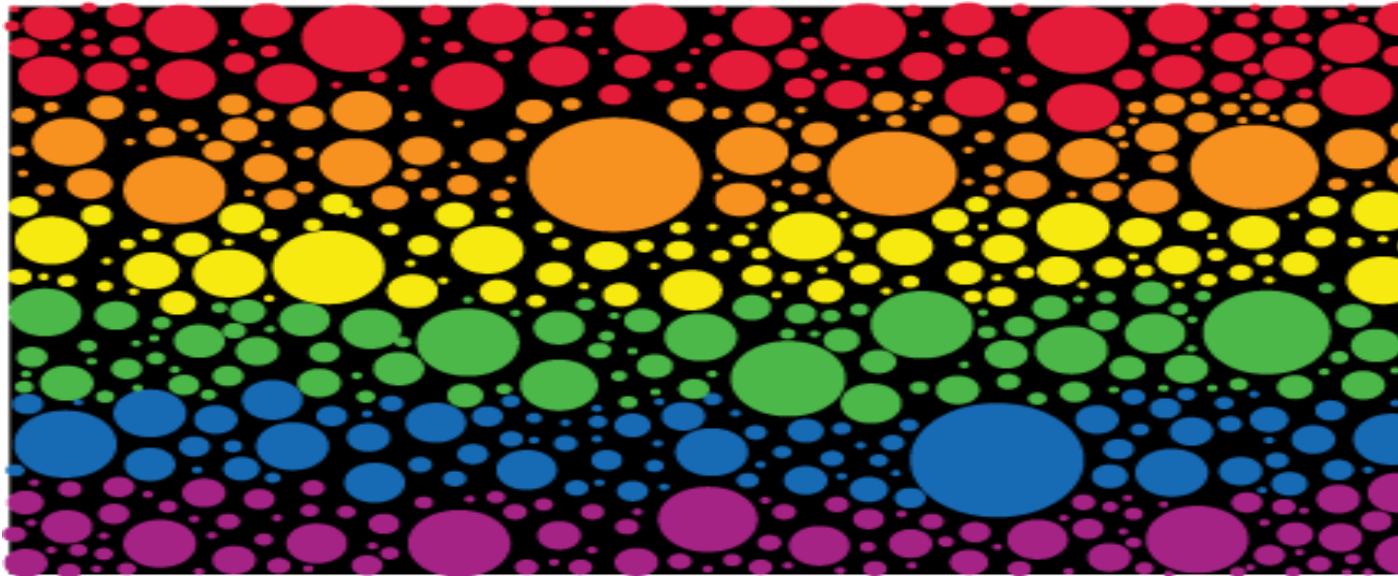


CREATING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

A Guide for Establishing & Sustaining
LGBTIQA+ Peer Support Groups



working it out

Tasmania's gender, sexuality and intersex
support, education & advocacy service

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Acknowledgements

Working It Out acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Tasmania, their diversity, histories and knowledge and their continuing connections to land and community.

We acknowledge the contemporary Aboriginal communities, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

And we recognise the value of continuing Aboriginal knowledge and cultural practice, which informs our understandings of history, culture, science and the environment.

Gratitude

Working It Out would like to express our gratitude for LGBTIQ+ people, activists, supporters, friends and allies whose courage and strengths have helped to make this a more just society for our communities and their friends and families.

Their commitment to change, their resistance and courage to achieve justice has impacted on all of us to some degree. For some of us there is on-going hurt, anger or frustration. We need to be mindful of this in both the way we work and engage with others.



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Introduction

Peer support groups are made up of people who have shared or similar experiences and work on the assumption that people who have similar experiences can better understand and support one another. For members of our LGBTIQ+ communities, engagement with peers in a group setting is well established as a valuable way to reduce social isolation and provide group members with many benefits for mental health and well-being.

LGBTIQ+ peer support groups offer group members a safe space to be themselves and connect with others to share, learn, create, problem solve, have fun, participate in activities and create change. All of these can encourage support and a sense of belonging, pride and community.

The information outlined in this resource has been developed as a guide for setting up and running LGBTIQ+ specific peer support groups. Some of this information may also be applicable to other LGBTIQ+ specific interest groups that are not focussed primarily on peer support. The guide aims to build the confidence, skills and knowledges of LGBTIQ+ folk and allies wanting to set up and maintain a group in their community.



How to Use this Resource

This resource is designed for anyone who is considering starting an LGBTIQ+ Peer Support or other interest group. It outlines some key things to consider prior to setting up a group, during the planning and development phase of a group and during the life of a group. There are a number of suggestions and tips, along with key considerations and a few templates and activities to help to get you started.

Creating Community Connections
A Guide to Setting up and Facilitating LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Groups

Some topics covered in this guide include:

- Characteristics of LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Groups
- Why LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Groups are important
- Things to Consider Before getting started
- Getting Started
- Meetings, Activities and Events
- Sustaining the Group
- Troubleshooting
- Resources

Whether you're involved in an established group or just starting out there may be sections that are more or less helpful depending on your specific project. Rather than a comprehensive list of instructions this guide is a starting point and suggests a set of recommended considerations to help you reflect and plan for your own group and assist you to think through important decisions that need to be made.

While the following examples of peer group characteristics, benefits and aims are inexhaustive they do provide insight into what a peer group might look like and some outcomes that can be achieved from a successful group.

Characteristics of LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Groups

- Made up of peers, people who share the same or similar experiences
- Coordinator/facilitator – manages and oversees discussion and content of meetings and/or online forums
- Is voluntary in nature
- Is inclusive to a particular group and/or interest
- A safe place where each person's identity is accepted, respected and affirmed

Why LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Groups are Important

Life can be challenging, and we all need support during times of stress, grief, loss, relationship breakdown and when we're under work or financial pressure. On top of this, LGBTIQ+ people might be subject to prejudice, stigma, discrimination, harassment, and violence. We know that LGBTQ+ people are disproportionately affected by mental ill-health, across the spectrum of LGBTIQ+ identities and the range of mental health problems.

The human connection people may find through a peer support group is important as many LGBTIQ+ people may also feel isolated in their day-to-day lives. The sense of connection, empathy, and understanding found through an LGBTIQ+ support group can provide group members with many benefits for mental health and well-being.

The reason that people join Peer Support Groups can be wide and varied. Some people join a Peer Support Group to have access to information, to learn from others, access support through understanding and empathy, share stories, to feel connected and to gain a sense of belonging. These and other benefits may include:

Support Group Benefits

- Promotion of inclusion by creating community
- Connection(s) with other LGBTIQ+ folk
- Reduces isolation and promotes a strong support network
- Access to supportive information, ideas and resources
- Improved mental health and overall well-being
- Provides a forum for shared experiences and positive LGBTIQ+ visibility
- A space in which diversity is celebrated and pride fostered
- Provision of accessible support and positive representation of LGBTIQ+ lives
- Enables opportunities to learn from others and gain support
- Provides a sense of belonging in a safe and affirming environment
- Opportunities for group members to build confidence, self-esteem and skills
- Empowerment of group members to live the lives they chose
- Builds capacity to work towards individual and group goals
- Can lead to increased awareness and positive change in the broader community
- Encourage physical, social, cultural and mental activity.



