especially talking about the course of how to talk to parents about vaccines. It all goes back to vaccine confidence. So let's talk about that as we start off our podcast today. Why is that so important?

Alex (01:10):

I can- I can start off on this one. So, vaccine confidence is when people feel confident that the vaccines do what they're supposed to be doing, right? So, vaccines keep us and our families from getting sick. And, you know, most people are vaccine confident. They do believe, you know, like, vaccines keep us from getting sick and that's why we've had polio eliminated in so many places in the world. But, you know, sometimes people, they have questions or they have concerns. Sometimes it's about vaccines generally. Sometimes it's about a particular vaccine. And when we, as public health professionals, actually listen and answer people's questions, you know, most people will feel much more confident about actually getting a vaccine when they have their ans- you know, when they have their questions answered.

Alex (01:57):

And so, during the ba- during the pandemic, we've seen vaccine hesitancy, largely due to public fear and uncertainty around this new virus. Probably the most important thing to know about vaccine confidence is that it can change. So for a lot of people, even if they have questions, you know, they're really just trying to do what's best for themselves and their families. And, so, if we can get them the information that they're looking for, you know, how do vaccines work? What are potential side effects they may be, you know, have some concerns about? Are vaccines, you know, how much do they cost? Is the COVID vaccine really gonna be free? People can become much more confident, and that's really important because, again, the whole point of vaccine confidence is, you know, making sure that people don't get sick and that we keep everybody healthy.

Clay (02:46):

It's interesting how fast people jump to mistrust about vaccines when, uh, y- w- we all had a crash course in, in virology when COVID-19 came along and-

Diane (02:57):

Indeed, we did, yeah.

Clay (02:57):

... people had to read about what this was going to do and what side effects existed and whatnot. And then the story about the vaccine began to grow because we were thinking, "Okay, what do we do about it?" And trust is at the core, I believe, of people's ability to go to a doctor and say, "I want the vaccine." Can you talk a little bit about building trust, and- and what do you use to establish that rapport with- with someone to know that "Hey, it's healthy and it is smart to go and- and get vaccinated"?

Gretchen (03:28):

Yeah, I think that's a really important question. Um, we have seen throughout the years both historically and currently that medical professionals, doctors, nurses, et cetera, are at the forefront of confidence. Um, we still do, uh, as a whole, um, really trust our doctors' expertise in terms of if they recommend the vaccine or any vaccine, whether it's the COVID vaccine, um, you know, or others, it is really important that they promote it. And really are able, like Alex was saying, to answer those questions.

Gretchen (04:04):

I think there's been a lot of jumping to mistrust or questioning the effectiveness or safety of this vaccine in particular because it's sort of unfolding as this pandemic has been unfolding. Um, we've been learning so much in such a short amount of time, whereas a lot of us really don't remember or didn't really learn about the long... (laughs) process of developing, like, the polio vaccine, or other vaccines. We just kind of trusted that it was the right thing to do because our doctors were recommending it.

Gretchen (04:37):

And while that is important to keep in mind, it's also important that we are able to educate ourselves, that doctors are able to educate their patients and talk about, what are the questions that they may be having, and what are their concerns, so that they can feel much more confident going into getting vaccinated for themselves, their children, and other family members.

Diane (04:59):

And you know, as we all know, just going to the doctor ourselves throughout our lifetime. Doctors or medical professionals. In general, y'all have your own language. You know, medical professionals have their own language, and to break it down so that we can understand it, and sometimes, you know, when you're not- you're not trying to dumb anything down, but we do need to understand. And so that really is a challenge for you all too, to make certain that people understand and can make the best decisions possible, as you mentioned, for yourselves or for your family.

Diane (05:34):

So you have a course, is that correct? About how to talk to parents about vaccines. That's- that's an interesting course at Johns Hopkins. How- how, why and how was that created?

Gretchen (05:48):

Yeah, that's really important. You've touched on two really important points. Is one, medical professionals and researchers, I think, notoriously have not been great at communicating with the public in terms of there's this assumption that I'm an expert, so everyone's an expert. And I can use, you know, medical jargon, or, um, other... more convoluted terminology that may not be, um, something that the average person knows and understands really well.

Gretchen (06:16):

And so that's part of the communication, um, strategy there is really kind of making sure that we're able to as- as professionals, whether it's medical professionals, researchers, um, et cetera, to be able to break down these concepts and these concerns, and answer them to the lay audience that would really understand and get a full grasp of why this is important, what are the side effects that may be occurring, and how, um, how can I be part of this growth and improvement in- in vaccine confidence?

Gretchen (06:49):

Um, but really developing this course came from a lot of parents being really hesitant, as the COVID vaccine, not only for themselves, they were hesitant. But also, we were able to vaccinate children, um, in that sort of five to 11 age range, parents were really, really hesitant to do so. Um, and so we thought, let's- let's put together something, um, in which we can not only help to educate and answer questions that people may have, the general public may have about COVID vaccines.

Gretchen (07:23):

Um, but also be able to really share those strong communication techniques, to be able to talk, not only just to other parents, even though that was really the impetus for this, but also just the general public. We've seen throughout this course that parents are sharing some of the videos with their kids so that they can understand and feel more confident about getting the vaccine. Or sharing it with, you know, grandparents.

