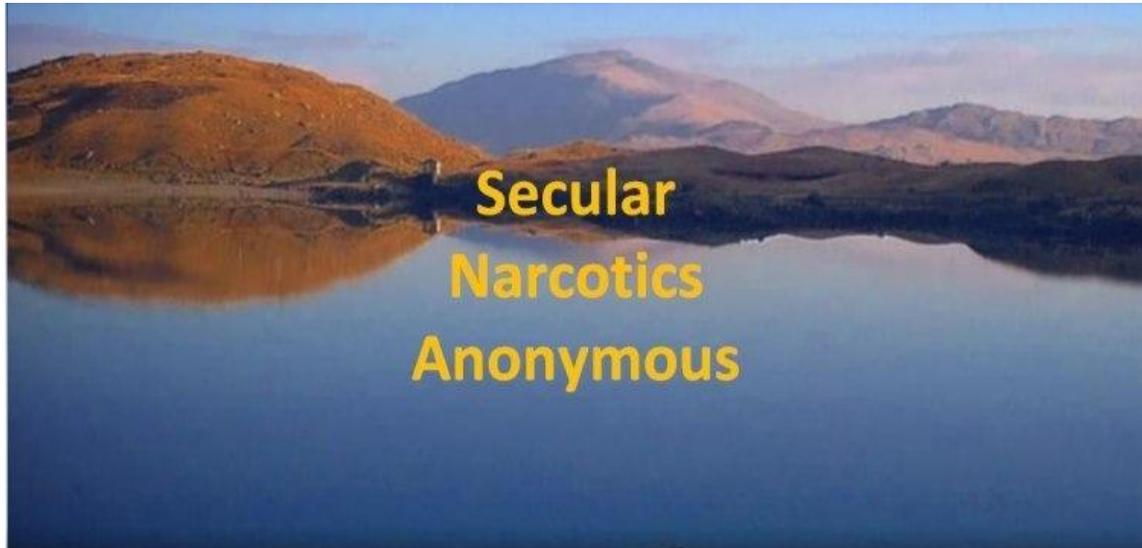


# Secular NA – Connecting Globally Amid a World in Crisis



*by Michael E*

I am an addict, 71 years old and a little over 5 years clean. I am clean because of the Narcotics Anonymous program, and I am so very grateful for the NA program as well as AA and the other 12-step programs that help those suffering from various addictions. If I follow the program, I will not use – one day at a time.

We all agree that this past year has been horrific. I mourn the lives lost, the families torn apart, and the suffering that has touched us all in one form or another. The pandemic itself as well as the lockdowns and other efforts to get it under control have created huge challenges for everyone – including those of us in 12-step recovery programs.

As I write this in February 2021, there are still very few in-person, physical NA, AA, or other 12-step meetings. And that's been difficult for many. But, we persevered. We adapted because staying clean is paramount to our lives and well-being. We found other means to connect – via telephone, text messaging, social media, socially-distant outdoor meetings, and especially through online, virtual meetings hosted on Zoom or other platforms.

This last alternative – video-based, online meetings – has not only allowed us to survive, it has enabled some communities to thrive, to connect and expand in ways we never thought possible. In particular, I am talking about my community – the secular, non-religious, Narcotics Anonymous community. Let me explain.

I am an atheist. I am very comfortable in my atheism. I'm not agnostic or troubled, and I don't think about my atheism a lot except that since I accept that this is the only conscious life I will have as me, it's precious. As an atheist, I appreciate every day, and that resonates so well with the "one day at a time" philosophy of NA and other programs.

While I am content in my atheism, I understand that others may feel differently. I can respect that – as long as they don't try to push their beliefs on me or others or disparage those who think or practice differently than they do. But, that's often the problem, isn't it? Many so-called "believers" – especially those who subscribe to a well-defined religion – also believe that it is their responsibility and right to "save" me. This I find unacceptable.

Like many others, it was tough for me when I entered the rooms. Religious thinking and language – not just spirituality – pervades the 12-steps, the program, the literature and the meetings. My very first meeting was AA, and they started with the Serenity Prayer (which I love – except for the god part) and ended with the Lord's Prayer (which I don't know).

I moved on to NA because of this and also because my problem was more than just alcohol. I needed to identify as an addict. The groups, the 12-steps, and the program all resonated with my need to do something drastic about my addictions, so I kept my beliefs to myself, interpreted and reworded the steps and readings as necessary, and got clean. After a few months, I did speak up at a rather large meeting about my atheistic approach to the program and how secular recovery was working for me. After I finished, there was a long silent pause, and I felt as if the entire group kind of moved back away from me. It was awkward to say the least.

