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The Resurrection of Self: How Deconversion from Religious Belief to Atheism

Healed a History of Rejection, Trauma, and Shame

A Dissertation Presented

by

Amy Phillips

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Social Welfare

Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Dissertation

The Resurrection of Self: How Deconversion from Religious Belief to Atheism Healed a

History of Rejection, Trauma, and Shame

by

Amy Phillips

Doctor of Philosophy

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There are two experiences that atheists have which are not yet well understood: discrimination and deconversion. Through semi-structured interviews, designed to better understand the deconversion process and the relationships of 35 American atheists living in both the Northeast and Southern regions of the United States, a better understanding of these experiences emerged. These individuals had damaging histories, which included abuse, abandonment and/or outsider status. These elements combined with religious teachings yielded a sense of self-as-bad in which respondents experienced feelings of shame, depression, anxiety, and in some cases suicidality. The 25 males, 9 females and 1 transwoman in this study used avoidance techniques in response to their damaging histories. One such response was that of self-sacrificing altruism, in which they either worked or volunteered in helping professions. This self-sacrificing altruism combined with their damaging histories, ultimately led to fatigue and a breakpoint event that, in the end, culminated in loss of belief.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

American atheists are an, as yet, unavowed minority group in the United States. There are two experiences that atheists have which are not yet well understood: discrimination and deconversion. Research has suggested that atheists are the most distrusted and stigmatized minority, in areas which have religious majorities, such as the United States (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011). The stigma that atheists experience in the United States is reported to be omnipresent (Harper, 2007). And biblical scripture may have an impact on this stigma. For example, Psalms 14 says “the fool hath said in his heart, *there is no God*. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good”. Recent research has shown that nonbelievers are the fastest growing minority group in the United States and around the world (Zuckerman, 2009).

Atheists are not commonly referred to as a minority group. While many outside the sociological fields of study may simply view the term “minority” as meaning a group that is smaller in number than the majority, this is not what is implied in a sociological context.

According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1968):

Contemporary sociologists generally define a minority as a group of people—differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion, or language—who both think of themselves as a differentiated group and are thought of by the others as a differentiated group with negative connotations. Further, they are relatively lacking in power and hence are subjected to certain exclusions, discriminations, and other differential treatment. The important elements in this definition are a set of attitudes—

those of group identification from within the group and those of prejudice from without—and a set of behaviors—those of self-segregation from within the group and those of discrimination and exclusion from without. (*Minorities*, www.encyclopedia.com, retrieved December 7, 2014)

This sociological definition of minority can be applied to atheists. The only portion of this definition which would benefit from modification is “differentiation” from others on the basis of “religion.” It would be clearer and more accurate to state “religion *or belief*” because atheism is not a religion, but rather a lack of belief in god. This differentiation is very important with regard to why atheists are not included by policy as a protected class. This differentiation will be revisited in greater detail later.

Like other minority groups, atheists are subjected to discrimination in the United States (Carmichael & King, 2010; Downey, 2004, 2011). They face discrimination at home (Simonson, 2011), at work (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012; Simonson, 2011), at school (Hammer et al., 2012) and in their communities (Hammer et al., 2012; Simonson, 2011; Swan & Heesacker, 2012). And, in response to this discrimination, some atheists hide their identity (Dawkins, 2012; Garneau, 2012). There is a need to give voice to this, as yet unacknowledged minority group, in order both to understand whether and how they experience discrimination, and to better understand the crisis experience known as the deconversion.

Deconversion is the process of moving from religious belief to nonbelief (H. Streib & Keller, 2004). For example, Streib et al. (2009) stated that deconversion is a broad term that is difficult to define and is rarely seen in scholarly literature. It is a biographical change or transformation and may have a number of different trajectories, including a secular exit, which is

the least explored of the trajectories. The other trajectories have been well studied in the literature and include religious switching, leaving one's church, or disaffiliation with continued religious belief. Streib & Keller (2004) noted that, conversion is a known term where an individual experiences a biographical change in the empirical realm of religion and leads the convert to exhibit new behaviors based on codes of conduct in their new affiliation.

Streib et al. (2009) proposed a model of deconversion that includes a number of often experienced elements such as: (1) loss of specific religious experiences; (2) intellectual doubt and denial of specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism and application of new moral judgments; (4) emotional suffering and loss of social support, stability and safety; and (5) disaffiliation from community. They noted that the deconversion can be experienced as a major crisis for individuals going through this process.

Of particular note among the 5 main characteristics are loss of social support and disaffiliation from community. Fone & Porkess (2008) showed that social isolation is an adverse event that may negatively affect brain development, behavior and may even lead to psychopathologies including depression and schizophrenia. A meta-analytic research study found that, perceived discrimination negatively affected both mental and physical health and also led to negative health behaviors as well as abstention from healthy behaviors, leading to poor health outcomes (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Wamala, Merlo, Boström, & Hogstedt (2007) based on a sample of approximately 15,000 men and 17,000 women from a variety of backgrounds, showed that when individuals experience discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. they can be as much as nine times less likely to seek needed healthcare. Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez (2009) used previously collected interview data to formulate a quantitative study and reported that a predictor of negative health outcomes was parental rejection. The study found that

young adults who had been rejected by their parents due to their sexual orientation identity in adolescence, had negative health outcomes in a number of areas including mental health, substance abuse, and sexual risk behaviors. Therefore, when considering a minority such as atheists, it is important to better understand how they may experience discrimination, because negative health outcomes such as these impact not only the individual, but also may affect their families and communities.

Background and Significance to Social Work Research and Policy

The profession of Social Work is concerned with populations that face discrimination, and atheists fall into that category. This is important to note because it has been said that atheists are more distrusted and stigmatized than other groups in America, such as homosexuals, immigrants, and Muslims (Lawson, 2011). Other investigators also have found that atheists are the least accepted group in America (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). According to the National Association of Social Workers (2008) Code of Ethics:

Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability.

Social change efforts facilitated by social workers often focus on the issue of discrimination and other types of social injustices (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008).

Therefore, social workers and social work organizations, such as the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), should acknowledge atheists as a population-at-risk and work on their behalf to address the discrimination they face.

In a country where Christianity predominates, atheists are more likely to find that they are ostracized when they openly identify as atheist (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012). In the United States, self-identifying as an atheist can mean job loss (Cragun et al., 2012). In some cases, deconverting from Christianity to atheism leads to ostracization from church, resulting in a loss of local social relationships, networks, and community (Palmer, 2012). When atheists are open about their nonbelief, they face negative reactions from their family and friends, including isolation, but also risk becoming targets of threats and violence (Smith, 2010). Lawson (2011) suggests that, discrimination targeted at atheists occurs because, to some people, nonbelievers are immoral and self-centered. He further speculates that it is likely that many Christians hold this belief because scripture in the Bible indicates that atheism is unacceptable. Some of the verses in the Bible instruct followers to shun, destroy and kill nonbelievers (Exodus 22:20, Deuteronomy 13:6-10, Deuteronomy 13:12-16, Deuteronomy 17:2-7, Deuteronomy 18:20, Mark 6:11, Jude 5, John 1:10, Romans 16:17 NAT). The Bible also states that, nonbelievers are deceptive, evil and are the “anti-Christ” (John 2:22, John 1:7, Hebrews 3:12 NAT). Given that Christian theology is based largely on biblical teachings, anti-atheist prejudice may be provoked at least partially by scripture.

Prevalence

The prevalence of atheists in the world is estimated to be between 500 to 750 million (Zuckerman, 2007). There is speculation that as much as 19% of the population consider themselves to be irreligious (Zuckerman, 2009). While there are no clear census reports that exclusively focus on atheists, there are reports that combine atheists, agnostics, and the nonreligious that, through time, has trended from 6.5% to 19% of the population (Zuckerman, 2009). However, given the fact that some atheists conceal their identity, the true prevalence of atheists is not known. What is reported, however, is that it is highly likely that the number of

atheists in the United States has been increasing as the percentage of the irreligious increases. Moreover, there are demographic differences: more men than women describe themselves as atheist, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals are almost twice as likely as heterosexuals to become atheist (Sherkat, 2003, as cited in Zuckerman, 2009).

One study reported that 22% of Americans who claim to be Christians do not define god as described in the Bible; rather, they define god by saying “everyone is god” or “god refers to the realization of human potential” (“Most American Christians,” 2009). In addition, one of the fundamental teachings of Christianity is the divinity of Jesus; however, 46% of Christians report that they disagree strongly and do not accept this teaching (“Most American Christians,” 2009). These findings may indicate that there are Americans who claim a Christian religious identity, yet do not believe in the theology of Christianity. This may well mean that those “Christians” who do not believe in God are atheists.

Richard Dawkins, an Oxford University professor of Evolutionary Biology and an atheist advocate, noted that, while the census data for Britain may indicate that there is a majority of Christians, this may be a misrepresentation of the true number (Dawkins, 2012). He noted that, “many of these ‘Census Christians’ do not subscribe to traditional Christian teaching and their presence is used by religious politicians and conservatives for political leverage” (Dawkins, 2012; Zuckerman, 2009). Dawkins (2012) said that, it is likely that these ‘Census Christians’ are not knowledgeable about the Bible and according to some studies (“U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey,” 2010), he appears to be correct. Based on what Dawkins surmises, it also is likely that the number of atheists in the U.S. also is higher than current estimates. This is a significant point because in the United States, the concept of Christian majority is used to influence politics and policy (Straughn & Feld, 2010). Here we can also see that the hidden identity of atheists might

more easily allow for the concept of a Christian majority to flourish. This also could lead to atheist's exclusion from elected office.

Limitations or Gaps in Existing Literature

A review of the literature reveals that atheists are rarely studied as a distinct group. Often they are lumped together with others who represent a whole range of beliefs that runs from atheist to theist. However, atheists are quite different from deists and agnostics. Deists believe that God “created the world but has since remained indifferent to it” (“Deism,” 2014) and agnostics believe that “it is impossible to know whether or not God exists” (“Agnostic,” 2014). Despite these major differences in belief, the current literature often includes atheists along with unaffiliated (Streib, Hood, Keller, Csoff, & Silver, 2009), “nones” (Baker & Smith, 2009; Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun, & Navarro-Rivera, 2009) or the nonreligious (Garneau, 2012; Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan, & Edwards, 2007). It should be noted that, some “unaffiliated,” “nones” and “nonreligious” do, in fact, believe in God, whereas atheists do not. Obviously, this difference is significant to consider when designing a research study dealing with religious diversity.

In order to examine the lived experience of atheists, the current study will use a sample of atheists only. In addition, the literature often has included populations from a variety of different religious backgrounds (Garneau, 2012; Kosmin et al., 2009; Small, 2008; Streib et al., 2009). The current study will be more specific, focusing on formerly Protestant Christians. According to Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (2007), a majority of Americans (51.3%) describe themselves as Protestant Christians. Current literature often is limited to college students (Mueller, 2012; Small, 2008); the current study will target a broader population.

Many studies have examined conversion experiences during which individuals have a physical and emotional experience that induces them to believe in god (Barro, Hwang, &

McCleary, 2010; Feldman et al., 2011; Gooren, 2010), and a few studies have focused on deconversion where individuals experience a crisis-state and cease to believe in god (Streib et al., 2009; H. Streib & Keller, 2004; Wright et al., 2007). Only one qualitative study specifically focuses on the deconversion experience of atheists (Smith, 2011).

There is literature that covers deviance (Fitzgerald, 2003) and stigmatized identity (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Garneau, 2012; Scott, 2011) that refers to atheists but there is no research that directly investigates the experience of discrimination from the perspective of the atheist. Moreover, Whitley's (2010) review of the literature also found that atheists were missing from the mental health literature, although it is reported that atheists experience psychological distress attributed to stigmatization (Garneau, 2012; Weber, Pargament, Kunik, II, & Stanley, 2012). And, finally, Gervais et al. (2011) reported that atheists are seen as a stigmatized group of ambiguous morality (Edgell et al., 2006), inclined to commit crimes (Michell, 2009), and never approached from an empowerment or strengths perspective. The strengths perspective approaches respondents by focusing on their assets and resilience rather than focusing on deficits (Saleebey, 2006). Importantly, this perspective states that social workers should help their clients by finding their strengths and by identifying resources with the client, rather than focusing on problems or pathologies (Chapin, 1995). Clearly, the research literature would benefit from a study that approaches atheists with the aim of simply getting a better understanding of their lived experience by letting them tell their story.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to see if individuals who deconvert from a religious belief system to nonbelief/atheism also experience stigmatization, are labeled as deviants, and encounter discrimination. Moreover, as noted above, at least one study on deconversion has reported that

there are typically 5 characteristics or “interindividual commonalities” of the deconversion process (H. Streib & Keller, 2004). While Streib et al. (2009) accomplished one of the most respected and noted deconversion research studies to date, it used a cross-cultural (Germany and the United States), qualitative/quantitative research design. The present study will use an American sample and will explore the deconversion process to see if it occurs in identifiable steps or stages.

Importance of the Study

This investigation is important because it aims to contribute toward the better understanding of the atheist deconversion experience. It also hopes to give voice to a stigmatized population and in doing so advances a social justice agenda. This study will provide insights to the experiences of atheists in America and will likely provide information that will better enable social workers to work on their behalf to address the discrimination they face and to assist them with the deconversion process.

Context

The United States ranks 5th as most religious country when compared with 30 other countries (Scaramanga, 2012). Yet, an atheist social movement appears to be on the rise, represented by the formation of the National Atheist Party, a social movement that states that our Founding Fathers intended our nation to be secular. The major reasons that this group gives for assembling include: to give American atheists a voice and to protect/promote the secular basis that they believe is our country’s foundation ("National Atheist Party," 2013).

Currently, various bills have been introduced in Congress and in several State legislatures to bring such Christian ideologies as Intelligent Design (Creationism) into science classrooms in

public schools (Attie et al., 2006; B. Johnson, 2013; E. C. Scott & Branch, 2006). There are also bills to allow prayer in public schools (ACLU, 2013).

Scope of the Study

This study will attempt to capture the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that American atheists experience during the deconversion process and the impact it might have on their network of social relationships in the family, among friends, and at work or school. Streib et al. (2009) found that, younger Americans make up nearly half of the deconverted atheists, with 28.7% having experienced a deconversion by the age of 25. Meanwhile, only 2.3% of Americans aged 63 or older experienced a deconversion. Since this data appears to indicate that there is a growing number of Americans who are going through the deconversion crisis, there is a need to better understand this minority population.

Research Questions

The research questions include:

- Under what conditions does deconversion occur?
- Do particular emotions, cognitions, and behaviors occur before, during, or after deconversion? If so, what are they? If not, why not? What forces mitigate these particular emotions, cognitions, and behaviors?
- What factors contribute to the decision to hide atheist identity?
- What factors contribute to the decision to reveal atheist identity?
- What short term, long term, intended, unintended and latent consequences follow when someone lives openly as an atheist in America?
- Do gender differences impact the deconversion experience?

- Are there differences in any of the above between individuals who grew up in the Northeastern as compared to the Southern regions of the United States?
- Are there identifiable stages in the deconversion process?

Chapter 2

Methodology

Grounded Theory

This investigation utilized a grounded theory methodological approach, a research strategy that embodies a logic of induction and is particularly appropriate when investigating a phenomenon that has not been well or deeply studied (Charmaz, 2006). The approach began with the identification of a topic of interest and an initial background literature review. The topic was then transformed into a researchable problem (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). An interview guide and consent form was created. The interviews were conducted and recorded; observation or jot notes were taken during the interview and a transcription was completed (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Next, an interpretive analysis of the transcript began. This included initially noting major topics that emerged, coding of topics categorically, and memo writing. After coding was completed, the interpretive analysis moved on to the formulation of empirical generalizations, which included principles of organization, themes, and concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interpretive analysis continued with constant comparisons among interviews until saturation or repetition of content was achieved. An empirically grounded conceptual model was constructed. If there had been any negative cases, revision of the model would have accommodated these cases (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Analysis

An interpretive analysis of the data was done to construct an empirically grounded conceptual model of the deconversion process to see if there is stigmatization, discrimination, identity and relationship problems as well as some kind of pattern that constitutes recognizable characteristics, steps, a sequence, or stages in the deconversion experience.

Study Population

Following is a demographic chart of the study population, by region of the United States.

EXHIBIT 1

DEMOGRAPHICS AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS: North, South, West

	North	South	West
Number Interviewed	13	21	1
GENDER			
Female	2	7	0
Male	10	14	1
Transgender	1	0	0
RACE			
Caucasian	9	19	1
Hispanic	2	1	0
African American	0	1	0
Biracial	1	0	0
Indian	1	0	0
AGE			
20-29	2	4	0
30-39	3	9	1
40-49	4	2	0
50-59	3	4	0
60-69	1	2	0
Mean (years)	43	41	34
MARITAL STATUS			
Married	6	8	1
Single	2	8	0
Divorced	5	2	0
Committed Relationship	0	3	0
NUMBER OF CHILDREN			
0	9	12	0
1	3	3	1
2	0	4	0
3	1	1	0
5	0	1	0
EDUCATION			
PhD, Doctorate	3	2	0
Graduate Degree	0	4	0
Master's Degree	4	5	0

Bachelor of Science	2	3	0
Bachelor of Arts	0	2	0
Associate Degree	0	1	0
In College	2	0	0
Some College	2	2	1
High School, GED	0	2	0
OCCUPATION			
Medical, healthcare providers	3	5	0
Educators	2	5	0
Creative	1	2	1
Self-employed	0	2	0
Government Attorney	0	1	0
TSA Supervisor	1	0	0
Assistant Apartment Manager	0	1	0
Banking Consultant	1	1	0
Electrician	1	0	0
Executive Assistant	0	1	0
Graduate Assistant Social Psychology	0	1	0
Mechanical Engineer	1	0	0
Military	0	1	0
Sales	1	0	0
Student Worker	0	1	0
Supervisor	0	1	0
Veterans Affairs	1	0	0
Unemployed	1	0	0
POLITICAL AFFILIATION			
Democrat	7	9	0
Independent	3	6	0
Libertarian	0	3	0
Nonaffiliated	2	1	0
Republican	1	1	0
Democratic Socialist	0	0	1
Moderate	0	1	0
FORMER RELIGION			
Southern Baptist or Baptist	3	5	0
Christian	3	4	0
Methodist	0	5	0
Multiple Religions	1	3	0
Pentecostal	1	1	1
Episcopalian	1	1	0

Evangelical	0	1	0
Unity Church of Christianity	1	0	0
Mennonite	1	0	0
Jehovah's Witness	0	1	0
Catholic	1	0	0
Hindu	1	0	0
LEVEL OF INCOME			
240,000-259,999	1	0	0
200,000-219,999	2	1	0
140,000-159,000	0	1	0
100,000-119,999	2	3	0
80,000-99,999	2	2	0
60,000-79,999	1	3	0
40,000-59,999	2	4	1
20,000-39,999	2	4	0
Less than 20,000	1	3	0

The study population consisted of mostly men (71%), a higher fraction than in the United States (49%) (United States Census Bureau, 2010a). One respondent was a transgender individual, and this is the equivalent of 3% of the study population, which is a much higher fraction than in the United States (.3%) (Gates, 2011). There were 29 Caucasian respondents, roughly 83% of the study population, a higher fraction than in the United States (78%) (United States Census Bureau, 2010b). There were 3 Hispanic respondents (9%) and this is a lower fraction than in the United States (17%) (United States Census Bureau, 2010b). The study population included one African American respondent (3%), a lower fraction than in the United States (13%) (United States Census Bureau, 2010b). There was one biracial respondent (3%), close to the fraction in the United States (2.4%) (United States Census Bureau, 2010b). And finally there was one Indian respondent (3%), a higher fraction than the United States (1%) (United States Census Bureau, 2010b).

The mean age for respondents from the North was 43 years old and 41 years old in the South and so in both cases, the mean age was higher than the mean age in the United States (36.8 years) (United States Census Bureau, 2010a). In the West, with only one respondent aged 34, this is lower than the mean age in the United States. With 15 respondents married (43%), the fraction is lower than average in the United States (51%) (Centers for Disease Control, 2010). There were 10 respondents who were single (29%), and this fraction is higher than average in the United States (24%) (Centers for Disease Control, 2010). There were 7 respondents who had been divorced (20%), and this is slightly higher than average in the United States (Men 8.3%, Women 10.2%) (Centers for Disease Control, 2010). There were 3 respondents who reported being in committed relationships (9%); comparable data from the United States was unavailable. It is noteworthy that there were 21 respondents who had no children (60%), and this is three times the average of childless women in the U.S. is 20% (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). There were 7 respondents (20%) who had one child, 4 respondents (11%) who had 2 children, 2 respondents (6%) had 3 children and one respondent had 5 children, while the average number of children per family in the United States is 2.01 (United States Census Bureau, 2011).

The study population included 5 respondents with a PhD (14%), around 9 times greater than the fraction in the United States (1.5%). There were 4 respondents with Graduate degrees (11%), a higher fraction than in the United States (1.3%). There were 9 respondents with Masters degrees (26%), a higher fraction than in the United States (7%). There were 7 respondents who had Bachelor degrees (20%), a slightly higher fraction than the United States (18.7%). There was one respondent with an Associates degree (3%), a lower fraction than the United States (9%). There were 5 respondents who had some college education (14%), a lower fraction than the

United States (19.6%). There were 2 respondents who had a high school diploma or GED (6%), a much lower fraction than the United States (29.5%). (United States Census Bureau, 2014)

It was noted that all respondents, with one exception, worked or volunteered in helping fields or altruistic endeavors. For those which are currently employed in non-helping fields, they shared that they volunteered for domestic violence victims, homeless, or previously worked as an EMT, fireman, or policeman. Occupations that did not initially appear to be helping fields such as assistant apartment manager and banking consultant, shared stories of engaging individuals in poverty. For example, the assistant apartment manager was responsible for serving eviction notices. The study population consisted of many medical professionals (7), educators (6), and creative professionals (3). While in the United States (2012) the median household income was \$51,371, the median household income of the study population was \$85,143 or approximately 40% higher than the national average (United States Census Bureau, 2013).

The study population included 16 Democrats (46%), a higher fraction than the United States (31%). There were 12 Independents/Nonaffiliated (34%), a slightly lower fraction than the United States (38%). There were 3 Libertarians (9%), a lower fraction than the United States (13%). There were only 2 Republicans (6%), a much lower fraction than the United States (29%). There was one Moderate (3%), a much lower fraction than the United States (35%). And there was one Democratic Socialist (3%); however, there were no comparative statistics for the United States.

Sampling Procedures

Interviews were conducted with 35 atheist individuals. Many of these individuals have attended *Meetup* or belong to *Meetup* through online engagement solely. *Meetup* is an online, social-network site where people with common interests can connect, gather together, and

socialize with each other. It is a virtual community that enables people to share thoughts, ideas, and stories. A distinguishing feature of this networking site is that it encourages in-person, monthly meetings. A purposive sample was recruited from these monthly meetings. Study participants were initially recruited from a *Meetup* group in a region of New York, where approximately 5-10 individuals, (roughly 10% of total online *Meetup* members) who are atheist gather once a month. This investigator spent 2 years with this group and developed relationships with a few members of this group. A gatekeeper¹ was identified and support was requested. The gatekeeper then additionally connected this researcher with a number of individuals belonging to an atheist *Meetup* in Alabama. In addition to the individuals who were recruited from *Meetup*, respondents also connected this researcher to additional people who were not part of *Meetup*, but who were eager to share their experience and be a part of this study. These volunteers heard about this study through friends who had already participated.

Inclusion Criteria

All participants were adults aged 18 or older and could be men, women, or transgendered individuals. Also, individuals were included who had deconverted from religion. Because an atheist is “somebody who does not believe in God or deities” (“Encarta Dictionary,” 2004) freethinkers or secular humanists were eligible to be included in this sample.

In the United States, Protestant Christians represent the majority, while atheists represent the minority. While other studies have investigated atheists alongside agnostics or nonreligious or nonaffiliated, this investigator specifically looked for atheists who formerly had been Protestant Christians. After interviewing nearly 30 formerly Protestant Christians who had

¹ A gatekeeper is someone who is a trusted member of the group and therefore able to assist in recruiting for this study.

deconverted to atheism, the investigator included 3 respondents who were of different religious backgrounds as a comparison. It should be noted that these 3 respondents contacted the investigator and asked to be part of the study after hearing about the study from other respondents who had already participated. Permissions were obtained from Committees on Research Involving Human Subjects (CORIHS) to include them.

Initially, this researcher sought to interview respondents who live in either the Southern U.S. or the Northeastern U.S. After approximately 30 interviews, this researcher was contacted by an atheist residing in the West, and again permissions were obtained from CORIHS so that this individual could be included. It turned out that he was originally from Louisiana, grew up there, and spent the majority of his life there before moving to California. This researcher was surprised to find considerable diversity in the respondents' birthplaces. There were even three respondents who were born outside the United States.

Challenges to recruiting

No major difficulties were experienced while assembling the study population, and this is likely because of the influence held by the gatekeeper and the member respondents. Also, this researcher joined the *Meetup* and built relationships with members and the gatekeeper prior to requesting volunteers. Without these factors, the response may not have been the same, although it should be said that the respondents seemed eager to share their stories and thus may have been open to an outsider requesting their voluntary involvement in this study.

One potentially challenging issue is that in the Northeast, Protestant Christians are not the majority, whereas in the South they are. Therefore, one must be willing and able to connect with those Protestant Christians in the South or risk having some challenges finding a good number

for the sample. Additionally, it was necessary to make use of Skype in order to interview many of the respondents, as they would have been otherwise inaccessible.

Measures and Data Collection

In-depth, face-to-face, 1 to 1.5 hour interviews were conducted at a location of the respondent's preference or via Skype² for those respondents who were otherwise unreachable. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into *Dedoose*, a qualitative analysis software package. A 22 item interview guide with an additional 11 item demographic section was used. All substantive items were open-ended in order to give maximum voice to the respondent.

Instruments

Interview Guide

The interview guide (please see Appendix A) contained items that sought to understand why the respondent attended *Meetup*, to understand the nature of their social relationships (family, friends, and work), and to better understand the previously mentioned "interindividual commonalities" that have been reported to occur in deconversion accounts including: (1) loss of specific religious experiences, (2) the development of intellectual doubt, (3) rejection of specific ritualistic prescriptions accompanied by a new level of moral judgment, (4) emotional suffering and (5) loss of social support and disaffiliation from the community (H. Streib & Keller, 2004).

A Sony Digital Flash Voice Recorder was used during the interviews. Following each meeting, an Observations Memo was created for non-verbal annotations (Please see Appendix B). Then transcription of the interview was completed, using Express Scribe Pro software. Once an interview was transcribed, the online software program called *Dedoose* was used to facilitate

² The investigator got permission to use Skype from CORIHS to interview respondents otherwise out of reach.

coding and analysis. Each interview was rendered anonymous by giving each participant a case number. A proposed timeline for the study was included (Please see Appendix C).

Dedoose: Qualitative Research Software

The qualitative research software program, *Dedoose*, was created for social scientists. It allows a variety of data to be used, including demographics and interviews as well as other data (Lieber, 2011). The program is said to “dramatically increase the efficiency, reliability, validity, interpretability, and presentation of data management, analysis and research findings” (Lieber, 2011). The *Dedoose* webpage offers detailed video tutorials that fully train the user on this program.

Limitations of the Study

Since this study focused predominantly on former Protestant Christians, its findings may not be generalizable to all other religious deconverts. Further research will reveal whether the findings are generalizable to atheists who formerly belonged to other religious groups. As respondents were sought via *Meetup*, it should be noted that there may be differences between atheists who join *Meetup* and atheists who do not join *Meetup*. Therefore, not seeking atheists outside of those who belonged to a *Meetup* may be a limitation of this study. It may be that findings were influenced by the very nature of those individuals who for reasons unverified reached out to likeminded others via *Meetup*. For example, perhaps these individuals experienced challenges in growing relationships without the use of a forum such as *Meetup*, and this may be why some social awkwardness was noted in this study population. Also, while this researcher did consider Northeastern and Southern regions of the United States, there was not consideration for urban, suburban and rural regions, and this may have added to the findings.

Since this study took place in the Northeastern and Southern United States, its findings may not be generalizable to other regions or countries around the world. Finally, this research was done by only one researcher, and this is a limitation as well.

Despite these potential limitations, a number of intriguing and apparently important findings emerged from the data. For example, the study population characteristics revealed a common theme that the respondents worked in helping professions. In addition, the respondents were typically male, Caucasian, married, and childless. They tended to be well educated with a higher income level than average. The respondents were much more likely to say that their political affiliation was Democrat or Independent rather than Republican. These characteristics emerged from the demographics questionnaire. Meanwhile, observation notes revealed an unexpected finding that a large number of respondents were either LGBT or gender nonconforming. This important finding will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Rejection, Trauma, and Shame: Abuse, Abandonment, Outsider Status – The Early Years (10-16 years old)

Through respondents' storytelling, data emerged that might otherwise not have been available to the researcher as in the case of quantitative or restrictive and specific types of research. Therefore, this study was able to uncover these new findings. It is clear by the unexpected nature of these findings, that were it not for the use of a methodology such as grounded theory, then these findings may never have emerged. For example, new revelation, that of the presence of a damaging history, leading the investigator to introduce the self-as-bad concept to reflect the respondents self-perception. Additionally, it was found that the sample consisted of a high number of individuals who were relegated to outsider status. In particular, the sample included many more gender non-conforming and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals than is typically found in the national population.

Damaging History

All of the deconversion stories recounted by respondents included a damaging history covering abuse, abandonment, and/or relegation to outsider status. This damaging history led respondents to experience feelings of shame, guilt, depression, and anxiety. Abuses revealed in many of the stories included physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Abuses were perpetrated by parents, and in some cases by religious leaders. Abandonment, including an absent father and/or being thrown out of the house, also occurred in many cases. In addition, respondents were marginalized and relegated to outsider status owing to some perceived deficit such as gender minority status or other perceived deficit. Some respondents were presumed to have outsider status despite their reluctance to acknowledge this status during the interview. They were

observed to display awkward social behaviors that were exhibited both in social interactions and in their comportment. Read, Hammersley, and Rudegair (2007) reported that clients who experienced child abuse and neglect, common among those suffering from serious mental illness, are reluctant to disclose their histories of abuse. Yet, in the current study the respondents frequently volunteered this information. And so in light of the above findings, it may be the case that even more respondents experienced abuse and neglect. Perhaps some of the respondents that had an abuse history, didn't talk about it during the interview. Some respondents indicated they had an abuse history in a vague and undetailed way. Examples of this behavior have been termed "nonspecific abuse."

Some respondents who suffered abuse initially had a resurgence of faith. They became more religious for a period of time, and then rejected their belief. Other respondents skipped this step of increased religiosity and went directly to rejecting their belief. When Walker, Reid, O'Neill, and Brown (2009) considered 34 previous child abuse studies, they found that there was a decline in religious belief or there was a combination of increased religiosity and decline of religiosity. Abuse was not limited to physical, emotional and sexual abuse for LGBT respondents who also often reported religious abuse as well. Super and Jacobson (2011) found that LGBT individuals who suffer religious abuse may end up with "low self-esteem, guilt, shame, spirituality loss, substance abuse, or thoughts of suicide." Data in this study also supported these findings.

Abuse

Nonspecific Abuse

At times respondents indicated that they were the target of abuse, but they described this in a vague and nonspecific way. Some respondents would describe a feeling of walking on

eggshells, while others would note that their parent was quite strict. Some respondents indicated that they modified their own behavior in order to avoid being targeted by their (abusive) parent. When hearing the respondents describe their home life in context, these descriptions seemed to indicate that abuse was present in the home and that the respondents were targeted for this abuse. Following are two respondent examples of what appears to be indications of abuse.

My parents both attended Wheaton College, my father also went to Bob Jones – if that'll give you an idea of the religious background that I grew up in. It was very strict, very fundamentalist, my father was a strict Calvinist, very authoritarian and very strong disciplinarian, very unforgiving disciplinarian. His view of god was the judgmental kickass god, he thought the love stuff was too much fluff for him. So he was definitely an Old Testament kind of guy. And I was required to go to church twice on Sunday, once on Wednesday, and just to make sure we were paying attention, he forced us to memorize stuff from the sermon, just to make sure that we weren't daydreaming that it was somehow being absorbed. So, and then when we became Lutherans, I had to attend confirmation classes on Saturday of all times, which of course just interfered with the weekend. Just poured down my throat. It was not a consensual act as a child. (#10 Respondent)

My dad was an army dad. He is a “what I say goes” kind of dad. I tried everything to keep the peace. My older brother was kind of a screw up growing up and so he was the source of a lot of – unhappy- I don't want to say unhappiness, but like, he was the source of a lot of my dad's anger I would say, growing up. And so there was a lot of – it was uncomfortable. But, I don't want to paint my dad as a bad person. He is a tough person to get along with. He can be very charming and enjoyable to have a conversation with as

long as you don't disagree. Once you disagree, he will start attacking you as a person. And that is really hard... He was in Vietnam, and like, so he saw a lot of awful stuff... But growing up was tense. It was one of those like "I'm going to keep my room clean so that I don't get yelled at" kind of upbringings. Very much trying to please people and all that. (#12 Respondent)

Physical abuse

Respondents talked about being physically abused by their parents and one talked about being abused by nuns. When one respondent talked about being physically abused, he noted that this caused him to be closeted about his homosexuality. Another respondent talked about physical abuse being used by nuns in order to convince him to believe in god.