Gretchen (07:46):

And that is, so it is definitely, we geared it originally towards parents, having communication with other parents, um, on a day-to-day basis. But it's really so much larger than that, and the- these, um, these communication strategies are much more applicable than just a parent-to-parent contact.

Diane (08:05):

And it's not just COVID-19, correct? This is about across the board for all vaccines.

Alex (08:10):

Um, our training is really focused on COVID-19 vaccines because we were just getting a lot of questions about this. And you know, one of the things I think is really important too, you know, in thinking about, how do we answer people's questions, you know, really in, like, good faith. And I think parents are just really good at talking to other parents. So we really wanted to make something for them, so that, you know, they could go to one place, feel really confident that all of the

information is credible, and, um, true. You know that they're not getting sort of bamboozled by misinformation, or false information or anything like that.

Alex (08:50):

And that breaks things down very concisely, just to get to the- the answers that people are looking for. And so we put this course together, and a big shout out, um, to the parents and teachers who, you know, sat in on an advisory board with us. And really walked us through, um, some of the concerns and questions that they had and some of their friends had. Uh, so we worked with a- a group of parents and teachers from all over the country to really try to understand, you know, how to make it easier for them.

Alex (09:24):

Because being a parent, and- and/or often case, teachers often are parents as well, it was just really tough. You know, it was really tough for them to figure out the answers to some of these- these questions. And parents are just trying to do the best they can. You know, they want to protect their families. They want to make the best decisions for their children. And you know, a lot of parents have a pediatrician, or someone they can speak to who's a medical professional.

Alex (09:49):

But a lot of people also don't necessarily have a pediatrician or a regular health provider that they feel that they can, like, really go to for answers for some of this. Um, so we just wanted to make it easy for people to get the answers that they were already looking for. And again, huge thank you to the parents and teachers who helped us put this training together and really, you know, sat down with us for several hours and kind of walked us through, you know, what matters to them, and sort of, what, you know, just what concerns and questions that they've had over the course of this pandemic.

Clay (10:27):

So I'm to understand that after someone has taken your course, they're considered an ambassador. And then from that point, they can, in their homes and in their community, impact the way people understand vaccines. How do- how do- how does one do that?

Gretchen (10:42):

Yeah, that's a really great question. So, yes, you're absolutely correct, this training is- is, um, ideally to help promote the- the idea of a vaccine ambassa- this foundational knowledge and understanding of not only how the vaccine was developed, um, but sort of the background of how our bodies and immunology works. And, um, the development and safety and side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine, specifically, but also more broadly, um, communication strategies to have these really difficult, um, and sometimes tense conversations.

Gretchen (11:18):

Um, and so with- with this training, we're promoting that people feel confident in being able to promote accurate information, whether that's in face-to-face conversation, um, or if they're able, we have a lot of this is accessible and can be shared online. Um, I know that several of the folks from our, um, from our team really shared a lot of the videos that were really simple, one to two minute explainer videos on various topics. Um, and that too can be a really great, easy way for people to get accurate and truthful information out there.

Gretchen (11:57):

Um, you know, not just in their correct contact, but also to people that they may follow on Facebook, or on other social media platforms, um, and so that can help to promote, again, greater education and a greater foundation for feeling, um, vaccine confident, especially as we're looking at, um, vaccinating, um, children and- and those who are even younger.

Diane (12:21):

Alex, can you break down the specifics of this course? You know, what... I- I know it took a good, long while, as you both said. And you got so much valuable input. But what... when you talk about the course, and you know, short snippets, and answers, and just easy to understand, and vignettes and videos, what specifically is the course, and how does it work?

Alex (12:47):

Yeah, so, uh, our- our training, our course is hosted on a website called Coursera, and it's free. And you can take courses on- on pretty much anything on Coursera. Um, and so it'll work on your phone. It'll work on a computer. And basically, you create an account on the course, so you would go [www.coursera.org](http://www.coursera.org), or you can also, you know, Google, uh, parent vaccine ambassador training, and it'll come up. And you create an account, and that lets you go through and complete some of these different, um, modules. And again, this was some advice we got from the parents and teachers, which is that they're tired.

Diane (13:31):

Indeed.

Alex (13:31):

They don't want to watch one-hour lecture.

Diane (13:35):

Yeah, yeah.

Alex (13:35):

So-

Diane (13:35):

No time.

Alex (13:36):

We... No time. So we try to keep things, you know, fun and short. And so people were really, like, you know, can you, one, keep things really to the point and keep it short, and just answer my question. And then two, the course also has, uh, quizzes. So if you complete the quizzes and you pass them, you get, you know, a little certificate of completion. But it also just helps people, you know, test themselves to be, like, you know, I think I understand, you know, basic immunology. I mean, when I was in high school, I don't think we even learned about how vaccines works.

