

Basic Trans Support Group Considerations

Groups for Trans Participants

Gender-specific groups: These are groups that have restrictions on who can attend, and focus on issues specific to the target population. Examples include transfeminine-only, transmasculine only, nonbinary-only, etc. Gender-specific groups may (but do not have to) focus on social, medical, or surgical transition support; dressing tips; and navigating specific gender roles.

All-inclusive gender groups: All-inclusive groups recognize a wide spectrum of gender identities and expressions. These groups are open and affirming for binary and nonbinary individuals. Moderation may be required to ensure that these groups maintain an affirming atmosphere for all.

Trans & gender-variant youth groups: Youth groups are for children and youth under a specific age. Some groups stop at age 18, others go up to age 21 or 24. Youth groups require that all adult volunteers complete background checks, meet facilitator : youth ratios, and obtain parental consent. Considerations: age-appropriate activities, aging-out, and relationship policies.

Specialty & intersectional groups: These are trans groups that provide support for trans people who also need support around another specific identity or issue. Each of these groups may require additional resources or training. These include (but are not limited to) groups specific to trans people of color, trans survivors of SA/DV/IPV, trans people living with HIV/AIDS, addiction/recovery groups, etc.

Groups for SOFFAs

Parents of trans & gender-variant youth groups: Parent support groups may be split into groups for parents of trans children/youth, and parents of trans adults. Issues may concern medical/surgical information; puberty suppressant medications; elementary, middle, and high school issues; talking to spouses, siblings, or other family members; custody issues; finding counselors and pediatricians.

Spouses/partners of trans people groups: Support groups for spouses/partners of trans people may or may not be open to trans individuals. Issues often include loss/gain/change of sexual identity, issues around sexual activities, discussing partner's transition with others, navigating social spaces, etc.

Friends/family/allies of trans people groups: Often for siblings, extended family members, friends, and allies - these groups may or may not be inclusive of parents. Issues may include providing support for trans people, navigating new social interactions, loss/gain/change.

Specialty & intersectional SOFFA groups: These are trans groups that provide support for SOFFAs of trans people who also need support around another specific identity or issue. Each of these groups may require additional resources or training. These include (but are not limited to) groups specific to SOFFAs of color, SOFFAs with disabilities, SOFFAs of a specific religious denomination, etc.

Peer Support Groups

Considerations Before You Begin

The more planning you do prior to starting the group, the smoother implementation will be. Here are a few questions to ask yourself before you get started:

- Why do I want to start this group?
- Do I have the skills and knowledge necessary to run this group?
- Who is going to help me?
- Who is going to attend the group, and how will I advertise to them?
- Where can I hold the group, and what does this space imply?
- Is the group accessible and inclusive?

Running Meetings

Establishing Rules & Expectations

Before the first meeting, you will need to think about how you will establish rules or guidelines. In order to keep everyone safe, there are certain behavioral expectations that participants must abide by. You can come up with these rules yourself, ask participants to draft rules during the first meeting, or ask participants to revise and add to a general set of rules. These guidelines should cover issues of confidentiality, respect, disclosure expectations, safe-zone expectations, mandatory reporting, content warnings, intra-group relationships, conversational guidelines, etc.



It is also important to let participants know what they can (or cannot) expect from the group. At each meeting, we often recommend reading or posting a statement about what the group is and what the group is not. For example: *“This is a peer-support group; this is not a therapeutic group. We are volunteer community organizers: we are not licensed to write letters in support of transition or provide clinical care.”*

Ideas for Icebreakers

- Check-in since last time
- Discuss a positive development
- What do you hope to get out of this session?
- Ask a thought-provoking theoretical question
- Identify a support person
- State what you do for self-care
- Ask a silly question

Facilitating Introductions

An important part of every group is allowing time for introductions, even if no new attendees are present. Name and pronouns are common, as well as an icebreaker that allows everyone a brief opportunity to talk. Make sure icebreakers are appropriate for the group

Activities and Structure

Many support groups consist of a discussion group, with various amounts of moderation. Discussion topics can be led by participants (open floor), drawn at random, decided by the facilitator, voted on, etc. Other activities could include film screenings, book readings or discussions, voluntary disclosure

stories, panels, guest speakers, writing reflections, healing/self-care activities, and so on.