I came out when I was 14. I went back in the closet because (my parents) were beating me. Umm. And... uhh I ... I couldn't take the violence that was happening. I re-came out at 16 and they threw me out of the house and that was the last I ever lived at home. Umm and it was over the religious aspect of all of this. (#1 Respondent)

And, there was a time or two when she came home and she was just really in a bad mood and took it out on me. I was taking care of my grandmother who came to live with us and she was in her 90s and uh- there was a time or two when my mom – I – ca- I thought- came a little close to being verbally abusive and uh – when I was really little, she spanked me – uh – because she had more hands on care with me. My dad, you know, was working and – and traveling some. So, uh, she uh you know, spanked me a couple of times and there was once where it was a little – like – over the line – even my dad pointed that out. (#3 Respondent)

I was beat up by nuns, and so you BELIEVE in god. And you can't even think of evil, because that's a sin, that strict! (#13 Respondent)

Emotional abuse

Respondents sometimes told stories about being upset by emotional abuse perpetrated by their parents. This emotional abuse caused discomfort and anxiety and was reportedly “emotionally devastating.”

Mainly from my mom, she had tendencies to explode at horribly emotionally unstable times in my life. And, yeah, I remember like I said before, thinking that I was just going to label myself a Christian, and not any specific denomination. That was for me, I was feeling proud that I would have the confidence to do that and my mom just completely ripped that apart and sort of was emotionally devastating sort of thing. She was pretty emotionally abusive. (#9 Respondent)

Sexual abuse

There were two male respondents who reported that they had been sexually abused. One was sexually abused by his mother, while his sister was sexually abused by their father. The other was sexually abused by his pastor after the pastor moved him into his house.

(My family life was) Crazy, chaotic, dysfunctional, and absurdly horrible. (Laughs). I come from one of the most dysfunctional families you probably would ever meet... My father molested my sister from very early age until she was about 16 and she went and became a prostitute... in Las Vegas. I have a foster brother who ended up murdering a family member - umm with a ---uh- hammer in our family room - and is serving a life sentence in (??) prison... And, that's where I come from (laughs) and it all.... is under the umbrella of born again Christians and Mennonites (laughs). High hypocrisy. (Laughs).

And not - mu- I - I would not call my parents loving people. I would call them violent umm abusive physically violent in very strange and cruel ways with umm - and sexually abusive ummm. This would be more of a psychological profile thing - but uh, my mother would force me to brush my twee- teeth with an electric toothbrush that she would masturbate with. And she was a very twisted and strange and deranged person - and umm came from foster homes and.... uhhh... she - she's had a terrible rough life. So... and we moved my whole life. We probably moved - I don't know, 10 times - and different school districts, different uh - different places all the time and it was very disruptive - life. umm. So... there. (Laughs). In a very swift nutshell. (Respondent #1)

The pastor was a 25 year old guy who was – the lord had change- uh saved from homosexuality, was married to a woman, and you know where this story is going right? So I was about probably 16 at that time, and uh (pause) So, you know we ended up doing it – because of course there is no such thing as – you know so the next day – the next day Jesus would – we would pray and Jesus would forgive us for what we did the night before and uh – and then uh... What happened was, my mother was – started dating a married man, and the church was opposed to that, she was excommunicated. And in order to keep us away from that terrible woman, you know, they asked us if we wanted to move in with them. I'm thinking that maybe the guy was realizing that I was gay and wanted to get some from me know. Anyway we ended up moving with them, with him and his wife and you know, what happened- happened. And it's uh – pretty much two gay people.

[Interviewer: Were you the age of consent?] No. I was a minor. The attraction was there, the guy was fine. Oh god, he was muscular beautiful 25 year old guy, he was gorgeous. So, possibly, I mean, I don't think I was raped. It actually didn't go that far – as far as a

sexual encounter. I think it was mutual. [Interviewer: He was a person of god lying about who he was.] Right, and him saying that the lord changed him, he used to testify to that all the time, you know? Like whenever we would go to a big meetup for the church, they always brought him out to tell his testimony about how the lord had changed him, and now he was a married man. And I knew it was bullshit. So all those experiences cemented my not believing any of it you know. And then every time someone would say something, I knew – hey, is that the truth or is he full of it. So, it is really that experience that turned me into an atheist. (Respondent #34)

Abandonment

There were two types of abandonment that presented prominently in the data: father absence and expulsion from the home. In each of these cases, parents behaved in such a way as to indicate to the child that they were disposable. The actions of the parents left their children in situations where the children's safety was no longer guaranteed, and their needs were not easily met. Research has shown that father absence is certainly damaging to children. Culpin, Heron, Araya, Melotti and Joinson (2013) found that father absence in early childhood was associated with increased risk of depressive symptoms in adolescence. Boyce et al. (2006) found that low father involvement in infancy “may be a predisposing factor for the emergence of mental health symptoms in middle childhood.” It is clear that father absence impacts the mental health of youths and may lead to depressive symptoms.

A number of respondents were thrown out of their homes during childhood or adolescence, and this is a form of abandonment and rejection. Montgomery, Thompson, and Barczyk (2011) indicated that throwaway children are prone to delinquency. Li and Liu (2013) have found that throwaways have many more difficulties including issues with parent- child

attachment and teacher-student relationship; and whose well-being was noted to be much lower than children who had not experienced expulsion from their homes. In sum, there is evidence that throwaways have relationship issues, mental health issues, and are apparently more prone to delinquency.

Father Absence

Father absence was experienced in a number of different ways for many respondents. For some, their father left the home when they were very young, essentially abandoning and rejecting the respondent during childhood. For others, the father remained in the home but was unavailable physically or emotionally. For example, some reported they had one of the following: an alcoholic father, an abusive father, a father that worked nights, or a father that traveled for work. Söderström and Skårderud (2013) reported that substance abusing fathers are unable to adequately care for their children and the likelihood of abuse and neglect increases. In cases where the father was absent either physically or emotionally, there was evidence that some respondents idealized their father. Vitz's (2013) "Defective Father Hypothesis" stated that having a father who is defective is a common trait among those who deconvert to atheism. Vitz (2013) reported that defective fathers may be absent (whether by leaving the home or through death), indifferent, abusive, or weak. There was support for these findings in the current study.

Well my father left when I was 8. Uh – always around but more for like – its its like his relationship with us was always about making us what he wanted us to be... kinda thing. Always trying to make me work in his business, always trying to --- but never really seeing who I really am. I mean ever since I was a little kid, I don't remember him asking me – how was my day, what am I doing in school, what do I like? – Nothing like, those

things didn't come up – so, I – it was always a very one-sided relationship. (#2
Respondent)

There were respondents who described their fathers being absent owing to a number of different factors. These included alcoholism and drug addiction, working, emotional neglect or indifference, and death.

My dad? Is a recovering alcoholic. So, my whole childhood he did not go to church, he drank a lot. And he still does not go to church which is very interesting, and I don't know the real answer to that – as to why. And he struggles now with depression very bad and bipolar disorder. So, he is – I don't know – I know this is sounding all garbled. I wonder sometimes if my dad struggles with lack of belief and he's afraid to say it around my mom. Because church has never been important to him. It just hasn't and I wonder if that is part of the reason that he struggles with depression. I mean I know part of the reason that he struggles with depression is because he was an alcoholic most of our lives and I know that's got to suck, but. I wonder, I just kinda wonder. And my oldest brother, he and his wife have a little boy and they're Christian, but they don't go to church and then my other, my middle brother, he is, he is an alcoholic and a police officer and he goes to church because his wife makes him. Umm, he's very angry. We had a rough childhood. So, me and my brother, we're very different. My oldest brother is kind of an introvert and keeps to himself and then my middle brother like I said, he drinks too much and he's very angry and opinionated, and then there's me, I'm bringing up the rear. I'm the black sheep... I think that if I could just get up enough courage to sit with my dad whenever he's not in one of his Xanax hazes and just kind of ask him, "Dad, why don't you go to church, I mean, I'm not judging you or nothing, but do you not believe? Cause I don't

either” and I think that would be a good conversation, but I’ve got to get him away from my mom long enough to have that conversation. (#5 Respondent)

Growing up I went to church, remember going to church all my life but not overly zealous parents. My father was an alcoholic and did not go at all. My mother went because it was almost like, you send your kids to school, you take them to church. But if you miss, it’s not a really big deal and we didn’t really participate on anything but Sunday morning. But as I got older then because my father was alcoholic, my family didn’t do a lot socially other than eat meals together and holidays together. We didn’t go on vacation, we didn’t do social outings, not a lot of things because of the problems at home. So, church was a very social outlet, the older that I got. And so when I was in 5th and 6th grade church provides activities for kids in that age group. And then as I got to be a teenager, there were lots of activities and lots of kids and kids that probably came from similar backgrounds that I came from, because it was rural, there was probably some alcoholism that nobody ever talked about in their families. So it was a time for us to come together and to immerse yourself in the church and in religion and the things that they taught was a real escape from what was going on at home. And was also a guarantee that I wouldn’t turn out like my father. He was a raging, mean, nasty drunk. So that was a guarantee, it kept me safe from that and guaranteed me that that was not where I was going. Extreme opposite of where he was... We would go places, do mission trips, go around and visit other churches and sing, go to church camp, and if I couldn’t do that, then I was home. My sisters were much older and they had already moved away so I would have been home alone, had it not been for that. (#7 Respondent)

Some respondents either never or rarely saw their father. Typically they minimized this experience by suggesting it only bothers them a little or by initially suggesting they saw him more often as Respondent #9 did below.

Usually when my dad would come visit me, he would come on Saturday morning and stay until about Sunday around lunch. And usually I would go see my grandparents then. Now every single time, but it was fairly often, so it was sort of a biweekly thing – or a bimonthly thing, sorry.-(#9 Respondent)

“My father left when I was a kid, so I have that stuff that still I get upset about every now and then.” (#14 Respondent)

Respondent #17 tried to acknowledge his father’s challenges and offered excuses for his father being unavailable. While the reasons he provides appear to be strong, it is noteworthy that he seems unable to acknowledge his feelings about his father’s absence, and instead only jokingly says that he has OCD.

I think that is part of some of the issues I had as a kid. I’m a little OCD to begin with. My father was too busy caring for my (paraplegic) mother, because he didn’t have family around, so he wasn’t really available. (#17 Respondent)

And my dad, he just stayed out of everything. He worked an awful lot, while I was growing up. He has been retired for quite a few years now. (He was gone a lot?) I mean, he worked in town, but he worked for the county government, so quite often he would be gone before I got up and wouldn’t be back until right before dinner. Often we would delay dinner for a little bit until he got back. And then he would be tired from working all day and he would just kind of sit there watching TV. And then he would sleep real late on

the weekends and stuff. So didn't get much interaction with him, until he retired, when I was in college. (#24 Respondent)

My dad worked the nightshift and he would wake up in the middle of the day to bring us somewhere if we had to be somewhere. At the time it felt like a rough family life because I was home so much babysitting while they were working. (#27 Respondent)

My father passed away when I was like 15. And so that really allowed the flood gate to open. Because he was like the barrier. When I wanted to go to the Islamic meeting to attend and see more about it, he would always say no. So when my father passed, I had free reign. (You were young when he passed). Oh yeah, too young actually. I was still trying to find myself. Yeah that – that – that was a trying time. So in that kind of – that was an interesting point that you made. Because I felt kind of like – not necessarily isolated, but I felt aimless. I had never experienced death before. I didn't understand really what was going on even at this age. I was like what does this mean, why did it happen, I was questioning god. I was actually very angry at god, I even cursed god many times. (#14 Respondent)

Thrown away

Respondents reported that they were thrown out of the home for a variety of reasons. Some respondents reported that this occurred when they told their parents they were gay; some respondents reported this happened when they told their parents they were atheist or questioning religion; and one reported he was thrown out of the home because he didn't mow the grass. Expulsion from the home as an adolescent left respondents without adequate resources to properly care for themselves and maintain safety. They were not of an age that would enable them to obtain employment easily. They struggled to obtain funds to purchase safe housing, food

or other needed supplies to sustain life and wellbeing. They were young and inexperienced and therefore more likely to be at risk for harm or violence. Following their expulsion, one respondent stole from others to survive and another slept in a gas station bathroom to stay safe and warm. According to Colby (2011) these are typical experiences among “throwaway youths.” Connery (2013) reported that LGBT individuals are at a higher risk than the general population for leaving home, having mental health issues, victimization, becoming addicted to substances, and participating in risky sexual behaviors. Moskowitz, Stein, and Lightfoot (2013) reported that young LGBT individuals make up between 20-40% of homeless youths, which is noteworthy given that LGBT youth are only 10% of the general population. The current study data seems to support these findings.

In the case of the throwaway, it isn’t that any of them attempted to persuade their abusive parents to let them stay. It was as if they saw this as a viable solution to avoid further abuse. While this circumstance carried with it one final damaging insult, that of abandonment, it was still viewed as the best option given the abusive and damaging circumstances that the respondents were in.

I came out when I was 14. I went back in the closet because they were beating me. Umm. And... Uhh I.. I couldn't take the violence that was happening. I re-came out at 16 and they threw me out of the house and that was the last I ever lived at home. Umm and it was over the religious aspect of all of this. (#1 Respondent)

“I – I’ve known a person too who said they were kicked out of their house – young person kicked out of their house because they were an atheist.” (#3 Respondent)

“I got kicked out of high school and my house the same day.” (#11 Respondent)

(My mother) says, “You can’t go anywhere because you need to mow the lawn.” I said, “I just mowed the lawn 3 days ago.” She said, “No you can’t go.” I said, “Well, that’s stupid, I’m going.” So anyway, she kicks me out of the house, she says “Get your stuff and get out of here.” She had some other stuff to say. So I’m packing my stuff because that’s what she just told me to do and she’s on the phone to my dad who just had a stroke, and is in the hospital trying to recuperate in a different city. And makes me get on the phone to my dad, tells him what I’ve done, like a normal conversation, but she doesn’t consider his condition. I have to talk to my crying father, who is a marine who doesn’t cry, because he doesn’t know what’s going on. I have to talk to my crying father, telling him to – telling me to “just do what your mom says.” So I’m like, “alright.” So I do and I get a handful of grass from the entire yard, and I was like “This is why you’re kicking me out?!” and I left. (#19 Respondent)

While it was unclear what the motivation was for throwing the respondents out of the home, what was clear is that this appeared to happen to a high number of respondents. This was an unexpected and notable finding.

Outsider Status

Individuals in this study who were considered to have outsider status, experienced rejections from parents, peers, church members, and religious leaders. In light of the subject of this study, it is important to note that, biblical scripture marks certain groups of people for rejection. In this study outsider status was experienced by gender nonconforming individuals, an “old maid,” and a “bastard.” Since religious families, peers, communities and religious leaders rejected these individuals, it may be that the rejections were based on biblical scriptures. Some scripture indicates to followers that some individuals should be excluded owing to their defective

or immoral status. For example, biblical scripture indicates that marriage is desirable in order to avoid being “mocked as old maids” (Isaiah 4:1 New Living Translation). Biblical scripture also says “If a person is illegitimate by birth, neither he nor his descendants for ten generations may be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (New Living Translation Deuteronomy 23:2). While “old maids” are apparently deserving of mocking, “bastards” and their descendants are not worthy to enter a church. Clearly, these biblical scriptures say that some of those among us are unworthy, defective, and deserving of rejection. It encourages rejections that lead some among us to be treated as outsiders.

One heterosexual feminine male talked about outsiders and how social integration or lack of social integration has a huge impact on one’s life. He noted that with less social integration, one is at higher risk of suicide. This is noteworthy given that some respondents indeed felt suicidal and were outsiders.

I started thinking about how that related to – in Sociology – umm Emil Durkheim’s work on religion – *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*? And you know Durkheim saw uh – uh – belonging as a matter of social integration. And religious belief – being a type of social integration and you know – he linked that to higher suicide rates – the less involved and integrated you are in groups – the more – the greater your risk of suicide – and I’ve started to learn – and read some other work on that – that that really seems to be a good model for – I think - why a lot of people become nonbelievers. (#3 Respondent)

Gender Nonconforming

Gender nonconforming individuals in this study included feminine males, masculine females, a transwoman, and also LGBT individuals. The bible indicates that homosexuality is worthy of death as punishment: “If a man practices homosexuality, having sex with another man

as with a woman, both men have committed a detestable act. They must both be put to death, for they are guilty of a capital offense” (New Living Translation Leviticus 20:13). Biblical scripture appears to indicate that women have their place as submissive to men. Therefore, a masculine or otherwise strong or dominant woman would be deemed immoral as she would be going against god’s word. Biblical scriptures refer to women as the “weaker vessel” (English Standard Version 1 Peter 3:7), and states that she is not to “exercise authority over a man” and is to “remain quiet” (English Standard Version 1 Timothy 10:12).

There was one feminine heterosexual male who briefly hinted at his awareness of his own outsider status by noting the possible significance of being a gender minority. It is notable that he did so in a vague way, and he did not go into detail on this particular topic while he did tend to go into detail about outside others.

And umm, when I think about most – maybe not all – but most people that I’ve known who are atheist, umm it seems like they have had some- uh if you look at their life, there is something about them that – most of these people have had – that make them an outsider in some way. That make them not well-integrated in some way... Umm, when I was 3 or 4 years old, my whole neighborhood underwent White Flight. So from age 3 or 4 on, I – I grew up in a middle class neighborhood – African – all African American. You know, by the time I was 8 or 9 I was probably the only white family in a very large neighborhood – little in-town suburb of Atlanta. So, I was always aware I was a little different. All my best friends were African American... and I was –maybe more able – thru my education and my own experience with race – to identify with marginalized groups and – probably outsiders and the little person. So, so – there you know racially if you’re an outsider or if you’re an outsider in terms of being a gender minority – or

something, I would think it would be more likely you would turn a lens back on religion and think about religious minorities. (#3 Respondent)

Some respondents presented as feminine male or masculine female, and one of them was heterosexual, while the majority were LGBT. These respondents had nonconforming comportment and some of them presented as socially awkward. Some of these respondents noted difficulties that stemmed from their gender nonconformity, while others did not discuss it. For those that did not discuss gender nonconformity directly, there seemed to be indications during their interviews that they were very clearly living with outsider status both as children and as adults. Many respondents with outsider status also reported paternal rejection and/or maternal rejection. Those with outsider status often shared that they struggled to develop and maintain relationships. Many reported that they felt lonely. It is worth noting that this loneliness was compounded upon the loss of the god relationship. What this researcher has dubbed outsider status, Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey and Oram (2004), as well as Sandfort, Melendez and Diaz (2007) have referred to as social rejection and peer rejection. Landolt et al. (2004) found that gender nonconformity was associated significantly with rejections from parents and peers during childhood.

Outsider status, often referred to in the literature as social rejection, has implications for the individual and for their communities. Williams, Forgas, and Von Hippel (2005) noted that, social exclusion has been linked both to depression and suicide, and to mass killings. They further noted that, when individuals are marginalized, they may resort to seeking bonds with fringe elements of society. This marginalization can have ramifications for the individuals, and society at large.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT)

All LGBT respondents reported that they had been taught that LGBT was a sinful “choice.” They all suffered from this label. One bisexual female respondent even suffered with such intensity that she attempted suicide because she “hated herself” and thought she was “evil,” which was surely as a result of how her family and church therapist responded to her bisexuality. One homosexual male respondent shared that he felt that god was planning his execution and eternal punishment. Some LGBT respondents talked about feeling sadness, grief, depression and anxiety, and they had concerns about rejection. For some, this rejection was a concern as soon as they realized that they were LGBT and that their religious family and church community had called this a sin. For others, there was a fear that as a LGBT they would be disowned, and some were.

One particularly memorable respondent told a story of what it was like to be put on hormones by her church counselor “to try to make (her) straight” and she told how this led her to nearly kill herself.

Yes. I was (sigh). I was probably 13 and I was – like I say – going to church 4 times a week. And I was battling greatly with my sexuality. And it being wrong, because I was Christian and I wasn’t supposed to be anything but straight. And they had me going to church counseling and had me on hormones to try to make me straight – which obviously didn’t work. So I started hating myself because I was the way that I am. I like girls, so that’s evil in the eyes of Christians. And my family and the church made me feel like I was evil. They made it very clear, they actually verbally told me that if I ever brought a woman home, that they would disown me. I went to church counseling and I had the conversation with my church counselor. They – were doing all these things to me. So I

hated myself. And I – you know – wanted to die pretty much because I was evil. And my own god didn't love me for the way that he supposedly made me. So I came to a precipice where I was wanting to die and I couldn't understand why god wasn't okay with me. And it finally occurred to me that if this god did exist, and he did make me this way, he didn't love me. Either he doesn't exist or he doesn't deserve to be worshipped. So – that for me was the boiling point. So then I did a lot of research and had the same kind of problem with most other religions and then finally was like, this is all bullshit. (Laugh)... I mean, I was literally sitting on the bathroom floor, crying my eyes out, this close (holds fingers closely together) to attempting to kill myself pretty much. And was like, if god didn't speak to me then and tell me it's okay, then like I said, he is either not there or he doesn't deserve to be worshipped. [Interviewer: You don't feel that way anymore?] No. Not at all. This whole thing has been very freeing and I started to actually love myself after chose atheism, and love everybody else – be open to everybody. (#20 Respondent)

Shaming

Some LGBT individuals reported shaming, sometimes publically, for their sexual identity and this experience caused them much harm. The feeling of shame and self-as-bad seemed to be amplified for LGBT respondents, perhaps as a result of specific religious teachings about sexuality and direct shaming of LGBTs.

Many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) respondents indicated that they were shamed for their sexuality not only by their parents, but also by religious leaders (such as pastors, Christian counselors) and their church community. Johnson and Yarhouse (2013) reported that LGBT individuals experience stigma and shame. The current study seems to

indicate that it may be that religious teachings amplify this stigma and shame. LGBT individuals reported suffering with thoughts and feelings around the religious teachings that view any sexuality other than heterosexuality as sinful and shameful.

McDermott, Roen, and Scourfield (McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008) found that “homophobia works to punish at a deep individual level and requires young LGBT people to manage being positioned, because of their sexual desire or gendered ways of being, as abnormal, dirty and disgusting.” They noted that young LGBT people deal with homophobia using shame-avoidance strategies such as minimizing homophobia and creating “proud” identities.

McDermott et al. (2008) noted that it seemed they young LGBT individuals were handling homophobia independently, and they did not seem to expect any support. The researchers indicated that this fact may have made the LGBT individuals more susceptible to self-destructive behaviors.

My brother has come out as gay, but yet still believes, which I found that kind of surprising, to a certain extent. He kind of came from the same kind of background that I did. I would have thought that the background that we came from would have been hugely unwelcoming to someone who was gay, and so I think that he did really struggle with it for a long time, and didn't come out until he was in college. It was surprising to me that he held onto his belief, even though I would imagine that that belief was kind of a source of guilt and shame and things like that. (Respondent #6)

I have really led an exemplary life and tried to love god my whole life and and I have found that my family hates me because of who I am and I know that I did not make

myself gay. I've known I'm gay since I was 5 years old. So there is no way that I - that this is a sin - I couldn't reconcile the two. (Respondent #1)

One bisexual masculine female who is married to a man presently, noted witnessing public shaming of a homosexual male who attended her religious school. When she told the story, it appeared to have affected her as if she had been shamed publically herself.

Umm, but that was REALLY hard for me (sigh) Ummm, the church I went to was very very strict on that – in that area. I mean we had – it was really kinda wrong the way they took it – I mean there was a a gentleman that I went to school with that – he is now openly gay – and at the time, he knew it and I guess they caught on to it and they made him do this whole big speech in front of the whole school about how – he had these experiences over the summer, but now he's cleansed and he's not gay anymore and god healed him – and all this stuff. And of course now he's – you know – who he is! (Laughs) who he always was! And they wouldn't accept that and it was a – a (sigh) kind of a scary – I think – in some ways experience for people who were LGBT in that school... it was really umm oppressive. And umm, psychologically damaging (laughs) I would say.

Umm, yeah. It it it was really torturing internally for me... and for other kids in that situation – so that's definitely a HUGE shift in my life was – to finally accept that about myself and others. Umm, a cousin of mine who's gay – I mean I had a lot of internal (*inaudible) homophobia. You know? ... To some degree, I wasn't as bad as they were because – my mother – as I told you is more open minded – in opera a lot of her you know theater coworkers were gay ummm – and she was more used to it. She was a little more accepting of it, umm – and she taught me that but she still – still had that idea that, 'but they are still doing something that's a sin' – You know? So, I mean – that – that

messed with my mind a lot. So, I mean to have come out of that was huge for me – to find a community where everybody was like ‘no, whatever you are is fine – that’s who you are, that’s okay!’ That was a big big burden off my shoulders. You know? (#2 Respondent)

Bastard, Old Maid

Two respondents who suffered outsider status included one female “old maid” and one male “bastard.” Each of these respondent’s stories indicated that they had outsider status. The female “old maid” described herself as suffering when all of her peers got married and had children well before she did. She never described herself as an old maid; rather, this researcher used a term well-known to describe the phenomenon. The male “bastard” was notably disturbed by his status, laughing awkwardly when describing himself as a “bastard of the church.” He said that the church members were aware of his status, and he always felt ostracized. Below both the “old maid” and the “bastard” talk about their individual experiences.

After high school graduation, people start going in different directions, some go off to college, or some went into ministry and went to other churches. So, where I grew up if you are in your early 20s and you’re not married, then there’s not – you know there may be one or two other people in your age group in your demographic because most people my age were married and starting a family or they had gone off to college. So, or they were much younger, like in high school, had kind of an American Graffiti thing, where the older guy couldn’t move away from high school. He was out of high school but he couldn’t move on and everybody else was growing up and every year he had a new crop of seniors that he hung out with. He got older. So I think that was kind of it. There weren’t many people in my demographic. In my home church. And I tried visiting a

neighboring church that seemed to have more people in my age group, single people in their early 20s but that just never felt like home. And then when I started dating my husband which I was probably 24-25 about that time, he was Catholic, I was Baptist, you know, what do you do? We visited not so much the social things at church, but we would go to church services, but nothing just ever felt right for either one of us... It was just kind of hard to find my place, where I really belonged. And then the love of my life, who wasn't a Southern Baptist Minister, was kind of different. (#7 Respondent)

Autism Spectrum

One final outsider status group in this study included individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Since there does not appear to be scripture related to Autism Spectrum disorder, their social exclusion may be related to the challenges they face in social integration. In their case, it is likely their perceived “differentness” that contributes to their social exclusion and outsider status.

There were respondents who appeared to have symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder. One reported that he had Asperger's Syndrome and that it caused him to have trouble engaging socially and making friends. For example, symptoms that were observed in some outsider status respondents included stuttering, reporting loneliness, reporting difficulty making friends, rocking back and forth, odd movement, avoidance of eye contact, and missing humor. While it may be possible that some of these respondents did not fall on the spectrum, they did appear to have at least a level of social awkwardness that was apparent in their comportment and in their social interactions. For example, a couple of the respondents seemed unaware of typical social cues which led to notable uncomfortable silences in the interview. In another example, one respondent faced himself sideways so that the camera saw the side of his face during a Skype interview. When this researcher met this respondent in person, he presented as a small framed and short

male with what appeared to be social anxiety. He shifted back and forth on his feet while attempting to engage with others.

It is likely that these noted behaviors have been present since childhood, and resulted in the individual's exclusion, thus relegating them to outsider status. So, while many atheists experience social rejection following their loss of belief, those who have outsider status appear to experience social rejection both prior to and following their loss of belief. Indeed, the rejection experience stemming from their outsider status may prime them to lose their belief in god. This appears to be the case both for the "old maid" and "bastard" and also for respondents who are gender nonconforming.

While the current study suggests that rejection traumas such as abuse, abandonment and outsider status somehow prime respondents for loss of belief, some researchers have concluded that outsider status has the opposite effect. Aydin, Fischer and Frey (2010) reported that socially excluded individuals had significantly higher levels of religiosity than non-excluded individuals. Aydin et al. (2010) further stated that "direct support for the stress-buffering function of religiousness was also found... reducing the aggression-eliciting effects of consequent social rejection." It should be noted that none of the respondents in the current study expressed or demonstrated any aggressive impulses, with the one exception of the negative case (#13). It may be likely that respondents who experience outsider status become depressed, and this depression leads to their questioning the existence of god. This may relate to the cognitive and emotional struggle that many of the respondents had around the suffering of others. They typically were conscious of the suffering of others more than they were aware of their own personal suffering. They told stories of personal suffering without the intensity of questioning that they expressed when talking about the suffering of others, in particular the suffering of perceived innocents.

One respondent talked about feeling lonely when he moved to a new high school.

Another respondent talked about how she felt like she was not a part of the church and described sitting apart from the others.

I could also mention the fact that I had uh transferred to that high school – different high school in 11th grade... I remember you know when I began 11th grade I wasn't the big hotshot that I was at my former high school – I was the class president at my former high school – and doing all these sports, and number one on the tennis teams – I was popular, now it was a much bigger high school, I didn't hardly know anybody and I was lonely... and and didn't know many people. (#3 Respondent)

We had chapel every week, it was Pentecostal so they did things like speaking in tongues and people would go to the front and cry and – you know, I just did not dig that display of emotion like it felt very fake, it'd been put on. I was Methodist, and I was like, what's going on? So I would sit in the back of the chapel and do algebra. I would just sit back there and do my homework, or do math or whatever, just so I didn't have to partake in that. It's not that I thought they weren't really Christians or anything like that, I just did not like the way they expressed themselves. (#12 Respondent)

Shame (until rejection of belief)

Shame was found to be a recurring theme throughout the data and contributed to respondents' self-as-bad concept. It seemed that their damaging history, combined with religious teachings, led them to experience shame. This, in turn, appeared to lead to respondents experiencing depression and anxiety. Ashby, Rice and Martin (2006) found that early experiences of shame have “traumatic memory characteristics” and are connected with “feelings

of internal and external shame in adulthood.” They found that more depressive symptoms were experienced by those who had shame memories with more traumatic characteristics.

Harman and Lee (2010) noted that recent research has considered the role of shame in post-traumatic stress disorder, and they suggested that “shame might contribute to the creation/maintenance of ongoing current threat as it attacks an individual's psychological integrity.” They hypothesized that “individuals with PTSD who report higher levels of shame would be more prone to engage in self-critical thinking and less prone to engage in self-reassuring thinking than individuals with PTSD who report lower levels of shame,” and their findings supported this hypothesis. Harman and Lee’s study is very interesting given the similar findings of the current study, which seems to indicate that respondents who experienced shame, developed a self-as-bad concept. This negative self-image led to symptoms including depression and anxiety. Both of these symptoms are found in PTSD sufferers.

Self as Bad, Sinner

It seems that childhood/adolescent rejection and trauma, combined with religious teachings such as Original Sin, led the respondents to see themselves as defective or bad in some way. When respondents experienced abuse or punishments from their parents or religious leaders, they may have believed that authority figures punished them as a means to correct their defective or sinful nature. This shaming led the respondents to feel guilty for the bad or wrong that they had done. Based on the religious teaching of Original Sin, the respondents may have rationalized that this was due to their innately “defective” nature. Feelings of guilt then led the respondents to experience extreme anxiety.

It is likely that the Original Sin concept, taught to the respondents from early childhood, may well bolster this the sense of “self-as-bad” and pathological shame. It is a Protestant

teaching which essentially states that when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, we, as his ancestors, inherited not only the sin, but also the guilt of having committed that sin. Thus, we are born flawed and sinful. We, in turn, must try to overcome this sin by repenting. Through repenting, or asking God for forgiveness of sins, Protestant Christians believe that they can avoid eternal torment in hell. And, as will be discussed, the concept of hell and this threat of harsh eternal punishment brought tremendous anxiety to the respondents both as children and as adults.

Schimmenti (2012) found that parental abuse and neglect can cause pathological shame and can lead to “negative expectations towards interpersonal relationships, disturbing feelings of shame, and a sense of a defective self.” The researcher found that the experience of shame led to “withdrawal from social contacts, narcissistic rage, addiction and perversions.” Kim, Thibodeau, and Jorgensen (2011) reported that shame was associated with depressive symptoms and that when guilt combined with depressive symptoms the individuals felt “exaggerated responsibility for uncontrollable events” and “generalized guilt, involving “free-floating” guilt divorced from specific contexts”.

Guilt is a feeling that many respondents reported experiencing during the deconversion experience, and in particular, they often reported this feeling when beginning to question god or beliefs. The reason for feeling guilty when questioning the existence of god was typically that they had been taught that this was wrong, and therefore amoral or sinful. The fear of hell was a concern that was so hard to overcome, that respondents experienced it throughout their deconversion and even after loss of belief had occurred. Respondents reported that they experienced mental and emotional discomfort due to ruminations and anxiety around their fear of hell. The fear of hell stemmed from religious teachings and biblical scripture which characterized certain traits as defective and sinful. Therefore, those particularly affected by these teachings and

scriptures were old maids, bastards, and those who were gender nonconforming or otherwise deemed outsiders in some way.