Alex (14:12):

So, you know, I think a lot of people have been really interested in just learning, one, some of the- the basic science of, you know, how does the immune system work? How do vaccines work? What is- what is the approval process for vaccines? But then also, a lot of these other questions that really important. So, you know, Gretchen brought up interpersonal communication. So that's our science jargon for it. But it's that, you know, you're at soccer practice. You're picking the kids up, and somebody asks you, you know, "Are you thinking about getting your kid vaccinated? Are you- are- what- what are you thinking about?" And that's an opportunity for people to, you know, be a resource for the other parents, or- or just the other folks in their community, to try to help answer some of these really basic questions that a lot of people have.

Alex (15:00):

Um, and this is true for lots of things too. You know, not just COVID vaccines. So the course covers some of these, um, you know, some of the research on how to have conversations with people about science. So there's a whole body of research on the science of science communication. And this is shown over and over and over again, just giving people the facts is not enough. To have meaningful conversations, we also need to really listen to people, and we need to answer their questions with a sense of trust and empathy along with the facts.

Alex (15:37):

And I think that parents and teachers are just, you know, intuitively really good at doing that because they're in that boat. You know, they're trying to figure out what is best. And they're looking at this information, and they're trying to assess, you know, what makes sense for their family. So they get it. So it's really, I think, just kind of a great opportunity for people to kinda help each other out with sorting through all this information that's out there and making some of these decisions that for some people, it's a really difficult decision.

Diane (16:10):

And you know, I like it when you said that there is a quiz at the end of each little mini segment. Because you know, when we're talking about misinformation, sometimes people think, "Oh, I know that. I know that." Well, you take a quiz, and you, ooh, you get the wrong button, and you don't know. And this way, you find out that no, this is not true. Or I misunderstood something. And I mean, it's immediate gratification when you're take your quiz. Either you pass it or you don't, or you know right away that you've got the right or wrong answer. So that is a perfect tool also for parents and for teachers.

Diane (16:46):

And again, these are quick. These are little vignettes. So it doesn't take a lot of time. Congratulations on doing this. What has been the response from people so far?

Gretchen (16:57):

Thank you, so, yeah. It's been overwhelmingly positive. Um, it really... we've promoted this and published this training back in January, um, and it has really just taken off. Um, and overwhelmingly, parents, teachers, other people in the public, not just in our own country but in other countries have gotten a hold of this training [inaudible 00:17:23]-

Diane (17:23):

Really?

Gretchen (17:24):

... and have found it really, really educational.

Diane (17:26):

Wow.

Gretchen (17:26):

Um, really succinct. One of the best things about it is it can take you anywhere between an hour and 90 minutes, and that's it. Um, and you're able to really focus in on what are the answers that you need. And what are the things that you're wanting to find out, and- and learn more about, and focus on that. Um, more specifically, if you're not really wanting to take the full course, although we recommend it... (Laughs)

Diane (17:49):

(laughs)

Gretchen (17:50):

That everyone take the full course. Um, but it has been, um, absolutely astounding how many people have responded so positively. Um, overall, we have, um, over 25,000 people currently enrolled, and have had-

Diane (18:06):

How many? 25,000.

Gretchen (18:07):

25,000.

Diane (18:09):

Oh my goodness.

Gretchen (18:11):

it has been, and we have- we've gotten responses from people as- as far as away as the Philippines and India, and, so it's not just folks in our own backyard, but everyone is wanting more of this information.

Diane (18:24):

So it's working.

Gretchen (18:24):

Um-

Diane (18:25):

It's definitely working, then.

Gretchen (18:26):

It is, we... So we have about 12,000 people that have already completed the course since January, and like I said, 20- almost 26,000 people that are currently enrolled in the course.

Clay (18:37):

I think this is... I- I- I- I wanna ask for- for people, because that's fantastic. 12,000 who have completed, 25,000 enrolled?

Gretchen (18:45):

Yes.

Clay (18:46):

Wow. So I know that it- it's gonna beg an obvious question for someone listening to you now. If someone wants to participate in this course, what do they do? I know it was... I think Alex referenced it earlier, but what do you do?

Gretchen (18:59):

Yeah, so you can easily go to coursera.org, or like Alex mentioned, you can just Google easily COVID vaccine ambassador training, how to talk to parents, and it will come up. And you'll click on that link. You'll create a really simple, um, easy sort of profile with your email and a password, just to kind of set yourself up. And then you have full unlimited access to the modules that we have, all of the information. We do also have additional resources for each of the modules if people want to learn more about a specific topic.

Gretchen (19:33):

That really was a bit more information that we necessarily wanted to or needed to share. With this, there's an additional resource page that has everything, links to- to more videos. Um, additional readings, et cetera. If people want to learn first, you know, for instance, a little bit more about the vaccine approval process, or more about vaccine communication, et cetera, there's additional resources as well.

Clay (19:59):

So, you know, one-

Alex (20:00):

And-

Clay (20:01):

Go ahead, I'm sorry, Alex.

Alex (20:02):

Oh, yeah. We also, because of the success of the course, um, just recently, it's been translated into Spanish. And so if anyone is interested in taking the course, um, and you- you speak Spanish, that is also available on coursera.org. And so if you are a- are looking for Spanish language resources, um, that is also, uh, another way to take this course, or to complete this training.

