



# Brief Guidance for Parent Support Meetings



## INTRODUCTION

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Gender dysphoria support groups are dedicated to serving those who have a loved one struggling with gender dysphoria (GD), or who has announced a transgender, non-binary, or gender-fluid identity. This guide is designed to give groups the basic tools to start and nurture a GD support group, no matter their size or level of experience.

## WHAT IS THE GOAL OF A GD SUPPORT GROUP?

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GD support groups provide self-support tools, mentoring, healing, and insights for those who have a loved one with GD, or with gender dysphoric behaviors. It can be extremely challenging for the family and friends of individuals of those struggling with gender identity issues: group meetings help people to realize that they are not alone, and foster a sense of support and solidarity.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE STARTING A GROUP

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Those who have attended Twelve Step programs or other support groups may have more insights and experience when starting a group; alternatively, facilitators may have already attended many GD support groups and understand the most appropriate tone and rhythm to adopt.

It is important to understand the difference between enabling and supporting behavior. Enabling generally helps an individual to continue with dysfunctional behavior; supporting helps guide the individual towards functional behavior.

Confidentiality is very important for participants to feel they can share their stories safely. Given that many meetings are held online, it can be helpful to provide joining members with information about changing their names, or not turning on their cameras until they feel comfortable. Some people prefer privacy; others need anonymity, to preserve the bond with their loved ones. It is vital that facilitators help with this and do not encourage participants to move beyond their comfort zone.

## IDEAS FOR STARTING A GD SUPPORT GROUP

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While there is no perfect way to start a new group, you may find the following suggestions useful:

- Contact other like-minded adults; groups do not have to be more than a few participants.
- To take root and grow, a meeting needs a regular time and place. Think carefully about choosing the best time for meetings to be held, and the most appropriate method of operating the group.
- Decide if the group is going to be virtual or face-to-face. There are pros and cons to both types.
- When starting a face-to-face group, one of the first tasks is to find a meeting place. If you are meeting with unfamiliar people, you may choose a quiet, safe public place, such as a community hall or a religious centre. Churches and other community organizations with a reputation for reaching out to the community may offer space for meetings.
- Many people seek privacy for a range of reasons, and the group might need to decide how it will be identified on the facility's schedule. Consider adopting a name for your local group that doesn't explicitly identify its purpose.
- Decide on the ethos of your group. For example, some groups might want a spiritual component, while others might focus on psycho-education.

- Think about which loved ones you want to include in the meetings. Is your group just for parents? Perhaps just for mothers, or just for fathers? Or are you open to including others who have been impacted, like siblings, grandparents, wives, husbands, sons, daughters, and friends?
- Equally, consider whether you want to open your group to those who have not been vetted or invited. If you wish to broaden your mission beyond the provision of healing and support, you may want to consider allowing presentations from desisters, detransitioners, therapists or other experts.
- Finally, think about running a Buddy System, whereby a more experienced member might volunteer to help any newcomers.

## WELCOMING NEW MEMBERS

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Each group decides how best to welcome newcomers. Because of the risk of political activists, we recommend vetting new attendees. During the vetting process, it can be helpful for a few members of the group to share their personal stories and ask the prospective newcomer to share a little about why he/she is interested in attending the meeting.

We recommend providing newcomers with a resource pack so they can find resources such as online forums and access further information.

Allow time for the newcomer to ask questions. It is often more appropriate for new members to speak in the middle of the meeting, after they have heard others speak and well before the end so they don't feel too stressed during the meeting.

If you are running an established group, consider introducing the newcomer to other members who can provide support until the newcomer becomes established in the group.

## MANAGING MEETINGS

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People respond to meetings in different ways. Some people are naturally reserved, and do not talk much; they are content to listen, finding comfort in identifying with others. Others talk in order to more effectively process their thoughts and feelings.

We encourage all members to focus on themselves rather than trying to solve other people's problems. However, more seasoned members might have many practical tips to give to newcomers. For example, some phrases from AA and Al Anon can be very helpful, such as 'Take what you need and leave the rest' and 'Let go with love'.

Facilitators might sometimes need to move the group along so that everyone gets a chance to speak during the meeting. Facilitators also need to ensure that the meeting doesn't become politicized, as this can remove the opportunity for therapeutic healing to occur.

It is imperative that facilitators seek support when they need it.

Some groups may choose to have readings from the books in [our online resource section](#) or find additional resources to read for the meetings. A group may want to set aside a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting for each member to do a one-minute check-in.

## SUGGESTED STRUCTURE

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- Welcome by meeting moderator
- Optional reminder of statement of purpose: "Please grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference."
- Optional one-minute check in
- Optional reading
- Optional sharing by each member
- Closing (groups may close with a statement that reinforces recovery and hope)
- Continued fellowship between meetings
- Offers of further resources to those might need further support

## CONTACT LISTS

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These can be helpful when you need to let someone else in the group know how you are doing, or reach out to someone if you believe they are struggling. Sometimes all we need is for someone to ask us what is going on; it can help us greatly to give voice to our feelings.

As confidentiality is so important, participation in these lists should remain voluntary.

## CONFLICT WITHIN A GROUP

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Disagreements are a natural part of any community. To stop them from creating quarrels, factions, or destructive personal conflicts, it is vital to foster a spirit of unity. We accomplish this by cultivating goodwill towards other members, and holding the welfare of the group above our own personal preferences. Our groups are strongest when we can solve or accept disagreements as they arise and continue to carry the message of recovery with equal compassion for all.

## MENTORSHIP AND SERVICE WORK

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We encourage those who have been with a group for a while to reach out to newcomers to provide them with support and mentoring. Often, those coming to GD support groups have deep seated wounds, and feel helpless and hopeless. They need others to show them that healing is possible. This may be providing a newcomer with a phone number or email, or setting up weekly check-ins.

In addition to mentoring others, there are many ways to serve as part of a GD Support Group. We encourage you to contact one of the [organizations](#) we list and offer to help them in some way.

Gender-related distress is a deeply politicized issue and we don't encourage politics to become prominent within support meetings: there are many platforms and groups for parents and others to work towards political goals. GD support groups don't intend to offer political support; rather, they provide a calm and healing space for when we are feeling vulnerable and in need of support.

Written by Stella O'Malley, Psychotherapist and Executive Director of Genspect

# Want to find out more?



## Genspect Training

As part of our mission to improve understanding of sex and gender issues, Genspect offers comprehensive training for schools, colleges and universities.

With sensitivity, compassion and factual information, we cover topics such as gender and gender identity exploration, sexuality and sexual orientation, mental health, bullying, bias, the rights of the child, the role and responsibilities of parents, and the role of the educator and the school community.

To find out more, drop us a line via the email link above.