One heterosexual male respondent linked the concepts of guilt and original sin when he talked about first questioning his beliefs. In his case, he experiences continued guilt, a sort of free floating guilt, which has persisted even after his loss of belief.

There were kind of specific moments where I would say this doesn't make sense. I think I had a lot of problems – I think the really things first started kind of falling down where as a kid who has an older brother the idea of me being punished for something that my brother did was – it was a possibility, but it was something like so unconscionably unfair that it would be horrible. And the idea of original sin is essentially that. You are being punished for something that somebody else did. That was the first thing that I really kind of threw down on with that. Between the ages of 16 and 18 were when I really – that was like, I started kind of questioning things and by the time I was 18, and I – I feel really kind of cowardly for saying this, but I think one of the big deciding factors was when I moved out, I was like, I don't have to go to church anymore. There is no guilt trip behind it, there is nothing like that. One of the things my girlfriend will back me up on is that I've never abandoned the guilt. Guilt is something that comes with it. It is just something that has followed me around for ever and ever. It's not like I feel guilty for not believing or anything – I feel guilty about everything. It is one of those things where I'll not say thank you to a cashier and I will feel badly about it for hours. (#19 Respondent)

Another respondent noted his discontent with the concept of original sin when said he rejected the idea of man being flawed. He further brought up the idea of afterlife or heaven and

hell. This is important because it speaks to the idea that, if you overcome your flaws or sins you will be rewarded in heaven, yet if you continue to be sinful or bad, you will be punished in hell. This is an important point when considering the effect that the concept of Original Sin had on these respondents.

I mean, I guess anything that would be classified as religious belief, I would reject. Any sort of – a lot of religions do this – have a reason why man is flawed in some way, in need of reconciliation, the existence of an afterlife, anything like that I reject. (#12 Respondent)

In some cases, becoming a parent and parenting one's own children caused a shift in thinking about the Original Sin concept and its related afterlife element. One respondent noted that she began to see herself as a better parent than god, in that she would never punish her children as harshly as god and would never "hold them accountable for something... that might not make sense (to them)." She could not imagine punishing her children with torment in hell, yet god, the father, would do so.

I think becoming a parent was also part of the deconversion I would say, solidifying a lot of those beliefs. Because a lot of times in the church they give you the analogy that god is our parent who cares for you and blah blah blah, I was like "Really?" because the whole idea of Christianity, the whole point of Christianity is to avoid a negative afterlife, right, to be reconciled to god so you can go to heaven, but I can't imagine doing something so negative to my children, or holding them accountable for believing something that might not make sense in their physical world and punishing them otherwise. People use that argument all the time: What if your children rejected you after everything you have done

for them? I'm like "what if they did! I still wouldn't torment them, you know?" (Laugh).
(#12 Respondent)

This concern for the well-being of children was a common theme throughout the interviews. One respondent shared a story from her childhood, in which she had been shown a video with heavy, terrifying, and arguably inappropriate content. The content was unfitting for young children in elementary school. She became very anxious after viewing this video and her mother was very upset by this. The video seemingly was meant to educate children about the dangers of not being "saved". Again, this terrifying video was intended to teach the concept of Original Sin and the importance of repenting so that one would not be tormented in hell for all eternity. These are clearly heavy concepts for anyone, and in particular children in elementary school. It seems to be a common theme that fear and terror are used in order to persuade people to maintain their religious belief(s).

Specifically, when I was a child, and I'm trying to remember how old I was – elementary school. Our teachers decided to show a video in class, and it was a video of a man, clearly this video had been done in the 70's, and it was this guy and these people were trying to save him. He was not a Christian, they wanted him to become a Christian, so they were witnessing to him. And he says, "Thanks, but no thanks," you know. And then he gets in his convertible and drives down the road and gets hit head-on by an 18 wheeler and dies. Right? So the moral of the story is, (laugh) become a Christian or you get hit by an 18 wheeler. Well, (laugh) my mom picked me up from school that day and we were headed on our way home, and we were going over a set of railroad tracks, and an 18 wheeler was coming the other way and I lost my mind! Like, I started freaking out. And all that movie did was make me afraid of 18 wheelers. Still driving down the interstate

when they are next to me I hate it. So, we just had this awful experience. Very negative for a little kid. My mom was really ticked off and ended up telling the school that they had no place showing this to children, and what were they thinking kind of thing. I think now they'd get their pants sued off! But yeah, that was awful. (#12 Respondent)

Some respondents seemed to become so anxious that they spent considerable time asking themselves if they were doing the “right” or “good” thing as judged by god. This became quite a lot of work for some respondents as they began to filter everything through this lens. One respondent felt limited in his freedom to even enjoy music that he liked, for fear that it would displease god. He also felt guilt for viewing pornography and described this experience as a “battle”.

My whole mental schema was veiled thru “is it of god, is it good...” and it became so ingrained in me that I filtered everything and saw everything and intended on doing thru this veil, “Is it okay, is it pleasing to god, is it not?” because I thought he was always observing my thoughts and with me and he did so much and he pulled me from the pits of hell and all this stuff. So I got really really – I wouldn't listen to certain music, I felt guilty looking at adult material (laugh), all these things, it was a constant inner battle of the flesh versus the spirit, it was real. That was my biggest problem, and I guess that helped me bc I was focusing so much on battling my human urges that I'm not too worried about the drugs (laugh). (#14 Respondent)

One respondent said that when he was a believer he often felt that god was angry at him and was judging him. He said he felt peace when he lost his belief in god, because he no longer felt that god was angry at him or judging him.

Umm - the world is a simpler place. I don't have a special friend in my head - directing me at all times. And I feel - is angry with me a lot of the time. And I feel... as much as I feel not at peace with umm not having a friend in the sky, I - I also find - have found total peace about not having this crazy motherfucker in my head (laughs) judging my every move and planning my execution (laughs) and uh eternal punishment (laughs). (#1 Respondent)

Restitution

One respondent spoke about the 12step program he participated in, and he talked about a desire to make restitution for the “wrongs” that he had done. He talked about feeling responsible for the death of a man left in his care. In order to heal the guilt he felt from this, he felt compelled to make restitution for this wrong through “good” works or volunteering to help someone in need. In the end, after making restitution for this “wrong,” the respondent said he was able to forgive himself. While other respondents did not use the term restitution, it could be said that their volunteering and their choosing to work in helping professions may be a sort of attempt at restitution for feeling “bad” or “wrong” in some way.

Ummm in the 12step fellowship that I was part of - it was never presented to me like that. You couldn't just scapegoat your - your ummm....you know, the thin- the harms you'd done others away. You had to make restitution - to the best of your ability. Umm one of the things I had done was - I was an orderly when I was very young, when I was 15. I became an orderly and that was what I'd done when I was on my own at 16. Umm and I was - I worked with a man - I worked with lots of old people in a convalescent hospital and one of the men that was there - he was a - ummm - uh -uh - he he had had a stroke and had no speech and I was - I - I - I was kinda lazy. I don't know, I was probably

typical 15-16 year old I don't know. But at the time, I had a lot of responsibility in my responsibility was to make sure that this person's intakes and outputs were charted very carefully. And I didn't really see the - im- the - how deadly important that could be. One of the things I did was - I was very cavalier about it. I - I would - just make things up when it was time to chart at the end of my shift. I'd say "yeah that one pissed and that one didn't and that one had a bowel movement and this one didn't... and this one drank - uh you know 400 cc's of fluid on my shift" I just made it up. (Pause) At the end of the shift, well this man ended up dying of a fecal impaction. And - and I don't know if it was me or if it was 2 other shifts - there were 3 shifts of people who were - umm - doing this important work, but I - umm I took it on as something that I had contributed to and probably mightily in my neglect. And umm it was very serious for me, I carried it around for many years. I never forgave myself for it. And umm and when I was in 12step programs uh my sponsor said, "You know let's find somebody who's had a stroke that you can - do volunteer work with, once a week" And I did. I found a gay man who had had a stroke and he was 57 - he was in AA alcoholics anonymous and he couldn't get to and from AA meetings and I would go pick him up at the nursing home and it was like a lifeline to him and I'd go pick him up once a week and drive him to AA meetings and I started doing it twice a week, I'd take him -- he hadn't been to the beach in years, so I took him to the beach and --- I did a lot of things with him. It was fun. And it was a lot of work. And ummm and I finally could forgive myself... for what I had done to this other man. Umm (pause) So, I learned a lot from that. (#1 Respondent)

Depression

As noted previously, research has suggested that shame experiences and traumatic memories related to these experiences lead to depression. Respondents experienced depression

throughout the deconversion process for a variety of reasons and these bouts of depression occurred before, during and/or after deconversion.

One of the things that I have mourned in losing my faith is, I always thought - even if I only went to hell - I'd have somebody explain life to me just before I went to wherever the hell I went. Hell or heaven or wherever the hell that meant. Or to be with god, who really always loved me - and always my best friend. Umm but I figured there would always be this moment where - it would - and I dreamed of this moment when I was a little kid - that I'd be somewhere ---- in--- I don't know --- a pre-heaven place - (laugh) - umm where somebody would explain it all to me - what did this life mean, what were my mistakes, what were the things that uhhh hurt other people or what were my my assets, what did I do right? And god - was he pleased with me. I expected an answer to all of that. (#1 Respondent)

One respondent talked about feeling sad that her sister, a believer, probably thinks that she will go to hell. The sister is also married to an atheist, and the respondent was indicating that it is sad her sister believes that they will both go to hell.

When we were growing up we did believe in hell. I'm assuming she still thinks that and she is just praying for us, which is kind of sad. I know that she is worrying about her husband and now she has to worry about me. But it is what it is. (#18 Respondent)

Anxiety

The issue of anxiety and its associated physical response, mental anguish and emotional discomfort in the form of guilt has emerged as an important focus of this data. There is an abundance of data which circled around this concept. In particular, feeling that they would be

rejected once they revealed their identity (atheist and/or LGBT) was a reason why they remained closeted. It was because of fear. This fear of rejection was quite strong, and for many resulted in a persistent closeting or hiding of identity. There is also a lingering fear of being evil or sinning that is quite hard to overcome. Respondents spoke of their fear that they didn't believe in god and their awareness that this was an evil thing to say or was a sin. Protestant religious teachings indicate that sin, when it is unforgiven, leads to eternal torture in hell, and this certainly is a frightening thought. When acknowledging a "sinful" or "evil" identity, whether atheist identity or LGBT identity, respondents often reported feeling nauseated, and/or shaking. Chadwick, Trower, Juusti-Butler, and Maguire (2005) considered two types of paranoia which were persecution (or 'Poor Me') paranoia, and punishment (or 'Bad Me') paranoia. The results indicated that the "Bad Me" paranoia group exhibited poorer self-esteem, more negative evaluations of self and others, higher levels of depression, and higher levels of anxiety. Fergus, Valentiner, McGrath, and Jencius (2010) reported that changes in shame-proneness during therapy resulted in changes in social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

One respondent talked about how it felt to self-identify as an atheist for the first time. He had such anxiety during this experience that he actually had a physical reaction.

I have to say the first time I had ever made an argument against religion was with somebody from my church... and I shook when I - he had us over to dinner, he and his wife had (partner's name) and I over to dinner. And we got to talking about religion and he said, "so you guys have been saved, right?" and I said, "umm I don't believe in any of that." He said "What?!" (laughs). And I said, "Well I don't really believe in it." And umm, and he said, "so you don't believe?!?" and I said, "No... No!" and he said,

"We have been asking you to become a member for a long time and you keep saying no" and I said "well that is exactly why, because I don't believe it" and he said, "You're kidding!!!" (Laughs). I said "no, I'm not kidding." and I said, "And I can actually firmly assert that you don't believe it either." And I remember when I said that, I just shook. (Laughs). Umm because I had never umm - I had never - what I call 'spoke truth to power' before and ummm - it was scary for me. He is a deacon and he is somebody that we love and he has actually hired us to do a lot of work on his own house and his gardens and ummm.... uhhh it was terror. Your know, I was - it was - it reminded me an awful lot of the first time I came out as a gay person to my mother, I mean, I - I - I was 14 and I shook (laughs). And I was terrified - because I knew I would be rejected too... I think my terror and fear and the newness of all this - and embracing something I was always taught was evil and I'm evil because I'm embracing this -- umm, all those voices will silence to become much quieter. And already have with some time. I'm finding that truth trumps everything right now and it's worth the journey and umm and I am finding peace. Its slow thing for me to find peace inside of this, and it's scary. (#1 Respondent)

This respondent compared self-identifying as an atheist to self-identifying as gay, and he said the two experiences were parallel.

(Becoming an atheist was) scary. (laughs) you know, I have a lot of parallels as a gay man, I remember when I was 14 for the first time I looked... in the mirror in the bathroom and I took the mirror as close as I could and I said the words - I said: (whispering) "You are a homosexual." And I was like (noise like a scream)! It was the most horrible thing you could ever say. Oh it was horrible, horrible, horrible. I just

thought - I - I wanted to vomit. It was like the most evil thing I could ever have said to myself. That's what I had been taught. (#1 Respondent)

The same respondent noted that he also felt anxiety at the thought that there was no god. He noted that there was no one guiding him and it scared him.

I remember the first moment that I realized - there is nothing in the sky directing me (laughs) and telling me what to do and presenting ummm dilemmas and uhh and presenting solutions and presenting teaching trials and things like that and I looked up and it scared the shit out of me. I looked up in the sky and it looked - I - I felt like I could see into outer space across a million light-years or something... and it felt so void and vacuous and I was so alone. It was so terrifying to me, I hated that feeling. I hated it. I don't like being that small - that nobody loves me (laughs). (Respondent #1)

Another respondent talked about feeling anxious when he was asked to work on Sunday.

I was working at a grocery store – one of the little part-time jobs I had as a teenager, I believed you weren't supposed to work on Sunday, as a Christian. And uh – one time my boss scheduled me to come in on Sunday to work and uh I remember thinking “Oh, I can't do this and I better find someone to work for me” and eventually I went in and worked on Sunday – I couldn't find anyone to do it and I was commit- I was a really hard worker – I was committed to do the job. So, I went in and I worked on Sunday and the whole time I was there, a four hour shift, I was feeling guilty – “I'm sinning, I'm sinning, I'm sinning” – and uh – then I was scheduled accidentally another time on a Sunday and this time I had a little bit less of a guilt trip about it and worked. And then finally I remember thinking “Well, you know isn't it interesting that we're learning in church that

you're not supposed to work on the Sabbath but after the church service lot of us at the church go to a restaurant where we're served by waiters who are working on the Christian Sabbath, Sunday" umm and there's some hypocrisy there. (#3 Respondent)

A male respondent talked about feeling anxious about the thought of a loved one going to hell. Again, the concept of hell caused tremendous anxiety in most respondents. For some, the fear of hell lingered even after losing their belief in god.

That you wake up in the night screaming because you're afraid you're mama's going to hell. Or I'm going to hell, or even though I was baptized, what if I don't really believe, or I've committed this sin, does that mean I'm not really a Christian and I've gotta go find uncle so and so who doesn't go to church because he might die and he will go to hell. And that whole Hell thing is just – (#7 Respondent)

One respondent became so anxious that he developed a clinically significant behavior which he needed psychiatric treatment for. Later in the interview he additionally indicated he had night terrors.

We prayed before every meal. I actually developed a pretty debilitating habit of – I eventually went to a psychiatrist and that kind of thing, but uh – I sort of had this obsessive sort of tick almost where I would like pray pretty constantly, because I sort of felt like I was always sinning for just being human, so I needed to do these things, to ask forgiveness every waking moment of my life. Mainly from misreading some parts in the bible and sort of having some overemphasized that church – mainly the fire and brimstone sort of sermons kind of scare the shit out of you when you're a kid... My uncle, the alcoholic, this is important information –he was sort of a father figure. One

thing he would tell me, and I later found out what caused this sort of thing, and I've talked to a cousin that also has this, and I've experienced this, we had night terrors when we were younger, and also sleep paralysis, which I'm not sure if you are familiar with those things, but sleep paralysis is sort of like, it's a really horrible feeling, because you wake up and you're cognizant of your situation, but you are paralyzed, you can't move. And usually you're still hallucinating from your dreams a little bit. Mix that with a heavy dose of fire and brimstone, and you get some really horrible nightmares that really seem very tangible. And my uncle told me about demons he would have and he thought at the time it was because of the sinful things he had been doing so he kind of would go to sleep, and he would wake up paralyzed and he said he would see a demon right at the threshold of the door, and he said he would just start praying... I had woken up paralyzed with still like – usually it's like a dark figure that's right at your peripheral vision. Its horrifying... but I think it definitely perpetuated some of the religious ideas in history... definitely I think that plays into the issues that my uncle has had and I think education and awareness definitely dispelled that for me and I think that's why I advocate for education and awareness. (#9 Respondent)

Another respondent talked about feeling alone, frightened and guilty when he lost his belief in god. He noted that he went through the process alone without any support.

It was scary and awkward at first, and it was completely unfamiliar ground because this occurred when I was around 40. And it was very tentative, it was very frightening, and I did the process alone. I didn't have a support group, I didn't have any friends that I was sharing this with, at least initially. So, it was a very interesting experience. A friend of my sent me the book Letters from the Earth, by Mark Twain. I had never heard religion

ridiculed. It was the most frightening thing I'd ever seen, but it was also exhilarating since I have that same type of ironic mind and sense of humor. So on one hand I was feeling guilty and terrified about the effect that this was having on me and then just thinking "Man this is just great stuff!" You know? And reading it was frightening but then it became sort of liberating and then because, I don't think a strictly intellectual approach would have had the impact on my belief system as satire did, bc I'm just wired that way. And I mean, I write satire, I enjoy it, it's just an awesome way of communicating and seeing the world. So, I think Mark Twain was probably responsible more than anybody else for alerting me to the fact that things might not be what I've been taught to believe all these years. (#10 Respondent)

Some respondents discussed said that they feared being rejected or judged and this caused them tremendous anxiety.

I think it was just a gradual, more and more "Okay, just admit it. Quit trying to (inaudible)" because you are following along with the crowd. That's what you do, you become part of a group. So, you are afraid that something held so deep with some of them, you are afraid to be rejected. (#11 Respondent)

It made me really nervous to be that open with that group. It (pause) like thinking back on it, some of the women just listened and didn't respond, so I have no clue like what their reaction was internally and that kind of that sort of thing will just drive me nuts if I think about it too much. Like, Oh what do they think, what do they think. But since then, enough time has passed and nobody has expressed judgment or treated me differently or anything. (#12 Respondent)

Some respondents had a lingering fear of god's punishment for their loss of belief.

Scary. (Laughs). I thought that when I decided that I wasn't gonna follow and believe in god I was going to have thunder, lightning strike me. (Laughs). I grew up a catholic in Mexico which is like 20 years behind the U.S. I was beat up by nuns, and so you BELIEVE in god. And you can't even think of evil, because that's a sin, that strict! So everything that you did, or I did as a Christian, always gets weighed between is this good? Bad? Where does it stand? So but this is your world, so when you stop believing, it's scary because, you are in an abyss. There is no point of reference. Okay, what happens now? There is no god to comfort you. (Laugh). Not many people – excuse me, my mouth is dry. Not many people are atheists, so there is not many people you can go to. (#13 Respondent)

An initial review of the data immediately revealed that there was a notably high number of LGBT and gender non-conforming individuals in the sample. Further analysis highlighted the finding that all respondents experienced a damaging history, including abuse, abandonment, and/or outsider status. Another important finding involved respondents indicated feelings of shame, which were apparently owing to a sense of self-as-bad. This was shown both by their damaging history and by religious teachings around the concept of Original Sin. These feelings of shame and the unresolved damaging history that respondents experienced, led them to use avoidance techniques in an effort to deal with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Following are charts which highlight some of the important findings discussed in this chapter.

Sexual Orientation Among Study Population

Sexual Orientation	f	Sample %	National %
Heterosexual	27	77.1%	94.6%
Lesbian, Gay	4	11.4%	1.7%
Bisexual	2	5.7%	1.8%
Transgender	1	2.9%	0.3%
Unknown	1	2.9%	
Total	35	100.0%	100.0%

*National Population Statistics data gathered from
 "How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender"
 by Gary J. Gates of The Williams Institute

Gender Non-conforming Among Study Population

Sexual Orientation	Gender Typical	Masculine Female	Feminine Male	Combined Gender Non-Conforming	% Gender Non-Conforming Study Pop
Heterosexual	16	2	9	11	31.4%
Lesbian, Gay	2		2	2	
Bisexual		2		2	
Transgender			1	1	
Unknown		1		1	
Total	18	5	12	17	48.6%

*National Population Statistics data gathered from
 "How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender"
 by Gary J. Gates of The Williams Institute

Chapter 4

Avoidance and Confusion: Running, Hiding, Self-Sacrificing and Doing Mental Gymnastics – The Young Adult Years (13-19 years old)

In this chapter, we will examine the ways in which respondents used a variety of avoidance techniques to overcome their damaging histories, and we will consider the confusion that they faced during this time period. With a damaging history, feelings of shame and a self-as-bad concept, along with the resulting guilt, depression and anxiety, it is no surprise that respondents implemented avoidant coping strategies. These strategies included self-sacrifice and altruism, soft identity, closeted identity, addictions, isolation, intellectualization, and avoidance of “sinful” behaviors. When none of these avoidant behaviors seemed to alleviate the feelings of shame, guilt, depression, and anxiety completely or permanently, respondents attempted to make sense of their world through mental gymnastics. Unable to make sense of their world, they were in a state of confusion.

Both cognitive and moral dissonance intensified during the young adult years. This dissonance likely stemmed from their inability to reconcile their damaging histories, but also reportedly had to do with questions around the content of the bible. The avoidance behaviors were implemented in order to avoid pain. The pain which they tried to avoid was related to their damaging history, especially related to dealing with rejection, trauma, and shame.

These avoidance techniques also seemed to have the added feature of allowing the respondents to avoid seeking resolution to their questions or doubts about their religious beliefs. Perhaps they were aware on some level that seeking answers to resolve the questioning and doubting might increase their discomforts. The avoidance techniques served the purpose of allowing for the dissonance with which they were dealing, while enabling them to avoid

resolution. It allowed them to maintain their religious belief despite their having many unanswered questions and issues around the biblical teachings. They would later come to identify that biblical teachings contributed to their self-as-bad status. At the same time, the altruism and self-sacrificing avoidance techniques that they utilized further heightened their exposures to suffering of others. This would later culminate in a breakpoint event that will be examined in the following chapter. When the usual avoidance techniques were not sufficient, and they needed to physically escape their abusive environments, some even had to leave home as adolescents.

Avoidance Response

Altruism and Self Sacrifice

It was noted that respondents worked or volunteered in helping fields. There were many professors, teachers, and medical staff among the respondents. Those who did not work in these fields, were volunteers in areas such as women's rights, domestic violence, and homelessness. There also were emergency medical technicians (EMTs), firemen and military personnel among the respondents. It may well be that respondents' experience with traumatic rejection history and resultant self-as-bad perception led them to marginalize this "bad self" by offering help to others. It is likely that this marginalizing of self while helping others served two distinct purposes. First, by marginalizing the self, or by not focusing on oneself, they were able to avoid feeling shameful, depressed, or anxious. Second, by focusing on helping others, they were able to feel good about themselves through the eyes of others. In essence, those that they helped viewed them as altruistic and good and therefore that served the purpose of fulfilling the respondents' need to be seen as good rather than bad. Vilardaga et al. (2012) reported that they found some evidence that altruism can be pathological in some cases. Vilardaga et al. (2012) noted that when altruism involves harm to the self or involves excessive self-sacrifice, then it is considered

“pathological altruism.” In the current study, the data did show some evidence of this pattern; it also appeared that when pathological altruism combined with a particularly devastating salient event, it led to the loss of belief. In the case of these respondents, the loss of belief seemed to be of benefit to them, as it allowed them to more easily let go of the self-as-bad identity by abandoning the religious beliefs that supported this notion. For example, LGBT respondents who had been shamed could let go of the beliefs that told them that their sexual identity was sinful. They were then able to also reject the notion of self-as-bad.

I’m a hospice nurse, I work triage, I work on-call, I work after-hours. So, if there’s emergencies, deaths, admissions, I do those. Like from 5 in the evening to 8 in the morning, during the week. I work all weekend. And it’s just putting out fires, as emergencies arise, I take care of them. (Respondent #4)

I work at the Children’s hospital in Birmingham, I work in the endocrine clinic, so with kids with endocrine disorders. I’m a nurse, I’m a clinic coordinator, so I’m kinda like, I guess, like a charge nurse or a supervisor. I get to work with a large group of doctors and nurses and healthcare professionals and we get to meet these really cool patients and kids and stuff. And I work around a lot of really cool people and have met some people, some really cool doctors. And I’m very happy, I love my job. I’m lucky to have it. I think I made a good choice. I’m happy where I am right now. (Respondent #5)

A male respondent who talked about his work with individuals dying from kidney failure, appeared to indicate that he felt troubled by those who would extend suffering owing to their religious belief and the hope that god would “perform a miracle”. Clearly it was difficult for him to witness this, as it was his mission to help alleviate the suffering that his clients faced. It was

the case the religious beliefs of his clients and their families caused him to witness extended discomfort that he felt was avoidable and needless. He was deeply troubled by this and it may be the case that these experiences assisted in his loss of belief.

I work as an academic nephrologist. So, I'm a kidney doctor. When patients get ill, their kidneys will often fail before they die and the question comes: do you want to subject yourself to dialysis with the hope that the extension in time that it provides, that you'll get better. And when you have people that are very religious, they feel like anything is possible, and God can come in and intervene and perform a miracle at any time so they'll always want to do the maximum regardless of the amount of suffering that it causes the person. Just because they have this hope that they are holding onto. (Respondent #8)

A female respondent talked about volunteering at a women's clinic, where she escorted women from their car to the clinic, walking women through a group of protestors and offering support. She noted that some of the women going to the clinic were indeed there for an abortion, however not all of them were there for that reason. The respondent said that she faced protestors calling her a "murderer" and a "racist". Here the respondent felt compelled to help these women who were going through a very difficult situation, and she was clearly angered by the protestors for their part in making the situation even tougher for the women. She indicated that the protestors were religious, and surely this experience further hardened her with regard to religion and religious belief.

So like if I'm defending a clinic, and then somebody tells me I'm going to hell and they are going to pray for me, that may be a very different conversation than a kind person who means well. [Interviewer: Have you had somebody say that?] Oh I've had lots of

people say things like that to me before, especially like if I'm volunteering at a women's clinic or something. Those people can be really aggressive and obnoxious and so it's actually – in those kind of situations it's a lot harder to be nice about that kind of stuff.

[Interviewer: Can you describe an example]. Yeah. So I have for example been doing clinic defense, where you walk people from their car up to the women's clinic and I've had people standing on the sidewalk that'll yell at me and tell me that I'm going to hell and that I'm a racist or I'm trying to think of some of the comments that I've gotten over the years. I think I'm helping women but I'm hurting them. Things like that and that Jesus loves me too even though I'm a murderer. And if I ask for forgiveness I won't go to hell and stuff like that. Those kind of things are things they say to try to get your goat.

[Interviewer: Feels like?] Yeah, you know, when you are defending a clinic and you are in that kind of situation, you try very hard to remain calm and objective and remember that your job is to make people feel safe and calm and to get them into the clinic and to try to ignore those people so you try to keep your feelings of just utter disgust to yourself but it's absolutely disgusting. It's such an insult. I mean, I fully understand and support free speech, but when you are beating up people – verbally assaulting them in these kind of situations, it's very hard. They may be getting an abortion, they may be getting a pap smear or whatever. So we only have 2 or 3 abortion providers in Birmingham. Actually I think we only have one right now, and it's a Planned Parenthood. So you don't know what people are going in there for and it's none of my business. [Interviewer: Verbal assaults, escorting, they assume abortion?] Yeah, some of them do. They come on days that they know are days that they are having those services there, even though they offer all of their services. Only a day or two out of the week that they are able to provide

abortions. So they show up in a – huge amounts of them show up on those days, so they know when they are having them on those days but yeah. And so many people need those services you know, for whatever reason. (Respondent #16)

A heterosexual feminine male discussed working as a fireman/medic. He noted that he witnessed many horrors including murder, rape, vehicle accidents, and poverty. He also witnessed births and deaths. While the respondent claimed that he had already lost his belief in god at this point, it may be that these experiences finalized his break from religious belief. This may be the case, as it seemed that the respondents typically began altruistic helping professions while still in the avoidance and confusion stage of their deconversion process. This can be supported by the respondents own words, for example, when he asks questions about god's plan and wonders about how these horrors he witnessed could be a part of that plan. It is likely that these questions he shares during the interview are the same questions that he asked while going through the deconversion process.

Historically the south has had high murder rates for a long time. Part of it is probably lots of ignorant people, hot weather that just makes everybody on edge. Hot summer nights, alcohol, and ignorance. And along with ignorance, come – particularly in men, a certain macho behavior. If you haven't got – you can't point to a big house, or a nice car or something, the only thing they have to be proud of is their maleness and their strongness and their "I don't take shit from anybody." And their willingness to kill each other is pretty high. So, lots of murders, rapes, accidents. I've held people's hands while they died, delivered babies, seen executions, terrible things. (During this period of time did you have any belief or had you lost your belief). I had already lost it at that point. But to tell you the truth, if I did believe it, if you truly believed that there was an omnipotent god

who could speak to you, someone that you could pray to who could actually intercede and make a difference in your life, someone who had a divine plan in you – for you, how would you feel about it if – your house burned down and your children died? How does that fit into that plan? How would it happen if your husband was a quadriplegic and couldn't move anymore and you'd lost everything? How would that make you feel thinking “oh, well, you know, god loves me, he's got a plan for me.” This is – *awful*. I saw awful things all the time, I can't understand how a loving god could let that happen. Maybe you're a bad person, maybe you're a terrible person and he might let terrible person, and he might let terrible things happen to you. But let's say you are a cute little girl and you've never done anything wrong and you got raped and murdered. How? How? Where could I find the good in that? I would not be the forgiving type on that. I would not be forgiving. And if I believed in a god, there is no way I'd ever walk back in a church after that. I think that would be the end. But I don't – I don't – I kind of believe that bad things happened because there's bad people out there. And there are truly accidents, things that just aren't planned – just in the wrong place sometimes. $\frac{3}{4}$ of our calls were medical calls so – in (town) all firemen are medics, so if something happens to you, a fire engine would come up immediately. Of course, we have fought fires as well, but I saw an awful lot of crime, because I worked in a poorer black part of the city, and we called it the Wild West. And drugs were rampant, and *terrible* things. People often just wouldn't believe the things that actually go on and *never* make the newspapers, it's just too bad. Actually, I know for a fact that the city of (town) and I know other cities do the same thing – It looks so bad to have so many murders occurring, that they try to actually keep the numbers down by playing fast and loose with the numbers. In that – it's

only a murder if you are 100% sure it was a murder the moment you show up on the scene. If you can somehow show up on the scene and say, “Well, I’m not exactly sure what happened” then we won’t count it as a murder, even though we find out tomorrow that it was definitely a murder, we won’t count it that way. It’s bad publicity. It looks like the local city government is out of control, it looks like the police chief is not doing a good job. The truth is the police can’t – they can’t make your place a good place to live. (Who can?) You, me, us. It takes a village – it actually does. It has to be part of the community values not to do violent things and to help each other. Where the – every man is king, and wants fealty, they can be as vengeful as that Old Testament god and shoot each other over nothing and that sort of thing. So as long as there are people who don’t honor human life, it’s easy to take. That’s my thought. If you just really don’t care, it’s easy to do. And of course a lot of its teenagers that are – oh they are dangerous. Partly because they haven’t got enough life experience to even appreciate life. They’ve got weapons and they are hotheads... I remember, oh I guess it was the early 1990s. We went to a wreck and there was a V-W beetle involved. And this beetle had run into the back of another larger car and they hit at such a slow speed that it – both cars were completely unmarked, not a dent, nothing. Just bumper to bumper just touched. However, the driver of the VW beetle, had a little girl that was probably 2. And she was standing up in the front seat, and when it hit, she pitched forward and hit that flat windshield on the VW beetle and it broke her neck and she died. She was dead on the scene. It didn’t crack the windshield, it didn’t mark either vehicle. They were probably collided at 2 or 3 miles an hour. But it was easily enough to throw a 2 year old off her feet. She was standing there and the mother didn’t – well they weren’t using child safety seats or anything like that.