Diane (20:32):



Do you, in the future, see, because of how popular this is right now, how well received, do you see doing more? Adding more to what you've already had, as far your program, as far as taking this course.

Alex (20:47):

Yeah, absolutely. You know, one group of people that's been really interested in some additional resources are actually, you know, people who are healthcare workers themselves. Because you know, they typically don't get training as part of their education on what do you do if someone comes to you, and they've seen misinformation, or how do you have conversations sometimes when, you know, people have some of these concerns. And so we've actually been, um, working with healthcare professionals to develop some resources for them, um, to help them have some of these conversations.

Alex (21:25):

And then again, also to kind of help them be ambassadors, not just with their own patients, or- or in their own practice, but also, you know, on social media. So that they can sort of have some of the skills for, what do you do if you see, you know, someone that is your friend on Facebook or who's in a Facebook group with you share misinformation? How can you, um, sort of step in in a way that's helpful, and not just, you know, gonna- gonna cause an argument or cause disagreements. You know?

Alex (21:57):

And so, uh, another area that we've been really interested in, and have gotten a lot of really positive response from their course, is we have a section on misinformation. And that applies, you know, generally. So it's really, you know, our examples are about vaccines in- in our training, but a lot of this research around misinformation applies to lots of different types of misinformation.

Alex (22:23):

And so rather than sort of encouraging people to act as fact checkers, you know, we sort of encourage ambassadors, and this is what that section of the course really covers, to learn about, you know, how is misinformation spread? What are some of these sort of sneaky strategies that are used to kind of, um, you know, get people to click on things that are not necessarily true? So that people, one, know how to spot misinformation, and then two, are able to kind of explain this to some of their friends, their families, the people that they work with, and that can, like, really, really help stop the spread of information.

Alex (23:06):

It- it- it's one of the, you know, I think one of the really important things about this training is that you really can make a difference. It can feel very overwhelming because, you know, there's misinformation all over social media. But when someone you trust, who you know in real life, you know, adds a comment that says, you know, this is misinformation. Here's the true information, people do see that, and it can make huge difference.

Alex (23:31):

So we really want to empower people to, one, like, understand how to fact check and how to spot misinformation, but also, we really want people to come away with some of the knowledge and skills, and, like, the things that they really can do to kind of make a big difference for this issue.

Clay (23:48):

One of the things that... I- I know that you want ambassadors to do, as you just said, you want 'em to get the right information out there. However, it's- it's so tough because if someone has better information by having gone through your class, there's all this skepticism, now, and social media has encouraged aggressive skepticism, just for the sake of skepticism. What are some tips that you give to people to help them effectively communicate truth versus myth?

Gretchen (24:17):

Yeah, that's- that's a really great question, and something that we do go over, and as Alex mentioned, um, it, there's a huge amount of research that's going into how to best combat misinformation. Um, and- and truly, it can be broken down into really simple steps. Um, which we go through in the course. But also, it's to really sort of state the fact, um, and then to go ahead and reinforce why, "Hey, what you're saying is a little bit off kilter or maybe false information because of this reason. Um, but let me go ahead and explain to you the harms of spreading something like this as well. And then let me go ahead and finish up by restating the actual truth, the fact of the matter."

Gretchen (25:04):

Um, but again, keeping in mind that, um, unfortunately, arguing or simply just disagreeing with somebody is really not an effective way to help promote effective conversations, but also effective growth and development in terms of promoting accurate information. If we're just going to- to dismiss something, that doesn't necessarily take it down from the internet. That doesn't necessarily engage somebody to rethink, um, what they're posting, or reinvestigate what they're posting. But really, by stating the facts, listing why it's harmful to spread whatever it was that was not true, and then going ahead and doing this from a really compassionate, empathetic, kind way, is going to be much more effective, and people are going to receive that in a much more pleasant way, um, than just simply saying, "This is not true." And leaving it at that.

Alex (26:00):

Yeah, so this may be a little counterintuitive for some people. I know, like, for scientists, and- and researchers, this can be really difficult, but, um, you don't always want to lead with the facts in these kinds of situations. Um, you don't want the other person to be on the defense, and- and to be just trying to, you know, argue with you. You- you wanna have a real conversation with them, right? And so the most important thing you can do to try to have a real conversation where you're really, you know, maybe going going to, like, get your point across, is you wanna listen, you wanna listen what the other person has to say, and you wanna listen with respect.

Alex (26:40):

You don't want to be dismissive; you don't want to be defensive. You want to give the other person your full attention. Let them know what you hear what they're saying, and then you kinda want to ask open ended questions that are gonna help you really understand what their concerns really are. And- and you wanna do this even if you disagree.

Alex (26:58):

So, um, one of the other things that can be really helpful in these conversations is also sharing your own experience. That can be really power for building trust. So you know, for example, with, you know, new approval for COVID vaccines for younger children, you might want to share something, like, "Hey, I'm taking my son, Matt, to get vaccinated next Tuesday. When are you taking your son?" Um, and if someone, you know, has a piece of misinformation, or they're not sure, they have

questions, you know, really listen to them and try to get a sense of, you know, are these concerns that you maybe feel like you could direct them to credible information that could really help them make an informed decision.