Aims of Peer Support Groups

- To provide members with information and knowledge about relevant topics.
- To create community.
- To provide support, encouragement and an opportunity for sharing personal issues while working towards appropriate solutions
- To provide social opportunities for people who may otherwise be isolated due to various reasons
- To raise community awareness about LGBTIQ+ issues
- Encourage opportunities for mutual support
- To share LGBTIQ+ specific information
- Assist people to develop skills and build confidence
- Help people gain access to local community-based services and information
- Respect and celebrate each person's uniqueness

Types of Peer Support Groups

Some peer support groups are a gathering of individuals at a physical or virtual meeting space sharing experiences in a relaxed open environment, while other groups have a more formal structure, use agendas and offer specific opportunities for their members.

Some groups operate in a face-to-face environment while other groups choose to bring people together via online methods such as chat rooms, forums, blogs and social media.

Peer support group options

- Face-to-face groups with formally structured meetings; or informal groups such as regular social and special interest gatherings;
- Online chat rooms/forums/groups;
- Email, phone and message groups;
- Peer-to-peer video eg., Zoom, Skype, Discord etc.
- A combination of the above.

Online support is similar to face-to-face groups – except the group is virtual in nature. Being part of an online community allows peers to share their stories with a broad group of people who may have a range of different experiences. Online groups are usually moderated by a number of 'caretakers' or 'administrators', who manage the content of the group along with the registration process of members. Online groups can provide a sense of community even though the members do not meet in person and can also be useful for people with geographical restrictions or for those with limited personal mobility.

New Groups versus Reforming Existing Groups

Some groups will be totally new. Others may be a re-formation or restructuring of a group that existed in the past but has disbanded. If you are resurrecting a group, it may be helpful to consider why the original group no longer exists (low attendance, ineffective meetings, lack of interest) and whether there is a need in the community for the group to be reinstated. Some questions you might ask could be:

- What type of structure the group had and how often the group met?
- What the facilitator did, or did not do, to maintain the group? and,
- Are any previous group members interested in seeing the group start up again and, if so, what suggestions, if any, do they have for the group's reestablishment?

Whether you are thinking about or just starting a new LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Group or re-establishing a former group it is worth considering the factors that are going to give the group the best chance of success.



Considerations for a Successful Peer Support Group

1. Create a safe space for all LGBTIQ+ people, and if needed, their family, friends and allies.
2. Understand how homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia impact the lives of LGBTIQ+ people and their families. Be prepared to challenge societal attitudes and practices that perpetuate any form of discrimination and/or hate towards members of LGBTIQ+ communities and their families.
3. Be inclusive of all LGBTIQ+ people and of their needs, experiences, questions and uncertainties.
4. Understand that there are many ways to define oneself, and that language and identities are not limited by one individual or group's understanding of what it is to be part of the LGBTIQ+ community. In addition, our identities may be fluid and evolving.
5. Be prepared to look at and take action to challenge the systemic issues and structural injustices that impact on the lives of LGBTIQ+ people and their families.
6. Encourage group member engagement through the sharing of knowledge, experiences and ideas but do not pressure anyone to contribute if they chose not to.
7. Emphasise the utmost importance of group member privacy and that confidentiality is to be maintained by all group members.
8. If action is required in relation to an issue or issues raised within a group do so in an informed, sensitive and confidential manner.
9. Acknowledge when something is beyond the group's scope or capacity and seek additional support if needed.
10. A successful Peer Support Group is a place where LGBTIQ+ people's agency and autonomy are fostered. They are supported and encouraged to have a voice, to take action and to develop a sense of pride and ownership.

Where to Start?

When establishing an LGBTIQ+ peer support group it may be helpful to think about the process as passing through four distinct stages:

1. **PLANNING**
2. **SETTING UP**
3. **RUNNING**
4. **MONITORING AND MAINTAINING**

Each of these stages involves a number of considerations that may be useful to keep in mind when thinking of how to go about establishing and sustaining a peer support group.



Stage 1: Planning an LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Group

The planning stage is where the foundations are laid for successful groups. It is important to give adequate consideration to Who, What, Where, When, How and Why you are planning to set up an LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Group.

Whatever the reasons, defining a clear set of objectives for the new group will greatly enhance its chance of success. A successful Peer Support Group will always have a clear purpose and be accessible to the people it is supporting. How these details are worked out will depend on the members of the group and the way the group is established.

Some of the questions to consider may be:

- Who is the group for?
- Who is the group not for?
- Why do you want to establish a Peer Support Group?
- What will be the aim(s) of the group?
- What format will the group have?
- Where will the group take place?
- When will the group happen?
- How do you envisage the group operating?
- How many people do you think the group will attract?
- How will you attract people to the group?
- How will you know if the group is successful?
- Under what circumstances would it be necessary to stop running the group?
- What would happen to the group if you moved away, or were no longer able to run it?

Depending on the type of group that you are wanting to establish, there may be a host of other considerations that come up in the group's evolution.

Is there a need for a Peer Support Group in my Community?

Before you put in the work to start a group, ask the very important question, is there a need for a group to be developed? To answer this question, it can be helpful to research existing services and supports that are already on offer for community members.

Some of things that may be beneficial to consider include:

- Learning about existing groups in the area. Your group should complement, not duplicate, what is already available in the community.
- Visiting or speaking to other group coordinators in the local community for information relating to how they run a successful group.
- Meeting with local community services and LGBTIQ+ providers in your area. They can be a source for referrals for potential members and help to arrange guest speakers and other support for your group meetings.

- Ensure you have enough support and assistance from those around you (eg., family members, friends, allies) and other members of your community to help you to get the group started and to keep it going.
- Think about the focus and the purpose of the group. It may be to provide emotional support, social interaction, information and/or resource sharing. It may also provide access to specific activities and/or interests or a combination of some or all of these.
- Remember that you don't have to be everything to all people or do everything at once.
- Start small so that you can build up over time.
- Begin to think about the structure of the group and how tasks will be performed.
- How is the group going to be managed and maintained?
- Where might be a suitable and available space for the group to meet?

What will the Group Do?

Coming up with ideas and planning for group meetings and any other actions group members may be interested in can come from many and varied sources. For example:

- Check out what other LGBTIQ+ groups are doing in different places (locally and internationally)
- Keep up to date with significant dates and events for LGBTIQ+ folk
- Link in and collaborate with other community groups

Share Skills with Each Other. Even if one or a few people are really good at most tasks, take the time to share knowledge and help everyone learn new skills. Building community is the whole point -- if we just focus on being "efficient" we lose sight of our bigger goals.