And she was dead. It was so strange. Just – you know – nothing. A wreck with no damage, and a dead child. [Interviewer: How do you get over seeing that?] I don't know. You just do. I mean, you go home and you think about it and I mean, I have – I have gone back to the fire station and cried before. Not often, but sometimes I couldn't help it. I remember things and it makes me feel bad and some things make you mad – negligence. I went to a child that had starved to death, and momma had been – we went on a Sunday morning and Momma had left on Friday afternoon to go to a crack house, and had not been back. And the man of the house, a 6 year old boy, was caring for his 4 year old sister, his 3 year old sister, and a 1 year old baby. And couldn't get the baby to eat and it – if it took any milk, it would throw it up and finally it just quit crying and such. And Sunday morning it wouldn't wake up and so he ran to his grandparents' house a mile away and they came and they couldn't wake the baby up so they called the fire department. And the fire department was there and it was because the baby was dead, that's why it wouldn't wake up. It was warm because the house was warm, but the baby was dead and an autopsy showed that it had starved to death. Because the momma – apparently with her drug use had had a history of not caring for her child, so it was malnourished and at a certain point, without hospitalization and intravenous feeding, there is no saving that baby. Terrible. It's terrible. There was actually community outrage because they wanted to put the woman in prison and take her other children and send them to some sort of community homes or something and the general community there felt that it was better that she stay with her children because they needed her. I say, "Hell! She let one of her children starve to death! I'm all for taking them." (Respondent #26)

One male respondent shared that he grew up in extreme poverty. He talked about being troubled by the poverty that he experienced and that he witnessed. For this respondent, part of the deconversion process clearly included his struggle to reconcile what he viewed as a positive correlation between poverty and spirituality. He shared that he was troubled by the poverty, illiteracy, marginalization or murder of women, and the aborted female fetuses in his home country, India.

I grew up the eldest of the 4 kids, we had no money, we were very poor, I think that what has become of me is totally attributable to education. To education. So I – fortunately I make good money, I can give a little bit. And I had to encourage my parents to use that money – some for educating other people that we are not related to, not to forget my brothers and sisters who I paid for their education – they are very short of doing that – they don't find reason in it. You don't go to a country with 1.3 billion people that is 80% below poverty line because they were spiritually enlightened, because they cared for their brother. No, you come to that massive poverty – the 2nd largest population with AIDS problem after Africa, Africa as a continent, India as a country – with not (?) we found the east had a spiritual answer. Because they are wrong, because they don't care. India has the greatest poverty statistics out of (?) you can see this year. How can anybody tell me that the Indians or the Easterns have found the solution to spiritual meaning. No they haven't. You have the greatest poverty, you have the greatest misery, the greatest illiteracy, the greatest number of women going through – who cannot read or write who cannot make their own decisions, the greatest burning of brides for dowry, the greatest death for dowry, the greatest dowry rate, the greatest child abortions because now you

have ultrasound so you should – if you can afford an ultrasound, you know whether it's a girl and let's abort it. (Respondent #28)

A female masculine male talked about how much she enjoys helping her clients as a chiropractor. As with other respondents, she finds pleasure in helping others who are going through stresses or who are in emotional (and in some cases physical) pain.

I have had a woman tell me how her son died. I have other people tell me about their husband or wife, what is not going right in their life. I had a couple patients that – one woman just the other day, she was keeping me up to date on how her father was doing. And then her father passed away the night before and she came in the next day to get an adjustment because she knew she was stressed. So it's like moments like that where I'm like alright I'm actually getting thru to these patients on exactly what chiropractic can help with. It's about pain, it's about really taking care of the body in moments of stress because then you can handle stress that much better. So it feels – it's amazing when I have a patient come and do something like that. It just – it makes my day. For patients that come in – and they come in for shoulder pain and they still have the shoulder pain but they tell me that everything else in their life is going so much better stress-wise. And they are sleeping better and that they completely attribute it to the adjustments.

(Respondent #31)

A male respondent, who described himself as a protector of his female friends, noted that he was deeply troubled by the treatment of women in this country. He had trouble reconciling how bad things could happen to “good people” and he referenced the Book of Job in the Bible. So, clearly this was a major factor in his deconversion. Again, as was the case with other

respondents, the pain that he witnessed in others impacted him greatly, led him to question his religion, and ultimately led to his loss of belief.

I've always been uncomfortable with in particular how the United States handles sex slavery and human trafficking and not feeling like we do enough and I found that forum to be unbelievably informative about the – how egregious it is in the world and in the United States. And that there is anywhere from 14-24 million people that are sex slaves and the average age is 13. It's a pretty horrific and horrifying number... almost every girl that I became friends with in college, including the woman I ended up marrying, had been raped, or sexually molested, or had been abused or all of the above, or some combination. And when I think about just the number of female friends I had in college, I would say 80-90%! So for me, it just played into my struggle with, okay well, these are all really good people and you can buy into the nonsense of the Book of Job and then whole thing about how we get stretched to see what we can overcome and it makes us better and I noticed some became very promiscuous and some became very shut down and like, there is nothing, I didn't see any healthy outcomes from that life experience.

(Respondent #17)

Running from Home

In some cases, respondents ran away from home in order to escape from their damaging environments. This is an observable example of avoidance as a mechanism used by these respondents to deal with their unendurable situation. Of course, this response to abuse, running away, could have left the respondents in a precarious position in that they were not yet of an age to live independently.

It should be noted that some respondents said they were thrown from the home, and it is possible that in reality they ran from home. Perhaps they described the situation in such a way because they had rationalized that it was beyond their control. Meanwhile, in both cases, in the throwaway and runaway, there was a survival instinct that motivated them to leave their harmful environments, even though there were risks associated with this circumstance.

One respondent talked about having left home because he “couldn’t handle” it. Although he did not explicitly state that he left home in order to escape abuses that he was facing at home, this was clearly indicated. He was still in high school when he moved out of his family home and began to live independently.

My granddad on my dad’s side had passed away. Which, wasn’t really a surprise, it was still sad, but it wasn’t – it was coming, we kind of knew. But they still hadn’t sold his lake house. My senior year of high school, I couldn’t handle living with my mom and her boyfriend anymore, and I ended up moving out and just went to live at the lake house with my cousin, that I said we had grown up as brothers. We lived together for a few months, just for me to get thru high school and got to college and I haven’t I uh have visited my mom, sure, but even now I can’t spend more than 2 or 3 days, I can’t stay around her, bc I can’t handle the sort of drama and sort of stress she brings. (#9

Respondent)

Soft Identity

A “soft identity” is an identity that, respondents used in place of their atheist identity. It carries less stigma than their true identity. By using a soft identity, respondents were able to avoid the discrimination atheists are known to face, yet at the same, time they were able to begin to move away from their former religious identity. Most respondents were noted to have used a

soft identity instead of claiming atheist identity. Some used it for a period of time, while others continue to use it currently. Respondents used a soft identity in order to avoid saying they no longer believed. Instead, they would claim that they were not religious, agnostic, or humanist. The use of a soft identity was a self-protective measure that functioned to soften the expected negative response they thought they would receive if they announced an atheist identity.

One respondent said that agnostic is a term used when an atheist lacks the courage to disclose his true identity. Others reported that they felt that family and friends found soft identities easier to swallow than atheism. One respondent, after being exposed to atheists in college, became more religious, reading and studying more, perhaps trying to quell the questions that came up. When he was unable to see the divine after all of this increased effort, he accepted a soft identity and called himself an agnostic. However, at the time, he actually was an atheist. He said it took a long time to feel comfortable calling himself an atheist. Walker, Reid, O'Neill, & Brown (2009) indicated that this increase of religiosity and then decline in religiosity is typical for children who have experienced abuse or neglect. However, it should be noted that this respondent did not report abuse or neglect; rather, he presented as socially awkward and reported extreme difficulty in making friends. Therefore, it may be the case that those who experience outsider status, as in this case, also may follow the same trajectory as those who were formerly abused or neglected.

There are people who say – who come to the Atheist *Meetups* but they say “I’m not really as comfortable identifying as atheist, but I call myself a nonbeliever” or “I call myself a ‘naturalist’” or all these different terms we we’re constantly having those conversations.
(#3 Respondent)

So, I had started calling myself Agnostic for a while, and then after a while I realized “Wow, there’s not much of a distinction between these two terms – you could be both.” One is about belief and one is about knowledge. But I’m also atheist. And I ended up becoming more comfortable with the term Atheism. I called myself “Freethinker” for a while just to – prevent uh any stigma from people, but like I said, now I’m in a more comfortable place where I don’t have to worry about the costs. (#3 Respondent)

“Agnostics are just cowards.” (Laughs) (#4 Respondent)

I don’t know whenever I would start to think about it, I would tell people “I’m not religious” and then agnostic- I don’t know why agnostic is so much easier for people to swallow than the word atheist, but it is. So, I’ve been referred to as agnostic. (#5 Respondent)

I kind of went all in in the 1st and 2nd year of college. I did daily logs I would spend I would go through these texts I would spend thirty minutes to an hour each morning reading and doing spiritual things and I would always attend church and try to do as much as I could. And towards the end, when I didn’t see anything from that, I said, “You know, I’ve done the best I can, and I still don’t see any presence of supernatural” so I just, all the pieces started to fall into place, and by the end of college, I knew I was agnostic, I didn’t know at the time that I was atheist. And then later after doing more studying and listening to people, then I kind of felt comfortable calling myself an atheist. (#8 Respondent)

Closet

Only two of the respondents were open about their atheism with family, friends and coworkers. The remaining respondents were quiet, if not totally silent about their atheism. The respondents highlighted their concern for certain costs that they believed would follow their disclosure of atheist identity. Respondents who were quiet about their atheism, or “closeted,” expressed feelings of sadness and anxiety about their closeted identity. In order to avoid jeopardizing important relationships, many respondents avoid discussing their nonbelief. The sadness came not only from their inability to fully be themselves around those that they love, but also from their loss of the god relationship. The anxiety came from the concern that they would be exposed as atheist before they are ready, and from the loss of a protective god. Closeted respondents reported often feeling awkward and uncomfortable when around religious family and friends. Additionally, even after giving up their beliefs, respondents feared hell.

Most of the respondents were closeted around close family members and close friends, often choosing to initially disclose to more distant friends or distant family to whom they did not have close bonds. Some reported that they feel frustrated and judged by family when they tell them that they are atheist. Some said that it is painful to be closeted and not be themselves. At the same time, many noted that they wish to “keep the peace” and avoid upsetting those that they love. Some respondents fear rejection and loss of relationships, and many simultaneously also deal with feelings of guilt from lying to family and friends about their true identity. Some respondents thought that disclosing their atheism would be so upsetting that it might cause a family member to die. Other respondents were concerned that their family would be hurt and concerned about their eternal damnation. Many said they didn’t want their family or friends to worry about them. One respondent gave voice to a desire that is likely present in all respondents: the desire to be seen as moral and good. One noted that his patients would leave and find another

doctor to care for their dying family member if he didn't remain closeted. Many reported that they don't disclose because they don't want to cause believers to lose their belief. Some said they didn't want to offend others.

A bisexual masculine female talked about being closeted about her sexuality and atheism when she is around her beloved grandparents. When she talked about this, it was clear that she felt both sad and anxious about keeping parts of herself secret from her family.

With my grandparents, that was the hardest one. I mean, I still have to not be – I still have to be a bit of a fake person with them – which hurts. I – I – I don't like it. I wish I could be myself. Umm it's just a hard situation because if I was a lesbian, I'd probably be forced to talk about my orientation with them, but because I'm not and I have this hetero-privilege so to speak – of being married to a man, it's like – why even go there – but then I kind of want them to know who I really am, you know. I mean, they make comments around me that stink – you know, talking about my cousin and saying 'Oh you know they're strange people like him' – because he's gay. And I – I just – I wanna be like 'You don't understand who you're saying that to right now!' – It's hard, but. They're so old that – I mean, I've had to teach my grandma 50 times the basics of the internet and she still doesn't get it (laughs) you know? They're just at a point in life where, I don't know if that battle is worth it. You know? So I – I avoid those subjects – just keep the peace and they talk a lot about Jesus and this and that and I just nod and 'Okay..' – and they know about the freethinker group – but I call it my Science Group – and they think I'm just a nerd into science (laugh) and they think that's cool and they leave it at that and I leave it at that so... (#2 Respondent)

One very memorable moment during an interview was when a male respondent, a hospice worker, shared a story about overhearing a family praying at the foot of the bed of their recently deceased loved one. They were praying for the “stoning death” of all atheists. This was a story that he shared shortly after explaining that he is mostly closeted about his nonbelief. Certainly, it is understandable that he would want to remain closeted when working because he has experienced hearing people pray to god that he would be stoned to death. It surely is a painful and disquieting experience to hear this after having dedicated one’s life to the altruistic profession of hospice care and after having cared for their dying loved one.

There’s not a ton of people that I just really talk about how I feel openly. Just a select few. You know, some have the same beliefs I do or some are on the fence. I have a friend that’s a Buddhist, it’s interesting. There are not many atheists in hospice. I know 2 or 3. It has a ... we have chaplains and they are all protestant. I mean it has a strong religious connotation, or at least the public thinks that. I haven’t found that it limits me very much. I have only been uncomfortable 2-3 times. Rituals bother me. We have chaplains that like to rub oil on people and I just laugh and walk away when they do that. And family members at a death before, I’ve been there when the family has you know called on the stoning of nonbelievers – and I thought that was interesting... I had it, I actually recorded part of it I was so flabbergasted, but my phone died and I don’t think I had it backed up. But I had it, I just walked to the hallway and recorded it and I played it for a few people. It was hilarious. Like, what a time to call for the death of nonbelievers is when your loved one just passed away. (#4 Respondent)

Some respondents noted that they remain closeted because they do not want to upset their mother-in-law or mother.

“My wife is... scared that her mother is going to find out and her mother’s going to drop dead if she knew.” (#4 Respondent)

I still think about it. Fear, for one day when I have to tell her “mom that I don’t believe in god anymore” and I still fear that conversation, fear her finding out and what am I gonna say and am I gonna put her in the looney bin, is she gonna have an emotional breakdown because that’s just the kind of mom she is. That’s my fear, is how bad it’s gonna hurt her. My church family that we were very involved in. I still, like I said, I’m not openly atheist, I just am still friends with people we went to church with. I’m still friends with my old pastor on Facebook and stuff like that, but there was definitely a loss of community and if I were to come out and say, “Hey, I’m (name) and I’m an atheist” I’d be deleted, and that part of – that’s another deep deep deep down I know that’s another part of the reason why I have not come out to be open about my lack of belief is because of the fear of rejection that will inevitably come... LGBTs having the same problems and they’re - and I feel so guilty especially after watching Ellen Page’s speech at the Human Rights Campaign and her coming out and talking about lying by omission. I know that I’m lying by omission and I feel really guilty about that, but I’m hoping that by the time that I am able to come out and say, “Yes, I’m a nonbeliever, I’m atheist” I will – everybody will be able to say, “Well, you know she’s been married to the same man in a monogamous relationship for 13-14 years together now and she has 2 kids, 2 good kids, and...” I’m moral and I’m good and I’m hoping that that will mean something one day when I am able to have enough courage to come out and say, I’m a nonbeliever. (#5 Respondent)

“There are very, very, few people who know I am a nonbeliever.” (#7 Respondent)

Because there are some pretty strong believers in that office. And while they would tolerate a nonparticipating believer, even if I were Hindu or if I were Muslim. I think they would tolerate that. I don't think they would tolerate atheist. I think they would think they would, but I think any little mistake, anything out of perfection would be judged immediately. I'm not out at work. I'm not even out in my family, other than my husband... I have 2 sisters and I think that it would bother them. And they are going through some things right now that I think I don't need to add any more pressure to their lives than they are already dealing with. And it's not something that's going to help them and might be a distraction with what they are already going through right now. So I wouldn't want to add that to them. I do want them to know at some point, because I do want them to know at some point. (#7 Respondent)

There were a number of respondents who said that they would "not lie" if they were directly asked about their beliefs. This seemed an important point because it apparently highlighted their discomfort at the thought that they were being dishonest. In a sense they were lying by omission, and not being their truest selves. While this was clearly a protective measure for themselves and for those they cared about, it was quite clear that they found this troubling.

I will not lie, if somebody asked me point blank. And there is no reason because I don't think there will ever be a reason. But if somebody asked me I'm not gonna lie about it. But I'm not going to volunteer it either. I think it would be disruptive in the office. (#7 Respondent)

I don't necessarily bring it up. If anyone asks I would be happy to answer the question for them. But there are certainly a number of people that know that I don't believe. I guess

I'm not very vocal with my beliefs. The one thing I would say is that my grandmother was a very strong believer and my grandmother was around during the time when I was born again, and I knew that my grandmother was getting older and it was my belief that I wanted my grandmother to go to her grave believing that I believed. That was very important for me. So, even though there was other people around at the time that did know that I didn't believe anymore, I didn't want my grandmother to know that. So, to my knowledge, she went to her grave, believing that I believed. To me that was a supportive thing. Once, after she died, now at this point, I don't really care who knows that I'm an atheist. Other than the fact that I think for jobs or for other practical things. It may have a negative connotation as to what that means. (#6 Respondent)

Yeah it can be scary when you're going into a new area, you don't really know what's out there but you're gonna kind of put yourself into an area that maybe you don't really have a lot of family that are involved in that. That can be a scary unstable environment, but I think because of the fact that my family is so supportive, I think they really allowed me to take that next step. That being said, my family is very still religious, so I – they – we don't talk about our beliefs. And I think for fear of what we might say. (#8 Respondent)

One respondent indicated a concern for his livelihood. He was clear that being an open atheist would mean the patients that he enjoys helping might leave his practice and go to a different doctor. The fear of negative repercussions at work was a common theme among respondents' experiences.

If I told them, if they knew an atheist doctor was taking care of their family member, they would probably take their family member and move them to another hospital, because how can god act – the way they see doctors is these are the hands of god, so how can god act through someone that doesn't believe, it's obvious that my family members will be doomed to death. So, I definitely avoid discussing that at all. (#8 Respondent)

Some respondents indicated that they remain closeted because they do not want to influence or unwittingly persuade others to become atheist. In this way, it seems that respondents were protective of others. It is as if they want to prevent others from going through the difficult deconversion process and the difficult experience of being a stigmatized religious minority - an atheist.

The people that I tell that I'm an atheist to, are I know are already atheist. And the reason why I do that is I don't want to influence another person in their – so I don't feel compelled to try to convert someone to an atheist. So, if there is someone that I know is not an atheist, and they are asking me about things I'm not going to say that I am an atheist. (#8 Respondent)

A number of respondents said that they would be honest if they were directly asked about their beliefs. However, it is important to note that they often dodged questions that appeared to be leading to this direct question about belief. For example, a male respondent said that he quickly moves away from a person who begins to ask him about what church he attends. So, while he claimed that he would be honest if directly asked, he also apparently will go out of his way to avoid being directly asked. This indicates the level of anxiety that he and other respondents have around revealing their atheist identity.

But, I do (reveal atheist identity) if directly asked, for the general populace, I usually make it clear that I am pretty adamantly – I don't really find that there is much value in religion and that I myself don't believe in it. Not so much my family though, because it could jeopardize some important relationships... I'm kind of like a svelte white American male with a southern accent. You're sort of like pigeon-holed by people outside, as well as people inside. So, you are sort of assumed to be Christian. So I have been asked things that aren't directly related. Nobody ever comes out and says "Are you an atheist, do you believe in god?" But they will kind of make conversation about their church that they kind of turn into "Well what church do you attend" and I kind of say "I don't attend church" and you know usually in those situations you try to cut it off kind of quick because you kind of – it can snowball pretty quickly there... My grandfather tends to have – he had a stroke at a very stressful time previously in my life and you kind of feel that there is a weight on your shoulders that you don't want to come out as an atheist and kill your grandfather in the process bc he had a stroke from this knowledge. (#9 Respondent)

This respondent went on to indicate that he has a desire to be seen for who he is, rather than to have people assume things about him based on his lack of belief. Clearly he was explaining what it was like to experience the stigma of atheism.

I don't go profess that I'm atheist, but it's (pause) I guess I feel more comfortable in my own skin when I'm around people that I know are like minded... It always seemed a little bit better to actually show yourself as a person first before you show yourself as an atheist. And I think that's sort of how I like to handle those sorts of situations... When I was younger in a small town in Alabama, I feel like, I'm having to preface everything

but, the only atheists were the guys that dressed in black and were the weird kind of people. And I still feel like a lot of people see atheists as that and they have this preconceived notion of that, but I definitely feel like I've hit closer to home whenever somebody knows me first, knows what I like kind of, sees me as a person, and then when they realize I can be all this stuff, and it isn't fundamentally different than what they're doing, and I'm an atheist, I think it hits people closer and it makes a bigger impact on that person about atheist, about their beliefs and I think it is more effective as a means to kind of get the word out. It frames atheism in a little better light than it has been previously.

(#9 Respondent)

One respondent shared that when she goes to her Mother's Meetup group she chooses not to say too much about herself or reveal too much about herself. She claimed that this was her personality, however it could be that she fears judgement from this group. She felt anxious when she "exposed too much of (herself)".

There is a core group and there is people that leave, and people that show up, like new people and they will just be telling you about themselves or about the church or whatever, and I'm just like "hmm" I just listen I don't say anything. I don't "Well here is what I believe!" I don't vomit out all that information. For one thing, I don't want to make anybody feel uncomfortable. And I think that that is an easy thing to do. And I get uncomfortable. Especially like, I feel like, Oh I've exposed too much of myself. You know? But that's just a personality thing with me. I'd rather just keep clammed up.

(Respondent #12)

This respondent also talked about being closeted at work. She indicated that she might not get the promotion that she is hoping for.

“I’m afraid. I’m afraid all the sudden I wouldn’t be the golden girl, next choice for who they want to hire. I feel like a little untrue to myself.” (Respondent #12)

In a group setting, or a small setting, I’m pretty comfortable speaking about most things. Just in public areas – like public where I don’t know other people’s beliefs, I don’t want to offend and I don’t want to start debates with people unnecessarily. (Respondent #14)

Addiction

Addictions were an issue for many respondents, including sex, romance, drug, and alcohol addiction. There were 2 respondents who were noticeably drunk during their interviews. It may be that their addictions resulted from their unpleasant emotions from the rejection and trauma they experienced. It also seemed that the addictions may have been used as a way to cope with altruistic fatigue that they experienced while working in helping fields. It may be that it is a combination of or an interplay of both emotions around their damaging history and their current life or work situations. Their work experiences were discussed frequently and these experiences often contained disturbing and upsetting emotional material. Apparently, these early and later experiences combined in such a way as to overwhelm the respondent’s ability to manage their intense emotions. It is highly likely the addictions were used to avoid and alleviate uncomfortable emotional states.

Schimmenti (2012) found that people who suffer developmental trauma experienced “feelings of shame” and “psychological disorders” and that “pathological shame” must be considered when evaluating clients with a history of parental neglect or abuse. She further stated that emotional neglect and role reversal led to shame and “a sense of a defective self” and that

the shame experiences led to psychopathology including isolation, narcissistic rage, addiction and perversions.

I identify myself as a recovering sex and romance addict for 27 years - I was sober, I still am sober by their terms - as - umm - not having any sex outside of committed relationship for 22 years and umm..... I - uh... and (pause) - as that was happening I could never tell if it was because I wanted this very badly - I wanted to be functional sexually in a relationship and have the best opportunity to have a monogamous relationship with somebody that wasn't all screwed up with - entanglements with other people and... and casual sex. Ummm.... umm... I didn't know if... I never really bought that that was a gift that was given to me by divinity. It was something that I really desperately wanted for myself and -- I - and I found myself willing myself not to do some - certain things that were self-destructive to me. (#1 Respondent)

One respondent said that he often corresponded with a fellow *Meetup* member online. In their online correspondence, he told her that he thought that religion is an addiction.

I told her that to me its like – religion is an addiction, especially when you have been addicted forcefully from infancy in childhood as I was. And you never really get rid of it. You never really fully recover. It's almost like the ol' AA thing, it's one day at a time, and you go into the meeting and say, I'm a recovering Christian. I don't think I'll ever be a recovered Christian, you know, and I think this is a process that starts. I mean, naturally it was more intense and a lot more was accomplished in the first couple of years, but no there was no point. To me, unbelief is a process that to varying or lesser degrees may never be completely realized in my lifetime, there will always be some residual part of that that is still there. [Interviewer: When you say residual, can you say more about that?]

Well, I mean, I find that I still think in bible terms. I don't mean philosophically, but I mean I'm always using bible references, I mean there is just a part of me that has just been drilled with this. And you just can't get it out. (#10 Respondent)

I had the bad drug problem and I went to the meetings and they were all faith based. First it was Narcotics Anonymous and they were a little more like new age, the majority of people like spiritual beliefs and that was cool, but it wasn't really working for me. It didn't capture me, after years of trying to go and get better. Nothing happened, nothing happened, not getting better.... Like, your problem is you have no power, the first step of the 12 steps is you are powerless, so I was told, "You have no power, more prayer more power." That's how you get power. So I'm like "Wow, the more I'm praying, the more it's working" the more you know – because my mind would automatically go through this process of something is wrong, your brain is a problem solving machine, something is wrong and it's going to try to find the solution. And I made these neural pathways so deep that like that is always the solution to every problem to every celebration to everything –The drugs was always the solution, so the idea was Make God Your Solution. So anytime you start thinking that, pray, pray, pray. Every time your mind starts going down that pathway, that always end up in that drug result, pray. I did, and it worked, it worked like fabulously. And that made me more of a believer and I started getting more like fundamental with it... I started getting more fundamentalist in my thinking, not so much like Christian fundamentalist, but more Big Book 12 Steps fundamentalist, where their ideas came from which (inaudible) Christianity. So I started going to church, a nondenominational Christian church. (#14 Respondent)

Isolation

Many respondents joined *Meetup* but never attended a face to face *Meetup*. They reported that the reason they didn't go was because they were busy or didn't have a social need. Some reported they experienced isolation and noted that this isolation fostered a lot of self-doubt. Many were concerned that they were the only one who was atheist. Some were isolated prior to their loss of belief, owing to their family constantly moving. Many reported feeling lonely. Some said they lack a social structure, while others said it is hard to find people who are like them. Some said they lack courage and hope for acceptance, while others said they keep distance because of their distrust that comes from their religious experiences. One said he was alienated from the family. Others have to keep their ideas toned down when in the presence of their religious loved ones. They do not wish to make others uncomfortable and fear they will be disliked. Since the two respondents who were drinking throughout their interviews were traveling a lot for work most of the year, this work-related isolation may have led to their addiction. Or, it may be that isolation via year-round traveling for work and addiction may both serve the same function - avoidance of unpleasant emotional states. Dorahy (2010) reported that lifelong shame and existing dissociation contributed to dissolving interpersonal relationships, and the current data seems to support these findings.

A heterosexual feminine male noted that people who deconvert would benefit from reaching out to likeminded others for support.

Make sure that you have people who are also nonbelievers – that you connect in some way. And that – that varies a lot depending on where someone's coming from. If you're a person who is in rural Iowa or Wisconsin or rural anywhere! Rural Pennsylvania, Rural Alabama – umm sometimes you can be really isolating – you don't get a sense of how accepted you are? Unless you have others like you –around you? Or at least others that

you are corresponding with – maybe even online. But, you gotta find some community of other people who are already where you are or where you wanna be and have conversations with them. That'll really – I think – shield you and protect you from questioning yourself all the time. (#3 Respondent)

A number of respondents reported that, while they joined an Atheist Meetup, they had not attended any of the meetings. Clearly, by only engaging likeminded others online and not in person, there is a sense of isolation felt by these respondents. While they noted that they had not attended owing to a busy schedule or for other reasons, it may be the case that the isolation serves as a sort of protective measure. It could be that isolation is being used as an avoidance technique.

I haven't been able to actually attend yet but I just conversed with some online or via email. No, I'm in grad school and I work fulltime and I just don't have extra time to hang out at night like I'd like to. I'm trying to come out and be more vocal. [Interviewer: Are you quiet right now about this?] I'm ... it depends on who I'm talking to. I'm a hospice nurse for a trade – which – yeah – atheists and hospice don't really go together. It's not a good platform to spout nonbelief. So, there's several people that know, but I don't stand on the porch and scream it. (#4 Respondent)

Honestly, I never really had the courage to actually go to one of them but I do kind of enjoy getting information sent to me. It sort of felt a little, I kind of like being able to keep my distance in that sort of sense. And I think that comes from a deep distrust in groups that conform together, kind of echoing back to some of the religious sort of things. It's sort of like, churches kind of felt a little superficial at times and I just sort of

think I enjoy the idea that there is a group of people that are similar to me and (inaudible) be a part of it, but sort of at a distance. (#9 Respondent)

(About corresponding on *Meetup* online only, not attending meetings) I travel a good bit, so you know, I can follow the conversations online and keep up with them no matter where I'm at and they give links to important topics, or interesting topics and it keeps you abreast of what's going on. (#11 Respondent)

"I live way out in the woods by myself and I work alone and I work at home." (#10 Respondent)

"I stepped away a little bit, I started questioning things and I started dating this girl that wasn't a Christian girl and I felt embarrassed to bring her to church." (#14 Respondent)

"I'm a very introverted person anyways, so I tend to kind of isolate myself." (Respondent #18)

A male respondent noted that he initially thought he was alone in his lack of belief. Of course, he thought this because he never talked about his lack of belief with anyone and so it never came up in conversation. This decision to remain quiet maintained his isolation.

I wasn't really discussing what I was reading in that book with anybody at the time. And I would say that that spring semester when I got back to school, I was not immediately aware of anybody that had similar beliefs. So, no I think I was kind of on my own as I was going through that process. Except I would say that there was something about Sagan's book that still made me confident and comfortable that I was heading in the right direction. (#6 Respondent)

I kind of had to move with my education from place to place. And every time I would move, I would lose a little bit of community from where I was but then gain some from

where I went to. And so it's almost like the community itself was ever changing. But, for me particularly, it's challenging to – every time I would take another step, like I went to a new location, it felt like I was always losing a little bit more than I was gaining. And I think that was just me. I think other people actually gain more from when they go new places, but I'm I kind of I guess long for the deeper connections which seems to be the ones that last longer. (#8 Respondent)

Well, it does affect me negatively in certain areas, I don't have as big of a social structure. I feel like there are certain friendships that I could have, which I don't. And it's also difficult in terms of relationships. Finding someone that's likeminded that also would be a good match is not easy as well... So, I would say the biggest negative I've had is that it's hard to find people that are like me. And so, you know, you do kind of isolate yourself in a certain way. And the way that I've dealt with that is I just focus more on work to fill my time. And then I'm hoping that people around me will start to – once I guess – I'm hoping that things around me will start to grow and people will be accepting. (#8 Respondent)

I do kind of feel a little alienated I guess from my mother's side of the family. Kind of like I was saying before, it's really hard to talk to them as a rational human being. It sort of feels like they're – they just assume too much. They believe in Jesus and god and all these things without critically thinking about it and I think it reflects on other parts of their lives. So it's really hard for me to be able to appreciate things that they have to say. Because I can't really play off of them very much. I have to keep it – I have to keep my ideas toned down significantly more than they have to keep theirs toned down. So it's

sort of – at best – it’s things that they say that I’ve given a lot of thought to and I’ve come to different conclusions, I can’t really convey my ideas to them. (#9 Respondent)

I started asking people the uncomfortable questions, they became very agitated and cold towards me and at some point I thought well, if my presence is just going to make them uncomfortable, why do I even bother because we are obviously going on different paths here. I am asking some questions that they don’t have any answers for they don’t like the questions, they are not liking me as a result of my questions. (#10 Respondent)

So, and my parents are Christians, they go to church, they are very active and you know. We are not as close as some families but we talk, we go down there – I’m going down there this week. And I play golf with my dad, (inaudible). And they are great people. They are very well loved and liked down there. They are very nice, very heart giving. They know, they never ask me, we’ve never had the conversation, I just don’t wanna do it. But I love them. And I try to ease it in there, “You know, if you believe all this, I’m not on the same page.” But, you know, no matter what they (inaudible) believe. They are always very kind to me. We get together for holidays. (Inaudible) And there is a disconnect between me and my dad more so than my mother – my stepmother. But, because he is so nice. And I know (inaudible) and you don’t want to hurt their feelings and “I’m worried about you, I’m praying for you!” (#11 Respondent)

“I’ve got more of that support now, even like within the last year. 6 months to a year. I felt pretty alone before that.” (#12 Respondent)

Intellectual versus Emotional

Many of the male respondents said that their deconversion process was related to intellect and not emotion. They denied having had any emotionally intense experience, despite sharing one or more such examples in their interview. This denial of emotion may be due to societal expectations around men and emotion, and/or it may be a protective measure where they avoid thinking about the emotional material and instead claim intellect as the way towards atheism. In this way, the men are able to state “I’m intellectual, I’m not emotional.” Very often these male respondents had experienced outsider status, and this type of rejection is known to cause extreme emotional responses. And so perhaps it is not surprising that respondents avoided feeling these emotions by focusing on intellect. Also, they wish to be viewed as having culturally accepted masculine attributes such as low emotionality. Lind, Delmar, & Nielsen (2014) reported that patients who had experienced “high psychosocial stress” in childhood, due to “conflicts stemming from perceived absent, insufficient, or dismissive communication during interactions with significant adults” led to difficulties in adulthood. Difficulties included having a “low ability to identify and express stress-related cognitions, emotions and feelings, and low bodily and emotional self-contact, which made them vulnerable to stressors.” Lind et al. (2014) found that patients typically dealt with these stressors by implementing “avoidant behaviors” and the use of these avoidant behaviors was said to prolong their experience of stress.