Alex (27:41):

And so again, even if someone, you know, disagrees with you, they- they... you know, they have a concern that is based on misinformation. You know, something like the- the mRNA vaccines might change your DNA. Um, you're just gonna have a better, more meaningful conversation if you respond with empathy instead of just responding with, "That's not true." You know? So, um-

Diane (28:06):

Exactly, and you- you know, it really... There's a lot to be said about the art of conversation. Because conversation is an art. And to listen, you've got that body language thing going on. You know, you can see somebody bow up whenever you say something they don't agree with, and they ju- they've shut down. And no matter, you can talk yourself blue in the face, they are not going to listen, they're not going to agree, they're going to walk away. And so as you said, to talk with respect, to talk with truth, and to not be judgmental to people.

Clay (28:38):

Well, and- and- and to your point, this is such a serious thing.

Diane (28:42):

Yes.

Clay (28:42):

And it- it- it- it's a really intense subject matter. And so if- if you're not using interpersonal skills, and- and reading someone's nonverbals, and- and understanding that they legitimately may not want to be vaccinated because of misinformation based upon fear-

Diane (29:00):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Clay (29:00):

... not wanting to survive. So you're- you're trying to tear down those walls.

Diane (29:04):

Right.

Clay (29:04):

And that's- that's a great point, Diane. How hard is it, or is it hard for you to get people to grasp that aspect of what you'd like them to do? To- to learn to listen, to, as Steven Covey said, "Seek to understand, then to be understood." How- how do you get people to grasp that?

Gretchen (29:24):

I think that's a really important key is, I, one of the things that I really try and promote, not only through this course, but just in my day-to-day life is just practice. It really comes down to practicing.

Um, how, you know, if someone is coming to me with misinformation, I'm going to try and tease out, what is really sort of the underlying component here that is making them fearful, making them not trust, um, best public health guidelines, et cetera.

Gretchen (29:53):

And then, so that's the component of listening, is, you know, opening up and saying, "Okay, I'm gonna listen to their concerns, regardless of it's, you know, false information or slightly ajar (laughs) information, et cetera, or old information. I'm gonna listen and really try and get to the foundation of why they're hesitant."

Gretchen (30:12):

Um, and from that, I can then, um, utilize these interpersonal tools of listening with empathy, having that open body language, um, to go ahead and not only share some different information, some truthful information, some scientific information, but I'm doing it in a way in which I'm not bombarding them with facts. I'm not gonna just throw a bunch of CDC websites at them and say, "Read up on it." I'm gonna give them, I like to think of it as planting seeds. Each of these conversations that I have with somebody that may be vaccine hesitant, I'm planting a seed.

Gretchen (30:49):

And Alex may come along later, and she may plant a very, you know, the very same seed. And as there are more of those kinds of conversations, we can then begin to address the really underlying concerns that some of these parents and people have with, um, this factual information. And that may open them up to really understanding and being more open to and receptive to factual information that I can then share, or they can find, um, through scientific resources.

Diane (31:21):

So how many times have you all heard, or people come up to you and say, "Thank you. Thank you, God bless you."

Clay (31:27):

(laughs)

Diane (31:27):

We needed this.

Clay (31:28):

Right.

Diane (31:28):

It was overdue. Because there's so much out there right now, and to be able to have this, to have this course.

Clay (31:36):

Right.

Diane (31:36):

To feel good about what you're doing.

Clay (31:38):

Yeah.

Diane (31:39):

Like you said, parents talking to parents and starting this. How- how's that make you feel? I mean, you're the- you're the pioneers, you're the leaders on this. Thank you again.

Alex (31:49):

Yeah, no, it's super exciting. And, you know, we did not do this course alone. One of our colleagues, uh, Dr. Rupali Limaye, um, I think she's talking to somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 people about vaccines.

Diane (32:04):

Oh, wow.

Alex (32:04):

And so she's kind of, uh, known as, like, the vaccine lady, her at the pool-

Diane (32:09):

(laughs)

Alex (32:09):

... where her kids go.

Diane (32:10):

I bet she is. (laughs)

Alex (32:12):

Yeah, and so, you know, it - it feels really great to, like, help make a difference for people, and to just make sure that, you know, it makes things a little bit easier, 'cause I think parents and teachers have had, you know, a really rough two years. And it feels really good to me to know that we have made this- this difficult, you know, thing that much easier for them. And- and we can see that in some of the responses people have to the course. So if you look at the course on Coursera, it has a 99%, you know, rating. And you can-

Diane (32:48):

Very nice. Yeah.

Alex (32:49):

And you can look at the comments from people who've taken it, and- and you can see, you know, people are appreciative, and you know, people really, um, want to learn some of this information themselves too.

Diane (33:04):

At the end of the day, it's been worth all those... I'm sure the long nights and all the conversations and all the questions you've had with each other, with all your whole team. Do we add this? Do we do that? Is it simple enough? Can people understand that? So it's all come together. It's finally all come together for y'all.

Gretchen (33:22):

It absolutely has. And- and yeah, I would just- I would hope to echo everyone that helped, um, not only create this. We have some really amazing, um, people helping us create videos, and, um, pull together different resources that we can then pull from to- to create these modules and these lessons. And, um, it was truly a team effort, and it's just been so amazing. After, um, probably the first week, we had, you know, close to 1,000 people that were already registered for the course.