Get Everyone Involved. Don't let the same people take responsibility for all tasks. Make sure everyone who wants to get involved can, even if tasks are small, like bringing food, hanging posters, sending out an e-mail. Have a new member do tasks with an old member. Seek ideas from all group members for consideration, discussion and action.

Organising Public Events. Your group might want to organise events for the larger public, and the possibilities are endless, from workshops, panels, speak-outs and lectures, to art making, film screenings, live music, art shows, and potlucks.

Organise Member Events with Invited Friends, Family and Allies. As above but for invited folk only. Maybe have a specific celebration or party for something achieved by or important to the group.

Stage 2: Setting up a Peer Support Group

The main things to think about when you are setting up a group include:

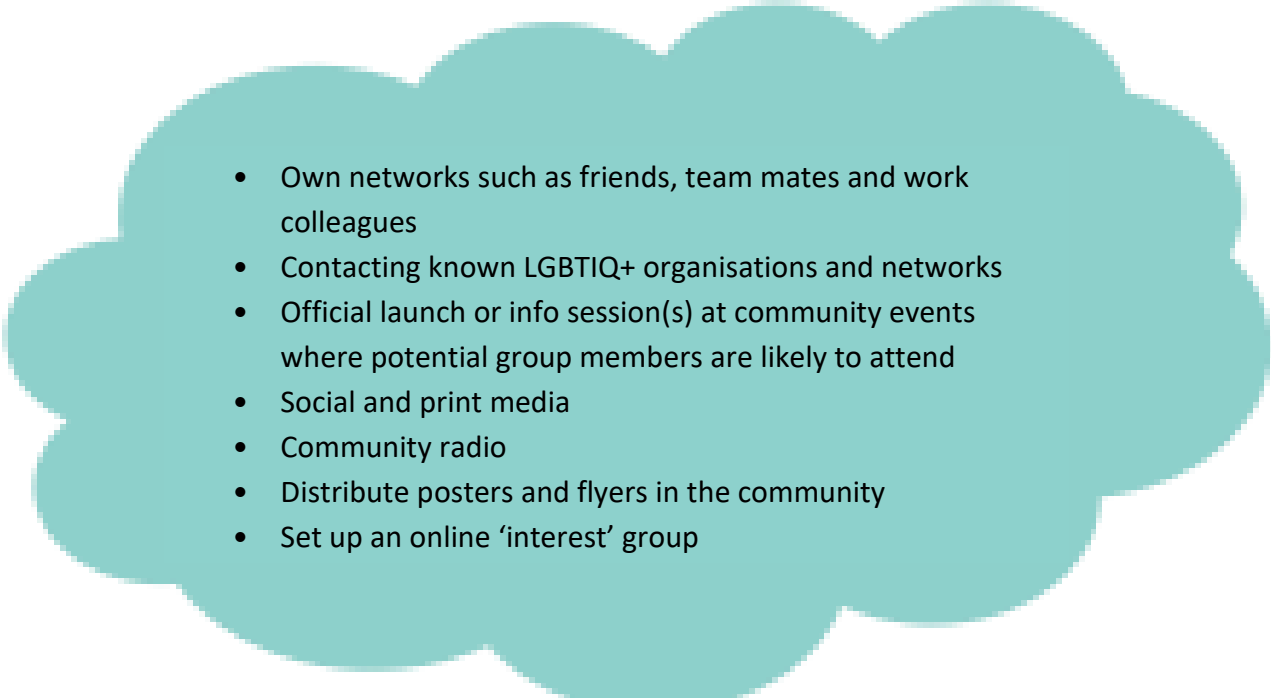
- How are you going to let others know about the group?
- What do you need to do to create a safe space?
- When and where will the group meet?
- Who can help you with various aspects of coordinating and running the group?

Spreading the Word

Make sure people know where and when they can find the group. Beyond the initial announcement to interested participants and other organisations, there are a range of options for promoting your peer support group. Which ones you choose will largely be determined by the nature of the group, your target audience, your time and resources. Whatever methods you use, promotion of your group will allow LGBTIQ+ community members, their friends, family and allies to spread the word so that those who may be interested in being involved can be.

Know that it's perfectly normal if your group's meetings start out (very) small. It will take time to get this off the ground. Be persistent and consistent with your promotion, stay engaged, and be patient. You may find after a while that you have a core group of regular attendees. You are providing an incredibly important service to LGBTIQ+ people in your community.

Promotion could include:

- 
- Own networks such as friends, team mates and work colleagues
 - Contacting known LGBTIQ+ organisations and networks
 - Official launch or info session(s) at community events where potential group members are likely to attend
 - Social and print media
 - Community radio
 - Distribute posters and flyers in the community
 - Set up an online 'interest' group

Raising Community Awareness and Gathering Local Support

Making connections with other community groups and organisations can also be a great way to:



- Get advice and helpful suggestions
- Identify ways to work together
- Share information and resources
- To find out what assistance they can provide
- To utilise their connections so that they can refer people to your group and create awareness about your group
- To assist with a space or room to enable you to hold group meetings

Other community organisations and local services can be a good source of local information and support along with community radio stations, local newspapers/newsletters and social media that can help to promote community awareness.

Register your Support Group

It is a good idea to register your support group with Working It Out. That way we can promote your group via WIO's networks and community members will be able to know that your group exists. Working It Out is willing to work with your group and help promote the support you are offering to your local community. See WIO's contact section.

Setting the Time & Place for your Group to Meet

Deciding when and where to schedule the group meetings and/or activities are significant decisions that will depend on the nature of the group, group member preferences, venue and member availability, potential costs, location and access.

Community organisations, halls, clubs and centres as well as local councils can be good places to start and may be able to provide a suitable space or at least, point you in a promising direction. Depending on the venue requirements of a group, Working It Out may also be able to offer a suitable space or provide information on other options.

Planning your meeting or group get-together schedule

While the meeting schedule may change over time as the group evolves and group members' circumstances change, it can be worthwhile having an initial schedule that will work for you and based on any information already provided by members if you are going to coordinate the group at least in the short term. When planning the meeting schedule it is important to consider;

- How often the group will meet, for example fortnightly, monthly or bimonthly
- The duration of each meeting, for example 1 or 2 hours in length
- Time of day - consider the most appropriate time of day for members
- Days of the week – Monday - Friday or on the weekend
- Availability of the venue



Considerations for a Suitable Group Venue

- Is the venue suitable for the group's activities?
- Is it easily accessible, including via public transport?
- Does the venue provide a welcoming, quiet, clean and comfortable environment that allows for privacy?
- What facilities does the group need in a space? (eg. gender neutral toilets, kitchen, parking, a secure space to store belongings etc).
- Is the space easily accessible for people with all levels of mobility?
- Can the group have evening or after-hours access if required?
- Are there any costs associated with using a space?
- Is the physical space safe and hazard free?
- Will the space cater for the diverse needs of group members?
- Other considerations depending on the group



Local councils are good places to approach for free venues. WIO in the south (where we have a larger space) may also be an option. Ask us!

