

A young woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a black leather jacket over a green mesh top, is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is holding a blue folder. To her right, a young man with short dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt with a colorful graphic, is smiling and looking upwards. The background consists of overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of orange, peach, and light blue, creating a modern, abstract feel.

# OPENING MINDS CHANGING HEARTS

A Guide to Being  
Openly Secular





*A Beginner's Guide to Becoming Openly Secular.*  
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## ABOUT THE OPENLY SECULAR CAMPAIGN

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.

## OUR MISSION

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.



## SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank **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 *Be Yourself: Questions and Answers for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth* and the *Secular Safe Zone Resource Guide for Allies* for this text.

## USING THIS TOOLKIT

In this toolkit you'll find key ideas, quotes from openly secular individuals, and links to the Openly Secular website that will provide you with more information about various topics. The following icons will help you identify each of these elements.



Key Idea



Supporting Quote



Weblink

## PREFACE

We believe that life, in all its fragility, is precious. From this perspective, values like authenticity, freedom, diversity, and equality are important. We believe that as all people should be able to openly live their truth. If we cannot express who we are, for whatever reason, we cannot fully live an authentic life. Sadly, this is a common experience for many people who conceal, downplay, or in some cases, have to be untruthful about their secular beliefs. Choosing not to affiliate with a religious institution is becoming increasingly normal, but expressing doubt or disbelief in the existence of god, gods, or supernatural phenomena is still taboo. To a majority of Americans, being secular is unacceptable.

People often forget that the beliefs, values, and behaviors that are “acceptable” are collectively determined by a small minority with the power to dictate normative standards for rest of us, who comply with these standards because we agree with them, believe that they are “natural” or fixed, or feel that challenging them is too costly. We are all social animals who on some level want to be liked and included, and many of us would rather hide part of ourselves than risk losing social acceptance. Unfortunately, silence is compliance, and compliance maintains the status quo.

The good news is that we can change the standards of acceptability. We believe that secular people have remained silent for far too long. This toolkit provides practical information on how to be openly secular. The information in these pages is based on scholarly research, personal experience, and lessons learned from past social movements. However, only you can determine what is and isn't applicable in your situation. This guide from the Openly Secular campaign encourages you and your loved ones to join our efforts to increase secular acceptance by eliminating religious discrimination.

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## WELCOME

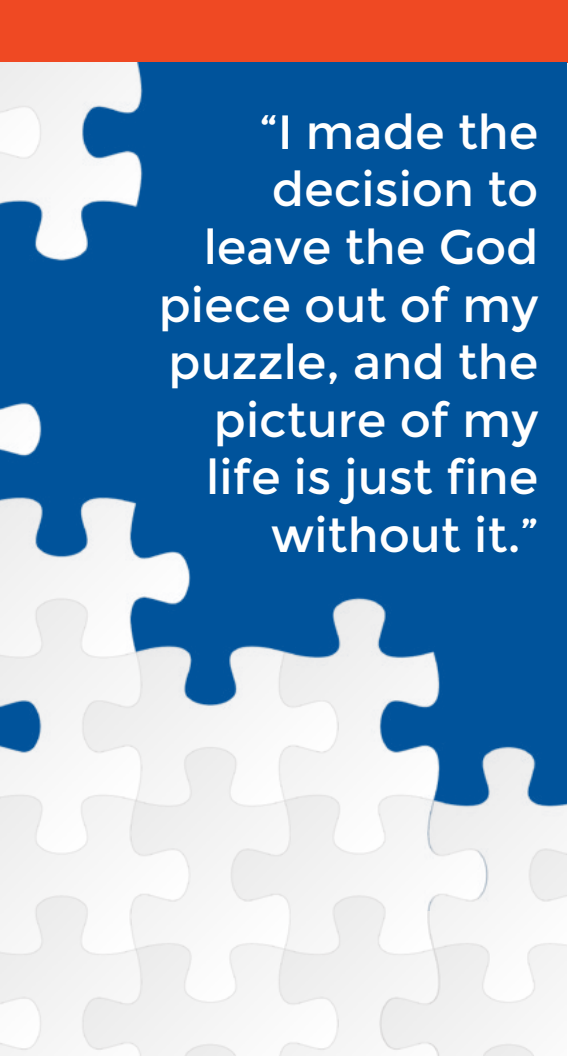
Thank you for making the choice to look at this toolkit! Whether your journey is just beginning, you've been on this path for awhile, or are considering joining a friend or loved one on their journey, we want to congratulate you for coming this far. Regardless of why you're reading this, we hope that after you're done you will be more informed about what it means to be openly secular, and if you don't already know, what many people experience prior to being open.