Gretchen (33:52):

And it just, completely, I think, blew us out of the water. We were completely shocked that that many people were really excited and yearning for something like this. Um, we were hoping that it would be successful-

Diane (34:05):

(laughs) Yeah.

Gretchen (34:05):

But we really didn't know, um, how receptive and open people would be to doing one more thing after a long day of work. Or, you know, spending a full day with a classroom of kids, whether on Zoom or in person. Um, but I think really kind of keeping it succinct, keeping it short and to the point. And giving people the information, um, that they were really wanting. Um, that was really largely, uh, shown to us from our advisory groups.

Gretchen (34:32):

Um, was really, really helpful in terms of what- what is- what are the biggest questions that you're hearing at soccer practice? Or, um, on, you know, the school playground. Like, what- what are we hearing, and what do we need to make sure that we're addressing? Um, and that was really, really important and impactful. And I think really shows in- in the way that this has been received.

Clay (34:54):

Wow. So to recap on that particular part of the discussion, beginning your retort to misinformation with, "No, idiot, that's not true."

Diane (35:02):

(laughs)

Clay (35:03):

Is not the most effective way-

Diane (35:04):

Probably not good. (laughs)

Clay (35:05):

... to get someone to your side in an argument.

Gretchen (35:08):

Sadly, that's gonna get people to [inaudible 00:35:08]-

Clay (35:08):

Yes, yes, yes.

Gretchen (35:08):

... pretty defensive. Rather than open-

Clay (35:10):

(laughs)

Gretchen (35:10):

... to- to learning further, but-

Diane (35:11):

What not to do, Clay.

Clay (35:12):

That what not to do, that's right.

Alex (35:13):

Yeah. (laughs)

Clay (35:14):

But you know, I- I- I- I laugh about it and joke about that, but there is so much misinformation out there, and you do want people to combat that misinformation. You know, how to do you that? What are some info- talk about some ways people can combat the- the information about COVID-19 that's floating out there? That's on the internet, and- and in other places.

Alex (35:33):

Yeah, so, I mean, one of the easiest things that I feel like sometimes we take for granted that people can do is sharing true information. Um, you know, you are probably a trusted resource in your community. Your friends and family are gonna, you know, have some trust in, I hope, have some trust in you. And- and information that you share, and so sharing true information is important.

Alex (35:57):

Um, the other thing that can be really important to is, um, you know, as- as I think Gretchen was saying earlier, is there are some ways that are more effective to debunk when people share, you know, information that's not true. And a lot of the times, people don't necessarily realize they're sharing information that's not true.

Clay (36:19):

Right.

Alex (36:20):

Right? Like, they're- they're- they're not intentionally trying to mislead anyone. And so I know it- it may not sound like much, but sometimes putting a comment, you know, under that post that says, this is actually misinformation. And- and we go through this in the training, but you know, you can take some basic fact checking steps. So, you know, what is the source? Is this coming from a credible source? When was it published?

Alex (36:46):

Um, does it include images or video that's been manipulated in some way? Um, where- where is the- where- where- where is the evidence coming from- from- from a story. Um, so again, it sounds like a really little thing, but just asking some of these questions, uh, either in person, or you know, online in your- in your social media can actually make a really big difference, and- and, um, people will often go, "Oh, you know, I didn't realize that. You know, this- this was coming from something that I- I've never heard of before, or I didn't realize that this wasn't- this wasn't true."

Alex (37:26):

And so just steps like that not only help prevent the spread of misinformation. Just, you know, fewer people seeing it. But it also really helps educate people about, you know, some of these good habits, on how to check before you share, to make sure something seems like it really is true, or it really is coming from a credible source.

Gretchen (37:46):

And just to add on sort of that more interpersonal level, when you're having these conversations, no one is expecting anyone to be an expert in all matters, especially with someone like a vaccine or immunology, et cetera. I think one of the most important things is when I don't know an answer, I'm gonna go ahead and do my best to go find the answer. And that's an okay response to when someone asks me a question, and I don't know the exact details that- of what they're asking, to say, "You know what? I'm not exactly sure of how to best answer that, but I'm gonna find that for you."

Gretchen (38:22):

And then I'm happily gonna send that onwards to you and make sure that, like Alex is saying, that I'm- I'm not just gonna make up or pull from something that I heard. I'm gonna do my due diligence and make sure that what I'm sharing is- is true, is from scientific resources, et cetera.

Diane (38:40):

And that is the respectful answer too. I don't know. Because we- we don't know everything. And you don't want to just pull something out of the air and then have it, you know, like, when you were a kid and you played gossip. You know, one, you know, one misstep, it goes on and on and on and on. By the time that it reaches, you know, another family, who knows? We've created a monster here. But that, what an excellent, you know, thought for people to know. You don't- you don't have to know everything.

Gretchen (39:06):



Absolutely not. I- I wouldn't expect that anyone be an absolute expert in all matters. Um, but it's- it's... I mean, the wonderful thing about being in such an age in which technology is at our fingertips.

