

# Facilitating PFLAG Support Meetings: Navigating Difficult Times

Living during a time of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, news stories, and rhetoric (which is often leading to real-world consequences of harm) brings extra stressors and concerns to PFLAG support meetings, especially when group members hold diverse identities and relate differently to the social and political climate we're all navigating.

While it is impossible for any support meeting to be “perfect,” there are ways to find more desirable outcomes when a meeting discussion becomes challenging. An ideal PFLAG meeting might be one where multiple people share their experiences, conversations bounce off each other, and folks are brought closer to finding an understanding of their emotions in the present, and maybe even given an idea of how to navigate those emotions in the future. A meeting where just some of these are true can make all the difference when someone and/or the group is feeling overwhelmed.

Here are some tips for facilitating a challenging group conversation:

## Look for the emotion behind your meeting attendees' words

- Name the emotion. Address the emotion, not the causes
  - E.g. “it looks like we’re dealing with a lot of fear tonight”
    - Address the issue with compassion, empathy, and care
  - If someone begins a political discussion, refocus the conversation on the emotions that we feel when our community is attacked.
    - How can we support our loved ones and each other in navigating these emotions?
  - Ask folks where they are feeling that emotion. In their body? How is it showing up in their life?
    - How does this resonate with the larger group?
  - Getting familiar with a “[feelings wheel](#)” may help facilitators feel better prepared to address how people are feeling in the moment and understand their emotions on a deeper level

- It's okay to let the emotion sit in the room. Give the room some space to process and feel the emotion they have named.
- Some people's stories include tragedy that may trigger other folks in the room. Sometimes it may be appropriate for the whole group to discuss and process together. At other times, asking that person if they'd be interested in an individual conversation outside of the group may help them feel supported while also making sure the larger group stays emotionally safe.

## **Keep meetings solutions based, focusing on what people can do in this moment personally and for their family**

- In the midst of difficult conversations, ask if anyone has suggestions for actions to help find joy and healing (ie. advocacy, self care)
- How can people cultivate joy at this moment? What about tomorrow?
- How can people engage deeper in their community? Or with current efforts locally?
- Is there something needed to help navigate the emotion productively? Ask what folks WANT— even if it feels unattainable.
  - “I want to live in a country free of gun violence”
    - Are there any local ordinances or spaces you can advocate for?
  - “I want to feel safe”
    - What things make folks feel safe? Are there ways to make your PFLAG safe feel safer for folks?
  - “I just want some good news for once.”
    - Is there a space you all can share good news? Start meetings with this? Any books, podcasts, etc. that have information that feels uplifting? Where can folks seek out information outside of social media algorithms?

## **Celebrate wins**

- Ask people if anything good has happened lately (ie. name changes, affirming doctor's visit)

- Bring up the light when there's dark, show when people are thriving.
- BONUS NOTE: Share these good wins with PFLAG National. If you're willing to let us share them broadly on social media, you might be able to help others outside of your community to see what productive work and joy look like when they are struggling. Reach out with that information to your CE staffer, or directly to [digital@pflag.org](mailto:digital@pflag.org), including a link to your social posts OR submitting a short update with what you're working on and, if possible/comfortable, a photo from your chapter.
- Encourage people to go to an event that is LGBTQ-centered and joyful.
- Wins can be small! Come prepared with your small wins to model this.
  - Getting to work on time, having a favorite treat, or taking a walk are good examples.

## **Remind attendees to return to basics when the outside world feels too much**

- It's normal to feel overwhelmed by our environment-- but we get to choose what we do with that feeling
- Be mindful of clickbait, AI videos, and sensational stories designed to get people to engage!
  - Log off! Log off! Log off! Set timers on app consumption for your day.
  - Algorithms are designed to make us feel bad. Literally.
- What's the likelihood that this is really going to happen to me?
  - Is there anyone in my life that is at a higher risk? How can I support them?

## **Don't forget the strong and lengthy history of successfully fighting for progress in LGBTQ+ civil rights**

- I.e. "It feels really bad right now because we've made a lot of progress (affirming spaces for trans youth, marriage equality, hormone therapy that's safe)"

- Any queer elders in the meeting? If so, ask them for perspective!
- Remember there's another side to this—progress will be made again but not without loss first
- Use history as a guide—this is not the first time our communities have faced oppression.
  - How have different communities navigated state violence, oppression, and imperialism historically?

## **As a facilitator, know when to tap out**

- It might be time to tap out when:
  - You are feeling unsafe or out of control
  - The conversation is spiraling and you can't get the group back on track
  - You start to take on the feelings of attendees—sometimes it's hard not to overempathize
- Tapping out could look like:
  - “This conversation has been really helpful for me not to feel alone, but I think I may need to take a break from it for the moment. Did anyone have anything else they wanted to discuss at tonight's meeting?”
  - “Things are so hard right now. Would you all mind if we moved the discussion along, maybe something that's bringing us joy these days? I'd like us all to sit with this conversation until our next meeting when we can bring back some thoughtful ideas and maybe some solutions.”
- If someone needs professional support, have a list of resources for them to check out to get mental health support
  - Here is a list of [mental health resources](#) from PFLAG National
- Don't forget to aim to have at least two facilitators in every support meeting, or take turns every month! Delegation will help with facilitator burnout and having multiple facilitators at each meeting allows one to step out with an individual or small group

who may need additional support outside the larger group

## **Check out our additional facilitation resources to create a strong foundation for your facilitation skills:**

- [PFLAG Facilitation Best Practices](#)
- [Facilitation With Flair: Fostering Dynamic Discussions Recording and Training Toolkit](#)
- [Taking a Step Back: Prioritizing Self Care as a PFLAG chapter leader](#)

### **Additional resources**

- [Mental Health Resources](#)
- [How to have a difficult conversation](#)
- [Step by Step: A Checklist for Difficult Conversations](#)
- [Practical Strategies for Effective Communication](#)
- [Feelings Wheel](#)
- [Americans For Suicide Prevention](#)– consider partnering with your local AFSP chapter to host free volunteer-led workshops for navigating topics of suicide in support meetings
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)- check whether there is a NAMI chapter local to you that could be a potential partner in supporting and educating your membership