Creating a Safe Space

Human connections are built in an environment where peers feel safe and have choice and control over what happens to them. Thus, it is vitally important that the space (physical or virtual) in which the group happens feels physically, emotionally and psychologically safe for all participants. It must be inclusive of all LGBTIQ+ individuals and celebrate diversity. Group members must be able to choose whether and how they participate in group activities. This includes choice around:

- When they attend
- How often they attend
- What they choose to share
- What they want to try or not try
- What role they take in a group or an interaction
- How long they stay in the group

People need to be able to withdraw from the group for a period of time and return to it later, as well as be able to miss meetings or leave early without feeling any pressure not to do so.

Having choice and control in one's own life can contribute to a sense of empowerment whereas, a lack of control can negatively affect well-being. Encouraging group members to be jointly responsible for the development of the group's guidelines around behaviour and how any unacceptable behaviour will be responded to can also support developing a safe space for the group (see next section).

Group members should also be supported to feel a sense of ownership in the group. This can be assisted by allowing all members to be involved in important decisions and regularly provide input regarding the group's function and operation. Seek member feedback on issues such as, the reasons to establish the group, how the group might run, what members want to get from their involvement in the group and what, if any, changes need to be made.

Other Considerations

Language & Pronouns

Language is vital for communication, the sharing of experiences, for connection, understanding and affirming one's identity and existence. This is the case particularly for many LGBTIQ+ people so it is necessary to be mindful of the role language may play in the sense of safety and belonging LGBTIQ+ people may feel in a group.

There can be many different definitions, understandings and expressions that relate to a given identity or community, so it is always best to respectfully ask what a word or label means to someone and the best person to ask about one's identity is the person you are talking to (provided you ask in a safe space/way). It is also important to keep in mind that language and identities may change over time and across settings.

When you introduce yourself to the group, sharing your pro-nouns, if any, can be beneficial to creating a safe space as this can also provide reassurance to group members that how we identify matters and we share pronouns because we know that you can't tell by looking what someone's gender identity is or how they want to be referred to. Sharing pronouns or any information by group members should always be optional and never mandatory. (See the Glossary at the back of this guide for a list of key terms)

Intersectionality

Take into account LGBTIQ+ people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they may face. Be mindful of the complex way in which an individual's identity and multiple forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups. None of us operate in a vacuum, after all, and leaders of support groups need to keep in mind how

oppression they may not experience themselves can affect people who participate in peer support groups.

Handling information – Privacy implications

With many community groups, access to some personal information may occur for a variety of reasons (eg. communication). If member details are obtained, the need to determine how group members' details will be kept secure and confidential is essential. Members details should never be shared without their expressed permission to do so.

Confidentiality

At the beginning of any new group, and as each new person joins, the topic of confidentiality should be raised. The group needs to be clear about what information 'stays in the group' and what can be shared. Confidentiality is non-negotiable.

Emphasise the importance of confidentiality. In order for your members to feel comfortable about discussing personal issues and work through problems, they need to feel confident that nobody is going to discuss personal details outside of the group. It is important that everyone in the group understands and practices this.

Review Progress

To assist you in determining where you are at with getting your group up and running it can be helpful to review each of the considerations discussed so far and get an idea of what may still need to be addressed before the group's first meeting.

- **When you have found a suitable space for your group and have received enough/some interest from community members who want to be involved, schedule a date and time for the first meeting**
- **Plan ahead, give folks plenty of notice so they can schedule it into their diary**
- **Send new group members information about what the group is about and details of the upcoming meeting including location.**
- **It can be helpful to provide a map, and public transport options to the meeting venue as well as photos of the venue inside and out.**
- **Send everyone a reminder a few days before the meeting**
- **This reminder should also include anything that members need to bring along or prepare beforehand.**

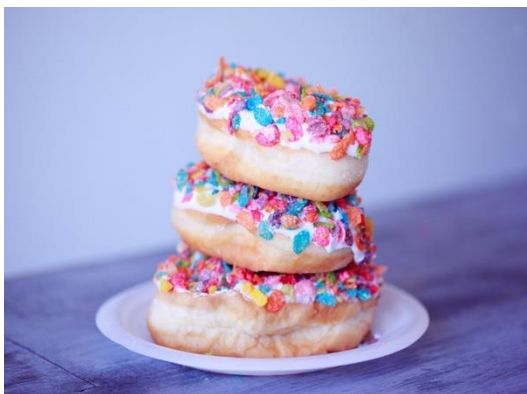
Stage 3: Running a Peer Support Group

The First Meeting

You've put in a lot of hard work into preparing for your support group to begin, and now the day has come to hold your first meeting or group get-together. If you haven't already determined some of the details and structure of group meetings, the first meeting is a good opportunity to make decisions on some practical issues, such as, how often to meet, suitable times and dates, discussion topics and possible activities for future meetings. Meetings can provide a safe space for emotions, understandings, experiences, fun, seriousness, connection, creativity and change. They can build resilience and community, offer hope and be responsive to the immediate and ongoing needs of group members.

Preparation and Pre-Meeting Checklist

- Develop a simple agenda (see example) or list of discussion topics and activities to help provide focus and keep the meeting on track if needed
- Prepare any materials required
- Put out signs to guide new members to the meeting venue
- Provide sticky labels for people to use as name tags
- Prepare the space in a way that accommodates anyone with mobility needs
- Ensure space will be comfortable for group members (eg., temperature, suitable lighting such as corner lamps rather than harsh fluorescents etc)
- Set up an attendance sheet or check in option for people to provide their details (to keep in contact with members and for COVID contact tracing)
- Set up chairs and other comfortable seating options such as cushions/beanbags
- Provide a bowl or similar for people to leave a donation towards any meeting costs
- Put out refreshments if providing



A Sample Meeting Agenda

- Welcome and Meeting Overview
- Introductions/ Check-in
- About the group.
- What are we going to be doing?
- What are our needs and wants within and outside the group?
- Brainstorm possible ways to meet these needs.
- What activities and projects are we inspired to do?
- Decide what needs to be done before the next meeting. For example, identify tasks, allocate responsibilities.
- Distribute resources and any relevant materials (this may also occur earlier).
- Check in with group members and seek their feedback
- Thank everyone for coming, give details for next meeting and close meeting
- Other relevant points...

Start the meeting

As people begin arriving, be sure to welcome them and guide them to where the meeting will be held. It can also be helpful to let new members know where the bathroom and kitchen are and any other relevant facilities. If group members are chatting amongst one another, it can be helpful to give a 5 minute 'heads up' that the meeting will start soon. Once the group has gathered and you are ready you can begin the meeting.