Diane (39:20):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gretchen (39:21):

Um, we can find out these answers. There are wonderful, credible resources that we can look to for the most updated information. Um, and I think that that can be a really powerful tool, um, in- in not only your own understanding and confidence, but also promoting, um, accurate information, whether it be in those conversations with family and friends, but also online.

Clay (39:44):

So how does one test the message and the messaging to make certain that it is saturating ini- in the right way?

Alex (39:52):

Testing the message and sort of getting a sense of its- if it's hitting right, is a little... it's a little challenging. It kind of depends on, you know, who we're talking to. Um, what is the context? But one of the things that, you know, has been seen in research on vaccine hesitancy for a while, is that people, really, a lot of people, the majority of people are willing to change their minds if they get information that answers their concerns. And so it's, I think really helpful if you're talking to someone to ask these open ended questions to make sure that you understand, you know, what the concern is. So that you can kind of look up answers together.

Alex (40:39):

And so that's something I think is really helpful if you're talking to a family member or someone you know, is, you know, say they have, uh, a particular question or a particular concern is, you can say, you know, as we were just saying, you may not know the answer offhand. You can say, you know "I'm not sure about that myself, but that is a really important question. You know, do you wanna look that up together and we can try to figure that out together?" And I think that's a really good, um, way to kind of engage people.

Alex (41:10):

Um, as far as message testing, if you're looking at, like, you know, a bigger scale, right? So, like, a public health department, or- or maybe, um, you know, something like that, I think you really, again, it comes down to listening. You have to kinda think about, you know, who am I trying to- to talk to, and what are their questions? And am I really answering these questions? And so, you know, we've been doing a lot of message testing research, and- and we find that it- the answer is, it depends. It really depends on, you know, who you're trying to reach, and where they are, kind of, in their own process.

Alex (41:50):

You know, some people really just need a little nudge, you know, they just want to have a little bit more understanding of, you know, there's strong consensus. I think it's something like 93, 94, maybe even be up to 97% of doctors, you know, support people getting fully immunized against COVID-19. And something like that can be enough for most people.

Alex (42:17):

And then you might have other folks who really, like, have, you know, gone down the rabbit hole with getting into misinformation, and you know, messaging for that group may be a lot more challenging. Um, and you have to be patient. And really give people time to kind of make their own minds up, and to, you know, think through some of the information that's out there for them.

Clay (42:42):

I was gonna ask, you- you've- you've both said this a couple times, that you don't overwhelm people with the facts, or- or analysis or statistics. So what is a proper balance of anecdotal information versus the hard, statistical data, when you're trying to explain something to someone?

Gretchen (43:01):

I think that's a really important question, and definitely something that is on- on a very large scale. I think it really depends on where people fall in terms of hesitancy, and where they- where their beliefs are. I think I prefer, just personally, to start with something more anecdotal. Starting with something that really helps people open up. And be open to then, coming in with one or two factual points, um, based on whatever it is that their- their concerns are.

Gretchen (43:33):

But I think opening with that vulnerability of me sharing a personal story, and of me sharing something that I was, you know, witnessing in terms of, you know, someone getting sick with COVID, or how they respond to a vaccine, et cetera, can allow people to not immediately get defensive, but kind of relax a little bit, and put that wall down just a smidge, in order for me to, uh, to then have a much more productive conversation, um, in terms of sharing facts or, um, promoting accurate information.

Gretchen (44:07):

But again, like you said, you don't want to bombard them with just fact after fact after fact. Give them time to digest it. Give them time to sit with it, and think through it, and then maybe in a week, come back with something else. Um, you know, listening to their concerns again, and maybe they've shifted. um, their concerns are something different now. And that's okay too.

Gretchen (44:29):

Um, we're all very multifaceted. And so it is not a one size fits all approach. Um, really listening and engaging with that person, um, in an open and honest way, I think is probably gonna be the best way to- to continue having those conversations, and make sure that they're being as effective as they possibly can.

Diane (44:49):

I think that is important, that we always have to remember that we have to learn, and then sometimes relearn the tools that we use. And this course that you all put together, how to talk to parents about vaccines, wow. Y'all hit it out of the ballpark. You hit it out of the ballpark. It's gonna be so helpful, not only now, but on down the line.

Diane (45:12):

In our podcast today, we've covered a lot of topics. We've given a lot of concrete, good, correct information. Is there anything in our last minutes that we haven't talked about that you ladies would like for our listeners to be aware of today?

Alex (45:28):

I feel like, Gretchen, there's only sort of one more tip for having conversations with people that comes to mind to me that's just a really easy one.

Diane (45:39):

We like easy.

Alex (45:40):

And, um-

Diane (45:40):

We like easy. (laughs)

Alex (45:40):

Okay, good. So this comes from, again, like, decades of research on how do you talk to people about vaccines. So this is true for, you know, all vaccines, not just COVID-19, but you know, we kind of want to do what we see as what everyone else is doing. So this is, you know, in research, we call this a social norm. And so when people feel that the social norm is that, you know, other people are getting vaccinated, and they're okay, that's a real motivator for a lot of people.