Take Lyz, for example. Lyz is like that really great friend you call at 3:00 am for a ride or that awesome boss you once had at that job you're still kicking yourself for leaving. She's that unassuming, low maintenance person that you meet and instantly click with. Are you able to picture the "Lyz" in your life? Their imperfections allow us to relate to them and them to us. This is Lyz's story.

## LYZ'S STORY

*Life is often a bit like a jigsaw puzzle that you transform into a coherent story by fitting all the pieces together. However, in my jigsaw puzzle of life, there was always this one extra piece that just didn't fit - God. The pieces of my puzzle went together wonderfully without it, but when I tried to fit this last piece into the picture, it made everything else wrong. Finally, I just stopped trying to make the extra piece fit. I made the decision to leave the God piece out of my puzzle, and the picture of my life is just fine without it.*

*My father was a deacon in the Episcopal church, where he found most of his community and spiritual support. I was reluctant to tell him about my "no-god-necessary" worldview, especially since he was getting up there in years, and I didn't want to introduce that tension into our relationship.*



“I made the decision to leave the God piece out of my puzzle, and the picture of my life is just fine without it.”

*So when he sat down next to me one day and asked in his “not-beating-around-the-bush” way, “Are you an atheist?”- I cringed.*

*“Well, yes,” I admitted, nervous about how he was going to react. “But I usually use the term Humanist since it includes more of my values.”*

*“Oh,” he replied. “Good. Because atheists, you know, they’re always protesting with signs.”*

*And that was that. No tension, no drama. As long as I was staying safe, happy, and out of trouble (and I suspect that he felt that protesting was likely to get me in trouble), he was happy with my life choices. My father continued his relationship with the church, and I continued my work in the secular community. Me, a professional atheist, and my dad, an Episcopal deacon, simply remained father and daughter.*

*This story was written by Lyz Liddell, a professional atheist and the Director of Campus Organizing for the Secular Student Alliance in Columbus, Ohio.*

## BEING OPEN WITH YOURSELF

Your willingness to identify as secular is likely shaped by your exposure to religion while growing up. For many of us who were raised with religion, opening up to ourselves begins by being introspective about our lack of faith. We begin to ask tough questions about our belief systems and will often rely on media and Internet resources to find alternative answers.

Before faith can be rejected altogether, individuals may need to reconcile their fear of adopting a secular identity. According to a 2012 Pew study, more Americans say they do not believe in God or a universal spirit (7%), than say they are atheists (2.4%)<sup>§</sup>. These people have not opened up about their atheism to themselves. The term “atheist” generates many negative connotations, resulting in people avoiding the label—but avoidance is exactly how the label gets its power.

§ Access the full report at: [pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise](http://pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise)



*“I wanted so much to believe. Whether it was to make my parents happy or because I thought it was the right thing, I wanted desperately to believe. But after realizing that it wasn’t there, I finally acknowledged to myself that I no longer believed in God. And the amazing thing was that once I acknowledged that to myself, I felt so much lighter. I felt instantly better and so much happier.” - Annie E.*

**Before you can open up to anybody, you must first open up to yourself. This means self-identifying with a secular worldview that is consistent with your beliefs and values and becoming comfortable with your new secular self. Remember, your secularism is only one piece of who you are.**

## IN GOOD COMPANY

Being secular means being in good company! Here are just a few well-known celebrities who live openly secular – writers, actors, comedians, athletes, scientists, activists, artists, entrepreneurs, heads of state, and more:

Alice Walker  
Joss Whedon  
Salman Rushdie  
Natalie Portman  
Meryl Streep  
Daniel Radcliffe  
Chris Rock  
Samuel L. Jackson

Ayaan Hirsi-Ali  
Michelle Bachelet  
Frank Lloyd Wright  
Dave McKean  
Frida Kahlo  
Ai Weiwei  
Pablo Picasso  
Alan Turing