Aim to set a friendly and welcoming tone before, during and after the meeting. If you are friendly, honest, and enthusiastic, that energy will spread to the other people in the room. It is also ok to be nervous! Just be honest and let others know how you're feeling. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable and as real as much as feels safe for you can inspire other people to open up. Remember, you're not trying to be a professional or 'have it all together', peer support groups are about being real and sharing a safe space with other LGBTIQ+ folk.

Confidentiality

At the beginning of each meeting, help create a safe space for participants by clarifying the importance of group confidentiality. When people feel their personal information won't leave the room, they may be more comfortable sharing it with others.

(Also see previous section on confidentiality)

Introductions

If this is a new group or there are new members present for the first time, it is important to introduce yourself, your pronouns, explain what the group is about and how you envisage the group operating, the importance of having a safe space including the need for respect and confidentiality. This is also a good opportunity to share a little about yourself, how you see your role, why you wanted to be involved in the group, and what your own hopes are for the group.

It is also good to explain why pronouns are shared - even if you think it's obvious, it won't be for some people and for others it will be important to hear why. It might even be one of the first times some LGBTIQ+ folk have heard the importance of not assuming people's pronouns emphasised and explained.

Invite everyone to introduce themselves and share anything that they would like to with the group such as why were interested in coming along. Once again, emphasise that sharing is optional, and it is totally okay for any group member to listen in and elect to 'pass' anytime on any topic if they do not wish to contribute a response. Some people might not feel comfortable, ready or might be questioning and simply being in the group is what they are comfortable with at that time.

Discussion & Activities

To begin the discussion, it can be effective to touch on something that has already been identified as important to group members or to simply ask the group if anyone would like to discuss anything in particular, has something they wish to share and/or a question they would like to ask.

You may already have some ideas about what you think the group may be interested in discussing and/or doing. These ideas may have arisen from your own research about the needs and wants of LGBTIQ+ people in your community and you may already have a number of topics for discussion and/or activities prepared.

Asking group members for their input will also be vitally important to ensure that the group offers something that members can feel a part of and contribute meaningfully to while feeling valued and supported. Some possible things to explore with the group could be:

- What are members' needs and wants within and outside the group?
- Brainstorm possible ways to meet these needs.
- What activities and projects are group members inspired to do?

- What needs to be done to support these activities. For example, what resources/materials are required, identify tasks, who wants to take on specific responsibilities?
- Think about the immediate, short and longer term aims and aspirations for the group.

Each meeting may follow a similar format or vary depending on what the group decides. For example, a meeting may be a completely open discussion, a facilitated dialogue, involve brainstorming, focused planning for an upcoming event, or something else altogether?

Group Guidelines

Apart from maintaining confidentiality and ensuring that all group members feel safe and respected, there are no hard and fast rules about how an LGBTIQ+ peer support group should operate. This is something that group members will have to discuss and decide. Some groups prefer to keep their roles quite informal, with members taking on various responsibilities as they arise. Other groups may choose to be more formal in structure and allocate specific roles and/or tasks to different group members who volunteer for such. Regardless of a group's structure it can be valuable if group members set some clear guidelines or ground 'rules' for the running of the group, how meetings will proceed and how decisions will be made.

Some examples of group guidelines could be:

- All members of the group are able to suggest topics for discussion
- Meetings will start on time where possible
- Members will take in turns, allowing others to voice their opinions and make comments
- Members will respect others' opinions and listen
- From time-to-time guest speakers may be invited to address the group
- Offer respect to all opinions, even if you don't agree
- Be open minded
- Contribute to a safe and comfortable environment
- Confidentiality and privacy will be maintained for and by all group members

Activity: Develop a Group Agreement

For people to feel comfortable and safe, it can be helpful to develop an agreement together that provides reassurance and guidance for all group members. A starting point can be to simply ask group members what they need to support them to feel safe and comfortable in the group. This activity can initially be done in smaller groups/pairs and then shared and discussed as a whole group to come up with group guidelines or an overall agreement.

Group Members' Roles & Responsibilities

All group members should keep overall group aims and guidelines in mind. Each member is responsible for their own behaviour and adhering to the agreed upon guidelines of the group. Everyone can assist one another through active listening (hearing and understanding) and by showing respect and support.

Peer Group Facilitation

It is common for LGBTIQ+ peer support groups to be facilitated by a peer or peers who are motivated and/or have some understanding of how to run a group or are keen to develop their understanding to do so. Some groups will encourage different members to take turns facilitating if they wish while others will tend to have a single facilitator for all/most meetings. Co-facilitation by two people and when facilitators reflect group diversity such as gender, age, and race can be positive options for LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Groups. It is also good to pair more experienced and less experienced facilitators, and to offer new people a chance to learn facilitation skills.

Role of Group Facilitator(s)

Group facilitators guide the group but do not control it. It is their role to:

- Follow and direct the agenda while also remembering that the group is more important than the agenda
- Hold the space for group members to share, listen and be heard
- Ensure group members feel welcome, valued and supported
- Encourage group members to listen to one another
- Support everyone to have their say and make comments
- Check in with group members that they are okay with how the group is running and any decisions made
- Make sure the meeting runs on time

Tips for LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Group Facilitators

- Aim to create a safe as possible space for the group
- Accept and be open to change
- Have a positive attitude and lead by example
- Understand that everyone is different and may have different views
- Be open to learning from other people within the group
- Have understanding and knowledge of the issues affecting people in group
- Show empathy and give support to group members
- Respect all members of the group equally
- Give consideration to the value of sharing your own story and recognise the value in others sharing theirs
- Have personal insight into your own life experiences, values and beliefs
- Be able to engage members and deal with conflict
- Seek, accept and act upon feedback from members about the group's progress
- Listen more than speak
- Be genuine
- Remember that the group is more important than the agenda
- Accept that some days things work and some days, they don't
- Make good use of the suggestions that members and others make
- Be neutral/unbiased
- Take care of yourself (see section on self-care)

Encourage members to talk about themselves

One advantage of support groups is that they can create an atmosphere where members feel comfortable talking about and working through very personal issues and experiences. Disclosure or the act of revealing personal information gives other members a chance to offer support, ideas, and assistance. It can encourage other members to share their own experiences and fosters feelings of trust within the group. To maintain that trust, facilitators may find that they need to disclose appropriate personal information about themselves from time to time and only if they are comfortable to do so.

Asking open ended questions

An open-ended question is designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own knowledge and feelings. It is the opposite of a closed-ended question, which encourages a short or single-word answer. Open-ended questions typically begin with words such as "Why" and "How", or phrases such as "Tell me about". Close ended questions will usually only attract a yes or no response.

Make sure that everyone has a chance to talk have their say

Some people are naturally more talkative than others. Asking direct questions can help to get quiet members to speak up - it is important that they have their say. It is also important to keep the more vocal members on-topic and gently remind them to let others have a turn at times.

Offer support

Giving members support can help them to realise that reaching their goals is possible; it can give them hope and let them know that you and others empathise with what they're going through.

