



PFLAG Support Group Guidelines

About PFLAG Support Groups:

Many PFLAG chapters have found that it is helpful to read, distribute, or post their support group guidelines as part of the business of every meeting. Ensuring that everyone understands the way PFLAG support groups work and the role of each person in the room is critical to providing a safe space for people to share concerns. By making sure that everyone present knows and accepts the guidelines provides the group facilitator with a powerful tool to keep meetings focused as well as with resources that can be used to respond to disruptions.

1. Our support group focuses on challenges and feelings associated with coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and the way it touches relationships with families, friends and our larger communities. We understand that we are all here to better understand our own feelings about sexual orientation and gender identity and to support each other as we learn to embrace our own sexual orientation or gender identity and expression, or that of our loved ones.
2. Confidentiality is a top priority. Nothing said in this room will leave this room, nor will people be pressed to share more information than they are comfortable with here or after the meeting.
3. We provide support by listening carefully, sharing our own stories, and discussing our own problem-solving experiences. We are sensitive to each person's stage in the acceptance process.
4. We each speak from our own experiences, and respect the experiences of others.
5. We are supportive rather than confrontational. Anyone who is uncomfortable may make this known to the facilitator.
6. Everyone will be given the chance to speak. To ensure that this can happen, each person is asked to be conscious of the amount of time they are using in order to leave adequate time so that others may also speak. No one person is permitted to monopolize the conversation.
7. We are considerate of the group and do not have side discussions. Each person's remarks are important to the whole group.
7. The facilitator will intervene when the guidelines are not followed and redirect the discussion.
8. Our main concern is to create a supportive atmosphere for all group participants.

Thank you for helping to create and be part of the family environment we have at our PFLAG support meetings.



PFLAG Support Group Basics: Confidentiality Guidelines

One of the elements that helps participants feel safe and comfortable at PFLAG support group meetings is when a confidentiality statement or agreement is read at the start of the meeting.

As a good facilitator, be sure to state that confidentiality is a fundamental agreement for all who participate in PFLAG support groups, and that anything said in a meeting is confidential to the group. It is good to make this clear in the general opening, but should also be reinforced at the beginning of the support break-outs by the small group facilitator.

Depending on the nature and size of your community, you can agree that participants may discuss the *situations* presented outside of the meeting, but **never** to use names or other identifying information in those discussions. This should also apply to electronic communications including website content, general membership e-mails, and social media posts (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). Encourage people to signify their agreement with this by raising their hands.

The confidentiality policy should be part of a broader set of guidelines to ensure a safe meeting space. You might also want to ask the group before each meeting – particularly if there are new attendees there – if there are additional guidelines to add that would make them feel more comfortable.

Examples from PFLAG Chapters to use or adapt:

“In order to insure confidentiality and safety for every person in attendance here, and to make this a safe place for all in attendance to share their most personal story and request for assistance, we require all present to turn off their electronic devices. That is, every cell phone or other device that has the ability to record voices, take pictures, or record Tweets or notes entered by the owner, must be turned completely off for the duration of this meeting. We allow no barriers to hearing or telling the truth about a need for help or an offer to help.”

—PFLAG Seattle

“Who you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here.”

—PFLAG Greater New Haven

“Confidentiality is a fundamental agreement for all who participate in PFLAG. Anything said in a meeting is confidential to the group. What you hear and who you see stays here. Please show your agreement by raising your hand.”

—PFLAG Sturgeon Bay/Door County



PFLAG Facilitation Skills: Support Group Ground Rules

Background:

Ground rules aren't a way to control a meeting – they're a way for all members of a support group to agree upon a set of behaviors that ensure that everyone is heard, included, and respected in your meeting. Below are a few suggested ground rules for support group meetings. Adapt them to make the rules fit your needs.

Be sure to get buy-in from attendees. After you share the ground rules, ask everyone to either say “yes” or raise their hand if they agree to the guidelines for the meeting. If someone has an additional suggestion, hear what they have to say and let the group decide if they want to adopt the suggestion.

Support Group Ground Rules:

1. **This is a safe space.**
 - Be honest about your feelings and thoughts
 - Use “I” statements and express your feelings, not your opinions
 - Respect confidentiality
2. **Share the air.**
 - Keep your comments relevant so everyone can participate
3. **Listen generously.**
 - Hear what people are saying. Don't interrupt.
 - Turn off all electronics, and step out if you must take a call
4. **Demonstrate respect cultural differences and diversity of views.**
 - No one is better than another – we are all equal with different perspectives and lenses.



PFLAG Support Group Basics: Effective Listening Skills

It has been said that we ought to listen twice as long as we talk. At first, listening seems easy. But it is only when we *really* tune in that we find out that effective listening requires considerable attention and some finesse. Here are a few suggestions to help build your listening skills and make you a better group facilitator.

- **Listen to understand.** Focus on what the other person is saying rather than trying to formulate a response or question.
- **Listen objectively and suspend your judgment.** Each time you listen, try to hear the speaker as if it were the first time you were hearing what they have to say.
- **Listen for the emotions 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, even though it isn’t immediately expressed.
- **Gently challenge assumptions or prejudice expressed by any members.** For example, if someone says, “Homophobia is terrible in the Black church,” they’ve made a generalization that needs to be addressed no matter what. The need becomes even greater if we want to practice cultural sensitivity. Imagine that an African-American person is attending when the comment is made by a white member. This could feel like a personal attack on their church, and might not make them feel welcome, or send a message that they don’t understand other cultures. It is the role of a good listener to address the issue when it happens.
- **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. The people coming to support group meetings are on a journey that many of us have taken. We have a responsibility to help them in a non-judgmental manner. This isn’t about you.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Encourage the speaker with a smile and a nod. Lean forward. Don’t sit with your arms and legs crossed. Make eye contact and focus on the person speaking. Don’t look at your phone or e-mail while people are speaking. This is not an appropriate time for multi-tasking.
- **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 for clarification.** 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 solution is the best or only way to handle such an experience can be helpful. Remember to keep your focus on the person seeking support, though.