Religion, to me, was very emotional based. It’s helpful to me to see something that’s so science and intellectually based. So, it’s interesting that not only do you not believe in god anymore different, but going from something that’s strictly emotional based to going to something that’s intellectually based. It’s helpful to me. (Respondent #7)

“I would say for me, they are more kind of intellectual things. Like, this doesn’t make sense, that doesn’t make sense, that kind of thing.” (Respondent #6)

“It seems like some people are triggered by an emotional event or a series of emotional events and others are triggered just simply by an intellectual challenge.” (Respondent #10)

“I never really had a time where I felt that god abandoned me or something. Or some tragedy where I felt like I was living in an unjust world. It was more of an intellectual debate within myself.” (Respondent #8)

Avoid sin, avoid “bad”

Respondents often described avoiding sinful behaviors, even after becoming a nonbeliever. The avoidance of sin may be due to the cognitive scheme that they had since childhood, and perhaps it is why the following step in the deconversion process is to deal with confusion and cognitions. Having grown up from early childhood believing that unforgiven sins would carry harsh punishment, atheist adult respondents struggled with residual cognitions and anxiety. In an effort to alleviate this anxiety, they avoided behaviors which were thought to be bad or sinful. Siev, Baer, & Minichiello (2011) reported that there is a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder called “Scrupulosity,” and it is incapacitating and problematic to treat. Compulsions in this subtype typically revolve around avoiding sinful behaviors (Siev et al., 2011).

I mean I have never drank, never smoked, never did drugs, no none of that... I have 2 alcoholic grandfathers, one on each side - on my mother's side and my father's side, and so I was deathly fearful of alcohol. And turned out that my sister became an alcoholic. So, I saw what alcoholism did to people and it was very frightening to me so. I just figured, it's probably a good thing that I don't do these things. Umm but I often think now - I think - what would it have been like had I - - I don't know - my my constitution against anything that was considered 'bad' - was so strong and I - I was like - if I had been

a fundamentalist Christian I would have been tyrannical I was very hardline conservative and umm... holier than thou - I was a monster (laughs). (#1 Respondent)

I - this is a very very (sigh) strange thing for me because – umm, it turns out (laughs) I'm getting comfortable with saying this – umm, still, that I'm bisexual – uhmmm. That was very confusing to me as a kid because I was taught that it is a choice. And that, it's a sin if you choose to do it – now, for me, I wasn't – it's not a choice that I was born bisexual – but the fact that I had a choice as far as – attractive – my my spectrum of attraction is broader. I can be attracted to men, women, or people who are in between. And, and that choice – so to speak – confused the heck out of me because --- they kept saying it's a choice and I'm like 'I kinda have a choice so it must be that I have to just avoid that side of me and just stay with men' – and so I was pretty much – I – I only dated – only in college did I finally start opening up to that – when I was questioning my beliefs and everything. (#2 Respondent)

(Talks about questioning, and feeling guilt. Guilt?) I think that that is the basis for religion. A lot of guilt. That you live your life this way, you believe this way, you don't question it. And that's what it was, it's because I had had this faith that you have the faith that you don't question the faith and it had been ingrained in me since birth! And then hear I am asking these big questions and questioning everything. And I'm not supposed to do that. And that's where that guilt comes from... While I was really questioning it and everything, it was kind of like, I kind of like tried to put on blinders and just kind of get my head straight, because my head was not right, you know, it was, like I said, I was dealing with all these feelings and the guilt and everything that went along with it, so, during that time, I probably didn't pay attention as much. But then, one day I heard a

conversation in an elevator or in a waiting room and I was like “Oh god, no! This is the work of talented people. People who are dedicated enough to go to medical school and study and work really hard. That’s why your child is better!” (#5 Respondent)

Because I was such a – I was so strict in my own life. I didn’t drink anything at all until I was in my 40s. Never danced. I’m a little resentful that, not so much the drinking, but I’m really resentful of never dancing when I was younger. (#7 Respondent)

“It’s so scary. And if you come out, like I say, if you’re not Christian, then you must be worshipping the devil.” (#7 Respondent)

Mental State: Confused, mental gymnastics, trying to make sense

Respondents often talked about feelings of confusion and the desire to try to make sense of things such as morality, mortality, and suffering. LGBT individuals had difficulty melding their “sinful” sexual identity with religious moral teachings. Some respondents discussed their feelings of confusion when reading the bible. In particular, when respondents came upon scripture that included maltreatment of vulnerable groups, they had extreme difficulty sorting out what they viewed as inconsistencies or immorality in the bible. Foy, Drescher, & Watson (2011) reported that crisis can lead one to lose their belief in god, and that this reaction triggers confusion and disillusionment.

I have really led an exemplary life and tried to love god my whole life and and I have found that my family hates me because of who I am and I know that I did not make myself gay. I've known I'm gay since I was 5 years old. So there is no way that I - that this is a sin - I couldn't reconcile the two... What I am understanding to be the truth now, or at least closer to the truth than anything that I had uhh been a part of previously where

I had always had thought - 'That's so weird, I don't get that - ' about some of the supernatural claims and so forth and -- angry crazy god -- and (laughs) stuff like this... And I've ... I've done all kinds of mental gymnastics to make some - certain things about me umm one - one of the things I'm - I'm not so proud of - uh is definitely part of my story is that I had a hard time with umm the idea that I was gay and reconciling that with my religion. And I had people who explained it away... and helped me with umm some problems with Leviticus and so forth. But it was never really satisfying to me. (Pause) I still felt like god really just disapproved of me. And that I real- prob- probably was still gonna go to hell. And umm... and I was told - uh this was reinforced most of my life by most any religious person I was around. (#1 Respondent)

"Well, explain to me exactly - I'm trying to understand umm, what is loving about slavery? Jesus supported that" and I quoted a scripture from Ephesians. And uh - she said, she didn't respond back because there are no answers to these things that will make any sense. (Laugh). (#1 Respondent)

One respondent noted that she felt confused, saying that Christianity didn't make sense to her. This respondent went on to describe her involvement with Christian apologetics, which is essentially learning to overcome questions about inconsistencies or questionable features in the Bible. She attempted to master Christian apologetics in an effort to overcome her own doubts and questions about the truth of the Bible. Through this activity, she became more of a disbeliever.

I'll never forget the moment that I first had the thought, umm - my process to it was - First I questioned Christianity, I learned enough about it to think, "Okay, this just doesn't

make sense - this doesn't have evidence, umm there's many older religions that have a lot of the same stories” - there's a lot you know that I learned - from the perspective of language and how the bible was messed with over time, the perspective of history, what records there are, this and that. I went thru the whole thing. I was very big on Christian apologetics... I - I remember taking it very seriously and wanting the holy spirit quote unquote - to touch me - and let me speak in tongues and I just sat there - I'm like “nothing is happening and this is weird, I don't understand” - (laughs) - cuz' - Is there something wrong with me? God doesn't like me? I don't know - but... it's not happening - (#2 Respondent)

This respondent also noted that she was troubled by the events of September 11th, and she was unable to find an answer to why this happened. She noted that innocent people were killed and she felt that god allowed this to happen. For her, this did not make sense. This state of mental confusion and disillusionment further pushed her to become a nonbeliever.

My junior year of high school was the year that September 11th happened and in that year we lost my cousin – he was a firefighter – he was in the unit – the whole unit was lost in the 2nd tower that went down first. And umm – at that time, I was in school and we had a big meeting in school about it – and I couldn't wrap my head around why – this wa- like why it happened. You know – I mean that was like the first time I started thinking about “what the hell is going on here?” – you know – because people are of a different religion come and just blow up a building and kill all these innocent people – and god's cool with that?!? I mean (laughs) you know – I mean – how does this – how do you justify this? It was just – and no, it didn't make sense to me. And I mean, obviously ever since then our government has had a field day with our country so... (Laughs) It's

just never turned out to be anything good. There's – I don't know how people just say, "Oh God has a reason" – you know? It didn't make sense. (#2 Respondent)

Another respondent also had difficulty with the similar concept, "the problem of evil". Again, this respondent seemed to have difficulty with finding an understanding as to why god would allow innocents, such as babies, to suffer.

I always found that the problem of evil was one that I've never found uh satisfactorily answered by my religious upbringing or any religion – I have never heard a satisfying answer of that – for how we explain suffering and evil in the world. Umm – I – I was given answers when I was a Christian – about that – umm you know, that that man, humans brought this on ourselves – umm and as I thought about that later on, I said that doesn't make sense – you know babies don't bring evil and suffering on themselves... Umm – supposedly we're responsible for our own actions as Christians, yet – you could be punished over generations for the evils of – people who came before you? Which is a kind of – if you think about it – a kind of socialism (laughs) in the pejorative sense of that term. Umm – yeah that because some guy named Adam sinned some time ago that there's all this suffering and misery and diseases in the world? Umm, animal suffering I could never square that. Animals supposedly cannot sin – they are outside the world of sin, and yet they suffer because of the stuff that humans do? Animals suffer even without any contact with humans? They kill each other, there's a lot of savagery in nature? Umm, I – I know that in Social Psychology there's a wonderful hypothesis called the Just World Hypothesis – which – again, another self-serving bias – that – having this belief that there's some kind of equity, some kind of final justice in the world, helps people to function. Umm, but it also isn't true. Umm, that – that uh – there are people who are poor

– who suffer – and they didn’t bring it on themselves. But the Just World Hypothesis allows us to be off the hook – you know it allows us to blame the victim, that people are poor, and suffering and homeless and you know and so forth – they must have done something to deserve it and therefore we have no social responsibility to them and I just really reject that – I think that to the extent that any kind of religion enforces that – that view as a philosophy – turns what is a personal bias into like a theology. I think it’s harmful. (#3 Respondent)

While some respondents pointed to intellectual reasons for their sense of confusion, it seemed that the basis for their confusion typically stemmed from an observance of some sort of injustice or pain experienced by the self or witnessed in others.

“I would say for me, they are more kind of intellectual things. Like, this doesn’t make sense, that doesn’t make sense, that kind of thing.” (#6 Respondent)

A female respondent noted that she felt it was unjust that she should have to suffer a low-carb diet in order to maintain a healthy weight. While this is a humorous example of confusion and disillusionment brought on by the pain of a sort of deprivation, it really caused her to question her beliefs and ultimately to become a nonbeliever.

“It’s still very new. It was probably a long time coming. Thinking “That doesn’t make sense. Wonder why that is! Well that’s just hooey.” And probably what was the tipping point for my deconversion, my husband and I are chronic dieters. We have tried every diet known to man. We have done, I don’t’ think we have ever done weight watchers, that’s probably the only one. But, we’ve done the rotation diet, we have done a low fat diet. We have looked at the South Beach Diet. And finally, probably about 2 years before

my deconversion, we went on a low carb diet... And my argument was “how can bread be bad for you? I mean that’s what Jesus fed – loaves and fishes. Jesus said ‘I’m the bread of life’ and why would he have used an analogy of something that is harmful?” “Oh well, it’s because the way we make bread now is different than the way we made bread then, we take all the good stuff out and leave all the bad stuff in. Okay, so did god in his infinite wisdom not look ahead in time and know that man was going eventually to zap all the good stuff out of wheat? That just doesn’t seem right... Was he thinking about it when he made it that way? I think I finally said, “He didn’t make it that way at all, he didn’t make it, there is no god.” (Laughs). I have one friend that I think is probably borderline, not ready to take that final step. But he thinks it’s hysterical when I tell him a low carb diet will make you an atheist. (Laughs). It’s the low carb diet made me an atheist. (#7 Respondent)

The Catholic Church doesn’t believe in birth control. The Baptist church you didn’t dance because well, that might lead to fornication. And I can remember at one time wondering if sex before marriage gave girls problems because it was the act or was it the stigma attached to it. So, what was it that was so bad and damaging to young girls? Was it because it was such a social taboo, or was it the act itself? And I can remember puzzling over that and deciding I don’t think I can resolve that on my own, I better just move on. (#7 Respondent)

Some respondents reached back to their church or to their religious upbringing to attempt to gain answers that would address the mental confusion state that they were in. However, they never found answers that were satisfying to them.

“So, again, I’m sort of going to church, doing all these sort of things and I keep coming up with or finding out ideas that just didn’t seem to make sense.” (Respondent #9)

For years, I had been trying to figure things out (laugh). Like I’d have those random nights where I would stay up real late and try and page thru books and the bible and stuff and pace back and forth trying to figure you know – so what does this mean? (#24 Respondent)

It was a journey I guess. Well, from a very very young age, I guess I was too logical: “That doesn’t make sense. That’s crazy.” And I would pick up on things: “This is one gospel and this – how did they get all those animals on the arc? There were a million animals!” And then as I got older, I just said, “this has gotten crazy” so I said, well before you make a one-sided decision, I was gonna sit down and read the bible at one point cover to cover and decide I’m either going to believe this or I’m not. So I read the bible and the more you read it the more it was like you know this is the craziest stuff I’ve ever heard. It doesn’t make any sense at all. (#11 Respondent)

I remember asking the youth pastor, “If Jesus died shortly after the year 2000, and it wasn’t until 1492 that Christians came to the new world, then that means for almost 1500 years then that there was no way for people that were native to the Americas to learn of Jesus, and does that mean then that all of those people went to hell, if there is no other way to get to heaven except through Jesus and these people had no way of knowing about Jesus, does that mean that they all went to hell? Or how did that work?” And so that might be kind of another emotional experience there. Again, there is kind of that intellectual realization of “there is something here that isn’t quite adding up.” I would say

that Sagan's book – between Sagan's book and the social psychology classes that I had it finally gave me the confidence – that's not really the right word I'm looking for. I finally felt it gave me the comfort to step away from that and say, "Yeah, okay this doesn't make sense." (#6 Respondent)

For some, the tragic death of a loved one led them to experience this mental state of confusion and disillusionment.

When she died, we were just wondering how somebody – if there was a loving god up there, how could he take someone so wonderful. Probably a lot of anger, you know.

(Inaudible) You're heartbroken and angry because it got me really really deeply thinking about it. (#11 Respondent)

Respondents struggled with confusion stemming from cognitive and moral dissonance and they tried, unsuccessfully, to make sense of things. When respondents were unable to resolve the confusion, their coping ability was destabilized. Their self-sacrificing altruism led them to be exposed to more suffering. This led to more unanswered questions around morality, mortality and suffering. The confusion and self-sacrificing altruism set the stage for the resulting altruistic fatigue, metaphorical derailment, and breakpoint that led to rejection of belief, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

In an effort to deal with their damaging past and their self-as-bad self-concept, respondents attempted to implement avoidance techniques which included running from home, concealing their nonbelief, self-sacrificing through altruistic work, and mental gymnastics or confusion and disillusionment. While these avoidance techniques appeared to work for a period of time, the respondents soon found that the avoidance techniques ultimately became ineffective

in helping to heal their past and deal with feelings around their damaging past and self-as-bad concept. They began to feel frustrated with the confusion that they experienced around issues such as mortality, morality, and suffering of self and innocents. In the following chapter we will examine how the use of these faulty avoidance techniques led to a metaphorical derailment, where the avoidance techniques became ineffective and respondents were forced to confront their damaging past and self-as-bad concept.

Chapter 5

Derailment and Liberation: Breakpoint, Rejection of Belief, Acceptance of Self – The Adult Years (18 years old and beyond)

Having experienced a damaging history during their early years, they suffered further during their young adult years while they employed avoidance techniques. The avoidance techniques that caused the respondents further discomfort included self-sacrifice, soft identity, closeted identity, addiction, isolation, and intellectualization. And while pursuing self-sacrificing altruistic works, they experienced self-suffering, and also were exposed to the suffering of others. This compounded misery combined with their damaging histories set them up for a metaphorical derailment. In this chapter, we will examine how the respondents arrived at the point where they dealt with their damaging history, freed themselves from shame, and then journeyed toward self-acceptance.

Derailment

While using avoidance as a means for dealing with damaging histories, the respondents ended up increasing their distress. They suffered because of their own discomforts, and because they witnessed others going through traumas while working in helping professions. Over a period of time, this led to altruistic fatigue, where respondents simply became overwhelmed and could no longer deal with their own suffering or that of others. This altruistic fatigue set the stage for one final breakpoint event, in which they typically witnessed the torment of one or more people, and often within a close timeframe, experienced torment themselves. This final breakpoint event led the respondents to finally face that which they had been avoiding. After much work, respondents reconstructed cognitive and moral schemes and rejected beliefs. The

beliefs they rejected were those that had taught them they were bad or sinful, simply for who they were. It was as if they finally rejected that which rejected them. In this act of courage and strength, respondents were able to free themselves from their religion-based cognitive scheme and morality teachings that had been the cause of so much suffering. Nowhere can this be as clearly demonstrated as when LGBT respondents talked about how their religious beliefs, religious leaders, religious family members and communities had taught them that they were sinful or even “demonic.” When LGBT respondents rejected their beliefs, they were able to heal the harsh damage that was done to them, most often by their own religious parents but also by peers and their communities. The harsh damage was done via abuse, abandonment and/or relegating the respondent(s) to outsider status. These damages caused respondents to feel rejected, shamed, depressed, anxious and in some cases suicidal. The literature reflects similar findings.

For example, Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez (2009) reported that LGBT rejection by parents is related to negative health outcomes and increased suicide risk. Brown, Craig, Harris, Handley, & Harvey (2007) reported that maternal rejection, such as emotional abuse, and neglect, such as absence of affection, during childhood was found to predict chronic depression in adulthood. Koken, Bimbi, & Parsons (2009) found that transgender male to female individuals who experienced rejection in childhood and/or adolescence, were left with significant impacts on their adult lives, which lent support for the Parental Acceptance-Rejection (PAR) theory. The PAR theory notes that perceived acceptance or rejection in adult relationships may be related to the acceptance or rejection that one experienced from their parents. Koken et al. (2009) noted that parental rejections included aggression and neglect, and this rejection led many of the transgender women to run away from home, potentially ending up homeless. When respondents

faced early trauma combined with the use of ineffective avoidance techniques, altruistic fatigue and a breakpoint event were likely.

Altruistic Fatigue

Altruistic fatigue is a term coined by the current investigator to describe the experience of respondents feeling overwhelmed by the suffering that they both experienced themselves and witnessed in others. Many respondents worked in helping fields or volunteered and during these endeavors, they witnessed the suffering of innocents. They felt overwhelmed by such seemingly pervasive suffering, an experience that ultimately led them to question why suffering was necessary. In many cases, respondents looked to god and their religious beliefs to try to find understanding of their suffering; however, they reported that the answers were unsatisfactory to them. These unanswered questions and the persistent feelings of overwhelming suffering that they both witnessed and experienced led to extreme discomfort and resulted in altruistic fatigue. Following the onset of altruistic fatigue, some respondents reported it became more difficult to care for others. After this, the respondents began to turn their focus inward, caring for themselves and repairing themselves.

Altruistic fatigue seems to share common characteristics with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Respondents seemed distressed by the suffering they had experienced and witnessed, and they used avoidance as a way to try to cope with the distress. They felt depressed and symptoms of PTSD also indicate depression: “inability to experience positive emotions, feeling emotionally numb, hopelessness about the future, (and) difficulty maintaining close relationships” (“Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” 2014). All of these PTSD symptoms applied to the respondents and were particularly emphasized during the time when they experienced altruistic fatigue. Additionally, they felt anxious and the comparative PTSD symptoms included

“always being on guard for danger” (“Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” 2014). Earlier in their experience, respondents had feelings of guilt and shame, and these are also PTSD symptoms. An additional PTSD symptom which was present in the respondents included “self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much” (“Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” 2014). Finally, as with PTSD sufferers, some respondents had suicidal thoughts, and two attempted suicide.

Importantly, respondents had all of these PTSD risk factors according to (“Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” 2014):

...experiencing intense or long-lasting trauma; having experienced other trauma earlier in life, including childhood abuse or neglect; having a job that increases your risk of being exposed to traumatic events, such as military personnel and first responders; having other mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression; lacking a good support system of family and friends.

Some of the most common events leading to PTSD include “combat exposure, childhood neglect and physical abuse, sexual assault, physical attack, or being threatened with a weapon” (“Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” 2014). Yet, it should be noted that, despite their damaging histories, the respondents initially seemed to adequately cope with their depression and anxiety through the use of avoidance techniques. And it wasn’t until intolerable confusion combined with simultaneously experiencing the suffering of self and others that they then experienced altruistic fatigue. At this point, the similarity to PTSD symptoms could not be denied. If altruistic fatigue was the primer, we must then consider what led respondents with this history to work in helping fields where they would be exposed to traumas.

Due to the respondents' damaging histories and self-as-bad concept, they were primed to not only have more empathy and sympathy for others who suffer, but also to have a desire to do good works, typically in helping fields or volunteer work. The altruism exhibited by the respondents should be described as self-sacrificing and is seemingly related somehow to their self-as-bad concept. Perhaps it is an attempt to alleviate the respondents' discomfort, because this altruism served the function of helping the respondent and others to see the respondent as morally good rather than morally bad. It may be that respondents who experienced damaging histories became more empathetic and sympathetic to the suffering of others, and in particular, the suffering of innocents. Some research seems to support this idea. Unfortunately, it seems that this damaging history may have led the altruistic, helping respondent to become overwhelmed with what this researcher has termed altruistic fatigue. Let us consider research that seems to explain why certain people engage in self-sacrificing altruistic pursuits.

The literature seems to support the findings of this study, that a damaging history, self-as-bad concept, and avoidance (PTSD symptom) are involved in understanding those who engage in helping behaviors or altruistic pursuits. Joseph (2014) reported that individuals with a history of abuse in childhood are more likely to both have low self-esteem, and engage in helping behaviors than other individuals without abuse history. Cloitre et al. (2009) reported that childhood traumatic experiences influenced adult PTSD symptoms and made the symptoms much more complex in that people who had this damaging background typically had many more symptoms than those who did not have this background. Lev-Wiesel & Sternberg (2012) reported that childhood physical abuse and emotional abuse were risk factors for social rejection and the researchers noted that social rejection is a risk factor for psychological distress. When 387 university students were studied, researchers found that as many as one-third of them noted

that they had experienced social peer rejection during adolescence (Lev-Wiesel, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Sternberg, 2006). Notably, those who experienced social peer rejection described it as their most traumatic event. Lev-Wiesel, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Sternberg (2006) reported that whether the students believed that they had social support available to them was not only related to their PTSD severity, but also to their level of depression. Respondents with a damaging history were therefore inclined to greater empathy for others and consequently perhaps to more altruistic pursuits. Yet, as the literature indicated, since those with this history are primed for PTSD or other negative psychological outcomes, it is not surprising that the respondents derailed. It is as if the altruistic fatigue was a time when respondents began to experience their own suffering, rather than avoid it, and this history combined with their altruistic work in such a way as to compound the suffering experience.

Perhaps primary suffering (respondent experiences suffering) combined with secondary suffering (witnessing the suffering of others, particularly innocent others) leads to a breakpoint or a kind of existential crisis. While it often was the case that there was a combined experience of suffering which ultimately led to loss of belief, sometimes respondents only reported the secondary suffering which they experienced upon witnessing the suffering of innocent others. Tomer & Elliason (2007) hypothesized that the suffering that follows a trauma, rather than the trauma itself, is what leads to an existential crisis or as the authors termed it, only after suffering “are the foundations of one’s meaning shook.” This hypothesis seems to hold merit based on the data of the current study. Perhaps it helps to explain why respondents faced a breakpoint event only following much confusion and suffering. And maybe it is the case that one faces trauma, then suffers, and upon facing compounding traumas soon finds the suffering intolerable, leading to one final event – a breakpoint event.

Breakpoint Event

The breakpoint event typically involved witnessing the suffering of innocents that often corresponded to the suffering of the respondent. While respondents had witnessed suffering of innocents prior to the derailment, what differed in this breakpoint moment was that the respondents already had gone through what may be considered the other priming stages including damaging history, confusion, altruistic pursuits and altruistic fatigue. With these pieces in place, the stage was set for a final breakpoint. At this point, the respondent was on a completely different path. Respondents now had a complete rebirth where all of the confusion and frustration felt prior to this breakpoint, finally was addressed. Avoidance techniques were set aside, in favor of knowledge seeking and the restructuring of cognitive, emotional and spiritual patterns. Respondents now began to search for answers to philosophical questions, in particular the question of why innocents suffer, but they searched in areas apparently not considered available to them prior to the breakpoint. For example, they consulted readings and experts considered evil by their religious leaders.

My dad was killed in an airplane crash. And uh --- a plane that he built himself... with my uncle. Uh my uncle didn't help him build it but they were killed together at the same time. Uhhh about 11 years ago. And (pause) I would have - I think I was suffering from PTSD... from this particular event because I would have nightmares about my dad. I flew with my dad, I got my pilots license, I was a pilot as well - and umm - I - uhh --- I would have these nightmares all the time about how - the very moment my dad died and the terror that he was in. And I'd be in the plane with him and - I was supposed to be in the plane with him the day that he died, but I ended up having a client who insisted that I stay with them. And uhhh... here in NY and to finish up a project and I told my dad I would

have to visit him a few weeks later - and my uncle took my place in the plane... and I was supposed to be in that plane with him that weekend. But, anyway, to make a long story short, I had all these - credible - uh frightening moments about being in the plane with my dad - witnessing his death and - not so much fear for my own life - but just wanting to somehow make that last moment of terror not happen for him. Ummm as he knew he was gonna die. And ummm uh..... I - I needed to know that my dad was okay somehow. And his- he had a girlfriend at the time, my parents weren't married anymore. And I talked with her and she said, "I was visited by your dad here on my- I was swinging in my yard and your dad talked to me and told me 'it's all okay' and he's fine." I said, "Really?" I said, "That's amazing." I said, "I'll pray every day that he visits me." And he never did. And I didn't expect him to. I - here, my superstitious mind said that - they only get one person to visit and he was really close to her and so - that makes sense and - it doesn't matter that he didn't visit me. (Pauses) And, but then I needed to know somehow that he was okay - that that terror moment that I could never reconcile in my own life was okay with him - and so I - umm - I started reading books, and I read this book of a woman who uh-- had a near death experience and she supposedly died - and - came back to life. I don't remember the name of the book, but umm she talked about how perfect heaven was, how perfectly happy that - uhhh - she says some things like 'the blades of grass sang the sweetest songs in the whole world' - and that was so comforting to me to know that maybe my dad might be in a place like that. And so I accepted that for a while - for quite some time. But it also - ummm - wet my appetite for bigger questions. And I started asking bigger questions from then on. And - the bigger the questions - the - you know -

the more information was available to me on the internet and so forth - the more trouble I got into (laughs). (Respondent #1)

One respondent had her breakpoint event while doing missionary work in Mexico. She said she was troubled that their goal as missionaries was to teach people about their religion. She felt that rather than proselytize, they should have been helping the people deal with their extreme poverty. Here we see how witnessing secondary suffering led to loss of belief.

Probably early in high school I became very religious, I was very involved with church and just very deeply a spiritual person. And in high school, maybe around my senior year, or the summer between my junior and senior year, I was a missionary and I lived for the summer in Mexico. And with a group. And it was just kind of a turning point actually for me in my life. I saw really abject poverty and people really, really struggling. You know our group was very sweet and very well-meaning but the purpose of our group really was kind of to educate people about our religious beliefs, and share those with people. And I found that very disturbing. I felt like people needed help, you know? And not to be preached to and so that was kind of my first window into – I don't really subscribe to what's going on here. That was a huge, big deal for me because up until then I kind of didn't go along with everything they said or just kind of believe blindly and all. I kind of picked and chose things. But that summer was kind of an awakening for me. That I don't approve of spending money and sending people out to do those kind of things. I just felt like there was much better things people could be doing with time and resources to like really actually help people that needed help. (Respondent #16)

One male respondent witnessed his quadriplegic mother accidentally roll her wheelchair onto his 5 month old son. This appeared to be his breakpoint event and is characterized by a number of innocents suffering within this one narrative. He noted that god was not there, and this was a theme that emerged throughout the data when respondents either experienced pain or witnessed pain in others, particularly innocent others.

I also remember when my son was 5 months old, I saw it again actually with my own family. My mother is a quadriplegic she rides a very heavy wheelchair, and my grandmother and my mother were babysitting my son and my mom's wheelchair lost control and actually hit my son, he was laying on the floor. And my grandmother was able to lift my mom's wheelchair up to move it out of the way to get to my son and this is an old messed up, emphysema, really out of shape woman who did that. Again, it's just physiology, it's not divine intervention. Divine intervention would have prevented a 5 month old from getting hit by a wheelchair- not would have given an old person the strength to move it. (Respondent #17)

One male respondent was beaten by his father after questioning the brutal Hindu Muslim rioting he was witnessing. Again, this respondent, as with other respondents, experienced pain himself and this coincided with witnessing tremendous pain in innocent others as well. This particular example is interesting in that the riots were spurred by religious differences. Surely this impacted the respondent greatly and it is believed to be his breakpoint event.

When I saw the Hindu Muslim riots, I thought "why we live this way?" When I came to the U.S. and found myself sleeping on the street bench and sleeping on bathroom of a gas station, to find warmth and heat, to get out of the cold, then to answer your question –

that concretely, I haven't done anything. When you are still coming up a teenager, you don't have the opportunity to have done that much harm that would inspire that kind of vindictiveness by a divine spirit... That I was pious in my thinking, I was clean in the way I was thinking, then when I started growing a little older, I started seeing all these – or seeing and observing the Hindu Muslim riots as they were happening around me all the time. Hindus killing Muslims, Muslims killing Hindus... Hindus killing Seiks and Seiks having a problem with Hindus and all that stuff... I remember one day, my father has a regular prayer where my family has to go on Tuesday. And they pray. It was a regular thing on Tuesday night in my home when I was growing up. And I remember screaming and yelling at my parents saying “Where is god?! We would not see this kind of misery that we see outside.” Because my father owns a small grocery store in India, we didn't have any money. We grew up very poor. My mom is very, is functionally illiterate as well, she doesn't know the first word of English. I grew up in remarkable poverty, remarkable illiteracy. And my father shot a (?) medical store that was owned by a Muslim in the Hindu Muslim riots, that store was completely demolished, robbed, burned – purely because India has its own Jerusalem, (?) the Mosque of Babba which was claimed to have been built over the foundation of where Lord Rahm the Hindu God was born. It has the same – as you would have in Jerusalem, remarkably the same thing... I grew up in the riots, with curfews early and the killing and people who were accountants in the morning, would go out in the evening and become monsters... I witnessed a lot of carnage, I witnessed Hindus going out in mobs, pulling Muslim wives and children and men out and literally burning them alive... And my claim at that time was, as a kid, because you do not know what else to say, you just scream and yell, I screamed and

yelled. And I remember getting beaten by belt (laugh) by my father as if it was blasphemy. (Respondent #28)

A homosexual male respondent heard Pat Robertson condemn homosexuals and blame them for the events of September 11th. This respondent had his breakpoint event in this moment when he experienced the pain of discrimination while concurrently witnessing the pain of the victims of September 11th.

So planes would crash, and accidents would happen, 9/11, those things. And it is hard to think – and – I don't know if there will be an opportunity to talk about this – but, being gay, I admit that I have some animosity towards religion just because of the whole gay thing. Well, I – when it comes to that, I hate them, because people like Jerry Fallwell, so, there is – if there is a hell, I certainly hope Jerry Fallwell is in that hell. Umm because he is a horrible person. I also hope that Pat Robertson goes to hell as well. “Gays are pedophiles” and “(we) caused September 11th” and “(we) are sick” and we are just the scourge of the earth. I used to – well, I still do, on right wing watch website, and I had to actually de-bookmark it from my website, because I can't go on this every day. But now I go on it and I just laugh at it. I laugh at it, but at the same time, I'm like, these people have an audience. So, there are actually people out there listening to them, and they believe this stuff. You know? The Rick Santorum's and – this – so that drives me crazy. (Not able to reconcile religion and being gay). I would have been happy being a gay Christian, in fact I was for a couple of years. What turned me off - with all these fundamentalist Christians who are anti-gay. (Respondent #30)

Rebirth, New Beginning

Following the derailment, respondents experienced a metaphorical rebirth. The rebirth involved reconstructing cognitive schemes, morality concepts, and the respondents' past. Respondents found reconstruction necessary because, for them, the former religious-based structures were ineffective and led to a breakpoint. This rebirth was a time of healing. Healing was necessary for these respondents because, they saw that their religious beliefs had caused them harm. In particular, religious concepts, such as Original Sin, contributed to these respondents seeing themselves as bad. This self-as-bad concept led to negative consequences: specifically, it led to avoidance, confusion, and altruistic fatigue. Eventually it led to a derailing breakpoint that was followed by the rejection of belief in god. It was then that respondents began to journey toward self-acceptance. Their first step was to finally address the confusion that had caused them disquiet.

Open Knowledge Seeking Initiated – Seeking Answers, Addressing Confusion

Respondents began to open up to seeking knowledge previously avoided due to “evil” status, such as science writings about evolution and atheistic writings. And what was discovered, was that there are some explanations that offer less dissonance to respondents than religious teachings. In particular, respondents were able to begin to let go of religious teachings such as Original Sin, and then they were able to begin to reject the self-as-bad concept. It should be noted that, despite the apparent relief from dissonance, respondents reported feeling anxiety while exploring these writings.