Support could simply be listening and making statements that show compassion, empathy, respect, acceptance and genuine regard for someone's well-being. Really listen to the feelings expressed by members and acknowledge those feelings. Support may also be expressed through body language and other gestures of understanding and kindness.

Providing suggestions and access to relevant information and resources can also be very supportive for someone who, for example, might be seeking further understanding, helpful strategies and additional knowledge about options that may be relevant to their needs and/or situation.

Sometimes a group member may need support outside the scope and capacity of the group and its members. It is therefore important to have some knowledge of other support options that are available in the wider community. If you don't know, ask those who you think might and/or conduct your own research online or otherwise. Provide the appropriate support services' details to the group member and ask them if they are able to make contact with the service(s) or have someone who can for them. Otherwise, you may choose to offer making contact on their behalf if you are comfortable to do so.

Knowing and maintaining safe group and personal boundaries will help all group members understand what the group is and what it is not and also what the extent of your role is.

(Also, see listings in the Support Services Section)

Problem Solving Tips

While solving problems shouldn't be the only goal of a support group, it is something that many members hope for and expect. All members should take part in the problem-solving process so that no single person is seen as the solution to their difficulties. It is the facilitator's role to help members learn how to help each other with problem solving tips.

1. Clarifying the problem

Make sure everyone fully understands the problem. If you aren't sure what the problem is, ask questions to get more information.

2. Talking about the alternatives

Bring up possible solutions to the problem but be very careful to word them in a way that doesn't give advice. Telling people what to do is not the purpose or responsibility of a peer support group. Try asking members to explain what has worked well for them in similar situations. Another alternative is to directly ask the person with the problem what they think might work, as they will often come up with incredible insights and potential solutions to the problem at hand.

3. Choosing which option(s) to take.

Encouraging the group to explore possible benefits and limitations of each suggestion can assist the person with the problem come to a decision on their own. Some individuals may wish to take some time on their own to consider the possibilities. Let them know that the group cares and wants to know how things turn out.

Trouble Shooting and Managing Conflict in a Group

Establishing a positive and supportive group will typically result in a group that works well together. In order for a group to be effective, all individuals need to listen and show respect to one another. People have different views and ideas and sometimes people won't agree with each other so disagreements may occur. Disagreements may result in conflicts that need to be resolved as soon as possible, so that the group can move on and continue to provide members with a positive and supportive experience.

Although conflict is a group issue and everyone needs to play a part in resolving it, group facilitators can take a leadership role by encouraging the following:

Tips for Dealing with Conflict

- Deal with it as it arises; leaving it doesn't solve the problem
- Choose your battles. Let it go if it really doesn't matter; decide if it is a minor or major issue (this does not cancel out the point above)
- Say what you want to say, not what you don't want to say; suggesting possibilities and recommending ways forward is easier to hear and more effective than complaining and criticising

- Use assertive communication by speaking for yourself; say how you feel and support other group members to say how they feel
- Deal with the problem first and the effects afterwards. For example, if member's arriving late is the problem, disruption is the effect; find ways to encourage members to arrive on time
- Make problem solving a group activity. Groups are far more likely to implement solutions if they had a part in shaping them

Closing the Meeting

Most peer support group meetings last between an hour and two hours. If the group is caught up in a particularly intense discussion or working to help a member solve a problem, you might go a few extra minutes overtime or ask members if they wish to continue the discussion at the next meeting. It is generally best to end the meeting before everyone is tired and eager to leave.

When the discussion is winding down or when a previously agreed-upon ending time has arrived, wrap things up. Here are some ways you can close the meeting:

- Give 5-10 minutes warning before the meeting closes.
- Summarise the topics that were discussed and outcomes that were chosen. Highlight any positive feedback or solutions that came up during the meeting.
- Check in to see where everyone is at the end of meetings by asking how they the meeting was for them and if anyone has anything that they would like to add/say before the group leaves.
- Let everyone know the time, date and place for the next meeting.
- Thank everyone for coming, say goodbye, and encourage them to come again.

Make any Notes if Necessary

Shortly after the meeting, if you haven't already, make some brief notes about what was discussed in the meeting while it is fresh in your mind. This information can be used to jump-start the next meeting and remind you of any actions that will need to be followed up. Make sure to respect confidentiality in any notes. Record group decisions and plans and main points of discussion without identifying group members.

In Summary

- Make time for introductions
- Discuss group guidelines
- Discussion, sharing and other activities
- Problem solve & resolve conflict if necessary
- Support group members
- Check in with the group
- Request feedback from group members (or after meeting)
- Thank everyone and close meeting
- Document what needs to be done before the next meeting



Section 4: Sustaining an LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Group

Maintaining & Monitoring: Tips on Keeping an LGBTIQ+ Support Group Going

As the group evolves over time, getting member input for what the group does and how meetings and/or activities happen will be vital for maintaining the group's relevance and sustaining its existence. Also, always let group members know that their involvement and help with the group is appreciated.

Share Responsibility for the Group

Letting others take leadership roles helps them feel more committed to and invested in the group. Provide opportunities for group members to take on different roles and responsibilities and ask them which tasks they would like to take on. For example, if someone is keen to organise an event or action, ask them to give the group some ideas of what they want done and why and encourage them to take active leadership, meaning engaging in doing the work.

Celebrate Achievements

It is also important to come together as a group to share any successes. Acknowledge and celebrate individual and collective efforts. Whether expected or not, any positive outcome from group activity can be celebrated and built upon. Have a party or do something special as a group to celebrate group milestones and achievements.

Share Mistakes

Regularly let members know that you appreciate their contributions and assistance. If someone makes a mistake, it is okay. Work together to share the responsibilities of any negative outcome and learn from the experience. Reflect on what may have been done differently and record any valuable insights for future planning.

Keep Track of the Group's Progress.

From time to time, check in with group members and ask for their feedback on how they think the group is going (see below). Find out how helpful the support group is for them, how comfortable they feel, and what they find most/least supportive about the group. Use this information to make appropriate changes and modify how the group operates as necessary.

Seeking member feedback

Feedback from group members is important for the sustainability of a group to ensure that what is important for members is the key consideration for guiding how the group evolves.

Asking individuals what they find most and least helpful in each meeting and what they hope to gain from future meetings and involvement with the group can be beneficial on many levels.

A simple feedback form could also be given to members at the end of each meeting or sent via email.



Continue to Promote the Support Group

Once the group is up and running, group members may decide they would like more people to join. Keep promoting the group in the ways already discussed as well as in new ways that

the group comes up with. Be creative and remember it is ok if something you think will work doesn't, just try something else.

Remember that this is a Support Group

Groups may evolve and change focus over time - for example, the group could become more social in the future as opposed to a formal meeting structure. This is also okay if group members are in agreement with any changes in how the group operates. No matter how the group may change, it is important to remember that your group's primary purpose is to provide support to its individual members.

