

# LIVING OPENLY SECULAR

Despite the large and growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated adults, living openly secular often incurs a range of social costs.

- 🌀 Verbal Harassment
- 🌀 Social Ostracism
- 🌀 Coercion
- 🌀 Stereotyping/Slander
- 🌀 Being "Outed"
- 🌀 Proselytization

A **secular** person is someone who does not believe in a higher power or supreme being. There are multiple labels that secular persons can adopt that best describe their nonreligious beliefs. An **atheist** is someone who does not believe in any gods. An **agnostic** either sees the existence of god or gods as unknowable, or makes no individual claim to know the answer. **Freethinkers** and **skeptics** see science and reason as more dependable than religious doctrine and revelation. Humanism is a nontheistic philosophy that focuses on improving the human condition. Only the natural world warrants consideration for **naturalists** (as opposed to the supernatural), and empirical evidence is the core of their worldview.

Like sexual preference, secular identity can be concealed. There is nothing wrong with keeping part of yourself private, but keeping who you are a secret out of necessity is linked to psychological distress and diminished well-being. So while there is a potentially high social cost for living openly secular, inhibiting free expression increases the likelihood of experiencing high psychological costs.

*"If I come out, everyone is going to hate me. I sort of went into a long depression after I realized that. But it was through opening up about my non-belief that my depression sort of slipped away. I found my voice, my sense of self-worth, and my confidence." - Matt*

# ABOUT OPENLY SECULAR

Openly Secular is a coalition project that promotes tolerance and equality of people regardless of their belief systems. Founded in 2013, the Openly Secular coalition is led by four organizations - Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, and Stiefel Freethought Foundation. This campaign is also joined by national partner organizations from the secular movement as well as organizations that are allies to our cause.

The mission of Openly Secular is to eliminate discrimination and increase acceptance by getting secular people - including atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, humanists and nonreligious people - to be open about their beliefs.



**Openly Secular**  
PO Box 2371  
Columbus, OH 43216  
Email: [info@openlysecular.org](mailto:info@openlysecular.org)  
[www.openlysecular.org](http://www.openlysecular.org)



Special thanks to PFLAG, [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org), and the Secular Safe Zone Project, [www.secularsafezone.org](http://www.secularsafezone.org), for allowing us to adapt pieces of the *Our Daughters and Sons: Resources for Parents Guide* and the *SSZ Resource Guide for Allies* for this text.

**For Extended Family & Friends:  
Understanding Your Secular Loved One**  
Copyright © 2014 Openly Secular.  
*Some Rights Reserved.*

Content written by Lori L. Fazzino, M.A.  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Graphic design by Sarah Hamilton,  
[www.smfhamilton.com](http://www.smfhamilton.com)

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International. More information is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Openly Secular grants permission for all non-commercial uses, including reproduction, distribution, and adaptation, so long as you credit Openly Secular and provide others with the same rights.

# FOR EXTENDED FAMILY & FRIENDS: Understanding Your Secular Loved One



## WELCOME

If you are reading this brochure, you probably just learned that someone you love is secular. Whether you were surprised by this news or if this admission is something you suspected for awhile, it's important to know that by opening up to you, your loved one made an important step on their journey towards living openly and honestly. This brochure is intended to help siblings, extended family, and friends understand and respond to loved ones who have decided to live openly secular. While we acknowledge the difficulties of learning that your loved one is questioning religious beliefs or has lost faith altogether, we believe it is important for family and friends to refrain from reacting harshly, responding negatively, and labeling the secular people with whom they have a relationship.

## A MESSAGE TO LOVED ONES

### "You Are Friends With an Atheist."

*If you live in the United States, you are almost certainly friends with at least one atheist, agnostic, nonbeliever, skeptic, or unaffiliated humanist, whether you know it or not. And your friend almost certainly endures prejudice and unequal treatment, whether you know it or not. And your friend is roughly as decent, good, loyal, honest, courageous, and generous as your other friends, and you know it...*

*...Those who get along without God are not lynched or stoned in this country, but neither do they have equal rights or acceptance. They encounter prejudice and cruelty on a personal level often. They pay taxes that support "faith based" programs and discriminatory organizations, as well as proselytization in the military, they see religion and religious based pseudo-science imposed on their children in public schools, and the stigma attached to their free-mindedness restricts their participation in public life. There are probably 20 atheists in Congress, but only one who admits it, and he won't use the word. President Obama's parents were both atheists, whether or not they used that word for it, and he got along fine without religion but would not have gone far in politics had he not adopted it...*

*...A lot of people who care deeply about civil rights, including atheists, have no sense of loss over religion, but a lot of other people have more need for direct community and reassurance than for lobbying Congress. Both approaches are needed. When you find out who your atheist friend is, you can offer to help. - David W.*

## REMEMBER THAT U.C.A.R.E.

Religious family members and friends are often unprepared to hear that their loved one is secular. It is important to sort out your feelings, which may at times be contradictory and confusing. Give yourself the opportunity to explore these feelings. However, it is never too late to show your love and support. Many families come to a place of healing and acceptance over time. You can choose to emerge from this period with a stronger, closer relationship with your loved one, if you show them that **U.C.A.R.E.**

### Understand.

- Secular people are normal, everyday people guided by their own values and morals.
- Most stereotypes about secular people are not true.
- Your friend or family member wants to have an honest relationship with you.
- Sharing who they are with you does not have to change your relationship.

### Consider.

- How valuable the relationship with your friend or family member was before they opened up to you.
- How your responses affect their well-being.

### Ask.

- How did they arrive at the decision to be secular?
- What values do they hold to be important?
- What will and will not change?
- What support do they need from you?

### Respect.

- Just as you want to be respected, so does your loved one.
- Avoid debating.
- Try not to use dismissive, invalidating, or condemning statements.
- Respect their position - they don't believe that they need to be "saved."
- Above all else, do not "out" them to other people.

### Express.

- Express your love and support when you are able.
- If applicable, open up about your own secular identity.
- Make sure they know, regardless of ideological difference, that you value your relationship.

## MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Remember, as difficult as this is for you, opening up to you was not easy for your loved one, who likely was worried about losing your love, respect, and friendship. It is important to remind yourself that they are the same person today as that they were yesterday, before you knew about their beliefs. Your loved one's rejection of religious beliefs is not a rejection of your family values or the values that hold your bond of friendship together. The most important thing you can do moving forward is to express unconditional love.

You are on a journey. Like every journey, this one will have its ups and down, but know that many families and friends taken same path and arrived in a place that is better than where they started. The important thing is that you and your loved one are working to understand one another.

*"I told my mom awhile ago that I felt like I was born to run marathons, but every time I started running, somebody would bash me in the kneecaps. I'd heal, get back up, and soon somebody bashed me in the kneecaps again. That somebody was religion. I finally got rid of religion. Finally I can run free and unimpeded." - Annie E.*

It is never too late to show your love and support, not only to your loved one, but also to yourself. Find a support network of people you can talk to and do some research.



For more information on how support, educate, and advocate for your secular loved one or on being a religious ally, visit:

[www.openlysecular.org/toolkits](http://www.openlysecular.org/toolkits)