Whoopi Goldberg  
Alexander McQueen  
Morgan Freeman  
Bill Gates  
Steve Wozniak  
Chris Kluwe  
Diana Nyad  
Warren Buffett

Jane Goodall  
Mark Zuckerberg  
Carolyn Porco  
Kathy Griffin  
Neil DeGrasse Tyson  
Adam Savage



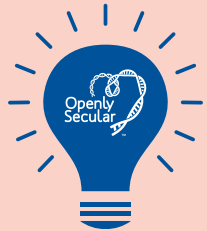
To learn more about these and other famous secular people, visit:  
[www.openlysecular.org/FamousFreethinkers](http://www.openlysecular.org/FamousFreethinkers)

## UNDERSTANDING DECONVERSION

For many, deconversion is a difficult, painful, and confusing process. The good news is that things will get better. You may think that the cost of leaving religion might outweigh the benefits. It is perfectly normal to feel this way.

### Leading Reasons for Religious Deconversion

- ⚙ Intellectual Inconsistencies
- ⚙ Theological Concerns
- ⚙ Biblical Inaccuracies
- ⚙ Moral Concerns
- ⚙ Moral Hypocrisy
- ⚙ Interpersonal Interactions
- ⚙ Lack of Spiritual Experience
- ⚙ Spiritual Anger/Disappointment
- ⚙ Emotional Suffering



#### Finding Support

The key to overcoming issues with deconversion and opening up is finding an accepting secular support network. You may not realize you need it, but validation is important and will increase your confidence about deciding to live authentically.



Many of the Openly Secular movement partners help people find such networks. For more information, visit: [www.openlysecular.org/partners](http://www.openlysecular.org/partners)



*“It was so refreshing to come home from church on Sundays and get on [friendlyatheist.com](http://friendlyatheist.com) and look at six or seven days’ worth of blog posts. I loved going to that blog. I was in turmoil until I got home where I could breathe, log on, and find support in reading posts from people who felt the way that I did.”*

- Amanda

## BEING OPEN WITH OTHERS

Maybe being secular isn't an important part of your identity. Maybe it doesn't come up in your everyday life. Some people are secular by default and might not see the need to have a serious conversation with friends and family. Maybe being secular is an important part of your identity, but living openly is too costly or you don't know how to have the hard conversations with friends and family. Maybe you are afraid of hurting or disappointing the people you love, or that you will be treated differently based on your beliefs. Some people remain quiet about their secular identity to avoid face-to-face confrontations with religious loved ones or as a way to mitigate secular discrimination. Other people want to live openly secular, but don't know where to begin.

### Throughout the disclosure process, it's common to feel:

- 🌀 Anxious
- 🌀 Scared
- 🌀 Angry
- 🌀 Worried
- 🌀 Guilty
- 🌀 Alienated
- 🌀 Annoyed

### But you may also find that you feel a lot of these things as well:

- 🌀 Empowered
- 🌀 Liberated
- 🌀 Relieved
- 🌀 Happy
- 🌀 Certain
- 🌀 Brave



*"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*

Sometimes there are very good reasons not to open up; living openly secular is not without social cost. People who won't accept you because you don't believe in a god may say and do terrible things. And not just strangers – these people could be your parents, friends, and former clergy.

There are also very good reasons for opening up. Hiding your secular identity keeps the important people in your life from knowing about a big part of you. By opening up you can live with integrity, begin building community support, and form healthy relationships. Being open also makes it easier for others to do the same.

## RISKS OF OPENING UP

- ⦿ You may experience immediate feelings of psychological/social injury
- ⦿ You may confront negative reactions, judgment, and hostility from others
- ⦿ Close relationships with family and friends may fracture
- ⦿ Your religious significant other might find your secularism incompatible
- ⦿ Your parents might deny financial support or kick you out of your home
- ⦿ You may experience prejudicial attitudes, harassment, and discrimination

## BENEFITS OF OPENING UP

- ⦿ Living honestly and authentically
- ⦿ Stronger relationships with loved ones
- ⦿ Greater access to support communities
- ⦿ Solidifying one's secular identity
- ⦿ Making it easier for others to open up
- ⦿ Learning that closeted friends and family are also secular
- ⦿ Reducing stress from concealing secular identity
- ⦿ Eliminating suspicions about reduced religious participation
- ⦿ Being a good role model
- ⦿ Feeling empowered and liberated



**There's no reason to open up  
if you aren't ready.**

## NEXT STEPS

The information presented in the following pages is useful to anyone who makes the choice to live openly secular. Living openly is not achieved all at once, but occurs over time as you disclose to more and more people. Every time we make a new friend, begin a new job, pick up a new hobby, we will have to make a decision about whether or not to disclose our secular identity.