One difficulty of a discussion group can be moderating the conversation. As a facilitator it is your job to make participants feel valued, to keep the conversation moving, to avoid too much repetition, to stymie inappropriate behavior, and to allocate air time fairly between participants. Learning when to prompt and when to allow more time for discussion is a skill that takes practice. **Remember** that participation is voluntary, and you should never force anyone to share.

Closing the Meeting

Always end the meeting on a high note. You want participants to feel empowered when they leave the space. It's also important to make sure that everyone is leaving in a state of wellness. It can be difficult to go from being in a supportive space to returning to a potentially hostile environment outside of the meeting. A few ways to end on a positive note include:

- Breathing exercise
- Meditation exercise
- Check-in
- Safety/wellness plan
- Self care ideas
- Positives from today's group
- Affirmations



Mediating Issues and Conflicts

Know Local Crisis Resources

Support groups can cause people to feel vulnerable and can unearth trauma. Anyone could go into crisis, or experience a PTSD episode. Develop an action plan for these scenarios, and make this clear in your introductions/rules.

Learn Conflict Resolution Models

Conflict resolution and de-escalation can be difficult, but is an important skill for a facilitator to have. In general, if there is a conflict between two people or parties, the issue should be solved privately before or after the meeting time. If there is a major issue that threatens safety or wellness, it may need to be solved during the meeting time.

Conflict with mediator

The mediator asks person A to state their understanding of the problem, while person B listens. The mediator then asks person B to state their understanding of the problem, while A listens. The mediator then asks A to restate how B understand the problem, and has B restate how A understands the problem. Both parties are asked to come up with potential solutions to the problem. The mediator is there to ensure the conversation is civil and productive.

Conflict with no mediator

Person A asks B to explain their understanding of the problem. Person A then restates B's understanding of the problem. Person A explains how their understanding of the problem differs from person B's understanding, and asks B to help them come up with solutions.

Intervention

When will you intervene in a conflict? The answer to this question may depend upon the age of participants, and the severity of the issue. For youth, you may be a mandatory reporter of all suspected emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. For adults, you may have an ethical obligation to report behavior if the participant is a threat to the safety of themselves or others. If a person discloses trauma-related information, but is not a threat to themselves or others, you can ask if the person would like information about local area resources, but you need to respect their self-efficacy to make their own decisions.

Accountability

Who will hold you accountable? Will you have multiple facilitators present? This is about protecting yourself and others from liability. We recommend having at least two facilitators present to reduce liability and to help in crisis situations with minimal interruption to the function of the group as a whole.

Keeping Momentum

A few issues that can affect the momentum of the organization:

- Attendance – Low attendance might mean you need to increase advertising, or change the date, time, or location of the meetings. High attendance might mean that you outgrow your initial space and budget.
- Frequency of meetings – Check-in with participants regularly. Are you meeting often enough? Too frequently?
- Facilitator burnout – Activism fatigue can destroy a group. Sharing the load with other facilitators can be helpful. Recognize the warning signs of burnout and stress, and do what you need to do to take care of yourself as a facilitator.

Sample Statement

Ground rules: What happens here, what is said here, who you see here, stays here; please be aware that names, pronouns, and presentation that people use here are not necessarily those they may use at work, at home, or in public. NO cell phone pictures. Please use a name tag, and indicate your preferred pronouns. You may change your name and pronouns at any time- but if you do, kindly change your name tag as well, or my little head will explode from trying to keep track. Networking, friendships, etc., that continue outside of these meetings are fine- please be careful, be safe.