So, I think the internet was the only place that I had social support. And it was these were just made up people that I never met. You know, I was having a one-way relationship with them. They were imparting information to me - they had no idea who I was. And

so... the *Meetup* group - for the first time, I met people who were - likeminded. And they scared me a little bit. But I like them... They scared me because umm - (whispering) they were also the demons that I was never supposed to be a part of. And they also, were the bad people, and so I felt like, "You're falling in with the bad crowd." (Laughs). "You're with the people you were supposed to never be a part of'...it's not bad enough you've fallen off the wagon, you now have taken up - you've made community out of them!" (Laughs). (Respondent #1)

So I started reading – before that I was reading a lot of Christian books, all I would read was Christian books. And then I started reading *The Genius in All of Us*, not like atheistic books, just books on genetics and I read a book on evolution. And just looking into all these different areas and watching a lot of documentaries. I started watching a lot of documentaries... I watched this one about – it showed the brain and how when you intentionally change your thought process, like thought patterns are just different connections and neural pathways and they are just, the more you think them, the more you use them – that pathway, the deeper it gets ingrained and it said that when you intentionally change your thought, you start, every time, you secrete a chemical or something that separates those neural pathways and starts creating new ones. And I'm like wow, that's pretty much what the praying is like. I'm changing a thought. I think that was one of the biggest connections. I was like wow. (Respondent #14)

They would invite me to church and I would say "Well, you know, I'm not really that religious." But I didn't use the word Atheist. And then as far as when I stopped believing in god, I can't really even define the specific time, but it was probably, well it was last year when I started thinking "this is kind of a cop out to say you are not religious, either

you are religious or you are not and you need to decide is there a god and what do you really believe.” That’s when I started doing all the research. So, listening to the podcasts, I read Richard Dawkins God Delusion and to be fair and balanced, I read the Dawkins Delusion. It was not worth reading, very flimsy arguments and it didn’t help at all, it didn’t change my mind at all, it didn’t counter act Dawkins’ book at all. So I did read that, I listened to some sermons, I listened to people’s accounts of supposed near-death experiences that they’d had. And I just decided that I didn’t buy it, I didn’t believe it. (Seth Andrews) had a similar story, although he was deeply religious, he didn’t go thru the “I’m not religious” thing. He was a Christian radio talk show host and he was very godly for a long time and then he gradually started questioning too. (Respondent #18)

A friend of my sent me the book Letters from the Earth, by Mark Twain. I had never heard religion ridiculed. It was the most frightening thing I’d ever seen, but it was also exhilarating since I have that same type of ironic mind and sense of humor. So on one hand I was feeling guilty and terrified about the effect that this was having on me and then just thinking “Man this is just great stuff!” You know? And reading it was frightening but then it became sort of liberating and then because, I don’t think a strictly intellectual approach would have had the impact on my belief system as satire did, bc I’m just wired that way. And I mean, I write satire, I enjoy it, it’s just an awesome way of communicating and seeing the world. So, I think Mark Twain was probably responsible more than anybody else for alerting me to the fact that things might not be what I’ve been taught to believe all these years. (Respondent #10)

Reconstructing Cognitive Scheme

At this time confusion was a primary issue. The ways of thinking about the world shifted as the religious concepts that once formed their worldview, became less relevant. As they let go of old beliefs and no longer saw them as valid, they had to undertake the difficult task of sorting through many of the previously held ideals and cognitions, which generated anxiety and confusion.

Reconstructing Morality

Many respondents had issues with religious morality from early on. They witnessed Christians and religious leaders behaving in ways that they found to be immoral, and many of them even thought that god himself had behaved in immoral ways. Following the derailing breakpoint, the respondents were free to embrace their own morality, morality that they believed to be correct and true, without any limitations or incongruities or inconsistencies. This appeared to resolve some prior anxieties and confusion. Many respondents expressed concerns that others would not see them as moral without god. Many reported that their new morality had to do with helping to alleviate the suffering of others and bringing peace to others when possible. It seems that these moral ideas were present early on in these respondents, but the difference is that following derailment, they began to embrace their own self-determined morality. Most notably, they discarded the concept of Original Sin, the concept of self-as-bad and the fear of hell as punishment. Finally, in a seeming attempt to bolster the good-self, some respondents idealized their abusive parents.

Reconstructing Past

Idealized other

There were some indications in the data that respondents were idealizing their abusive and/or abandoning parent(s), and most often they were idealizing an absent father. This was likely a protective measure, in that by convincing themselves that their father was ideal, they did not have to face the fact of their father's absence and therefore they did not have to acknowledge that he had abandoned them. Through idealizing the father, they avoided painful emotions and cognitions. They sidestepped feelings of sadness and anxiety by avoiding thoughts that they were rejected perhaps as a result of some defect that they had. There were some examples in the data of respondents who had idealized their abusive mothers as well. By convincing themselves that their mother was ideal, they may have avoided seeing someone who is a part of them as deeply flawed. By convincing themselves that she was ideal, rather than a cruel punisher, they avoided uncomfortable emotional states. They sometimes seemed to excuse their mother's abuse.

Flanagan (2011) argued that according to Kohut's self-psychology an idealized other served the purpose of making one feel safe and whole within the self. Typically, the characteristics that are placed on the idealized other include strength, calmness, and wonderfulness (Flanagan, 2011). It is likely that, the idealized other served an important function for these respondents who suffered traumatic rejections, mostly from their parents. Charged with the task of providing safety and security, but who planted and nurtured a self-as-bad concept in their children. The shaming that occurred for many respondents may have led them to feel less than whole, without a sense of safety and wholeness, some respondents idealized their father, mother, or a spiritual leader.

Father as ideal

My dad I could relate to a lot more. He – he was more uh – you know – cosmopolitan, had travelled around the world in the navy. He had a college degree and – was an atheist,

something I didn't mention. Which I found out later in life.... he was always open to – he took what I believe and thought seriously and uh –and that's probably one of the things I treasure most about my upbringing is – is my dad's ability to connect with me and encourage me and my family's openness to me – being able to develop my own beliefs even if they didn't always line up with someone else in my family's – my mom or (middle brother) or (older brother). (#3 Respondent)

One male respondent talked so highly of his father, yet noted that he was rarely present. Despite his father's absence, the respondent talked about his father in an overly positive way. This was striking during the interview and was the moment when it became clear that this idealization was an important finding for this study. Through idealizing an absent father, respondents seemed to avoid feeling rejected by him. In this way, they helped to keep those feelings of self-as-bad at bay.

My dad kind of helped, in that he was really sneaky. He knew my mom wouldn't pay attention to the things that I read, and he instilled a very deep value in reading ever since I was younger. All he had to do was bring a box full of books over, put them down, and he knew I would hit at least, skim over every single one of them. And I still remember some very specific books. There was a sort of Encyclopedia of Religions & Myths that he gave me... all these sort of myths and then hear is the Christian myth and that was just hard to swallow that this was the same sort of things. My dad was pretty sneaky about that. The other – the title sort of slipped my mind, but there were other books that definitely shaped me in ways that I think are very much a part of my core sort of system. I'm kind of struggling with some words here. But, he definitely did give me access to those things and he knew that I wasn't going to tell my mom and that I would have to

kind of struggle with it sort of by myself. Sort of it's a little frustrating there, but he would talk to me when he would come visit. And he came to visit regularly, bi-monthly basis and for special occasions. But he definitely was supportive and kind of pushing me in that sort of direction. (#9 Respondent)

I would say that it definitely was, I couldn't have done it without my dad. My cousin that I grew up with, he was not anywhere near my situation. He dropped out of high school. And I feel like I would have been very close to that had it not been for my dad. (#9 Respondent)

[Interviewer: Do you guys talk a lot still?] Yeah, mostly on the phone. And we are both sort of – we don't really need to socialize a whole lot, so I don't call him and talk too much, I'll send him an email, or a link and then we'll talk about that later... he is a lawyer, so he knows how to construct sentences really well, that I cannot really penetrate immediately, and kind of he lives a little bit of ambiguity in there too. (#9 Respondent)

Rejection of Belief

After going through several stages, the respondents began to reject their beliefs. The rejection of belief was consistently described as a long, gradual process and likely was taking place during the stages of avoidance, confusion, altruistic fatigue and breakpoint. In some cases, respondents were able to clearly note the moment when they consciously and sometimes audibly acknowledged to themselves that they no longer believed in god. Others initially acknowledged a soft-identity, and then later became comfortable with the concept that atheist was a more accurate description.

It has been noted that one characteristic of trauma-related syndromes includes spiritual consequences (Marvasti, 2004):

These include a loss of belief in God, justice, fairness, humanity, and the world as a benign and good place; existential crisis such as loss of meaning and connection with others or with the world and God; and a sense of a foreshortened future.

Reconstructing Purpose and Meaning of Life

Many respondents talked about finding a new purpose and meaning of life, and they needed to do so through a lens of nonbelief. Following the rejection of belief, respondents said their purpose and the meaning of life had to do with alleviating suffering of others, or avoiding contributing to the suffering of others. Also, they often reported that they valued this life more, believing it to be the only one that we have. One fundamental difference was that they reported they wished to do good works for the benefit of others, rather than to please god.

The purpose for life - - is not apparent, umm - and it's something that each of us has to address and it's important that we actually come up with good reasons for living and good reasons for loving each other - and there are really good reasons that are - ummm that are - discernable by deeper thinking, and that is - - as the Buddhists say, "everybody in the planet is suffering to a degree." And I believe that's true. We are all a bit not quite right - most of us has not had all of our needs met - and I think human beings are very needy creatures... and umm, to limit - the suffering I may cause you - and the suffering you may cause me - and trying to find the best way to umm add a little more peace to the world is the only reason really to be alive. And the here and now is the most important thing that we have that we can make the biggest difference - right just this second - if we can grasp

peace, and give that to somebody else. It's the most important thing we can do. And the rest of it is all a made-up bullshit thing that doesn't make any difference in the long run anyway - because this world shall come to pass -- and I mean really come to pass. This will become stardust again - there is nothing here umm - your fame, your fortune, and your good deeds mean nothing except to the people you do them for right now.

(Respondent #1)

Recognition of Regrets

The respondents sometimes talked about feeling regrets. They wondered how their life might have been different or better had it not been for their religious beliefs. There was a sense that respondents felt time had been lost or wasted.

One male respondent discussed feeling that he had been a “poor parent” to his children, and said that he had caused them to feel confused owing to his changing from very religious to atheist. It appeared that the respondent felt guilty for raising his children in the religious belief system which had caused him discomfort. He seemed to indicate a wish that he had not been a believer who raised his children to believe as well.

I got married as a believer, and I was in the 7th day Adventist Church which was the first church that I had actually chosen myself. The previous ones had been chosen for me. And that union produced 5 extraordinary children, all of whom are exceptionally intelligent and excel at all their endeavors. 3 of them are in college, and I'm a single dad now with my youngest daughter who is 16, living with me. Now, it's interesting, that my deconversion took place somewhere in here, and that is probably one of my biggest regrets, because, my children are confused. And I don't mean necessarily confused, but I

mean because I went from being a strong believer to making this transition when actually had I to do it all over again, I would have simply taught them how to think and evaluate the evidence and then let them do it on their own. But, despite my poor parenting, my youngest son who is 20 and is attending the University of Alabama and majoring in Aerospace Engineering, became an atheist even when he wasn't living with me. My oldest son would probably be classified as an agnostic. My 16 year old daughter, it's probably too early to tell, her 2 older daughters – I don't know, they sort of maybe believe in a god, but they are so socially liberal, that even if it does, it's probably a harmless affectation. So it doesn't – and I've apologized to them and I've apologized to them during the process, like "I wish I could give you concrete answers but I'm finding myself here struggling. I just really can't tell you anything, but go your own way and do whatever." (Respondent #10)

One male respondent noted that he felt that he had missed out on learning how to connect with women because he had been taught that it was honorable to maintain abstinence. He said that he felt he had missed out on some of life's pleasures because his religious belief prevented him from having sexual relationships with women. He appeared to feel a loss and he also seemed to have anger around this issue. It seemed that he was grieving the loss of time that he had experienced and the loss of potential intimacy that he could have had.

I think once you deconvert – one thing I think I need to add – it's significant. This had to do with the whole sexuality thing. Not only being confused about how to approach women but the fact that if you really believed this stuff, you were abstinent, so I was making this, and I wasn't abstinent the entire time, I couldn't – you know, I couldn't make it that long, but I really was serious about that. Because I thought god was looking

at my sexuality and wanted to think that I was honoring him by obeying his word. When I first had the realization that I had just followed these rules for no reason, and denied myself who knows – just being human, I was so upset, and then the very next thought is that there is no one to be upset with. It was so weird. What do you do with that? I guess we are human beings and so we all have to say “I wouldn’t change anything because it made me the person I am today and blah blah blah” and that is true but we kind of have to think that otherwise we’d be all depressed. But that’s one of the things that I – not just sex, but science and career, and so many things that if I wouldn’t have been fed this line I would have looked at reality differently and I would have made a lot of different decisions. Maybe I would have been a man-whore, I don’t know. Maybe I would have been a Forensic Psychologist. I don’t know. But the point is that I think all of what life should be about was put on pause for me, because I was supposed to preach the gospel and everything got- being a normal person just got put on hold. I went to Argentina for a semester, Costa Rica for a semester. All my friends are out having the time of their lives and I’m like reading the bible and traveling by bus to church and it’s just like, seriously? I can’t believe – I feel like I’ve wasted my 20s. And whenever I phrase it like that my friends try to calm me down but, and I do appreciate the fact that I do – I didn’t reject religion for emotional reasons. I have – I know that there is intellectual reasons that this position is unsupportable, but and maybe I wouldn’t have known it like that if I didn’t go through this, that’s a possibility. It just seems like it robbed me of a lot of life. So that was the only thing I thought. I felt like I had been deceived. Your thought is, I have to get the one who deceived me. They must be held accountable, and it’s just like – is that me? Religion is a vacuous entity I can’t get mad at religion. How weird. I don’t know what to

do about that. But just to maybe inoculate people from religion from now on.

(Respondent #19)

[Interviewer: Can you describe what it was like becoming an atheist?] It was a “Wow!” but it was a quiet wow. It was kind of a reasoning kind of thing. And then it was every emotion imaginable. Angry at times, because you think, and I still deal with that quite a bit, because you think you feel like you’ve had a life wasted. I am 56 years old. So you think, “what would my life have been like otherwise, what could I have experienced otherwise? What decisions would I have made otherwise?” I don’t know that it would have been a lot that different, because I grew up in a very rural area. So even had I not been – but then if people around me had been a little more open minded, that might have made a difference. In a way it was almost at times and at times it still is, almost like a burden has been lifted. Like it’s like (sigh) okay. I know where I am now, I know what this is, I know how I got here and why I feel this way. A little freeing, in a sense. And at times, you feel like you need to make the most of it now, and you can make the most of it now. A lot of resentment, because you feel like you’ve been brainwashed. But the people who brainwashed you had been brainwashed. It wasn’t like they were doing something intentional. There is no place to put the resentment. You know that somebody out there knows, but it’s so far removed from anybody that ever touched my life. I think my mom would have been, and maybe my dad too, because neither one of them were overly participating in church. They weren’t closed to it, but they weren’t overly zealous in participating. Had I not been surrounded – you know, that was the social network where I lived. Had I not gone in and participated the way I did, I think they would have been fine just being Christian in name only. Certain things that you didn’t do. And my mother

probably felt like a lot of people did, that's where morals come from is from religion. So you are that, just because those are you're moral ties. (Respondent #7)

Acceptance of Self

After a lifetime of damaging rejections from others and rejection of self via marginalization or self-sacrificing, the respondents finally began the journey toward self-acceptance. They worked on self-acceptance by continuing to educate themselves so that they more clearly could understand their new beliefs, thoughts, and morality. After years of isolation, they also sought social connections. Many commented that they felt liberated. Partly, the liberation they felt was reportedly because they were finally able to freely seek knowledge from all sources.

Knowledge Seeking Continues – Building Confidence

Respondents seemed to need to increase their confidence in their new beliefs, which they did by seeking knowledge. While respondents had already initially sought knowledge, now they sought it for the purpose of developing their new identity. Many read books, watched debates on YouTube, talked with other nonbelievers at *Meetup* and/or went back to college.

Sometimes people are going to come to you and say “why do you think we are here,” once people find out you are atheist. “How do you explain the human eye?” “What do you think caused the Grand Canyon” or something. All I can say is to just listen to as many debates as possible and (read? Inaudible) as much as possible. And I guess it's good to find a good background before you go out and try to (be prepared because people will want to debate you) Or just be comfortable with – like when I first came out, I didn't have any of these answers. I didn't know how I was here or why I was here, (inaudible) I

would just say, come out when you are ready. [Interviewer: How do you know when you are ready?] I would say that when the point of holding it in becomes unbearable, but also when the fear is not unbearable. (Respondent #25)

She's my mom and I love her, but. She will probably just stay the way she is for a long time. She's interested and open to listening to science stuff – climate change, creation, evolution type stuff. But she knows and she has told me explicitly that she can't contend with me in a debate about theology, so she is just gonna have her faith and let me believe my things. (Respondent #19)

I was reading more literature about those viewpoints. [Interviewer: Which viewpoints?] About atheists viewpoints. Richard Dawkins that was a go-to big name. I know who this is, he is a scientist, he speaks my language. I can read him and understand what he is saying. (Respondent #12)

I would also say read some Chris Hitchens books, watch the Atheist Experience Online, I don't know if you've heard of that but it's great. Matt Dillan is wonderful! Wonderful wonderful! But that's how I spend some of my time, you know I drive a lot so I will just load up- you know episodes of that on my phone or I'll get Chris Hitchens debates and I'll just listen to that when I'm driving... I found it's important to be prepared for, especially in the South, to have a belief like this, you have to be able to defend it. That's done the most for me, is initially I have seen every single second of every debate Hitchens has ever done. You know. [Interviewer: And why do you think it's necessary for newbie atheists to be able to defend themselves?] To be, because we are such a small minority, to be taken seriously. You know? And I have found that that's not a major

problem because most atheists can quote the bible much much better than their Christian counterparts. That's because we have read, we have seriously looked at the question and you know, and that's why. (Respondent #4)

Seeking Social Connection / Meetup

Again, the fact that respondents started to seek social connections following their deconversion was noteworthy because, prior to the rejection of belief, they had been intentionally isolating themselves. To be sure, not all respondents were seeking social connection at the time of the interview; some remained isolated. In fact, while some respondents joined *Meetup*, they had not yet attended a face-to-face *Meetup* at the time of the interview. However, more often it was the case that the respondents did reach out, rather than isolate. The reasons that they sought support often had to do with a lack of likeminded or supportive people in their life. For example, one respondent noted that they needed support because their family would not have accepted their atheism and would not have been supportive.

Find a good support group. A support group of people, whether it be through *Meetup* or through the online community or just somebody that you might work with or somebody around you that you can latch onto and talk to. That would be my advice, you need support. [Interviewer: Why do you need support?] Well, in my case, because I had nobody else. I come from a religious family who are not going to accept the fact that I'm atheist because, I mean, I'm telling you, growing up, the word atheist was a horrible word. That's worse than being any other religion. To be a nonbeliever, to believe in nothing, is unthinkable because they think that we can't come from nothing, that some of this has to be divinely created. So, I mean, you have to find support, especially in a place

like this, because if you don't you are completely alone, you've got to find somebody.

(Respondent #5)

Joining *Meetup* also seemed to serve the purpose of helping respondents feel less like an outsider, in that it provided a group of people who were like them and who also supported and accepted them. Participating in *Meetup* seemed to help heal respondents past rejections in this way.

So there is that battle when we have discussions. They will bash Christianity, but then they still profess Christianity, or talk about Jesus. I'm like, "You just trashed the church, how are you still saying you are Christian, and then you believe in UFOs." We've had some intense debates about religion versus non-religion. So that outlet, that social support wasn't necessarily there. That was one thing about the *Meetup* was, joining the different atheist groups was that there was a social connection. That – there were people in the area that were actually thinking and that believed similar beliefs even if we had some diversion beliefs, but we were kind of similarly yoked so to speak. Now my family does not know that I'm an atheist. I think it would just kill my mother. (Respondent #22)

There was a sense that respondents saw *Meetup* as a source of support and as a source of information and references for further information about atheism. This appeared to be most important for those newly deconverted respondents.

I get to --let loose-- all the feelings that I have or have had umm regarding my history with religion... my past with it. (Pauses) (Is there any particular conversation that occurred at the *Meetup* that was especially relevant or meaningful to your experience?) Ummm... in the beginning of joining I was very quiet - and just listening - and I took in a

lot. Umm. A lot of what I took out of the *Meetup* in the beginning were umm getting references to authors and books and umm more information -- resources. And that helped me a lot. Umm. I spent a lot of time reading a lot of books by umm Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, uh - uh - some others that are less known - like John Loftus I happen to like a lot because he had been a pastor ummm - he had a background in Christianity and he left it. Umm. His story is a lot like mine in that - I always said that my problem was I cared too much...(laughs)... when I was a Christian. I needed to know more. I was like, 'why do we believe this,' 'what's the historical evidence?' - You know - 'what exactly do we believe?' - Umm 'why don't we read the entire bible and actually know what it says?' I did all those things and that was a reason why I ended up leaving Christianity - because it all fell apart the more I looked into it and John Loftus' book is about that - it's uh called, 'why I became an atheist'... uhmmm. But all those authors have helped me a whole lot. Christopher Hitchens, umm a lot of the online debates, I - I got all these references out of the *Meetup* group - you know, initially. I got a window into the freethinker world. (Laughs). (Respondent #2)

Liberation

The respondents' sense of liberation stemmed from no longer carrying shame around their "sinful" or "demonic" self. They no longer believed the scriptures and religious teachings from which those labels originated. They were able to research, gain knowledge, and determine for themselves what they held to be true and what they valued, and what their morality would be. Yet, while liberation was felt, it should be noted that, for all respondents, there were some costs associated with their rejection of belief.

And one day I was getting ready for work and I looked in the mirror and I was reflecting on all of that information and I was like I am an atheist. And it was like the sky didn't fall, it was a liberating feeling that I had just taken off of myself. It was just an awe inspiring moment. I never thought that I would actually ever get to that point in a million years, I never thought that because I was raised in a Christian household, Southern Baptist. So there was that, and of course being African American, you have to be religious for cultural reasons. So I never would have thought. I kind of would have saw myself as more of a "spiritual" person – whatever that means (laugh). I never would have thought that I would come out and say you know what I am an atheist. And once I said it verbally out loud, all the wrestling stopped in my mind. (Respondent #22)

So I look at the afterlife that – I give it a lot – I give it thought, but I kind of put it somewhat in the back of my mind because the negative side about – the disappointment about becoming either atheist or agnostic is that you realize that is a great possibility that this is all there is. And in some ways that does suck. I have to say it as it is. I'm trying to be as brutally honest – it's like yeah it sucks. You do want to reunite – it's human nature – you do want to reunite with those that have gone before you and to realize that that is likely not the case at least that we can prove so far – as you see I'm trying to wiggle out of that one. I won't wiggle, I'll just speak honestly. As far as we know there is nothing else beyond this. Yeah, it does kind of suck, it's like Aw Man It's a Disappointment. But, it's also liberating at the same time, to where, it's a motivator to try to live each moment as if it is your last and take advantage of the opportunities of the now. And don't necessarily put off tomorrow what you can do today. (Respondent #22)

In a way it was almost at times and at times it still is, almost like a burden has been lifted. Like it's like (sigh) okay. I know where I am now, I know what this is, I know how I got here and why I feel this way. A little freeing, in a sense. And at times, you feel like you need to make the most of it now, and you can make the most of it now. (Respondent #7)

(My nonreligious therapist) has helped me come to my own understanding and be comfortable in that. And I don't feel – I – control my mind, I thought that that was an outside thing, that my mind just happens to me, instead of me creating my own thoughts and using my brain, instead of my brain using me. And it's been liberating. (Respondent #14)

Costs

Respondents experienced costs following the rejection of beliefs. Many respondents experienced relationship losses and/or relationship difficulties. Some respondents became addicted, especially to alcohol. These costs sometimes originated from the judgments that others made about these nonbelieving individuals. Other times the costs derived from the respondents feeling they could not be their true selves with those that they loved. Unfortunately, for these respondents, nonbelieving led to further discomfort. Perhaps this explains why some respondents carried on with the avoidance techniques of either isolating themselves (not attending the meetups) or using substances (addiction).

Relationship costs

Whether or not the respondent disclosed their atheism to their family and friends, there typically was trouble in these relationships as a result of the respondents' rejection of belief. If they disclosed their atheism, family and friends initially responded negatively except in the rare cases where another family member or friend also was an atheist. The resulting tensions typically

included either a complete break in the relationship or feelings of awkwardness or discomfort when around loved ones. If they did not disclose their atheism, if they remained closeted about their nonbelief, the respondents often felt sad and anxious around their loved ones. They felt sad because they believed that their family really didn't know them. They felt anxious because they feared that their loved ones would find out about their atheism and then reject them. It also should be noted that there were relationship costs throughout the process of deconversion, as the respondents isolated themselves and disconnected from loved ones and friends. Respondents attributed this isolation behavior to a desire to avoid discussing their doubts with religious friends and family. Respondents sometimes confided in atheist friends or family members, although this was rare, as respondents frequently noted that they did not know any atheists. Perhaps they avoided talking with religious friends and family because respondents rightly predicted that this would result in costs.

That's something that I'm sure most of the people will figure out for themselves, but at the same time though, (inaudible) keep that in mind that it can cost you relationships but it's – even with that knowledge, you should stick to your beliefs. You shouldn't – you shouldn't practice something just for – or embrace any ideology just for the sake of relationships. You shouldn't do it. (Respondent #15)

Yeah, when I was starting to tell everybody that I no longer believed this stuff and that I was withdrawing from the university and trying to go somewhere else, a lot of people were weirded out by it. That girl that I told you that was pretty mean? She cussed me out on Facebook. And told me, because I was a leader in the church, she told me “You're the last person that is supposed to do this. How the hell could you do this shit?” She was pissed. (Respondent #19)

The military is pretty Christian. We are pretty conservative. A few people snipe every once and a while. But I snipe back. So, that's fine. I don't mind. I like a little give and take there. [Interviewer: Do you have an example?] I have just had people say that I was – never trust somebody who was godless or something like that. Or telling me that oh – “don't worry there are no atheists in foxholes, when the time comes you will believe.” Things like that. I don't know. There has actually been numerous – numerous incidents in the air force academy for hazing due to people not praying and such. (Respondent #26)

[Interviewer: Have any issues emerged in your relationships as a result of being openly atheist?] Yes. My divorce. Atheism is maybe a symptom that says you are allowed to think. You are allowed to go out of the bounds. You are not going to subscribe to what was told to you. And if you go and start thinking and start debating with your wife – that (?) she will say “ah, screw you, I came here to be well dressed and bedazzled in gold and sitting in a sari and serving or hosting nice parties at home. What the hell are you talking about I need to think for myself?” So, yeah I have lost a lot to it. And the same thing with my parents. I can't hold a conversation because the only simple answer is, “Well you didn't follow the ritualistic way. What do you expect?” (Respondent #28)

Addiction

Some respondents appeared to have addictions, as two of them were drinking during their interviews and another was visibly drunk during the interview. One (chiropractor) admitted that she recently had just begun the process of trying to stop drinking because she thought it was causing trouble in her relationship. It may be that the continuance of addiction for some respondents is related to the ongoing rejection that they feel from their loved ones. In these three cases, the family members had expressed their extreme upset over the respondents' atheism.

So, one of the things that I mean – that has come up recently in my past with (current BF) is because we were living together, I didn't really have time alone. It was like, we work right next to each other, we go home and we are with each other and I didn't have like that alone time? I would be between my friends and I or myself, I would end up smoking pot just to kind of mellow my brain out, to escape. And he used to complain about it, saying that I wasn't present. And I didn't really see at the time, because I felt like I was present, but now I see that that is true. And I have since stopped. And then just recently with us getting back together, I noticed – like we got in an argument the other day and it was very similar to the arguments that we used to get into, I've gone to therapy and really done a lot of reflecting on what caused us to break up. Instead of blaming him, I have learned to see where it was me – where I was responsible. So I saw that – even what he did did bother me and would still bother me, the fact that I had been drinking just kind of added fuel to the fire, instead of me being able to just kind of logically just cool down, it just didn't – and it escalated. So I have since told him that I am just going to stop drinking. [Interviewer: Is that difficult?] I mean, it only just happened Friday, and no it hasn't been difficult. And like I told him the other day, there was a family gathering at his mom's and his brother in law asked me if I wanted a beer, which first of all, I didn't drink beer so it wasn't whatever. It was kind of – I told (current boyfriend) “Because of the fact that you're not asking me to stop, it makes it really easy to stop, because it is not like I'm going to try to sneak a drink.” Like oh (current boyfriend) won't know so I will just go and do it anyway. The ultimate goal is to really see if the drinking is really what contributes to the arguments. So if I am going to drink, even if he doesn't know about it, it defeats the purpose of trying to figure out how we can make us work together. My

ultimate goal is to be able to be with him. And so – (does he know that?) Yeah. So what I need to do to make that happen, I'm willing to do. (Respondent #31)

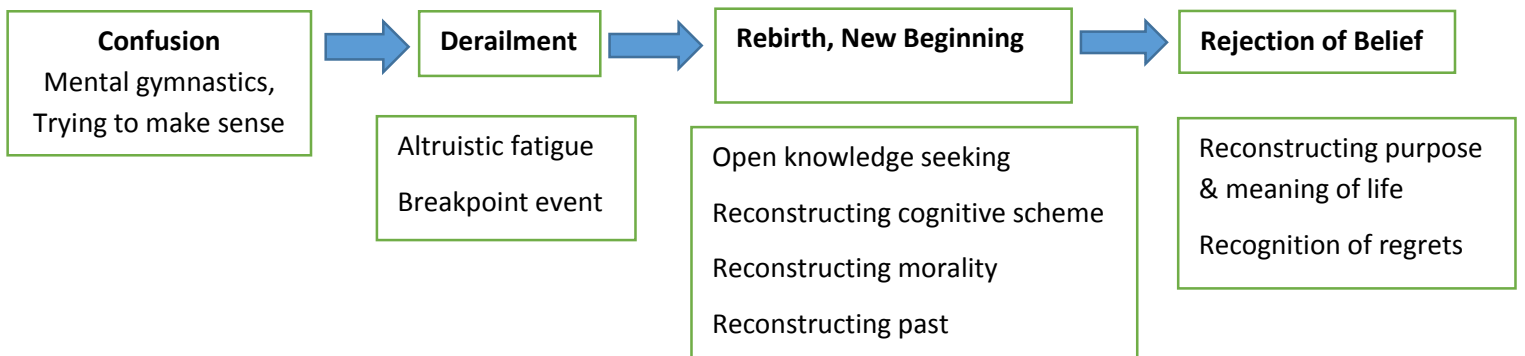
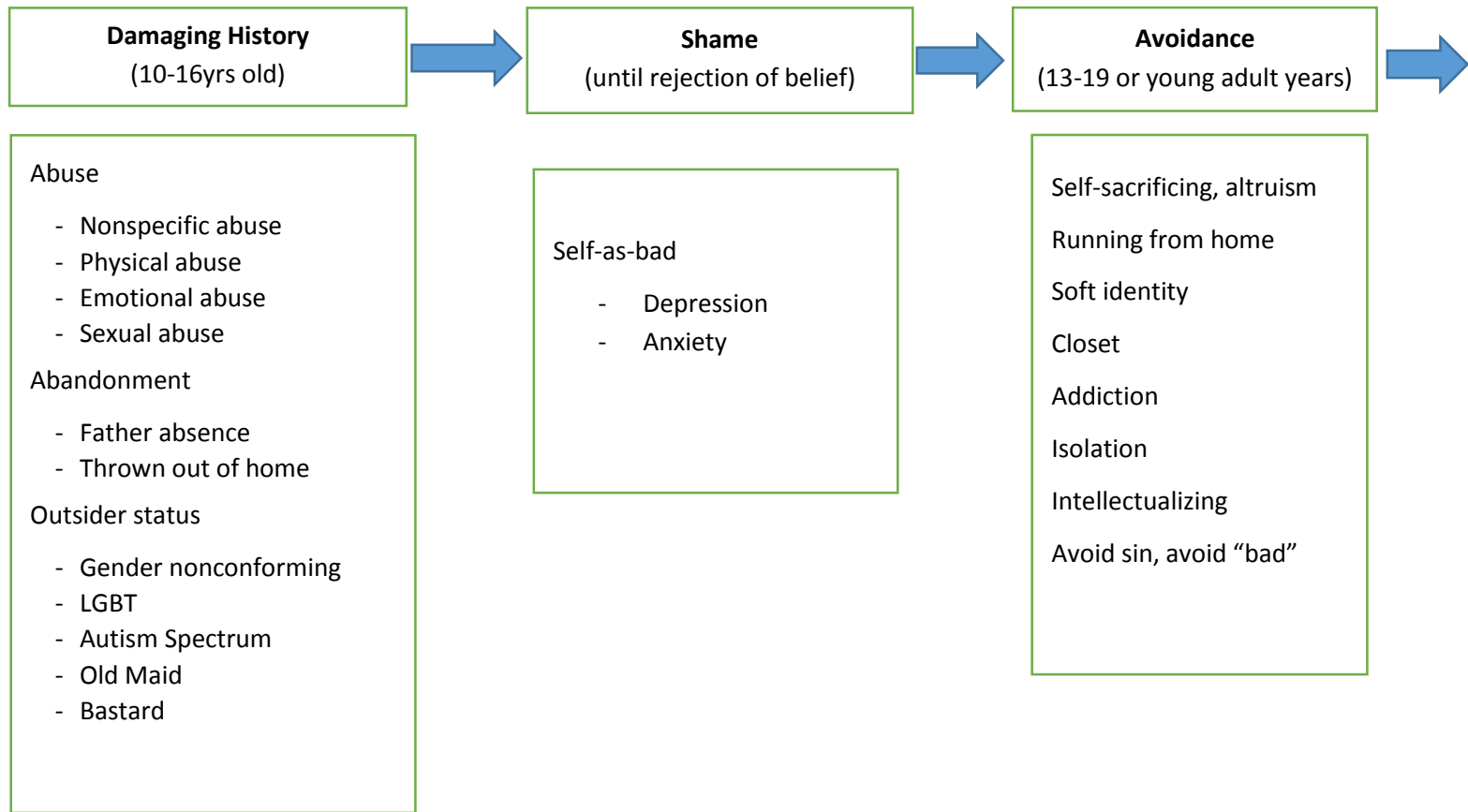
[Observation note: Respondent was drinking heavily throughout interview and reported he planned to go to the bar following the interview] “After talking to you, I will go down to the bar and have some food and probably have a conversation with somebody. I had one with somebody sitting next to me last night.” (Respondent #28)

The data revealed that, following a damaging history and ineffective avoidance techniques, respondents experienced altruistic fatigue and a breakpoint event. The breakpoint event caused an existential crisis. It was followed by a period of time in which respondents began seeking knowledge previously avoided owing to its perceived “evil” status, such as science writings about evolution and atheistic writings. During this time they addressed the confusion that had troubled them by reconstructing cognitive schema, morality and their past. Through addressing their confusion in this way, they rejected the self-as-bad concept and the concept of Original Sin. This allowed them to be free of the anxiety attributed to these concepts. Respondents noted that being able to reject these concepts also enabled them to free themselves from the fear of eternal punishment in hell. On the way to acceptance of self, they reconstructed their purpose and meaning of life and they recognized and acknowledged regrets.

