

STARTING A SUPPORT GROUP KIT

To start a support group, there are a number of preliminary steps you must take. Realistically, the start-up cost will be approximately \$100.00. This checklist provides you with a comprehensive list of what you need to do to start a viable group.

1. Think of a name for your group. My group, Spouses Of Gays Association (SOGA) had an easy to remember acronym which also helps. You can feel free to adopt that name or you might consider a name such as "Straight Wives Support Group," "Straight Wives of Gay Men," "Straight Wives/Gay Husbands," or any other name that will tell your audience exactly what the group is about.
2. Next, establish an address. For an official address, it is better to rent a post office box to protect your privacy. Once your group is organized, you may not want to reveal your personal address to the general public. A post office box can be obtained at most local post offices. There are also privately owned mail stores where you can rent boxes. If you are not near a post office box, you may consider a mail service that can rent you their address and forward your mail to you.
3. A telephone number must be obtained. It is impossible to establish a support group without a means of communication. If you use your own personal phone number, you may be exposing yourself to prank or obscene calls on your home phone. You can either install a second phone line just for incoming calls or find an answering service that

allows you to pick up your calls daily.

4. You need to decide where you will hold the meetings. I held the meetings in my home or occasionally in the home of other members. If you are hesitant to do this, look for meeting spaces in the community that are rent-free to self-help groups. Some places to explore with public meeting rooms are libraries, banks, hospitals, community organizations, churches, synagogues, and women's organizations.
5. Once you have completed the above steps, create stationary which can easily be made on the computer. State the name of the group, the address (post office box), and phone number. Print out corresponding envelopes with the initials of the group on the return corner of the envelope. Some people may want information by mail, but not the exposure of the name of the group which can be viewed by the mailman and neighbors. My envelopes showed "SOGA" with the P.O. Box in the left hand corner.
6. Write a statement of purpose on your new letterhead. This is the one I used at the time I started my support group. Feel free to copy or modify it to your thoughts:

SPOUSES OF GAYS ASSOCIATION (SOGA)

We are a group of women that are bonded together through one common factor--our husbands are gay. We understand the confusion, pain, and heartache that you are experiencing. We don't want you to feel that you are alone, for there are millions of other women who are living the

same experience.

Once the feeling of devastation has passed, a whole new line of questions comes to mind, starting with, "Where do I go from here?" Whether you choose to continue in your marriage or dissolve it is only a choice that you can make in the end, but we are there along the way to give support and comfort.

We come from a vast variety of backgrounds, and our marital statuses run the gamut--some of us are married, while others are separated or divorced. Regardless of our situations, we are willing to share our experiences with you in the hope that it will help you cope better in the days ahead. We have a 24- hour HOTLINE for emergencies and women who are willing to befriend you during this time when you will really need a friend.

There is no charge at all for our support sessions. We are doing this out of our mutual concern that women in our situation should never feel alone or isolated. All you have to do is pick up your phone and call--we'll be there for you. For future information about our meetings, please call our HOTLINE between 6 - 9 p.m.

7. Research a list of local newspapers in your community by using the local Yellow Pages. Call each newspaper and get the editor's name and the correct address of the paper.
8. Prepare a press release. This is a sample of the one I used when starting my group:

On your group letterhead, use the following format:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE:

SUMMARY: SUPPORT GROUP FORMING

FOR WOMEN MARRIED TO GAY MEN

The Spouses of Gays Association (SOGA) announced their formation this week in Philadelphia and surrounding suburbs. The purpose is to serve as a support group for straight women who are married to, separated, or divorced from gay/bisexual men. There will be regular meetings conducted in the Philadelphia area as well as a 24-hour HELP HOTLINE. If anyone is interested in participating in the group, please call the Director, Bonnie Kaye, any evening after 6:00 p.m. at (phone number).

A position paper has been enclosed for your information. ###

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT BONNIE KAYE AT (PHONE NUMBER)

Press releases should be double-spaced. The last sentence in the release should be followed by three number signs (###) to let the editor know that you are finished. Following that is a contact line so the editor can call you for more information or follow-up stories if he/she is interested.