This group has been started by a small group of local gender-variant individuals in response to requests from many area individuals and providers. We are here to help provide peer support, for community. We're all volunteers. We are not therapists. We do not give advice, we can't provide you with letters for hormones or surgery. If you are seeking a mental health counselor, or providers for medical gender transition, we are in the process of compiling a list of resources in the area.

Additional Resources

Trans Education, Activism, Community & Health (TEACH) Alliance www.teachalliance.com

We are a non-profit organization that provides education and trainings. We have numerous training resources on our website, and are available to provide consultations and workshops for your organization.

Forge-Forward <http://forge-forward.org/>

This is the largest repository of trans aging and anti-violence resources that we've found. They have really wonderful resources for SOFFAs, as well.

101 Alternatives to Suicide for Freaks, Teens, and Other Outlaws by Kate Bornstein (Book and App) - Although focused on teen suicide prevention, this is a great primer on what harm-reduction strategies look like in practice, and contains great ideas for self-care.

The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani & Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha – This book is focused on intimate partner violence within activist communities (including LGBTQI communities). This is a great primer for anyone providing violence support groups.

Self-Help Resource Centre

A very comprehensive guide on planning and running a peer support group:

<http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/site/wp-content/uploads/MH-Peer-Support-Manual1.pdf>

Running Trans Youth Support Groups

A Few Considerations*

- Background checks for ALL volunteers
- Parental consent forms
- Liability insurance**
- First aid / CPR certifications**
- Allergen policy & food handling safety
- Mandatory reporting**
- Drug/alcohol/firearm restricted space
- Facilitator : youth ratios**
- Accountability policies
- Age policies
- Dating policies

**This is not an exhaustive list. Check all state and local laws prior to establishing youth groups.*

***May (or may not) be required and requirements may vary depending upon state and local laws.*

Facilitator Training

Screening: We recommend establishing a rigorous screening process for selecting facilitator and volunteers. All volunteers over the age of 18 must obtain a state/federal background check (and possibly fingerprinting). Even if not required, we recommend current First Aid and CPR certification, and food handler's permits if food will be served at meetings. Training should be provided to establish consistency with volunteers.

Accountability & Reporting: Facilitator-to-youth ratio requirements vary by state and by the age of the children present. Additionally, groups should have procedures in place to avoid one-on-one contact between a youth and a volunteer in order to reduce liability. At no time should volunteers be allowed to date youth in the program (even if youth are over 18). State laws may require that any disclosure by youth of emotional, sexual, or physical abuse be reported to authorities. Some facilitators may be mandatory reporters by nature of their professions. It is imperative that youth know who is and who is not a mandatory reporter.

Policies for Youth

Age: At what age do youth age out of the program, and why did you pick that age? Some youth programs go up to age 18, others until 21 or 24. How old must volunteers/facilitators be? If the group runs to age 18, it can be difficult to have someone who is 19 or 20 volunteer with the program, simply because they may have difficulty acting as an authoritative figure (especially if they were formally a youth participant in the group).

Dating: Youth are never allowed to date volunteers. Is dating within the group permitted? Establish clear guidelines and make these known to youth.

Activities

Activities for youth should be engaging and age-appropriate. Younger children may best find support through kinesthetic activities, arts, or crafts, while older youth may prefer a traditional discussion group format. Facilitators and youth should practice active listening.

Group Dynamics: Take into account that siblings may be present, and additional conflict-resolution strategies may need to be employed. Decide policies for handling behavioral issues ahead of meetings.

Active Listening Tips

- Lean toward speaker, make eye contact; nod
- Do not interrupt; know when to allow silence
- Be nonjudgmental; use warm tone and signals
- Summarize statements to ensure understanding
- Do not offer unsolicited advice; do not pry

Recommended Reading

The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals by Stephanie A. Brill and Rachel Pepper

Disclaimer: This packet does not constitute legal advice. Check all state, local, and federal laws before establishing a support group. This is an informational guide only and is supplemental to other trainings.