Change Happens

Group membership and meeting attendance can vary considerably and there may be periods in the group's existence when you may question whether the group is still needed by your community. This is okay. Sometimes you may simply have to just keep turning up and see what happens. Hopefully, via your promotion and other efforts, word will get out to those who when they are able and ready will come and join you.

Closing the Group

Occasionally Peer Support Groups end operation for various reasons. Before making the decision to close the group it is important to talk with members and discuss the situation. If some members are still interested in being a part of an LGBTIQ+ peer support group and they are unable to keep the current group going, help them to find another group or put them in touch with Working It Out. Depending on your location, it may be possible for your group to join with another group providing similar support.

Taking Care of Yourself

To truly be at our best, both for ourselves as well as for the people around us, we need to make self-care a priority. Do whatever works best for you but ensure that you get enough sleep, exercise regularly and eat well. Maintaining your social and other interests is also important. As is, the maintenance of your own healthy boundaries and other supports.

As peers, we have to be mindful of our own mental health and related needs. There are some days you might not be up to supporting or holding the space for others, answering inquiries about your group, or promoting and outreaching. It is okay to pace yourself, it is okay to take time out and it is okay to ask for help. Be gentle on yourself.

(Also see Support Services Section)

Summary

While not everyone wants or needs support beyond what is offered by their friends or family, an LGBTIQ+ specific peer support group can help those in our LGBTIQ+ communities to connect with others, share their experiences, feel safe, affirmed and accepted. LGBTIQ+ peer support groups can help create community, reduce isolation and promote general well-being for all members. There are a number of considerations to keep in mind when planning, setting up, running and keeping a peer support group going. It is hoped that this guide has provided you with a better understanding of some of these considerations as well as a number of tips that will benefit any LGBTIQ+ peer support group that you may be involved with now or in the future.



Thank you!!

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide and we wish you the very best with your efforts towards creating a more supportive community for LGBTIQ+ people, their friends and families.

Working It Out

Working It Out supports the LGBTIQ+ communities across Tasmania. As an organisation we are here to help and support you as a member of the LGBTIQ+ community and as an LGBTIQ+ Peer Support Group. We look forward to working with you and building relationships with you, your group and your community to provide greater opportunities for all LGBTIQ+ people and their families. Please contact us anytime and we will get back to you as soon as we can.

Contact

South

278 Argyle Street
NORTH HOBART TAS 7000

North

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GLOSSARY

(Fostering Pride: a guide to setting up and sustaining LGBTIQ+ and allied groups
Pride/Diversity groups in Tasmanian schools)

Language is constantly evolving; new terms are introduced, while others fade from use or change their meaning over time.

This glossary is designed to provide basic definitions of words and phrases commonly used in discussions about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and related issues. This remains true for the following terms and definitions. For terms that refer to people's identities, allow people to self-identify rather than you deciding the labels that apply to them.

Asexual/Aromantic: This is when a person does not experience a sexual or romantic attraction to anyone. This person may still be in loving relationships with people, however their way of loving another person does not include the expression of sexual desires and actions typically portrayed in society's narratives about deep commitment and love between people. It does not mean there is something wrong with them. They just aren't attracted to people in that way.

Assigned Gender: Assigned sex is a label that you're given at birth based on medical factors, including your hormones, chromosomes, and genitals. Most people are assigned male or female, and this is what's put on their birth certificates.

When someone's sexual and reproductive anatomy doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male, they may be described as someone with variation of sex characteristics (intersex).

Cisgender: A term for people whose gender identity aligns with the gender identity they were assigned by a doctor at birth.

Dead Name: Deadnaming occurs when someone, intentionally or not, refers to a person who is transgender by the name they used before they transitioned. You may also hear it described as referring to someone by their “birth name” or their “given name.”

Gender Affirmation: This is when a person is going through the process of affirming the gender that they have always or have come to understand themselves to be. Some people say that they are ‘transitioning’ from one gender to another. Others use the idea of ‘affirming’ their gender because they are literally affirming who they are.

Gender Binary: A social and cultural system that constructs the idea of two distinct and exclusive gender categories of male and female.

Gender Diverse: Gender diverse is used to cover the many ways and words that people use to describe their gender identity. Many trans people will not identify as gender diverse but rather in gender binary ways, for instance, trans male or trans female (or simply as male or female).

Gender Dysphoria: Refers to the severe and unremitting emotional pain resulting from gender incongruity. Often experienced as an intense persistent discomfort with the primary and secondary sex characteristics of their assigned birth sex of being seen as their assigned birth gender.

Gender Expression: The multiple ways (e.g., behaviours, dress) in which a person may choose to communicate gender to oneself and/or to others.

Gender Identity: How an individual identifies in terms of their gender. Gender identities may include, “male,” “female,” “androgynous,” “transgender,” “genderqueer” and many others, or a combination thereof.

Genderism: A system of oppression that benefits cisgender people at the expense of transgender and gender nonconforming people. Genderism may take the form of transphobia, bias, and discrimination towards transgender and gender nonconforming people.

Gender Nonconforming or Gender Variant: A person who has a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth. People who identify as “gender nonconforming” or “gender variant” may or may not also identify as “transgender.”

Genderqueer: A person who has a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth. People who identify as “genderqueer” may or may not also identify as “transgender.”

Heterosexism: A system of oppression that benefits straight/heterosexual people at the expense of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Heterosexism may take the form of Homophobia or Biphobia, bias and discrimination towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Homosexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some members of the same gender. Many people prefer the terms “lesbian” or “gay,” instead.

Identity: Identity is how we understand ourselves, what we call ourselves and often who we connect to and associate with. Each of us has a unique diversity of social identities based on our sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and other important parts of who we are. Those identities develop over time, intersect with each other, and help give meaning to our lives. It’s important to remember that these terms are about self-identification; no one can tell anyone else how to identify or what terms to use.

Intersex: Intersex people have innate sex characteristics that don’t fit medical and social norms for female or male bodies, and that create risks or experiences of stigma, discrimination and harm.

Lesbian: A person who is female-identified and who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some other females.

LGBTIQA+ (LGBTI, LGBTIQ): Acronyms used to encompass people of diverse gender, sexuality and bodies. IN particular, it refers to lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, intersex (variation of sex characteristics), queer/questioning and others.

Misgendering: using the wrong pronoun for the person. Sometimes we do this because we make assumptions about a person based on how they look. Other times we do this because we have known the person for a while as their birth assigned gender and it is just habit. Intentional misgendering is a form of abuse.

Non-binary (NB): Some students may identify as non-binary - that is, as neither male nor female. People with non-binary identities may use a variety of terms, labels, and pronouns to describe their gender and so it is important to ask the student how they would like to be referred to. They may ask that you use the pronouns ‘they’ or ‘them’, or ‘ze’ or ‘zir’. Or they may just ask you to use their name and no pronoun at all.