Having achieved the acceptance of self, a difficult feat, they continued to seek knowledge in an effort to build their confidence. Part of confidence building included reaching out to likeminded others, via *Meetup*. Despite the respondents achieving acceptance of self and increasing confidence, they faced costs following their rejection of belief. Many respondents experienced relationship damage or loss, and some experienced addiction. These findings

derived from inductive research were surprising and intriguing. In the concluding chapter we will revisit the initial research questions that led to these findings and review the deconversion process or empirically grounded conceptual model that emerged from this data (see Exhibit 2). Finally, we will consider policy issues inspired by these findings.

Exhibit 2: Deconversion Process



Chapter 6

Conclusion: Review of Deconversion as a Path to Self-Acceptance and Policy Implications

In this chapter, we will examine the deconversion process as a path to self-acceptance and reflect on important policy considerations. Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge that the term deconversion is a misnomer. Deconversion implies that there is a conversion that precedes the deconversion. In the majority of cases, respondents did not convert; rather, they were indoctrinated into Christianity by their parents from a very early age. It can be said that respondents successfully rejected a belief system that had oppressed them and made them feel bad about themselves. They recovered themselves in a sense. Rather than seeing their “differentness” as defective or sinful, they journeyed to a place where they accepted themselves. They advocated for the normalcy of their differentness. The rejection of belief really was a process through which they rescued the self. In fact, the respondents often initially tried harder to embrace religion, studying and immersing themselves deeper prior to finally rejecting their beliefs. Marginalized and abandoned, these respondents were told that they were evil and sinful. It is not surprising that they suffered with a terrible self-image. Despite all of this, they lifted themselves up out of the abyss, and fought their way back to themselves. Now, let us look again, at how these respondents arrived at the place where they identify as atheist, accept themselves as good, experience liberation, and deal with some costs.

Research Questions Revisited

Under what conditions does deconversion occur?

It appears that preconditions include a damaging history with at least one of the following elements: abuse, abandonment, or outsider status. This damaging history caused the respondents to feel rejected, to experience shame, and to have a self-as-bad concept. Additional conditions

appeared to include a period of time where avoidance techniques were employed, a period of time where confusion was present, and the presence of altruistic fatigue, and a final breakpoint event.

Do particular emotions, cognitions and behaviors occur before, during, or after deconversion?

Before deconversion

Emotions felt before deconversion included fear, frustration, anger, shame and guilt.

Cognitions experienced before deconversion included a self-as-bad concept and a questioning of traditional religious beliefs. Behaviors exhibited before deconversion included avoidance techniques such as running from home, self-sacrificing, adopting a soft-identity, hiding a true identity (closeted), becoming addicted, isolating themselves, intellectualizing, and avoiding sin.

During deconversion

Emotions felt during deconversion included loneliness, depression, anxiety, fear, frustration, anger, shame and guilt. Cognitions experienced during deconversion included continued self-as-bad concept, increased questioning, and confusion. Behaviors exhibited during deconversion included open knowledge seeking, where respondents allowed themselves to consult any source of knowledge, even those which had been deemed evil including books about evolution or books by well-known atheists. Other behaviors included the beginning of the reconstruction of cognitive schemes, morality, and the past. Respondents began changing the way they thought about the world, changed the way they thought about morality and reframed their past in order to make it more tolerable. Reframing the past sometimes involved idealizing abusive parent(s).

After deconversion

Emotions felt after deconversion included happiness, liberation, and some residual fear. Respondents also felt sad and awkward when around religious friends or family members,

because when they knew about respondents' atheism, they were often unaccepting, and when they did not know, respondents felt they could not be themselves and felt dishonest. Other emotions sometimes included loneliness, in the cases where respondents only told a couple or a few people about their true identity. Sometimes respondents felt isolated when they experienced rejection from friends or family as a result of disclosing their atheist identity. Some respondents felt regret about what might have been, or how their lives might have been different or even better if it were not for their religious beliefs. They felt a sense of loss stemming from this regret.

Cognitions experienced after deconversion included contemplation and rumination about social justice issues, or an increased concern for the suffering of others. Respondents also spent time thinking about the purpose and meaning of life, and morality. They restructured these ideas such that they were not dependent on formerly held religious beliefs.

Behaviors exhibited after deconversion included continued knowledge seeking, seeking social connection such as joining *Meetup*, and some began or continued addiction(s). Knowledge seeking at this stage was for the purpose of building confidence overall and especially in their new nonbelief. Seeking social connection also reportedly served this function. For those who had addiction behaviors, it seemed that this was a reaction to the rejection(s) that they suffered when they disclosed their atheist identity. In particular, it was noted that those individuals who were visibly drunk during the interview reported that they had an especially negative reaction from family members.

What contributes to the decision to hide Atheist identity?

Respondents reported that concerns for costs kept them from disclosing their atheist identity. Costs of concern involved rejection from friends and family, difficulties in getting or maintaining a job, concern that their disclosure would cause a loved one to lose their own belief,

and concern that a loved one would suffer such emotional distress that it would result in a stroke or death. Respondents did not disclose while living at home and still dependent on parents. For those respondents with children, they worried that disclosing their atheist identity might bring repercussions to their children such as becoming targets of discrimination.

What contributes to the decision to reveal Atheist identity?

When respondents held a supervisory position at work, or a position of leadership, and/or felt they had job security, they seemed more willing to disclose their atheist identity. When respondents were self-employed, they were more willing to disclose. When respondents had a more distant relationship with family member(s), they were willing to reveal their atheist identity.

What consequences follow when someone lives openly as an Atheist in America?

When respondents live openly as atheist in America, they will likely face some rejection. In most cases, this openness appears to be better for the respondents. Also, when others live openly as atheist in America, it allows those closeted atheists the increased chance of knowing someone else who is a nonbeliever, which was reportedly a great comfort to closeted respondents. In one case, it appears that a respondent lost his job as a high school Spanish teacher after he disclosed his atheist identity.

Are there gender differences?

Male respondents repeatedly claim that their journey to atheism was based on intellectual rather than emotional grounds. However, in every case, both male and female, there were very clear emotional elements involved in the deconversion. Males often disclosed that they had been physically or otherwise abused. Females often hinted that they had been abused, rather than stating clearly that abuse had happened.

Are there differences in any of the above between individuals who grew up in the Northeastern as compared to the Southern regions of the United States?

Some respondents had lived in both the Northeast and the South and reported that it was much more difficult to be an atheist in the South than in the Northeast. Respondents who lived in the South often highlighted this fact, and further noted that they lived in rural areas. Respondents in the Northeast were more likely to disclose their atheist identity at work. Respondents from both regions seemed equally likely to hide their atheist identity from friends and family. Whether they disclosed to family and friends was based mostly on how important the relationship was to them, or how close they were.

Are there identifiable stages in the deconversion process?

This particular research question may well be the most intriguing. It was found that these respondents underwent a profound transformation in which the outcome was self-acceptance. As examined in Chapter 4 and 5, this process is the central finding of the study.

Journey to Self-Acceptance

Costs

While the respondents expressed sadness that their transformation cost them some relationships, and that some respondents were suffering from addictions, by and large respondents reported that they felt liberated and happy.

Acceptance of Self

It is likely that the liberated feeling that respondents reported was owing at least in part to their finally accepting themselves. This seemed to be accomplished both through building confidence by continued knowledge seeking, and through seeking social connections with others as many did by joining a *Meetup*. It appears quite important to the respondents that they establish connections and relationships with other nonbelievers. This served to bolster their confidence, assure them that they are not alone, and foster acceptance by themselves and others.

Rejection of Belief

The acceptance of self was feasible because of the respondents' willingness to reject their former religious beliefs. In many cases, their former beliefs carried shaming and self-as-bad messages that were bolstered by biblical scripture. This clearly was harmful to these respondents. Since rejecting beliefs was not an easy feat, respondents found it necessary to reconstruct their purpose and meaning of life. Some respondents expressed regrets and wondered how their life might have been different and better were it not for their former beliefs and the energies and focus they spent on those beliefs.

Rebirth, New Beginning

Rejecting former religious beliefs was preceded by a willingness to seek knowledge from sources otherwise avoided because of their "evil" status. In a sense, the respondents became open to all available knowledge and eagerly sought answers to questions that they reported had never been satisfactorily answered through their religion or beliefs. Once they were exposed to new knowledge, they began to reconstruct their cognitive scheme, their morality, and their past, as when some respondents idealized their absent father or abusive mother/father for example.

Breakpoint Event

The breakpoint event for respondents followed a combination of primary personal suffering (respondent experienced suffering) and secondary witnessing suffering, particularly of innocent others. This suffering stemmed both from primary traumas (those traumas experienced by the respondent) and secondary traumas (those traumas experienced by others and witnessed by the respondent). This compounding of traumas, overwhelmed the respondents and led to a final traumatic breakpoint.

Altruistic fatigue

Altruistic fatigue was experienced by respondents after helping others, to the point that it became unbearable. This probably was related to their weakened coping ability stemming from their own suffering. With this altruistic fatigue in place, respondents then experienced one final breakpoint event that led to complete derailment. The derailment constituted a major existential crisis event for these respondents.

Derailment

The metaphorical derailment follows a period of altruistic fatigue and occurs at the moment of the breakpoint event. The derailment may be seen as an existential crisis, in that the very meaning of life is questioned. This is the moment when confusions stemming from cognitive and moral dissonance which already had been present but tolerable, becomes intolerable. The result is that former religious based beliefs and associated cognitive and moral schema shatter in the face of this final breakpoint and derailment. The experience is a traumatic one.

Confused

Prior to arriving at the time where the respondent experiences altruistic fatigue and a breakpoint and resulting derailment, the respondent had spent some time feeling confused and trying to make sense of their religious beliefs in a world in which they experienced and witnessed frequent suffering. For these respondents, their religious beliefs were now seen as a source of confusion and served to undermine the very foundations of their belief systems, and paved the way for derailment and loss of belief.

Avoidance

Before really acknowledging that they felt confused about their religious beliefs and had unanswered questions around their beliefs, the respondents used avoidance as a means to cope with underlying uncertainties and discomforts related to their damaging histories. The religious

beliefs that they were taught from early childhood, such as Original Sin, led the respondents to view themselves as bad. This was further confirmed when they were punished in a variety of ways by their parents. In order to avoid the self-as-bad concept, respondents avoided sin, adopted a soft identity, isolated themselves, focused on intellectual rather than emotional pursuits, and became self-sacrificing and altruistic. For a time, these avoidance techniques served the purpose of maintaining the respondents' sense of meaning in the world while at the same time protecting them from the negative emotions that came with a self-as-bad concept.

Self as Bad, Sinner

The religious teachings often included shaming and guilt around sins such as homosexuality. When not met, traditional gender expectations carried with them a sinful stigma. Seeing oneself as bad led to depression and anxiety. It is no wonder then that the respondents attempted avoidance as a means of coping with these powerful negative emotions.

Damaging History

Having had a damaging history, including forms of rejection such as abuse, abandonment, and outsider status, respondents started out with a shaky foundation. Those who suffer such childhood traumas have low self-esteem and struggle with adequate coping abilities. They were destined to see themselves as bad. While at the end of their deconversion stories these respondents found peace and liberation, they still deal with rejection for their atheist identity. Now, however, they no longer see themselves as bad and have achieved self-acceptance.

Policy Issues

Counseling and Supports, Atheists

Although Whitley (2010) found that atheists were missing from the mental health literature, atheists experience psychological distress attributed to stigmatization (Garneau, 2012; Weber et al., 2012). The current study shows, atheists endure a damaging history, altruistic

fatigue, and their loss of belief. Each of which may involve mental health issues. Without adequate mental health research for atheists, it may be even harder for these individuals to get counseling and supports that may benefit them. And as has been noted previously, psychological distress of atheists impacts not only the individual but also their families, friends and communities. Untreated or inadequately treated mental illness has implications for everyone, not just the individual.

Finally, Gervais et al. (2011) reported that atheists are seen as a stigmatized group of ambiguous morality (Edgell et al., 2006), inclined to commit crimes (Michell, 2009), and never approached from an empowerment or strengths perspective. Other marginalized groups who have been assumed to lack morality and commit crimes, such as African Americans and Hispanics, have faced inequality in the justice system (Warren, Chiricos, & Bales, 2012) and are more frequently the victim of unwarranted police searches (Evans, Maragh, & Porter, 2014). When groups are stigmatized, innocent people face discrimination. This discrimination should be addressed through policy, education, and advocacy. These social change efforts should proceed at both the domestic and an international level.

There are disturbing similarities between the past and present in American history. We note that, historically, lynching in the South targeted African Americans, as well as people who were viewed as being uneducated or who lacked religion. As we look to the present, we see that some groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have beheaded Americans. While we may be told this is an act of terror, it is also an act targeted at nonbelievers.

This study is important because it has given voice to a stigmatized and oppressed population and in doing so has advanced a social justice agenda. It furthermore has contributed

to the better understanding of the atheist “deconversion experience.” Social workers should advocate on behalf of atheists to address the discrimination they face and be prepared to assist them with identity challenges. There are a number of places where atheists reported that they have faced discrimination: home (Simonson, 2011), work (Hammer et al., 2012; Simonson, 2011), and school (Hammer et al., 2012). Social work organizations, human rights organizations and social workers should consider these areas when implementing positive social change strategies on their behalf.

Discrimination at Home, Work, School

Discrimination may occur in a variety of settings. Some of the settings that respondents discussed as areas of concern included at home, at work, and at school. Of course, these different areas create a variety of policy implications. For discrimination faced at home, social workers must be aware of the discrimination that atheists face, and they should be aware of the signs that deconversion or loss of belief may occur. For discrimination at work, current policies should be modified to clearly include atheists as a protected group. For example, while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of “religion,” it should actually state “religion *or belief*.” This distinction will be discussed in detail below.

Respondents did not disclose while living at home and dependent on parents. While it would be difficult to promote policies that would impact their home environments outside of those already in place for child abuse and such, it may be beneficial to promote programs of inclusion in public schools. For example, many public schools have incorporated the Safe Space program for LGBT youths. Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is the leading national education organization “focused on ensuring safe schools for all students... GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of

sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression” (“Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network,” 2012). The GLSEN offers Safe Space Kits for schools that include information and guides to creating a Safe Space within their school. The guide contains four main sections: Know the Issues, Support, Educate and Advocate. *Know the Issues* offers information about LGBT experiences and some of the bias they face. *Support* talks about explicit ways you can offer support to LGBT students. *Educate* talks about ways to show students and school staff how to fight anti-LGBT bias and behavior. *Advocate* details ways to create change within the school. At the present time, there is no specific program available for atheists or nonbelievers or even questioning youths who are sorting out what they believe. Many respondents noted they lost their belief as adolescents or while in college. This seems to indicate a need for there to be supportive programs to assist teens and young adults in both public high schools and in colleges. This may prove to be challenging given that some states have laws that exclude atheists. For example, there are seven states that currently have laws in place to prevent atheists from holding public office.

Candidate Ineligibility in Seven States

While the United States Constitution, Article VI, says “no religious test shall ever be required as qualification to any office or public trust under the United States” (U.S. Const. art. VI), seven states maintain laws which prohibit candidate eligibility for nonbelievers (Goodstein, 2014). The states that currently ban atheists from holding public office include Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. Pennsylvania may as well be included, because while the state says that no one can be banned from public office on the basis of religion, they qualify this by saying that they must believe in heaven and hell.

Atheist as Minority

Atheists are a minority group. The previously noted sociological understanding of the term minority, appears to describe atheists quite well, though with one important distinction. Minorities are often thought to be differentiated on the basis of characteristics including race, nationality, or religion; however, atheists are differentiated on the basis of *belief*, not religion. Atheism is not a religion, rather it is a lack of belief in a deity. Atheists do not fit under definitions which are meant to help discriminated groups: they do not fit the current definition of *minority group*; they are not a protected class; and both of these exclusions stem from the general misunderstanding that sees atheism as a religion. Therefore, in the language of current definitions of *minority group* and protected class legislations, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when “religion” is referred to as a protected freedom, it does not apply to atheists. There have been Supreme Court decisions, where it was said that atheists are included in that protection; however, atheism is referred to as a religion and this is inaccurate. Atheists are not clearly protected by current laws, and the Supreme Court decisions which have alleged that atheists are included and that atheism is a religion are not the best method to address this problem. Instead we should offer legislation that protects all people equally and in an inclusive way. This has been done in the United Kingdom with the Equality Act of 2010, described below.

Atheism as Belief, Not Religion

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made discrimination, on the basis of a number of characteristics, illegal. The protected class characteristics include race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, pregnancy, citizenship, familial status, disability, veteran status and genetic information. However, while it does note religion as a protected characteristic, it does not include atheists who are without religion. Therefore, this distinction appears to exclude atheists. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s government website describes a

number of protected classes including “religion.” However, “religion” as a protected class does not expressly include those who have *no religion* and those who have no *belief* in god.

("Religious Discrimination," n.d.)

United Kingdom Equality Act of 2010

The United Kingdom acknowledged the importance of this distinction (religion *and belief*, rather than simply religion) when they passed the Equality Act of 2010. This Act notes that protected characteristics include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. This Act notes “religion or belief” as a protected characteristic and further describes this characteristic: “Religion means any religion and a reference to religion includes a reference to a lack of religion” (*Equality Act of 2010*). Here we see that a country other than the United States has passed equality legislation that is inclusive of atheists. So, it can be done.

Final Thoughts

This research began with the intention of better understanding two experiences which American atheists face: discrimination and the deconversion experience. Surprisingly, what was found was that these individuals all experienced a damaging history, altruistic fatigue, and a derailing breakpoint event. While discrimination is present for these individuals, there were two main illustrations that showed its presence: the closet and relationship costs. The majority of respondents remained at least partially closeted. Those respondents who did disclose their atheist identity lost relationships and that deprived them of social and emotional nurturance and support.

The deconversion experience appeared to include elements not previously identified in the literature. While this study did find that some of the characteristics Streib et al. (2009) reported were indeed a part of the deconversion experience, other elements have gone

unmentioned by Streib or others, namely, the experiences of avoidance, altruism, altruistic fatigue and a breakpoint event. This is significant and seems to indicate a need for further research. Future research should focus on individuals who demonstrate avoidance behaviors, are altruistic and self-sacrifice, experience altruistic fatigue, and a traumatic event. Research should consider how these individuals deal with a religious crisis. Special attention should be paid to programs and policies that affect individuals in these particular situations, as it may be that they are in the process of a deconversion experience. Therefore, adequate training for therapeutic professionals and leadership or supervisory professionals in various helping fields would benefit from knowing how to support individuals undergoing a deconversion. In order to bolster this training and support, it will be necessary that influential organizations such as NASW and CSWE become advocates for religious minorities such as atheists. Education will be key in ensuring that the discrimination that these individuals face is addressed and combatted effectively. Since the deconversion process is an isolating process, it would be beneficial for every municipality to employ supportive programs, similar to *Meetup*, so that these individuals will have someplace to go for support and therapeutic interventions.

In what appears to be a radically protective maneuver which carries dramatic costs, respondents underwent a transformative deconstruction and reconstruction process during which they overcame not only a damaging history, but also their self-as-bad concept. By rejecting the very foundations of their religious roots, they were able to reclaim their identity of good self. Only through extreme courage and effort were they able to accomplish this feat. In a larger sense they were rejecting the beliefs that once taught them to see themselves as defective, and through rejection of belief, they reclaimed their good self-identity. It was a feat that accomplished an almost insurmountable goal. These individuals accomplished the goal of salvaging themselves

from their prior shame. This was particularly true for LGBT and gender non-conforming respondents. While much of American Christian society may see life as a nonbeliever as a lost life, in fact, these respondents claimed to feel liberated and peaceful following their deconversion.

Instead of their atheism leading them down some sort of criminal and amoral path, they came to value this “one life” immensely. They also became even more attuned to social injustices including women's rights, LGBT rights, poverty, immigration, and education. Many of them spent much time acquiring knowledge and applying critical thinking skills. While prior to deconversion they isolated themselves, many began to make social connections with others after deconversion. It is important to note that this study appeared to indicate that religious teachings, such as Original Sin and homosexuality as sin, led some respondents to suffer greatly. Some respondents almost lost their lives at their own hands before radically transforming and letting go of these beliefs. Yet, with all of the reported positive outcomes following rejection of belief, it is clear that these individuals suffer prior to, during and following their deconversion experience. The suffering is related to their damaging history, shame and self-as-bad concept, deconversion process and discrimination experience. Therefore it is clear that this group would benefit from further research into their experience of deconversion and discrimination, and they would benefit from widespread advocacy and education of all involved.

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Appendix
Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Opening Questions

1. Tell me about what brought you to Meetup.
2. Are you a part of any other groups?
3. Are you finding your participation in Meetup useful? (if Yes, why and how?)
4. What is Meetup all about?
5. How many times have you attended Meetup?
6. Are you comfortable discussing your belief(s) at Meetup? Why?
7. Is there any particular conversation that occurred at the Meetup that was especially relevant or meaningful to your experience? (What impact did that have on you?)

Transformation

8. Can you describe what it was like becoming an atheist?
9. Are there areas in your life where you used to see the divine, but no longer do?
10. Are there any specific beliefs that you now reject?
11. Are there any other things that you now see differently?
12. Can you provide some examples?
13. Was there a time that you can identify when you lost your beliefs?
14. Was there ever an intense emotional event that preceded your loss of belief?
15. Did you have any social support during that period of time?
16. Do you now feel a sense of safety and stability?

Relationships

17. Was there a time when you experienced a loss of community? (Can you tell me more about that experience?)
18. Please describe your family life.
19. Please describe your work life.
20. Have any issues emerged in your relationships as a result of being openly atheist?
21. What advice would you give to someone who has just become an atheist?
22. Is there anything in particular that you would like to talk about so that I could better understand your experience?

Demographics / Social Profile

23. Gender
24. Date of birth
25. Level of education
26. Ethnicity
27. Former religious identity
28. Marital status
29. Number of children
30. Political affiliation
31. Employment status
32. Annual pretax income
33. What state were you born in?

Exhibits

EXHIBIT 1

DEMOGRAPHICS AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS: North, South, West

	North	South	West
Number Interviewed	13	21	1
GENDER			
Female	2	7	0
Male	10	14	1
Transgender	1	0	0
RACE			
Caucasian	9	19	1
Hispanic	2	1	0
African American	0	1	0
Biracial	1	0	0
Indian	1	0	0
AGE			
20-29	2	4	0
30-39	3	9	1
40-49	4	2	0
50-59	3	4	0
60-69	1	2	0
Mean (years)	43	41	34
MARITAL STATUS			
Married	6	8	1
Single	2	8	0
Divorced	5	2	0
Committed Relationship	0	3	0
NUMBER OF CHILDREN			
0	9	12	0
1	3	3	1
2	0	4	0
3	1	1	0
5	0	1	0
EDUCATION			
PhD, Doctorate	3	2	0
Graduate Degree	0	4	0
Master's Degree	4	5	0
Bachelor of Science	2	3	0
Bachelor of Arts	0	2	0

Associate Degree	0	1	0
In College	2	0	0
Some College	2	2	1
High School, GED	0	2	0
OCCUPATION			
Medical, healthcare providers	3	5	0
Educators	2	5	0
Creative	1	2	1
Self-employed	0	2	0
Government Attorney	0	1	0
TSA Supervisor	1	0	0
Assistant Apartment Manager	0	1	0
Banking Consultant	1	1	0
Electrician	1	0	0
Executive Assistant	0	1	0
Graduate Assistant Social Psychology	0	1	0
Mechanical Engineer	1	0	0
Military	0	1	0
Sales	1	0	0
Student Worker	0	1	0
Supervisor	0	1	0
Veterans Affairs	1	0	0
Unemployed	1	0	0
POLITICAL AFFILIATION			
Democrat	7	9	0
Independent	3	6	0
Libertarian	0	3	0
Nonaffiliated	2	1	0
Republican	1	1	0
Democratic Socialist	0	0	1
Moderate	0	1	0
FORMER RELIGION			
Southern Baptist or Baptist	3	5	0
Christian	3	4	0
Methodist	0	5	0
Multiple Religions	1	3	0
Pentecostal	1	1	1
Episcopalian	1	1	0
Evangelical	0	1	0
Unity Church of Christianity	1	0	0

Mennonite	1	0	0
Jehovah's Witness	0	1	0
Catholic	1	0	0
Hindu	1	0	0
LEVEL OF INCOME			
240,000-259,999	1	0	0
200,000-219,999	2	1	0
140,000-159,000	0	1	0
100,000-119,999	2	3	0
80,000-99,999	2	2	0
60,000-79,999	1	3	0
40,000-59,999	2	4	1
20,000-39,999	2	4	0
Less than 20,000	1	3	0

Exhibit 2: Deconversion Process

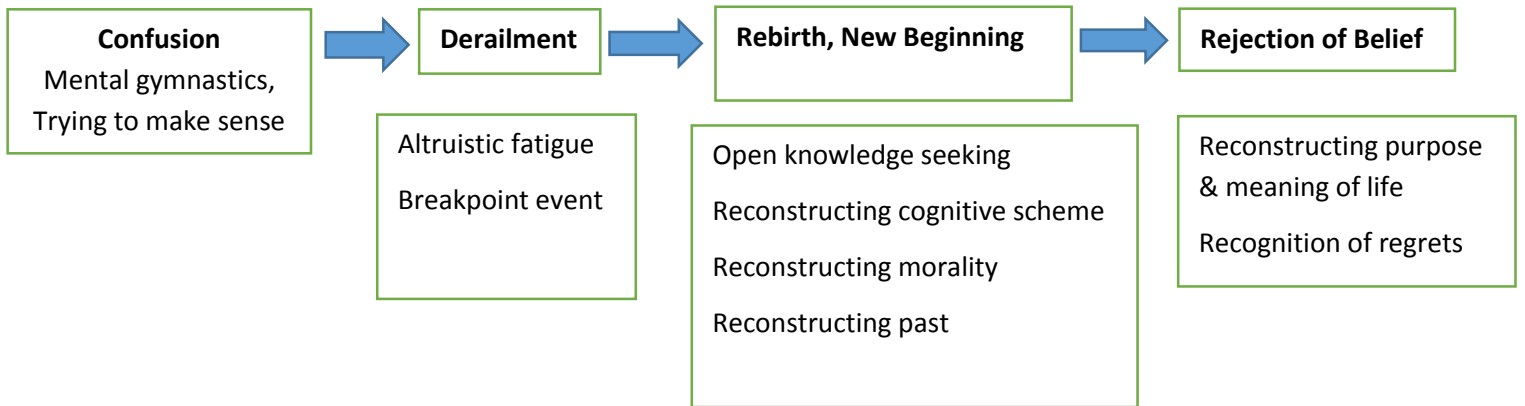
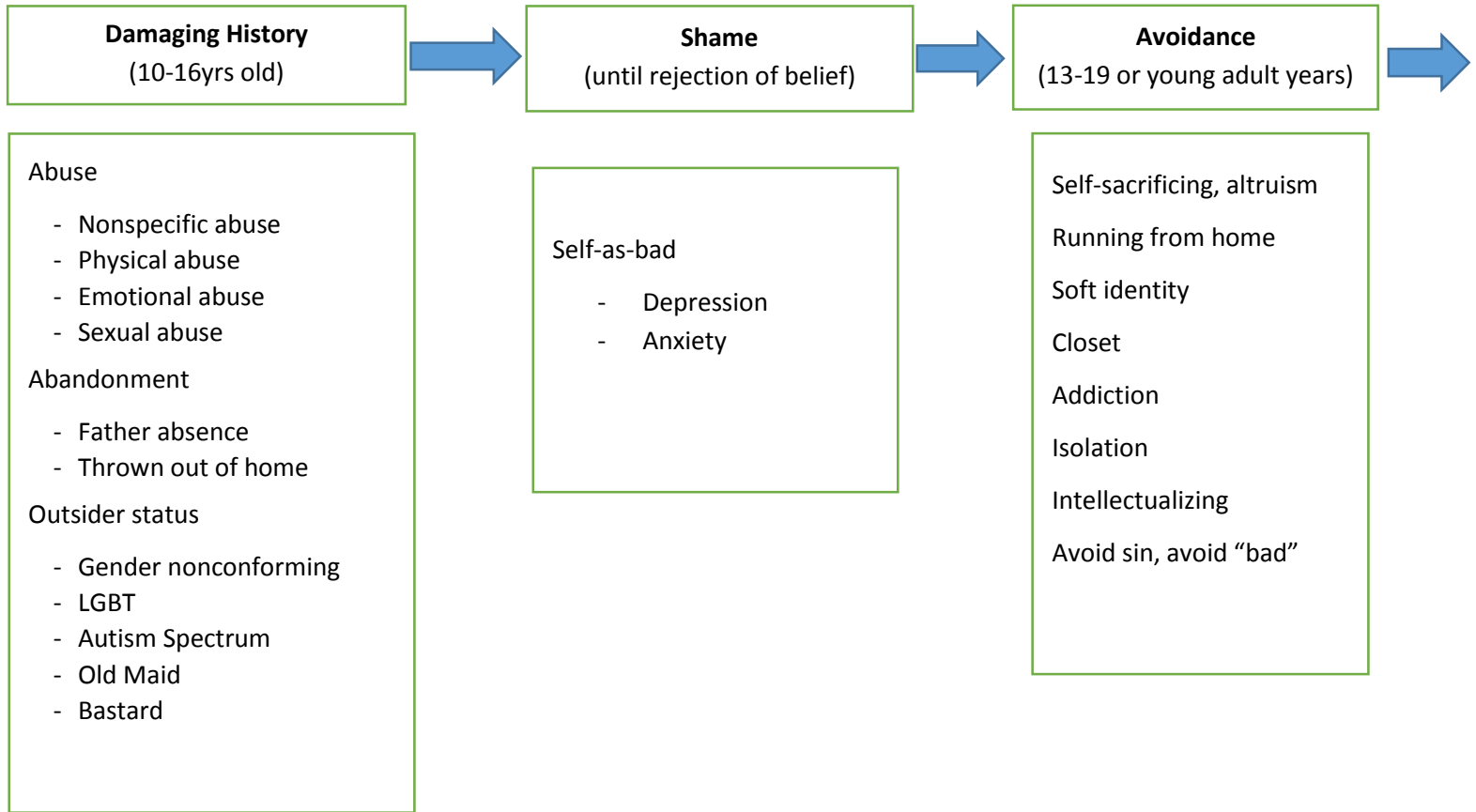