I'm from the Seattle area, but I first got clean while in Florida. When I returned home after 3 months, I started going to meetings in Seattle. It was generally good, but I didn't talk about my atheism when I shared. Then I heard about these folks who were meeting to talk about non-religious recovery. This wasn't a typical 12-step meeting – it was a meeting talking about 12 step programs without the "G" word or "G" ideas or a religious higher power. WOW! This was for me.

These meetings (secular AA meetings) were a great experience – intellectually and emotionally and I soon discovered that there were plenty of them but very few (if any) Secular NA meetings. There were none in our region so we decided to start one – [Beyond Belief, Seattle-Everett, Washington](#). We did get some push-back at first from other NA members and groups – the usual, "you can't get clean if you don't believe in a higher power," and we did have some difficulties in finding a place to hold our meetings. But, that only made us stronger and more determined to show that secular recovery is real, and for many of us, preferable.

That was about 5 years ago, and today we have a healthy but relatively small core membership. The group members are very enthusiastic in our meetings and we have a wide range of clean time – from days or months to over 30 years. In 1989 World Services of NA commissioned an ad hoc committee to look into Special Interest Meetings (Bulletin 18). They reported that

*“Special Interest meetings have existed in Narcotics Anonymous for some time. There does not appear to be anything in the Twelve Traditions which cautions groups against holding special interest meetings, provided that the group has no requirement for membership other than the desire to stop using. Special interest meetings tend to survive and flourish in local NA communities where there is a need and desire for such meetings and do not exist in NA communities where there is no need nor desire.”*

In our meetings, we do some of the NA readings – but only the ones that do NOT mention god or a higher power: *Who is an Addict, What is the NA Program, Why Are We Here, A Journey, We Do Recover*. We emphasize that we are first and foremost an NA meeting, so anyone is welcome regardless of their beliefs or lack of beliefs. We do make a special effort to make those who identify as religious to feel comfortable in our meetings. For a long time we were pleased to be one of a handful of secular meetings in Narcotics Anonymous (that we knew of).

And then Covid hit.

In March 2020, our meeting venue was required to close – and has remained closed for almost a year now. We had only one alternative to not shutting down: to go virtual. So, we quickly started meeting via Zoom. And then the magic happened – we started getting more attendees – from widespread geographic areas – Baton Rouge, Toronto, California, Maryland, Florida, Arizona, Colorado! And Melbourne, Australia – where there was a group just like ours – using the same name, “[Beyond Belief](#).” It was like finding our long-lost family. Many of these people became regulars at our meetings, and we became regulars at theirs – in spite of the time differences. We now regularly get 15-30 attendees at meetings that used to attract half that number. And the energy is electric.

Many of our members have said – “there’s something special and energizing about these secular NA meetings.” We may be separated by many thousands of miles, but we are together in recovery. There are strong feelings of community and friendship among the group. And during sharing, many – MANY – express their appreciation of finally finding and being part of a secular recovery meeting where they can express their disbelief without risking judgement or negative feedback. Also, our diverse group of attendees span the full range of clean time – from less than a week to well over 30 years.

Everything isn’t perfect, of course. A few of the home group members don’t care for this online format, but we try to stay in touch using other means. And sometimes there are technical difficulties with bandwidth or Zoom itself. But the benefits far outweigh the limitations – so much so that we are committed to continuing the Zoom/online presence when we return to face-to-face meetings. Our new, global brothers and sisters are just too important to not have them at every meeting. We’ll figure out a way to make it as seamless as possible.

There are already a number of new developments from our connecting the secular NA community globally. We – the [Beyond Belief groups in Seattle-Everett](#) and [Melbourne, Australia](#) jointly launched a new virtual-only meeting – [Beyond Belief International](#). This group meets at

9pmEST/6pm PST on Saturday in the US and 1pm EADT in Australia. And a new meeting was launched in Greeley, Colorado in early February. The first meeting had over 20 attendees. There are weekly meetings in based in Paris (French speaking), Amsterdam, London, Melbourne and the Seattle, Santa Cruz and Creeley in the USA.

We are also starting to organize more as a global community and have launched a very basic new website, [Secular NA](#), that seeks to provide accurate up-to-date information about secular NA meetings worldwide as well as resources. There is also an active Facebook group, [The Secular NA Coffee Shop](#), which was created in 2016 by members in the UK and Australia.

We are excited about the future of non-religious, Secular Narcotics Anonymous. We appreciate very much the model, encouragement, and support of the secular AA community, and we look forward to mutually-helpful collaboration and coordination in the future.

Stay safe, healthy, and clean.

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*Michael E is a grateful, recovering addict. He is a member of the Beyond Belief Seattle-Everett NA group and trusted servant/secretary of the Beyond Belief International NA group. He is an official "old guy" in years, but a "pup" in recovery time with just a little over 5 years clean.*

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