Press releases are printed free of charge. It may be a good idea to contact the editor of each local paper to let him/her know that you are starting the group and sending out the release. Tell them to look out for it in the mail, and ask if you can count on them to print the release. You can

usually count on a 2-3 week delay. Newspapers are not obligated to print press releases, but most of the time, they do. Since this is a newsworthy group from the editorial perspective, you may get calls asking you for a story. Tell the newspaper that the group is just in the formation stage, and as soon as you get the group started, you will call them with a story about the group. The more publicity your group gets in the formation stage, the more exposure you will have for getting membership.

9. Establish whether or not you want to charge a minimal fee from people attending the meetings. There is no shame in charging one or two dollars to help defray the costs of postage and phone bills. Also establish the frequency of the meetings, i.e., once a week or bi-weekly or monthly.

By this time, I had formulated a checklist of all the help needed in the organization and included it in the letter I sent out to everyone who expressed an interest in the group. My original letter, dated December 28, 1983 stated:

Dear Friend,

Within the past month or so I have been in touch with you about the formation of a wives support group. At the time that we spoke, you expressed an interest in such a group. This is just a note to let you know that SOGA (Spouses of Gays Association) is presently getting organized in the Philadelphia and Suburban areas. In as much as this group will be far more than just a support group, there will be a great need for participation from everyone who can spare some time--even if it is minimal. Some of the

volunteer jobs that need your help are the following:

- . Counseling**
- . Hot Line**
- . Liaison between resource groups**
- . Research (scanning newspapers and magazines)**
- . Mobilization coordinator**
- . Secretarial work**
- . Speakers Bureau**
- . Public Relations**
- . New Membership**

Even if you can spend one or two hours a month, it can greatly boost our effectiveness. I would appreciate it if you would contact me to discuss your participation in the group. Sometime in the near future, a meeting will be scheduled for anyone who would like to attend. In the meantime, please remember to feel free to call me if the need is there, no matter when it is.

Best regards, Bonnie Kaye

This letter or a similar one will accomplish two important tasks. First, it will let your interested parties know that the group is actually getting started. Furthermore, it will make people feel as if they have a commitment to the group. People like to feel that they have input into an organization. This gives them the opportunity to help build a stronger organization.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE MEDIA/PRESS

A support group can be as private or public as the group decides it should be. It is easier to start a group if you have a nucleus of people to work with you. This helps to share the duties, tasks, and responsibilities. Your group may decide that you would like to get more publicity to alert the public to your cause. This type of support group seems to generate public interest for many who are either curiosity seekers or those anxious to understand straight/gay marriages. You can notify the local newspapers, television and radio talk shows and community organizations about your group if you are looking to have stories written. Stories also provide new leads for membership. The more exposure you have, the more your group will grow. **Remember, however, never encourage, coerce, or push anyone to participate in a story who is not comfortable with being part of a story or who doesn't understand the long term implications of public exposure.**

People will join your group **expecting** their privacy to be respected—**and that is your foremost obligation.** There can be consequences for those people who are willing to publicly discuss their private lives. If members have children, they must be the first consideration. Children are often victimized by their peers when information about a gay father is revealed. Once the words are spoken, they cannot be taken back, so use careful judgement. Sometimes people are willing to talk to the press if their real names or last names are not revealed. Confidentiality must be agreed upon with the press before doing the story. Make sure that you have this agreement when necessary.

UNDERSTANDING THE PITFALLS OF THE MEDIA

If you are not familiar with the media, there are a number of issues to think about before you have an interview. Remember—the job of the press, whether it is newspaper, television, or radio, is to make the public take notice of a story. No matter how sympathetic your interviewer may be prior to the interview, there is no guarantee that you will see that sympathetic side when a story comes out. In some cases, the story may have far more sensationalism than you were anticipating.

It is said that people are looking for their 15 minutes of fame. We often see that today on television talk shows that turn their shows into a circus. This is not the intent of your support group. Before any interview, anticipate the questions that could be asked and carefully prepare answers that you won't regret at a later time.