Exhibit 3: Gender

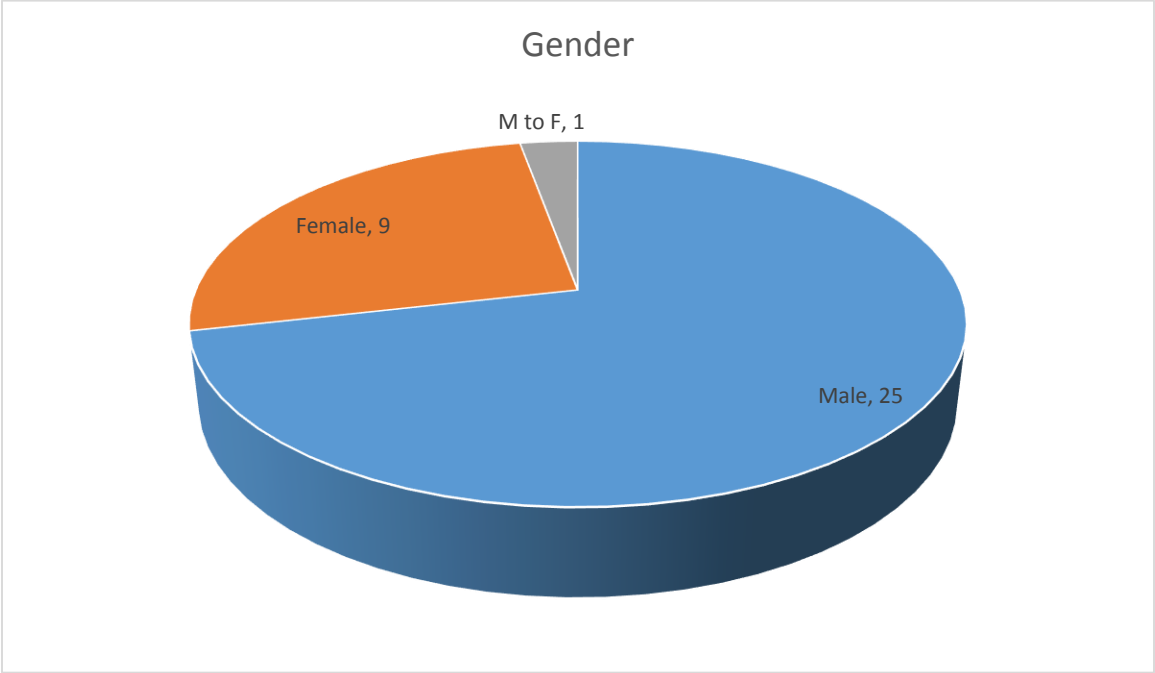


Exhibit 4: Education

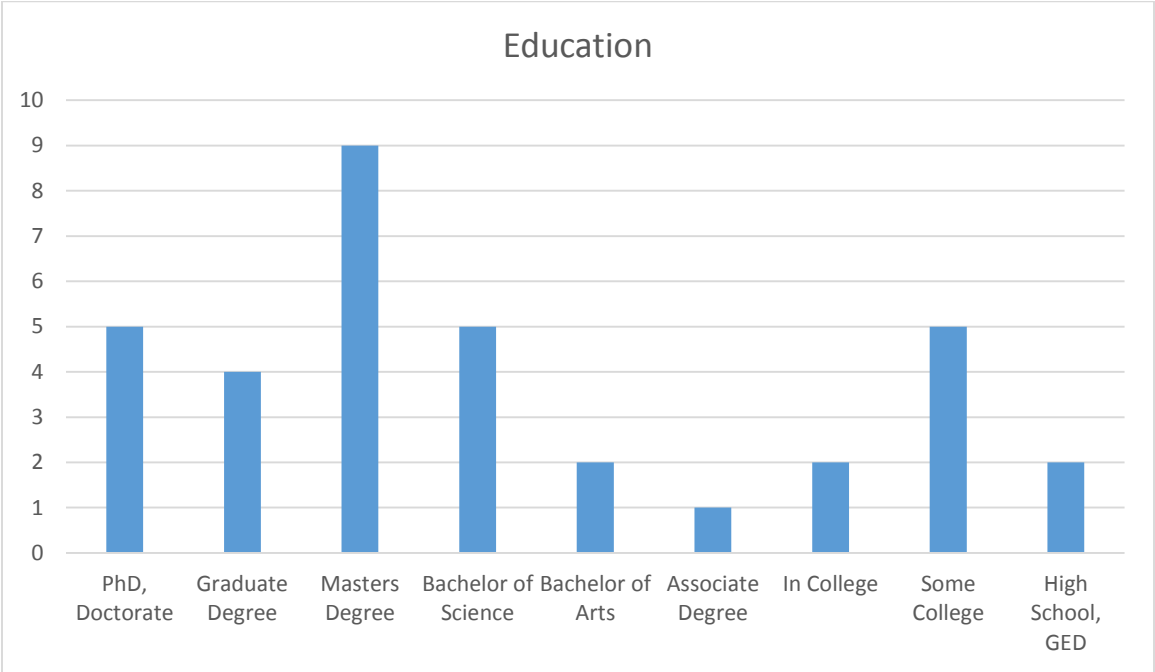


Exhibit 5: Former Religious Identity

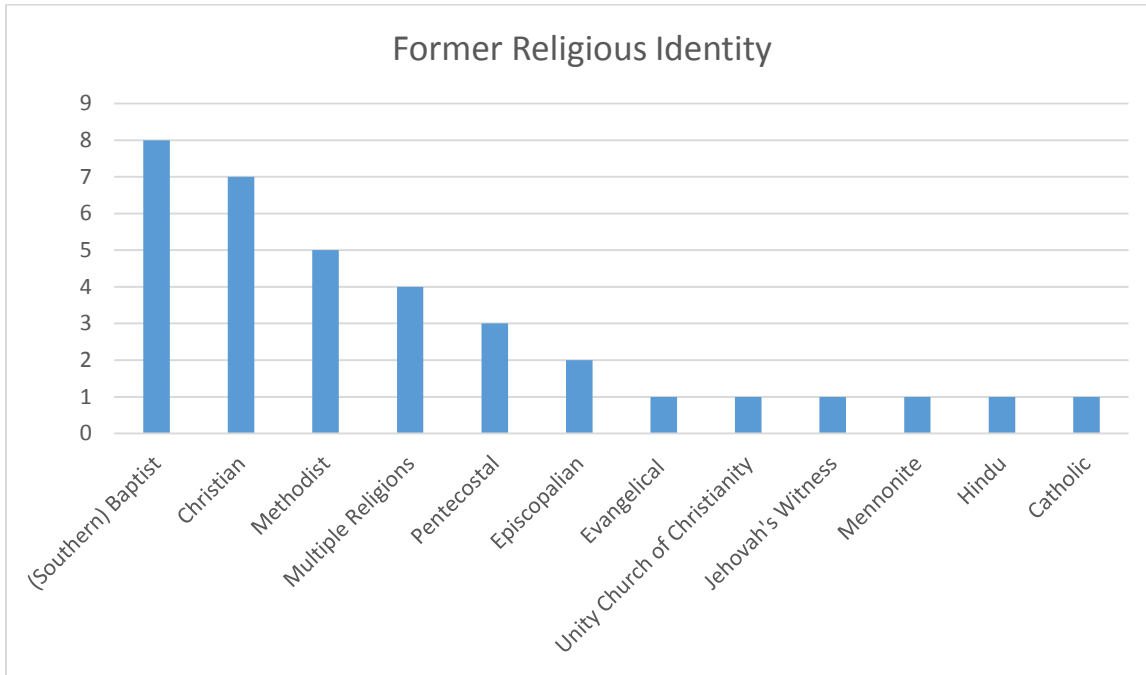


Exhibit 6: Marital Status

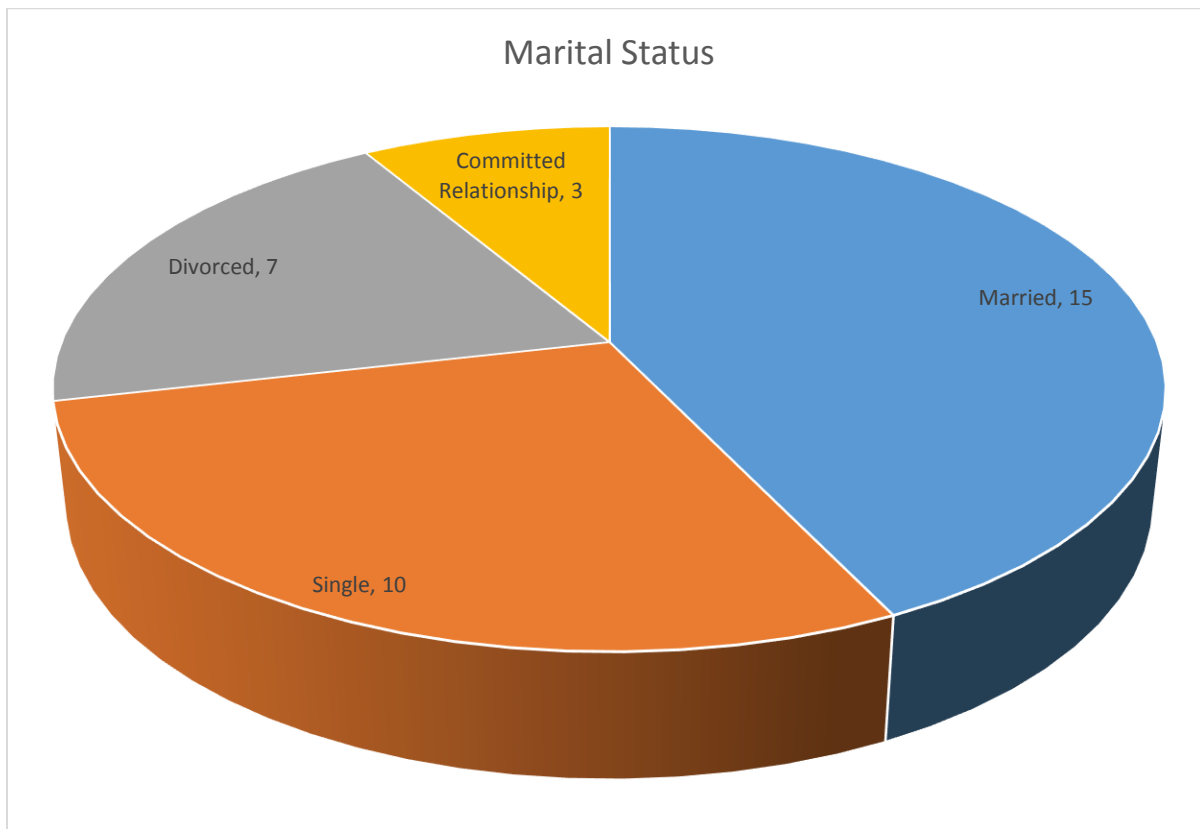


Exhibit 7: Number of Children

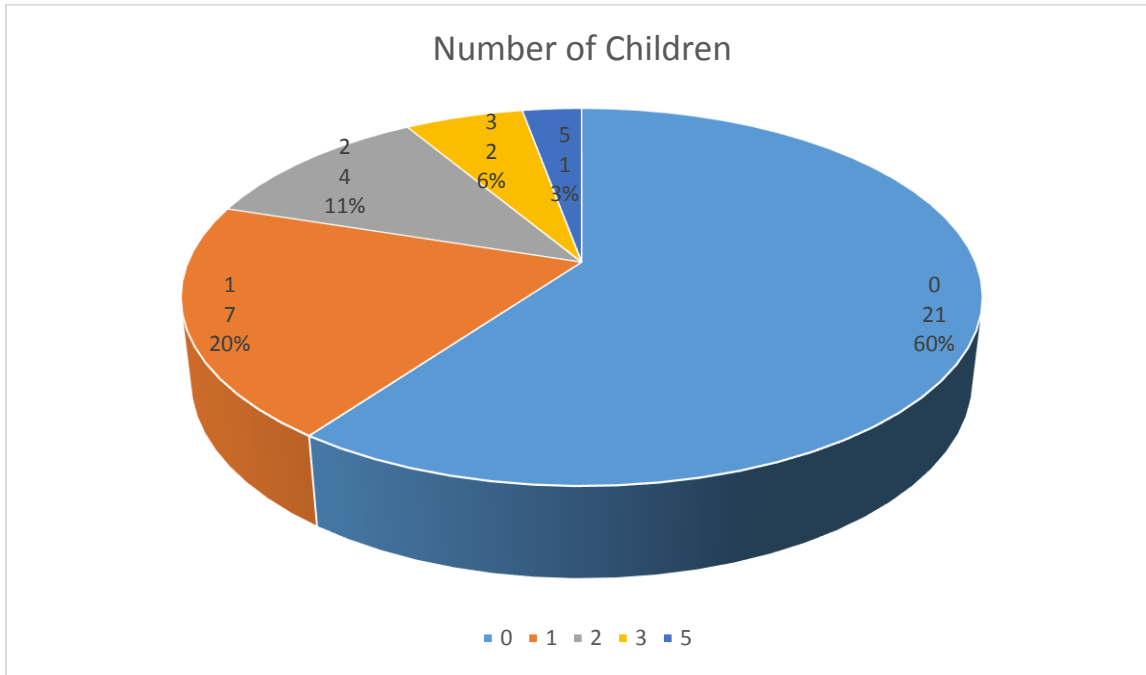


Exhibit 8: Political Affiliation

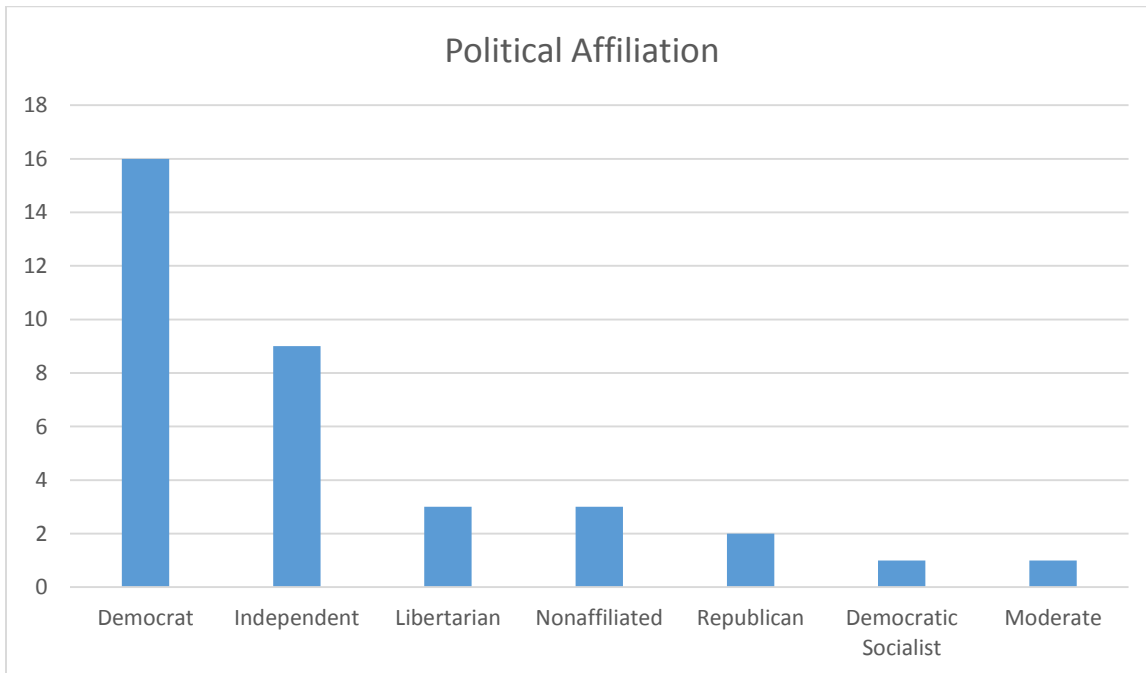


Exhibit 9: Income

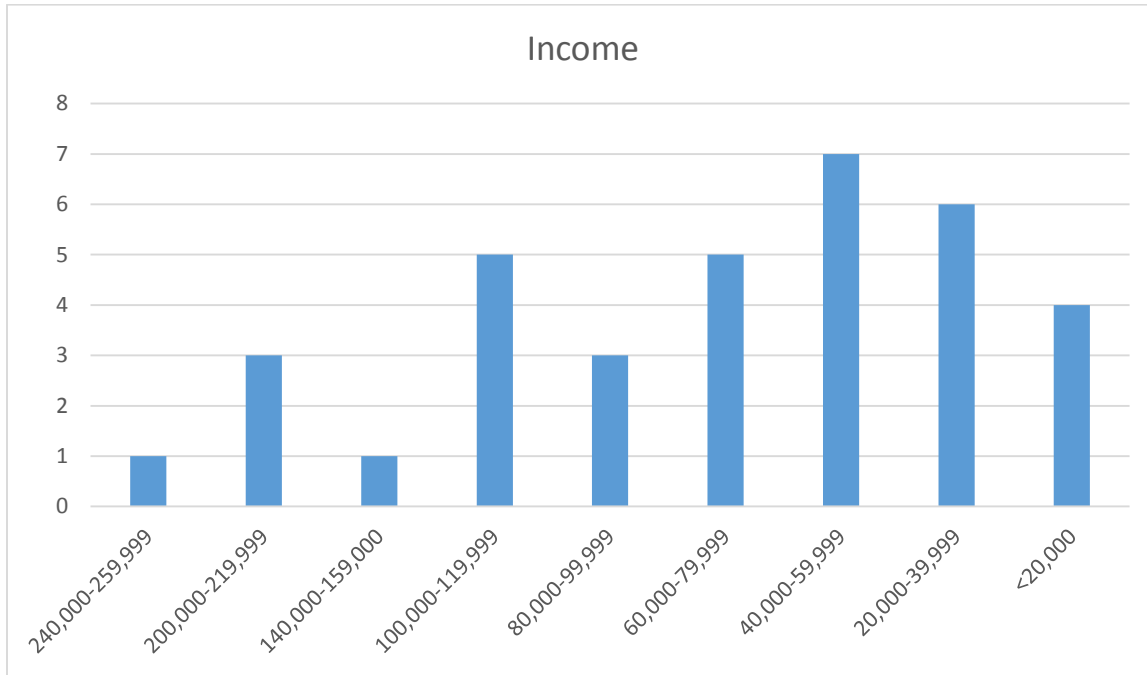


Exhibit 10: Current Region

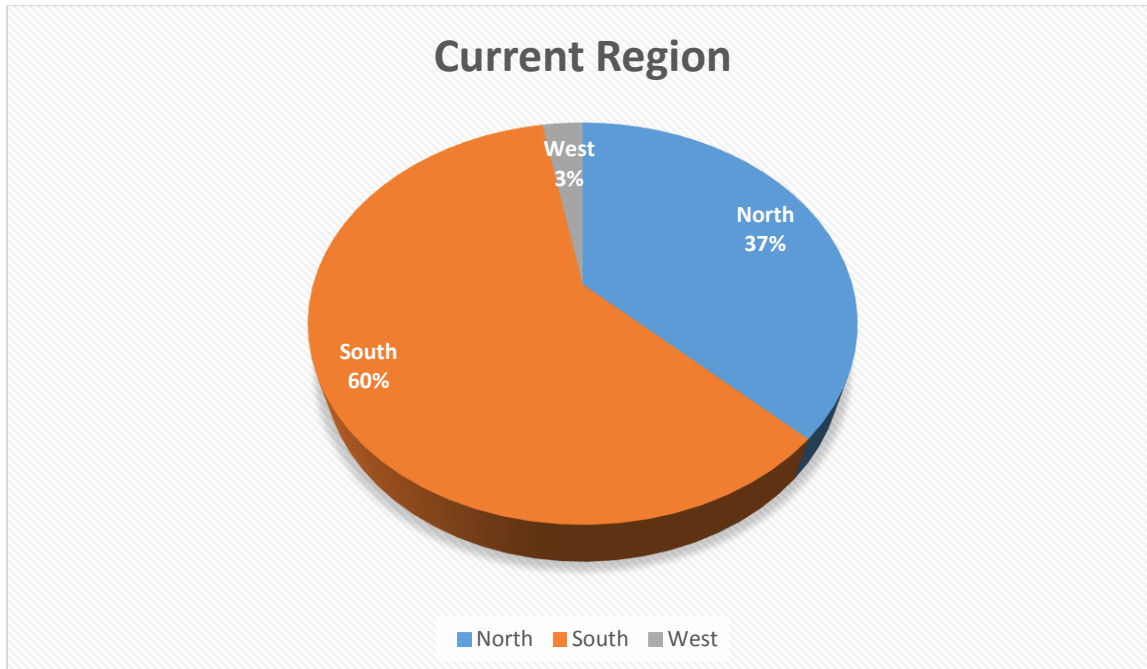


Exhibit 11: Codes and Categories

Damaging History

Abuse

- abuse, females physical abuse
- abuse, females sexually exploited
- abuse, physical
- abuse, sexual
- abuse, substance abuse
- abuse, verbal
- abuse, emotionally abusive
- manipulate
- abuse, sex slaves
- mistreating
- neglect
- religious child maltreatment
- aggression
- Attacked, if attacked – defend nonbelief
- Attacking
- bully
- thrown out of house, neglect
- Religious trauma
- faith healing harmful
- hell
- fire and brimstone
- shunning
- ostracized
- Horrible
- Horrible things happen
- Didn't have a choice
- Christians discouraging education
- church, had to go
- close minded
- coerced
- forced
- control
- cruel
- cultish (restrictive? Isolating?)
- fundamentalist Christianity
- defensive
- Didn't have a choice

- Dysfunctional

- grew up too fast (neglect?)

- on my own since I was 16 (neglect?)

- Most struggles from childhood

Suffering

hard

painful

9/11

Baby death

death, witnessing death

death, sister

miscarriage

dog run over by car

Self-acceptance

accept

accept me for who I am

Accept what I was told

acceptable argue politics, not religion

acceptance

approval, do not seek approval

acknowledged

admit to myself

apologized

alone or lonely (isolation?)

alone, don't stay

alone, you are not...

others like me

Myself

Be yourself

Being a complete person

Brain

Brainwashed

Cant' be myself

Couldn't' be myself

Trying to be myself

Change

Changed

Life changing

Life altering

Changes, going thru
Not going to change her/him/them
Willing to change
Need for change
Changing Christian tattoo
Choice or choose
Christian icons
Confidence
Confirming
Conforming
Conform, does not
Convincing yourself
Creative
Critical thinking
Death Scare (existential)
Decisions
Deconversion
Deprogram
Existential
Life
Life has meaning
life, value life
make my life count
value this life
live for today
meaning in life
Expectations of me
Express myself
Finding myself
Fooling myself
Forgive myself (also morality?)
Hated myself
Hated, people hated me
Healthy
Health concerns
Helped me
Identified myself as who I was
Identity
Is something wrong with me (also morality?)

Know me
Lightbulb moments
Look to you for answers (leader?)
Love myself
My own interests
Never really seeing who I am
Nothing wrong with me
Isolation
Nobody to talk to
feeling excluded
feeling small
feeling unloved
church still attending
communicating with spirit
dark
dead loved ones are okay?
dead loved ones reunite
death
funerals
don't belong here
Regrets
what my life would have been like
Denial or Avoidance
there wasn't a trauma experience
says open but doesn't voice
deluded
denies intense emo event
Closeted
bible belt
bigotry
can't dare utter the words
can't smile and nod anymore
Can't talk to them
sad
grief
miserable
had to leave college
Grief

Grief, compounded
Miss deceased loved ones
cried
crisis
clammed up
comfortable in my shell
closeted
closet, come out of the closet
closet, went back into the closet
closets, 2 closets
disclose, should I disclose?
Does not voice disagreement
nonconfrontational
don't want to talk about it
draining
Disappointed
disillusioned
Coping
Depend on belief in god
Appreciate
blessing
Angel
Angel, saw an
Ghosts
Meetup
Avoidance
Meetup, don't go
Meetup, haven't attended yet
kicked out of high school
alcohol
alcoholic
alcoholics anonymous
Hung over
12 steps
narcotics anonymous
drug addiction
never recover
Drugs
marijuana
don't go out partying

don't party
addiction
heroin anonymous
gambling, poker
not thinking about religion
introverted
if asked directly will sidestep it
hesitant
ignore
escape from home
escape, wanting to
cautious about how vocal & who talk to
avoid debates
avoid that side of me
I walk away
avoiding Christians after being hurt by
Christians
avoids discussing (god, loss of belief)
not go down path father went
keep the peace
disengaging
disengaging from religious
all in my head (ruminating? Self doubt?)
kicked out of high school (teen acting out)
Well-being, Concern for Others
health and wellness
helping others major category
Animals
euthanasia
activist
advocacy issues
guns
feminist
abortion
clinic defense
belief in god useful
birth control
blame the victim
beauty (sharing to help others)
caring

cared too much
caring for
child born
child or baby
children concerned about them
indoctrination
children concern about coming out atheist
children, my children
child – free to pick up a religion, choice
education system horrible
feminine male
harmful
health & wellness
HIV
Homophobia
Human Rights Campaign
Humanist
hunger
hunting
hurts people
immigration reform
injustice
interfaith marriage
intersectionality
intolerant
jail or prison
just world hypothesis
justice
killed innocent people/animals
murder
genocide
marginalized or vulnerable groups
oppressed groups
oppression, internalized
oppressive
elderly
minorities
black community
latino community
minorities: religious minorities

women
gender inequality
glass ceiling
sexist
women as inferior
women as subservient
women's rights
minority, atheist minority
maslow or basic need
medical
military
atheists in foxholes
lake hypacia
obamacare, fight obamacare
caring for elderly family members
Don't want to make uncomfortable
Don't want to mess with their faith
Don't want to upset family
Don't want to worry family
Uneducated
Unintelligent
Idiot
ignorance
Empathize
Empowering
Encourage
How to encourage now
It gets better
It is alright
It will get easier
Equality
inequality
exploitation
gender identity
LGBT
Altruism
teaching
charity
charity, secular charity
pacifist

humanist
nurturing
comfort
comfort from belief in god
comfortable
comforting
carl sagan
complex oppression
courage
not scared
without fear
not go down path father went
not judgmental
no confrontational
human rights campaign
alternative health
Denying pleasure
Didn't dance
Don't smoke or drink
Advocacy issues
Differentiating
Discrimination
labeling
Harass
Diversity
Make a difference
Make restitution
Anxiety
spoke truth to power
physical reaction
clammed up
comfortable in my shell
Worries or rumination a
is there going to b a cost
Pascal's wager
would have gotten rid of me
worried would b exposed atheist
want to tell but father dying
concern @ being outed
concern @ getting a job as atheist

concern @ location meetup
doubts?
confirming
courage
depression
despair
devastated
disruptive
fear
killed, fear will be if travel to other country
I'm still here so I think I'm right
freaked me out
nightmares
OCD
Relationships
"I'll Pray for you"
Alienated my child
Arguing
Debate
Opposing opinions
opposition
Hard thing to fight
Hard to connect
disagree
compromise
Atheists, knowing atheists
Atheists, who are they and what are they like
Behavior (reinforcing god belief by friends)
Trying to keep believing
Believers
Bonding
Boss
Boss tried to hit on me
Chaplains
Childlike (judging xtians as childlike)
Clients at work
Close relationship
Community, find a
Confided

Connect	Father, not close
Media	Idealizes absent father
Documentaries	Father angry
Fox news	Father grumpy old man
Internet	Father not religious
Facebook	Father terminally ill
Online community	Father very religious
Podcasts	Father figure
Movie	Feel closer to people who know me @
News	atheist
Tv	Fellowship
music	Friend
Connected the Family	Friends, make new (gain friends)
Conversation, stimulating	Friendships lost (lose friends)
Convinced	Friends for your kids
Desire to communicate thru art/writing	God
Culture	Higher power
Deceived	Omnipresent
Deistic	Omniscient
Didn't Feel God	God created (the world)
Don't see presence of	God doesn't exist
Distrust	God of the gaps
Fake	God relationship
Inauthentic	God protecting
inconsistent	God teaching lessons
Divisive	God threatens
Divorce or marital problems or breakup	God will punish
Engaged	God will reward
Excuses	God, gift from
Explanations	God didn't help or intervene or let happen
Face to face	God not there to protect
Failed you as a mother/father	God disapproved of me
Faith	God doesn't love or like me
Faith not enough faith	God gets you better
Falling away	God is a jerk
Left the church	God is best friend
Family	God loved me
Family difficulties	God not there to comfort
Father	God observing (thoughts, actions)
Father absent	God on our side

God pleased?
God works in mysterious ways
God's plan
God, always talk about
God, don't believe in
God, felt god's presence
Never felt anything
Grandfather
grandmother
grew out of belief together
group, created
groups
guy going to determine my future
helpful
identified with
if asked directly, would say atheist (some
would avoid)
in relationship with nonbeliever
influenced by people
interactions between (man & woman)
is there going to be a cost
Jesus
Job
Can't get a job
Interviewers asking about beliefs
Jeopardize job
Job loss
Job security
Judgmental
Laughing
Humor
Leader
LGBT, knew lgbt
Lie or dishonest
omission
Misleading or deceptive
Likeminded
More in common with
Listening
Not listening

Mentor
Mother
Mother died
Mother was abused by boyfriend
Mother, single mother
Moved
No social support
Not close
Not comforting
Not depend on
Not judgmental
Not religious
Offended
Offensive
One way relationship
Open / out of the closet
Open marriage (infidelity)
Open minded (accepting)
Morality:
Absolute morality
Christian morality
Good thing or bad thing
Moral inventory of self
Morality, good without god
Reward or punishment
reward
Affair
Afterlife
eternity
Heaven
Hell
Gonna go to hell
Hell, you are going to
Hell, avoid hell
Arrested
Ask Jesus for forgiveness
Baby born with Male/Female Organs
Bad People
Bastard
Choice, bad

Christian apologetics
Christians F***ed me over
Christians Pushing Beliefs
Church, trying to find the right church
Church, try to get me back
Consequences
Curse
Death penalty
Demons
Devil
Devil, don't believe in
Evil
Experiencing Christians as hypocritical
Experiencing Christians as immoral
Feel bad
Good judgment
Good person
Guilt
Guilty, don't feel
Homosexuality as a sin
Hypocrisy
Killed if didn't listen
Lack of caring or concern
Lacks emotional response to tragedy
(negative case)
Man is flawed
Mistakes
Negative
Negative experiences with religion
No resentment toward religion
Rejection
Atheist, you can't be atheist
Atheist, filthy atheist
Awkward
Blacksheep, I am the
Blamed
Branded Satanist
Disapproving
Disease, feel like I have

Diseased, "you're infected... very sick person"
Disposable
Excluded
Family ashamed of me
Family distant
Family, not close with them
Family, not a source of support
Insulting
Defects
Confused
Didn't make sense
Doesn't make sense
Make it make sense
nonsense
Messed with my mind
Could never reconcile
Contradictions
Don't know how it works
Doubter
Doubting
Making connections
Making meaning
Meaning making
Mental gymnastics
Mind can't comprehend
Knowledge Seeking
Education
College
Graduate school
School
Seminary
Well educated
Knowledge
Learn
Learned a lot
Love of learning
Rebirth
Awakening
Awareness

Noticing
Exposed to more
Curiosity
Emotions
Emo anger, move past quickly
Emo angry
hostility
Emo ashamed
Emo confident
Emo disgust
Emo embarrassed
Emo enjoyed
Emo frustrated
Nothing worked
Emo happy
Euphoric
Emo hate
Emo jealous
Emo love
Love everybody
Emo overwhelmed
Emo regret
Life wasted
Emo uncomfortable
Emo unhappy
Never satisfying
Emo upset
Emotional
Emotional discussions politics
Emotional versus intellectual
Emotionally unstable
Excited about future
Exhilarating
Freedom or liberating
Fun
Hopefulness
Hurt feelings
Hurt, might be
Non-category codes
Absolutes

Accountability
Adolescent
Adolescent space of your nonbelieving
maturity
Agnostic
Agree
I just nod
Ancient Aliens
Annoying Anti-theist
Assuming
Atheist
Atheist child
Atheist late in life
Atheist then Spiritual then Atheist Again
Beliefs
Bible
Bible as word of god
Bible is true
Bible I read it
Bible study
Biblical illiteracy
Calvinist
Catholic church
Christian School
Christianity
Christopher Hitchens
Church
Church 3 times a day
Church, does not go to
Church, stopped going to
Conscious
Conservative
Conservative religious views
Conspiracies
Context
Crazy
Creation
Creationism
Credulous, I was
Critical of church

Critical of god
Critical of other gay men
Critical of religion
Critical of religious people
Cynical
Jaded me
Dan Barker
Darwin
Dawkins
Destiny
Devout
Disbelief
Divine intervention
Miracle(s)
Don't believe
Dreams
Durkheim
Multiple religions
Other religions
Logic
Effects
Email
Enjoyable
Entertaining
Evaluating
Evangelical
Evidence
Evolution
Experience
Fancy
Impressive
Freethought or freethinker
Goal setting
Good news club
Government
Great quotes

History
Ideas
Ideology
Individuals
Information
Intellectual people
Intellectual(izing)
Interesting
Interests
Kant
Liberal
Liberal Christianity
Libertarian
Lifestyle
Mark Twain
Memory
Moment
Moment, there wasn't a moment
Money
Mystery
Mythic
Naturalist
Nature
New age
Nonbeliever or unbeliever
North
Not actively questioning
Not gonna crusade for atheism
Not compelled to convert them to atheism
(acceptance?)
Not trying to proselytize atheism
Organized religion