### People who you disclose your secular identity to might feel:

-  Uncomfortable
-  Embarrassed
-  Angry
-  Hurt
-  Worried
-  Insulted
-  Sorrowful
-  Betrayed
-  Confused
-  Rejected

### But, they might surprise you and feel:

-  Supportive
-  Unsurprised
-  Honored
-  Understanding
-  Relieved
-  Fine

Living openly secular does not mean that you are open at all times or in all places. Some secularists are more selective about who they open up to, while others have no problem tattooing a Darwin Fish on their forearm. Some people live openly through sharing their story when opportunities arise, and others become activists in the broader secular movement. The pages that follow can help chart your course, but only you can decide which path is right for you.



## PLANNING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Many people experience some level of anxiety about their disclosure due to concerns about negative reactions and the impact opening up will have on relationships with loved ones. Before you begin to open up, you'll want to develop a plan. Ask yourself:

### Whom should I tell first?

The people you open up to first should be the ones you trust the most. You need to be able to trust them not to hurt you, to accept you for who you are, and to respect your privacy and not tell anyone you don't want told. Use the first few conversations to get comfortable with opening up and to establish a support network for later.

### Am I informed and able to answer questions?

Before opening up, you should be able to answer questions about your worldview, your reasons for disclosing, and how you think things might change. You'll also want to make sure you have enough information to answer questions or correct false ideas about secular people. Some helpful facts can be found later in this guide.

### Am I prepared?

Sometimes opening up is no big deal. You should hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst. Sometimes people don't respond well to secular disclosure, which is why finding a support system before opening up is incredibly important. Make sure you have a plan of action in the event you need to leave your home or lose financial support. We strongly suggest only opening up when you feel safe to do so and that you realize being prepared also means you're aware that once you open up to one person, you no longer have complete control over future disclosures - somebody may disclose for you.

This happened to George, whose religious doubts led him to atheism and a conversation with his mother sooner than anticipated. Here's George's story:

*The first person I told I was an atheist - the first time I said it out loud - was to my brother. I just said to him one day, "Ya know, I think I am an atheist." He said, "You know what? I think I am too!" My brother wasn't religious, but yet we both came to the same conclusion. The real turning point for me, though, was having this conversation with my mom, which I have to say, blew my mind. That conversation really broke down this huge wall between us. She knew for a long time that something was going on and worried about me, about my soul, but didn't want to bring it up so there was always this uneasy hesitance between the two of us.*

*My brother was the one who told her. She called me right away and said that she heard I was an atheist, and we finally talked. It was pretty remarkable because over time, she had grown a lot, just like I had, but things were never said. It's really funny because religion didn't promote a lot of honesty in the family. It promoted a lot of silence. Ever since then our relationship is much more open and honest. I'm closer with my mom and brother than I have ever been!*

It is perfectly normal to experience anxiety over how people might react. You can control how you deliver the news; not how others respond. Many people who've opened up to loved ones felt pain, loss, and rejection. Others claim that their actual disclosure went better than they expected. The good news is that relationships were restored over time as loved ones reached a place of acceptance. For most, living openly was an integral part of the healing process.



More information and resources aimed at specific audiences are available at:  
[www.openlysecular.org/toolkits](http://www.openlysecular.org/toolkits)

## INITIATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Difficult conversations include varying opinions, high stakes, and strong emotions, and are a normal part of everyday life. Whether done spontaneously or carefully planned out, opening up to someone is opening the door to a difficult conversation. Once you're ready, follow these three simple yet effective rules when initiating the conversation.

### Ash Beckham's Three "Pancake Girl" Principles

**Be Authentic.** Even the strongest relationships can get messy. When we're authentic, sometimes people get hurt. Balance honesty with compassion.

**Be Direct.** If you're sure about your secular identity, regardless of what label you choose to identify with, just say it. Alternatively, you can open up in stages if you're unsure, but until you're direct, your loved ones will hold onto hope.