Alex (46:10):

So in these conversations, you know, dropping in that over 200 million Americans have been fully vaccinated, or, you know, the vast majority of people have been fully vaccinated. That can be, um, I think very persuasive for a lot of people. And that, again, that is true not just for COVID-19 vaccines, but for other vaccines as well. Um, so that's just another one of those, you know, simple tips that is really research based, that can really help people, uh, have these conversations.

Gretchen (46:46):

I think like you're saying, Alex, creating that social norm, or allowing people to learn that "Hey, you know, people in our community, you know, this percent of people in our community have been vaccinated." Allowing people to understand that that is now the social norm in their community or being the person who starts that social norm. Um, you know, saying, I- I got vaccinated. My whole family is vaccinated. That can really help promote, um, uh, promote positive vaccine behavior, but also make people feel more comfortable to having conversations and asking, like, "Hey, how did you and your family respond to the vaccine?"

Gretchen (47:23):

I think there's a lot of questions in terms of side effects, 'cause it is a spectrum. And so you can then share your experience. And- and that's a really helpful and beneficial tool, that you don't- you don't need scientific fact for that. You are just sharing your own experience, and that can be a really good opening for becoming, you know, your own community's vaccine ambassador.

Alex (47:50):

And I guess-

Clay (47:50):

So great.

Alex (47:50):

One, I'm so sorry.

Clay (47:50):

No, go ahead, Alex.

Alex (47:50):

Kept interrupting you.

Clay (47:50):

Go ahead. Yeah, it's okay, go ahead.

Alex (47:54):

No, and I- I think one more sort of tidbit that I think is really important too is, um, the American Academy of Family Physicians just published a survey of 2,000 Americans, and they were asking them about trusting vaccines. You know, how has the pandemic affected your trust in vaccines generally? And they found that the majority of respondents expressed no change, so 40% of people, you know, said it hasn't really changed anything for me. But they also saw 30% of people actually experienced an increase in vaccine confidence since the pandemic.

Alex (48:27):

And so, you know, I think that's, like, a really important thing to keep in mind, is some of these conversations, again, are actually working. They actually really do help people feel like they understand, you know, why vaccines are important, and how they are helpful, and why- why they pr- how they- how vaccines help us protect each other.

Clay (48:49):

Is there a number one, in- in the course of talking or dialoguing with people who've gone through your course, is there a number one myth that you heard or saw more consistently than others?

Alex (49:01):

Oh, I don't- I don't know. The- one of the real challenges with the myths and misinformation is they're constantly changing. So that is really tough. Uh, to answer. I think the main concern that people have, or that I think comes up in a lot of misinformation is, I think a lo- I think people have concerns about potential side effects from the vaccines.

Alex (49:28):

Um, and so far, you know, what we've seen in the data, again, over 200 million Americans, you know, fully vaccinated, is that the risks of getting COVID-19 are much, much higher for you and your

family, then some of the- the potential risks or side effects from the vaccines. And so, in the training, we actually go through some of the comparisons. So again, like, a- kind of more, like, an apples-to-apples comparison. So people can get a sense of, you know, yeah, there have been some rare side effects from the vaccines. That- that does happen.

Alex (50:05):

But also, COVID-19 itself can cause, you know, damage to many different organ systems in the body, and I think people don't always, you know, see that in the news. And aren't always aware of that. And so getting to see the real sort of comparison, um, I think answers a lot of the questions we get around, you know, potential side effects or tradeoffs of the vaccine versus getting sick with COVID-19.

Diane (50:33):

And I believe that's a case in point to what you said, Gretchen. That's when your personal story or that testimony to your health, that's what plays so well, because you're not being expert, you're just saying, "This is what I've done. This is how it impacted me, and this is why I did it."

Gretchen (50:49):

Exactly, exactly. Yeah, and- and obviously, context changes concerns. But I think overwhelmingly, allowing people to not only hear your own testimonies, hear your own stories. Um, but really sharing, you know, that there are significant risks associated with COVID itself. And so by having- by being vaccinated and that allows you to have a much more mild case of COVID, if you do in fact get COVID post-vaccines, as opposed to the risks and health concerns that arise if you're not vaccinated, and you get COVID.

Gretchen (51:29):

Um, I think those are really, really important, but also, like Alex mentioned, unfortunately, myths and misinformation changes at the drop of a dime, and, um, and so hopefully we can use some of these tools and recognize these myths and misinformation better so that we can be more effective at combating and having better conversations?

Diane (51:51):

And that's kind of the nature of the beast to being a human being, isn't it?

Clay (51:54):

It is, it is.

Diane (51:54):

Yep, it's gonna go on forever, I think.

Clay (51:56):

Well, Alex, Gretchen, we appreciate you so much, the work that you're doing at Johns Hopkins, and, uh, and really this effort to get rid of so much of the information out there. Thank you so much for joining us.

Diane (52:08):

You both were fabulous, thank you.

Alex (52:10):

Thank you.

Gretchen (52:10):

It's been a pleasure.

Clay (52:11):

And we hope that everyone who's been listening has enjoyed this wealth of knowledge that has been shared with us today. Thank you for listening to another episode of Vax Matters.