

Facilitating Peer Support Groups



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PFLAG support groups provide a confidential and supportive setting for parents, families, and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons as well as members of those groups themselves. PFLAG works to promote a greater understanding of homosexuality, bisexuality and gender identity by challenging unhealthy attitudes and educating those who have been negatively influenced by the homophobic attitudes of others. In essence, the goal of the support group is to help everyone “come out” of their own closets of fear, uncertainty, distress and anxiety about these matters — to family, friends, co-workers, and especially to themselves. Many people come to PFLAG because they fear rejection and hostility over their concerns, and may feel shame. They turn to our support groups seeking a safe place in which to work on these issues.

PFLAG support groups are open groups which may have different sets of participants each meeting. Almost all group meetings include several “seasoned members” who are comfortable with sexual orientation and gender identity issues and who attend in order to offer their comfort, support, and experience to the “new-timers.” Participants benefit from this mix through the mutual support provided, the restoration of a sense of self-control, and improved self-esteem. They meet peers with shared experiences and learn from each other. New participants sense that the others really understand what they are going through — because they genuinely do. Attending just one support group meeting can lessen feelings of isolation and alienation. People often comment on how “normal” and “genuine” everyone seems. As a result, they feel less stigmatized.

If yours is a meeting with ten or fewer in attendance, it is probably best to conduct the support section of the meeting as one group. If you have eleven or more in attendance, breaking out into smaller groups of five to ten ensures everyone will feel encouraged to participate in a more intimate setting. A handy way to decide who goes to what group is to first decide how many break-out groups are appropriate, then simply count off: 1-2, 1-2, etc; or 1-2-3, 1-2-3 etc; and so on for as many groups as you need. Sometimes breakout groups will be established according to topic, such as a newcomers group, an HIV/AIDS group, a transgender group, etc.

If you are meeting in a larger room, support groups can move to parts of the space that work comfortably for somewhat private groups. Many facilities have several rooms that you can arrange to use for this part of the meeting.

Being a Facilitator

The PFLAG support group is the essential “intake” point for many people new to PFLAG and our values. The facilitator thus becomes a key ingredient in the welcoming and accepting process. Volunteers often ask what being a facilitator requires. They want to know if special skills or techniques are needed. Ideally, the person who chooses to be a facilitator should, first of all, be committed to their own growth — intellectually and emotionally — for they will soon discover that helping others often involves being a role model for the behavior they hope others will adopt.

A good facilitator is aware that helping others takes work. Facilitators are required to listen intently and to be able to respond effectively. They are able to see the world through the other person's eyes, from that person's frame of reference. They show respect for others by not making judgments, and trusting others to know what is best for them. Facilitators can provide a sensitive interaction with others' comments when needed and offer follow-up questions to keep the discussion moving. A good facilitator can help set a tone that is affirming and supportive. A good facilitator cares, is honest, and has a non-defensive communication style.

Effective facilitators do not choose this role in order to satisfy their own needs. They recognize that it is a privilege to be allowed to help others, and they respect that privilege. Those who become facilitators, however, realize that they have their own limitations and room for personal growth. They should be willing to explore their own behavior and know (or learn) who they are. They realize that life is a developmental process and that each stage has its own tasks and crises.

Facilitators generally listen more than they speak, but must be ready to intervene if the participants stray too far from the guidelines. They make sure every participant has a chance to express him or herself, and that each member of the support group treats the others with respect and compassion.

Finally, a good facilitator should have a deep respect for the peer support group process as a way of helping others to achieve personal growth.

Effective Listening Skills

It has been said that we ought to listen twice as long as we talk. At first, listening seems easy. It is only when we really tune in that we find out that effective listening requires considerable attention and some finesse.

- » Listen to understand. Focus on what the other person is saying rather than trying to formulate a response or question.
- » Listen objectively, suspend judgment. Each time you listen, try to hear the speaker as if it were the first time.
- » Listen for the emotion behind the words. This is the time to call on your emotional vocabulary skills. Reflect back what you have heard. A phrase like, "That must have been disappointing," builds empathy.
- » Listen for underlying concerns. Listen for the deeper concerns that are driving a particular point of view, position, or set of issues. For example, concern for the safety of loved ones and for their well-being is often a driving underlying concern.
- » Gently challenge assumptions or prejudice expressed by any members. For example, if a white member says, "Homophobia is terrible in the Black Church" that is a generalization that needs to be addressed. If an African-American person is attending, this could feel like a personal attack on their church, and might not make them feel welcome.
- » Try to forget yourself. Now is the time to place yourself in the shoes of the other person. Keep listening, even if you disagree with their opinion. Many of us have learned and changed in PFLAG, but everyone has to do this in his or her own time. Focus on the person speaking.
- » Be aware of your body language. Encourage the speaker with a smile and a nod. Lean forward.
- » Be genuine. Allow your true self to come through. Don't be superficial. The more honest and open you are, the more effective you will be.
- » Don't interrupt. Interruptions should only be permitted when they are a request for clarification.

- » Ask questions. Questions should be open-ended and not overused. They should be genuine questions — not a leading statement or opinion framed as a question.
- » Acknowledge what you hear. Sometimes it is helpful to repeat back what you think you heard.
- » Ask permission before giving advice. People like to be helpful. If we have struggled with the same issues, we feel compelled to offer advice. If the other person says, “What do you think?” that is your cue. Sometimes you might say, “I have an idea, do you want to hear it?” Sharing your own similar experience without implying your resolution is the best or only way to handle such an experience may be helpful, but remember to keep your focus on the person seeking support.