

To Empathize or Not to Empathize with the Unvaccinated

In the past, vaccines took up to ten to fifteen years to manufacture and distribute. This is because of the complexity of vaccine development. But within the past year and a half, scientists have been able to manufacture and distribute COVID-19 vaccines. With so many concerns with the vaccine, how is one supposed to view those who choose to not receive the vaccine? Should those who die because of COVID-19 and are unvaccinated should they receive empathy? Writers are finding it hard to empathize with those patients and are asking us to think about it from their perspective. Those who are more empathic feel sorry for the unvaccinated, those who are unempathetic feel frustration and anger towards the unvaccinated. Some feel that the unvaccinated deserve empathy because they are dying, others feel they should not feel empathy because they could prevent getting sick just by getting the vaccine. One thing that could have advanced these articles was having interviews with students who were forced to get the vaccine to attend school this fall.

Some writers say that the unvaccinated should not receive empathy but instead with anger/frustration. Cory Sicha in his article the empathy wars believes that the unvaccinated should not receive empathy. His article talks about how many people who are vaccinated are unable to wrap their heads around the idea of being unvaccinated as death rates continue to rise. He says that “one home for the most furious of those types is a Reddit board called HermanCainAward, which bestows its titular award ... posthumously. The forum is named for the former presidential candidate Herman Cain, a cancer survivor who was opposed to wearing masks to prevent transmission of coronavirus.” (Sicha). Sicha is frustrated at those who are not getting vaccinated because they believe it is a hoax or fake or due to misinformation. This is clear throughout his writing as well when he talks about “Crappy low-res memes,

misinformation, general jackassery, nastiness — it's bad out there. This is misinformation that kills whole pews of churches. It's unreal to witness the information filth-pit the anti-vaxxers live in, even if, as some of us, you are regularly exposed to and/or are related to them.” (Sicha).

Another writer who agrees with Sichá is Tressie McMillan Cotton, the author of *The Limits of My Empathy for Covid Deniers*. Cotton says that she is “finding it hard to muster the empathy these stories try to elicit because other images are so fresh in my mind. The maskless rallies, the red-faced anti-maskers screaming at grocery store workers, the protesters hurling invectives at the school teachers who are begging for masks so that schoolchildren can return to school — those images fill me and crowd out my empathy.” (Cotton). Cotton agrees with Sichá to stop empathizing with the unvaccinated. She doesn't believe that not giving empathy is death shaming but instead may be promoting others to get vaccinated. She is worried that the onslaught of Covid denial stories could be robbing her of undermining her empathy for others. Cotton also is worried that by not doing the most we can in our communities, such as getting vaccinated, people are actively harming those who they love.

While some writers are completely unempathetic, other writers are trying to empathize with the unvaccinated. Chavi Eve Karkowsky, the writer of *Vaccine Refusers Risk Compassion Fatigue*, feels angry towards the unvaccinated but also feels empathy towards those dying of COVID-19. Karkowsky is a medical doctor in New York City and has worked closely with pregnant COVID-19 patients. Karkowsky states that “health-care workers have suffered through a terrible year and a half—a period first defined by a lack of masks and gloves, and throughout by the very real fear of personal sickness and death. We have been afraid of bringing the disease home, infecting our spouses, and of leaving our children parentless. For about three months, I didn't kiss my children.” (Karkowsky) People's choice to get unvaccinated affects other people's

lives besides their own. Karakosky uses her own life as an example when trying to prove this point. Still unsure why those deciding to not get vaccinated after such a rough year and a half, Karakowsky believes that the main reason why the pandemic in the U.S is not over yet is because of those who are refusing to get vaccinated. He says that some people have valid reasons, but most are refusing not because of information. It is more rooted in a general mistrust of the government. Emily Sohn is one author who also agrees with Karkowskys feelings toward the unvaccinated. Sohn wrote *Empathy Fatigue in Clinicians Rise with Latest COVID-19 Surge*. Unlike Karkowsky who worked closely with COVID-19 patients, Emily Sohn is a freelance journalist in Minnesota. Sohn interviewed numerous doctors to help build her article. One quote included in Sohns's article shows readers that doctors are finding it hard to express empathy towards patients because they are tired. "Compassion fatigue or empathy fatigue is just one reaction to feeling completely maxed out and overstressed, Nelson says. Anger at society, such as Erickson experienced, is another response." This quote helps readers to understand where doctors are coming from, and how nowadays patients may be seeing less empathy in the office.

An author who feels that would empathize with the unvaccinated is Elizabeth Bruenig. Bruenig is an opinion writer who has written for The Washington Post, and The New York Times and currently writes for the Atlantic. Bruenig's article *Stop Death Shaming* explores her ideas on empathy toward the unvaccinated. Bruenig interviewed her uncle who is an auto repairman in North Texas. She empathizes with her uncle for not getting the vaccine and states that it is "fair enough" because her uncle wanted to wait until there was more research on long-term effects. Her uncle does say that "[he'll] be honest, [he doesn't] watch a lot of the news, because stuff like that, you're almost—you're almost ashamed if you don't have it" (Bruenig). He states how the articles about the unvaccinated dying aren't persuading him either. Most unvaccinated people are

waiting on more traditional vaccines like Novavax, a non-mRNA vaccine. Renee Graham, an opinion columnist for the Boston Globe, agrees with Bruenig that the unvaccinated should receive empathy. Graham states that “from the beginning of this pandemic, there’s been a severe deficit of empathy. Armed anti lockdown protests seemed to accelerate last spring after headlines indicated that people other than the protesters themselves — especially communities of color — were disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Health officials and educators trying to keep children safe are being terrorized over mask and vaccine mandates. Americans’ inability to put the greater public good above their selfishness and political ideology has been this virus’s most deadly mutation.” (Graham). Graham empathizes with those unvaccinated because she feels bad that they are to blame for the pandemic. She understands the frustration people have with the unvaccinated, but she “just can’t debase my humanity to mock the dead and dying.” (Graham). French is the author of *The American Crisis of Selective Empathy* and is an American Commentator for the Dispatch, and also empathizes with the unvaccinated. In French’s article he talks about how Americans are experiencing an empathic crisis, “but it’s not quite the crisis you might think. Our empathy can overflow for the people we love, for the people within our tribe—even when they make grave errors. But what about our empathy for “them,” the people we distrust? Then empathy is in short supply. Indeed, in some cases, the very concept of empathy is under fire.” He believes that right now the answer is to empathize with all because COVID-19 is hard for everyone. He understands why some may be frustrated with the unvaccinated, but to stop death from shaming those dying from lack of vaccination.