Oppression: Systems of power and privilege, based on bias, which benefit some social groups over others. Oppression can 1) take many forms, including ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized; 2) be intentional and unintentional; 3) be conscious and

unconscious; and 4) be visible and invisible. Oppression prevents the oppressed groups and individuals from being free and equal. Many people face oppression based on more than one of their identities, creating a unique complexity of challenges and resilience.

Pansexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some people, regardless of their gender identity.

Personal (gender) Pronouns: The pronoun or set of pronouns that a person uses when their proper name is not being used. Traditional examples include “she/her/hers” or “he/him/his.” Some people use gender-neutral pronouns, such as “zie/zir/zirs,” “they/them/theirs.” Some people prefer no pronouns at all.

Phobia: irrational fear.

Queer: An umbrella term used to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms. While it is used as a neutral, or even a positive term among many LGBT people today, historically “queer” was used as a derogatory slur.

Questioning: A person who is in the process of understanding and exploring what their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression might be.

Racism: A system of oppression that benefits white people at the expense of people of colour.

Reclaimed Words: As language evolves, some individuals and communities choose to identify with terms that had previously been used as slurs against them. The words are “reclaimed” and given new meaning, often imbued with a sense of pride and resilience. Examples include, “queer,” “dyke,” and “tranny,” among others. It’s important to remember that identity is unique to everyone; not all members of a community readily accept the use of reclaimed words, as they may still find them offensive and hurtful.

Sexism: A system of oppression that benefits male-identified people at the expense of female identified people.

Sexual Orientation: The feelings of who a person is attracted to emotionally and/or physically, in relation to their own gender identity. Some people may identify as “asexual,” “bisexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “pansexual,” “queer,” “straight,” and many more.

Straight or Heterosexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some members of another gender (specifically, a male identified person who is attracted to some females or a female-identified person who is attracted to some males).

Tranny: A derogatory term directed at a transgender person. Some transgender people have reclaimed the term and use it as an affirming label with which to identify.

Trans and gender diverse (TGD): Trans is an umbrella term used to describe a person whose gender does not align to the gender assigned to them at birth.

Transgender (trans): Transgender is a non-medical term that has been used increasingly since the 1990s as an umbrella term describing individuals whose gender identity (inner sense of gender) or gender expression (outward performance of gender) differs from the sex or gender to which they were assigned at birth.

Some people who use this term do not consider themselves as matching a binary gender category of either strictly male or female. In addition, new terms such as gender non-conforming, genderqueer, bigendered, and a gendered are increasingly in use.

Transsexual: Transsexual is a historic, medical term that refers to individuals who have undergone some form of medical and/or surgical treatment for gender affirmation or confirmation (historically referred to as sex reassignment). Some transsexual individuals may identify as transgender, although many primarily identify as the male or female gender to which they have transitioned.

People who identify as transgender but who do not seek medical or surgical treatment are not transsexual.

Transition: The process through which transgender people begin to live their lives as their gender they identify with. It includes social, legal, medical transition.

Transphobia: The irrational or learnt fear or hatred that incites violence disgust or ridicule and discrimination against transgender people.

NOTE: Sometimes assumptions are made when people have religious or cultural backgrounds that are not Anglo-Celtic, that they will be more conservative and less accepting of TGDNB people. This is not always the case, and in fact trans identities have existed historically and are celebrated in many cultures.

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Sample Checklists and Other Resources

1. Sample Meeting Checklist
2. Support Services
3. Other Resources and Links
4. Access and Inclusion Legislation

1. Sample Meeting Checklist

Item examples:	X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book venue. • Communicate with group members in advance re: meeting date/time; meeting location and characteristics; things to bring if needed and other relevant details. • Prepare activities and materials if needed before meeting. • Arrange any catering such as tea, coffee and biscuits. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a meeting agenda if applicable. • Make sure the venue is ready before the meeting eg. The space is a comfortable temperature; seating options set up; external signage for new members... • Have someone chosen to welcome members to the meeting. • Have name tags ready (eg. sticky labels). • Have any activities, resources and materials ready for group members. • Additional requirements... 	

2. Support Services

Urgent help (24/7 services)

- [Lifeline](#) — 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) — 1800 551 800
- Suicide Call Back Service (24/7) 1300 659 467 suicidecallbackservice.org.au
- Emergency — 000

National

- [Qlife](#) — Australia-wide anonymous and free LGBTI peer support for people wanting to talk about sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships. Call 1800 184 527 or webchat 3pm-12am AEST.
- [Minus 18](#) — Resources help and guidance for Australia's LGBTIQ youth.
- [Black Rainbow](#) — Australia's leading Indigenous suicide prevention and mental health support source for LGBTQ+ people.
- [PFLAG Australia](#) — Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.
- [Trans Pride Australia](#) — Social and support group for trans and gender diverse people and their loved ones.
- [Intersex Peer Support](#) — An intersex peer support, information and advocacy group for people born with variations in sex characteristics.
- [Intersex Human Rights Australia](#) — Support and education by and for people with intersex variation traits.
- [Headspace](#) — Australia-wide online, phone and in-person support and counselling to young people, their families and friends. Call 1800 650 890 (9am-1am).
- [ReachOut](#) — ReachOut.com helps under 25s with everyday questions through to tough times.
- **1800 RESPECT 1800 737 732** 24/7 counselling, information and referrals for sexual assault, domestic and family violence
- Beyond Blue
ph: 1300 22 4636; web: beyondblue.org.au

Tasmania

- [Working It Out](#) — Tasmania's gender and sexuality support and education service provides free and confidential counselling, support groups, education programs and workplace training.
- [Switchboard](#) — Anonymous and free telephone counselling, information and referrals for the LGBTQIA+ communities of Victoria and Tasmania.

3. Other Resources & Links

LGBTIQA+ Health Australia Community Resources

<https://www.lgbtighhealth.org.au/communityresources>

Centre for Mental Health (UK) LGBTQ Peer Support

https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication/download/CentreforMentalHealth_PeerSupport_LGBTQ.pdf

Writing Themselves in 4

<https://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/publications/writing-themselves-in-publications/writing-themselves-in-4>

R U OK's LGBTIQA+ Resources and Conversation Guide

<https://www.ruok.org.au/newpagea3fdc42f>

The Centre of Excellence in Peer Support (VIC)

<https://www.peersupportvic.org/>

The Sane Blog: Staying Safe While Supporting Peers

<https://www.sane.org/information-stories/the-sane-blog/wellbeing/staying-safe-while-supporting-peers>

3. Access and Inclusion Legislation

Equal Opportunity laws that deal with discrimination and harassment, including:

- *Age Discrimination Act (Commonwealth) 2004*
- *Australian Human Rights Commission Act (Commonwealth) 1986*
- *Disability Discrimination Act (Commonwealth) 1992*
- *Racial Discrimination Act (Commonwealth) 1975*
- *Sexual Discrimination Act (Commonwealth) 1984*
- *Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Act 1998*

Creating Community Connections

A Guide to Setting up and Facilitating LGBTIQA+ Peer Support Groups

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