**Be Unapologetic.** Be proud of your secular identity, and be proud of yourself for opening up about it – in doing so, you are bravely speaking your truth. You can apologize for the things you do, but never apologize for who you are.

*"We all have closets. All a closet is, is a hard conversation. And although our topics may vary tremendously, the experience of being in and coming out of the closet is universal. It is scary. And we hate it. And it needs to be done."*

– LGBT Advocate, Ash Beckham

### Managing the Conversation

- 🌀 Open up sooner, rather than later
- 🌀 Be upfront about the reasons you're opening up
- 🌀 Emphasize the importance to your relationship
- 🌀 Be prepared for negative reactions
- 🌀 Know your own limits
- 🌀 Be patient, calm, and non-confrontational
- 🌀 Speak with clarity
- 🌀 Give people space to react
- 🌀 Know when to end the conversation

## OPENING UP TO PARENTS

Many people admit that their parents were the hardest people to open up to about their secular identity. Yet many people indicated that opening up to parents was not as difficult as they expected. Regardless, you'll want to prepare yourself for the possible reactions - both positive and negative - listed below:

- Some parents may have suspected you were secular and opening up about it may provide a sense of relief.
- Some parents may be concealing their secular identity from you, and by opening up, you've allowed them to live openly as well.
- Some parents may simply be indifferent, focusing more on your happiness.

**It's also common, however, for religious parents to initially react in ways that express their hurt. They often:**

- Cry, get angry, or refuse to participate in the discussion.
- Deny or reject their loved one's secular beliefs.
- Tell secular loved ones that they're wrong or don't really believe as they do.
- Automatically assume that secular loved ones are depressed or that leaving faith is the result of unhappiness or trauma that is unrelated to religion.
- Conflate rejecting faith with a rejection of family traditions and values.
- Use hurtful stereotypes to describe the secular loved ones.
- Use religious texts to justify their disapproval and condemnation. In the most extreme cases, secular loved ones are evicted from their homes and/or lose their family's financial support.

**Whether or not they are supportive right away, your parents' initial reaction may not reflect how they will feel in the long term. Give them some time to adjust to your secular beliefs.**

## OPENING UP TO FRIENDS

When you are ready to open up to friends, you may realize that some of your friends also identify as secular and just haven't yet opened up to you or may know other secular people. You might be uncertain about opening up to friends, and although some people may choose to end their friendship with you, others may surprise you.

Some considerations regarding opening up to friends:

**Don't make assumptions.** You may have an idea about how different friends will respond, but you may be surprised at who turns out to be judgmental or supportive.

**Friendships come and go.** All friendships go through ebbs and flows, and some people aren't meant to be lifelong friends. If people terminate relationships because you opened up, try to stay positive. One friend lost can be another friend gained.

**Your friends may become secular allies.** Friends may want to support you, but aren't sure how. Give your friends the chance to be supportive.

### Opening Up in Various Contexts

The Openly Secular Campaign provides additional information for opening up/living openly secular within different contexts.

To access toolkits and other helpful resources, visit: [www.openlysecular.org/toolkits](http://www.openlysecular.org/toolkits)

## A MESSAGE TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS

We wanted to include a note here for parents, relatives, friends, or whomever a loved one is opening up too. There are a number of resources available on our website, but this may be the immediate moment someone needs to give a loved one something to read, when accessing the website just isn't an option. So this section may seem out of place, but it isn't. Our goal is to preserve relationships, and in this case that means making sure extra safeguards are in place.

### **For those loved ones who may be reading this:**

It is important to take the time to sort out your feelings, which may at times be contradictory and confusing. Give yourself the opportunity to explore these feelings. Remember, it is never too late to show your love and support. Once you are ready to support your secular loved ones, all you have to do is show them U.C.A.R.E.

### **Understand.**

Supporting your loved one is going to require you to understand a few things. Secular people are normal, everyday people guided by their own values and morals. It is extremely important that you understand that most stereotypes about secular people are not true. Additionally, opening up can be a difficult and scary process. It is not meant to hurt or offend you. You should understand that your loved one opened up because they want to have an honest relationship with you and that sharing who they are with you does not have to change your relationship.

## **Consider.**

Supporting your loved one may be difficult, but you should consider how valuable the relationship with your loved one was to you prior to finding out about their secular beliefs. Your loved one didn't just wake up and decide to be secular; they are same person today as they were yesterday. It is also important to consider how your responses affect their well-being. Negative reactions that are critical, dismissive, and judgmental are correlated with poor psychological well-being. The good news is that it is never too late to show your love and support.