Never reveal information during a moment of anger that could cost you in a big way at a later time. No matter how angry you are at your gay mate at the time of the interview, don't say something stupid out of anger that will create a myriad of problems for you and your children. Keep to the facts without overplaying emotionalism. Let your audience learn from your information. Don't turn the media into a forum for your own personal vengeance. This will only hurt you, your children, and the support group.

Know your interviewer before the interview. Watch how she/he interviews other guests or read her/his articles. If you are not comfortable with a specific interviewer, decline the interview. Never think that you can outsmart the press.

Anyone working for any form of media has experience, and in almost all cases, far greater experience than you have. Think carefully before responding to any questions that you are not comfortable with. Don't be afraid to say that the information is personal and you are not prepared to discuss it if you find it can be misleading or offensive.

RUNNING A SUPPORT GROUP

A support group can only be as effective as its membership allows it to be. Many find that formulating a support group is much easier than actually running one. Once you have a nucleus of people to start, it is important to decide on the direction of the group. If there are too many diverse opinions, the group cannot work. Some of the issues that need to be resolved are:

- Who should attend the group? Wives, husbands, separately, together?
- Should other family members be allowed to take part?
- Should new mates be allowed to participate?
- Should the group support couples who are trying to stay married?
- Is the goal of the group to give support to everyone regardless of their situation and marital goals?
- Should there be a charge for meetings to defray costs?

These are just some basic problems that need to be addressed. Each group can benefit by having a group leader or co-leaders to get the meeting started on time and to keep it moving in a positive and productive way. When I started each meeting, I introduced myself and then went around the room allowing each

person to introduce her/himself. Each person told a little about her/his situation. After the introductions, I asked if anyone wanted to discuss a problem or ask questions that the group could share together. If there was no response, I had an agenda planned that would create discussion.

Although it is almost impossible not to be judgmental, the goal of a support group is actually just that—to give support. That's why it is important to set the goals of your group before you actually begin. For instance, there are groups that are specifically dedicated to keeping straight/gay marriages together. If that is your intent, be very clear with that message. It is not fair to impose a point of view on people who may not want to keep their marriages together and are looking for support in an opposite direction.

In the same light, if you decide to run a support group for people who want to end their marriages, be honest and upfront with that goal. There are some women who are determined to make their marriages work no matter what, and your group would be counterproductive to their present goal. Let them know that your group does not support straight/gay marriages and if they need your help at a later time, you are available. Don't be surprised to hear from these women at a future time when all their efforts fail or their husbands walk out on them.

At the beginning of our group, SOGA, it was our intent to give support to anyone in a relationship with a gay person—straight wives and gay husbands; straight husbands and lesbians wives; straight people with bisexual mates or any other related combinations. We were willing to give support whether people were staying in the marriage, leaving the marriage, or not decided. The only issue that

we agreed not to support was giving support to straight/gay couples who hadn't married yet and were looking for our endorsement. We did have a few couples like that come to us and we stuck to our agreement. We were willing to deal with the problems once they came out in a marriage, but not knowingly before a marriage. We unanimously agreed that we could not advocate walking into this type of marriage.

Unfortunately, I was unable to respect the original goal of the group after a couple of years. It was too difficult for me to endorse a couple staying together when I saw their unhappiness. My change in attitude is what started to pull our group apart. This is not to say that I was right—but I did what I felt was right and what I could live with in good conscience. This certainly did not make me the right leader to lead a non-judgmental group. If you see that you are getting jaded after a period of time, step back and evaluate your role in the group. It may be time for you to leave.

One thing I learned quickly when I started my support group. You must be open-minded and understanding. If you are quick to judge the lifestyles and situations of others, you will never be effective as a support group leader. You will hear stories that will shock you, and in some cases, sicken you, but you must be able to step back and be a fair and impartial listener. You do not have to accept others' lifestyles as right for you, nor do you have to personally approve of them, but you cannot sit and judge publicly in the group. That is not what support is about. Remember, when people come to a support group, they are obviously in pain of some kind. Sometimes they are looking to share their pain; other times

they do not feel comfortable or ready to reveal information. If people are not ready to discuss their pain, that is fine. Just being in the company of others who can understand their pain may be what they need at the moment.

If you need additional help in getting your support group started, or if you have any questions about the information, feel free to contact me by email or write to me.

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