## **Ask.**

In order to better understand your secular loved one, ask questions. If they don't clarify these questions when opening up to you, ask them why they made the decision to be secular, what their secular values are, what is and is not going to change, and most importantly, how they need you to support them.

## **Respect.**

Try to keep in mind that, just as you want to be respected regardless of your beliefs, so does your loved one. Showing respect can look different to different people, however, a good rule of thumb is to avoid debating, dismissing, invalidating, or condemning your secular loved one. Supporting your loved one also means respecting their position - they don't believe that they need to be "saved," and above all else, realize it is not your responsibility to "out" them to other people.

## **Express.**

Expressing your love, support, and if applicable, your own secular identity is the best way to let your secular loved one know that you are on their side. Many people think that acceptance is synonymous with agreement. It's not. Let them know that, regardless of a difference of beliefs, you value your relationship with them.

The Openly Secular Campaign has resources for helping religious friends and family members understand secularism and support secular loved ones.

- 🌀 **For Openly Secular Allies**
- 🌀 **For Religious Parents**
- 🌀 **For Extended Family and Friends**
- 🌀 **For Spouses and Partners**
- 🌀 **Educators' Guide to Secular Students**
- 🌀 **Clergy Guide**
- 🌀 **Employers' Workplace Guide**



For more information on how to become an Openly Secular Ally, visit: [www.openlysecular.org/toolkits](http://www.openlysecular.org/toolkits)



## LIVING OPENLY SECULAR

As you continue on your journey towards living openly secular, here are some things to keep in mind:

- ❁ Despite the negative and positive aspects of opening up, a majority of people who have shared their story publicly express satisfaction from having done so.
- ❁ Although living openly can sometimes be difficult, most of us find empowerment through liberation.
- ❁ Living openly makes your own life better. It gives you the freedom to live honestly and authentically.
- ❁ Being secular may be an important part of your identity that you cultivate everyday, or could be a quality that you rarely think about. Living openly doesn't mean that being secular has to define who you are, but it is a natural aspect of your core self.
- ❁ Living openly as an atheist, agnostic, freethinker, humanist, or any other secular label makes it easier for others to live openly as well. Living openly secular today will help subsequent generations of nonbelievers to live openly secular tomorrow.
- ❁ Living openly secular presents an opportunity to normalize nonbelief and dispel untrue stereotypes and myths.
- ❁ Living openly is what you make it. You can just “be open” – by being ready to affirm your secular identity when opportunities arise, by wearing a secular t-shirt, listing your “Religious Views” on Facebook to reflect your secular identity, or by telling your Twitter followers about the awesome secular podcast you just listened to. Or you can have an intentional conversation with those you decide it's important to open up to.
- ❁ Living openly is an ongoing process. As you meet new people, make new friends, and embark on new junctures throughout your life, who you open up to and how you live openly is something that remains in your control.

## EIGHT COMMON MYTHS ABOUT SECULAR INDIVIDUALS

This is in no way a comprehensive list of secular myths. Instead, these are the most common myths people are familiar with.

### MYTH #1 Secular people are angry at god and just angry in general.

**Fact:** Secular individuals don't believe in a god, so they can't be mad at a god. Some secular people are angry about religion and what happens on account of religious beliefs, but that is different from being angry at a god.

### MYTH #2 Secular people wish to convert people away from religion.

**Fact:** Secularism is not something that people can be converted to. It is a personal decision that takes a lot of thought and consideration. Although many secular people would like to see more acceptance of secularism and discussion of religion, this does not necessarily mean that they wish everyone to be secular. Many simply wish to coexist with the religious and be accepted for who they are.

## MYTH #3

Secular people live empty, unfulfilled lives.

**Fact:** Secular individuals have lots of things in life that make them happy and fulfilled: friends, family, sports, love, helping make the world a better place, learning new things, etc. The list could go on and on, and in almost every place it overlaps with what makes religious people happy, too.

## MYTH #4

Secular people have no morals.

**Fact:** Secular individuals are typically just as moral as theists. Secular people, like theists, derive their morals from many different areas including philosophy, role models, experience, family, etc. Typically the only disagreement is over the use of scripture and religious dogma as the basis of morality. Beyond that, secular people and theists can (and do) typically agree on many aspects of morality and what it means to be a good person.

## MYTH #5

Secular people are arrogant.

**Fact:** Some secular people are arrogant. Some religious people are arrogant. The truth is that some people are arrogant. Most secular people find the claims of religion unconvincing and are willing to calmly explain why. This is honesty, not arrogance.

## MYTH #6 Secular people don't know what it feels like to believe.

**Fact:** Many secular people were religious at one point in their lives, and therefore have most likely experienced religious feelings. The significance and level of truth that a person attaches to those feelings, however, typically differs between seculars and theists. Secular people typically recognize that these feelings can be significant and meaningful, but they see them as emanating from their brain, not from a god. Many of us experience the same emotions we once did from religion by contemplating the universe or looking at stars in the sky.

## MYTH #7

Secular people have nothing to live for.

**Fact:** Secular people have lots to live for, most of which religious people would also say they live for. They live to enjoy the company of people they like/love. They live to satisfy their curiosity by learning about the world. They live to experience new things and to take in the wonders of reality.

## MYTH #8

Secular people are the reason misfortune befalls America.

**Fact:** There is no evidence to support this position. Bad decisions that result in damaging effects on the United States (or the world) are made by a lot of people of all religions. However, scapegoating is an effective tactic for creating an out-group. This is why the idea that nontheists are at fault for America's woes is especially worrisome. It contributes greatly to the notion that nontheists, no matter how kind or charitable, are the enemy. This can make life difficult for nonbelievers.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The tendency to make generalizations about secular individuals comes largely from an unawareness and/or misunderstanding of the range of terms used to talk about secularity and nonbelief.

**Atheist:** The term atheist simply denotes a lack of belief in a god or gods. This comes from the prefix “a-” which means “without” and the root “-theos” which means “belief in a deity or deities.”

**Agnostic:** This word also comes from the prefix “a-” which means “without” and “-gnostic” which is a word referring to knowledge and its existence/nature. Therefore, an agnostic is a person that believes there is certain knowledge that we as human cannot be privy to because of the nature of that knowledge. One can be an agnostic and also be a nontheist or a theist.

**Freethinker:** A term that means an individual who eschews religious dogma and scripture in making decisions about what they choose to believe and what worldview they choose to accept.

**Humanist:** An individual that embraces human reason, ethics, social justice, and philosophical naturalism, while specifically rejecting religious dogma, super-naturalism, pseudo-science or superstition as the basis of morality and decision-making.

**Living Openly:** A state in which secular individuals are open about their nontheistic identities in various public, social, and professional contexts.

**Naturalist:** A naturalist is someone who subscribes to a philosophical position that all that exists is (or is caused by) natural phenomena. Therefore, supernatural phenomena are necessarily incoherent and nonexistent.

**Nones:** The term “nones” refers to the growing segment of the population who claim no religious affiliation. These individuals are not necessarily nontheists, but do not identify with organized and/or mainstream religion.

**Nontheist:** An individual who does not identify as a theist. They are not necessarily without a belief in spirituality or even a deity, but do not adhere to any organized definition of theism. They may identify as an atheist, humanist, agnostic, or may simply call themselves nonreligious.

**Opening Up:** The act of disclosing one’s secular identity. Synonymous with the term “coming out.”

**Religious Ally:** An individual who identifies with a religion, but is not hostile towards secular individuals and supports their efforts to live openly.

**Religious Discrimination:** Forms of individual and institutional discrimination that targets religious minorities and secular people.

**Secular:** Refers to those things which are not concerned with or connected to religion.

**Skeptic:** Individuals who use the scientific method and reason to evaluate claims about pseudoscience and the supernatural.

**Spiritual, but not Religious (SBNR):** Individuals who maintain a concern for spiritual issues and personal development, but pursue them outside of formal religious institutions.

**Theist:** An individual who has a belief in god/gods.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are numerous other organizations that work on behalf of secular people. The following is a list of Openly Secular partners movement that may be able to provide you with information or services.

<b>American Atheists</b>	<b><a href="http://atheists.org">atheists.org</a></b>
<b>American Ethical Union</b>	<b><a href="http://aeu.org">aeu.org</a></b>
<b>American Humanist Association</b>	<b><a href="http://americanhumanist.org">americanhumanist.org</a></b>
<b>Americans United for the Separation of Church and State</b>	<b><a href="http://au.org">au.org</a></b>
<b>Atheist Alliance of America</b>	<b><a href="http://atheistallianceamerica.org">atheistallianceamerica.org</a></b>
<b>Atheist Nexus/Atheist News</b>	<b><a href="http://atheistnexus.org">atheistnexus.org</a></b>
<b>Black Atheists of America</b>	<b><a href="http://blackatheistsofamerica.org">blackatheistsofamerica.org</a></b>
<b>Black Nonbelievers of America</b>	<b><a href="http://blacknonbelievers.org">blacknonbelievers.org</a></b>
<b>British Humanist Association</b>	<b><a href="http://humanism.org.uk">humanism.org.uk</a></b>
<b>CampQuest</b>	<b><a href="http://camp-quest.org">camp-quest.org</a></b>
<b>Center for Inquiry</b>	<b><a href="http://centerforinquiry.net">centerforinquiry.net</a></b>
<b>Ex-Muslims of North America</b>	<b><a href="http://exmna.org">exmna.org</a></b>
<b>Foundation Beyond Belief</b>	<b><a href="http://foundationbeyondbelief.org">foundationbeyondbelief.org</a></b>
<b>Freedom From Religion Foundation</b>	<b><a href="http://ffrf.org">ffrf.org</a></b>
<b>Freethought Action</b>	<b><a href="http://freethoughtaction.org">freethoughtaction.org</a></b>
<b>Freethought Society</b>	<b><a href="http://ftsociety.org">ftsociety.org</a></b>



Hispanic American Freethinkers	hafree.org
Institute for Humanist Studies	humaniststudies.org/home
Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers	militaryatheists.org
Military Religious Freedom Foundation	militaryreligiousfreedom.org
People For the American Way	pfaw.org
Project Reason	project-reason.org
Recovering From Religion	recoveringfromreligion.org
Richard Dawkins Foundation	richarddawkins.net
Secular Coalition for America	secular.org
Secular Community Project	harvardhumanist.org/sc
Secular Connexion Seculaire	secularconnexion.ca
Secular Student Alliance	secularstudents.org
Society for Humanistic Judaism	shj.org
Stiefel Freethought Foundation	stiefelfreethoughtfoundation.org
United Coalition of Reason	unitedcor.org
Youth Secular Association	youthsecularassociation.org



For some of Openly Secular’s recommended lists, visit our website at [www.openlysecular.org](http://www.openlysecular.org)

## **CALL TO ACTION: BECOME OPENLY SECULAR**

In any community there are a few people who are not satisfied with the way things are done, and who go against the grain. These are referred to as positive deviants. They often try out new and possibly unacceptable ideas that in the end prove correct, or promote some positive change. So from the undesirable comes the desirable. Positive deviants disrupt the status quo; they challenge and subvert the way things have “always been done.” Living openly secular challenges the normalcy of religion in the United States.

Consider Rebecca Vitsmun. Rebecca was among many who fled the Moore, Oklahoma tornado on May 21, 2013, narrowly escaping the havoc, and coming back to a home that no longer existed. The next day, media outlets broadcasted the devastation and interviewed some of the tornado victims. Rebecca Vitsmun was interviewed by CNN news anchor Wolf Blitzer. The interview started out as a typical tornado victim’s interview, but then took a sudden turn when Blitzer asked, “You’ve gotta thank the Lord, right?” Rebecca, carrying her nineteen-month-old son, replied graciously with a smile and a slight tilt of the head, “I’m actually an atheist.” Rebecca’s courage to disclose her atheism on national television struck a chord with many non-believers. The interview went viral and was viewed on YouTube almost 300,000 times in less than three weeks. This is living openly secular.

Positive deviance can go farther than individual action; positive deviance can also come from collective action. Consider the students from the Atheists, Humanists, Agnostics student organization at the University of Wisconsin, Madison who organized the first atheist pride parade in 2013. According to director Chris Calvey, “We want to show that atheists come from all walks of life, and that we are nothing to be afraid of. All it takes is for each one of us to live openly as a secular individual. Together we’ll eliminate religious discrimination and build love and acceptance for the secular community.”





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*Opening Minds,  
Changing Hearts*™

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