

Logistics

The first step in forming a new group is to organise a meeting. This process of organization has several components: finding a space. Letting people know that the meeting is going to happen, and deciding upon the actual agenda for the meeting.

Finding A Space: In many communities it is possible to obtain meeting space at little or no charge. Public libraries, schools, city or town halls, someone's home, women's or progressive bookstores, food cooperatives, religious meeting houses (Quakers and Unitarian Universalists are usually particularly receptive) may have meeting space available. Keep in mind issues such as safety, accessibility to public transportation and wheelchair accessibility, and try to select a place which is fairly neutral, to allow closeted people, or people new to bisexual identity the maximum possible safety. When you have found a meeting space, make sure to leave time to advertise. Usually 6-8 weeks is sufficient.

Contact Information: It can be very helpful to list a telephone number or post office box where people can contact for more information. Should you list your own address or phone number? Some people feel comfortable doing this, others do not. One woman lists her telephone number with a pseudonym. That way she knows immediately whether someone is calling as a result of her ads or poster, and she feels safer because she is not giving out her real name. If you list your own number and have restrictions on when you are willing to be called, state clearly in the flier or ad, such as "for info, call Maria at 222-2222 between 6pm and 9pm." Another option is to rent a voice mailbox or to ask a local (or not too far away) lesbian/gay hotline, or lesbian/gay centre, or women's centre to serve as your contact number, at least for a limited time. Whatever method you choose be sure to return all calls promptly, and to be discreet. Remember: homophobia exists and not everyone is out to his/her roommate, parents, spouse, etc.

Covering Expenses: Keep expenses as low as possible, then pass the hat at the meeting. State what your expenses were, and propose a suggested amount, asking people to pay what they can.

Getting The Word Out: Advertising

Once you have located a site for your first meeting you must let as many people as possible know that it is happening. There are a number of ways to do this, mostly through newspapers and fliers.

Newspaper calendars and classified ads. Many newspapers will list events open to the public in a calendar section. Check your local newspaper to see whether they do this. Calendar listings are usually free. If a calendar listing is not possible, you may want to consider placing a brief classified ad. Keep it as short and inexpensive as possible. For example:

BISEXUAL support/discussion group forming. First meeting November 22, 7:30p.m. at Local High School Cafeteria. Call (789)456-1234 for info.

Try to get this listing into as many publications as possible: the newspapers of nearby colleges, the nearest gay paper (even if it is based in another city or town), any local or regional newsletters (does a nearby Unitarian Universalist Church have a newsletter). Is there a women's centre newsletter published nearby?

Fliers. Make up a clear, concise A4 or other standard size poster about the meeting. State the time and place of the meeting, whether it is wheelchair accessible, what its purpose is: "to discuss the possible formation of an ongoing bisexual support group". Statements about confidentiality may be helpful, especially in a more conservative environment. Get these posters up in as many locations as possible: on bulletin boards in local progressive stores, on local campuses, in bookstores, at the nearest food co-op, gay bars, etc. Use your imagination. One place you may want to consider posting is the inside of bathroom stalls. They sometimes stay up longer before getting pulled down, you will have a captive audience, and interested people can read them and copy down the information in total privacy.

Remember: when choosing where to place calendar listings and to hang posters, keep in mind that bisexual people are a very diverse group, and to reach the maximum number of people you will want to get the word out in many different locations. This means reaching people from all economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and who are bi, gay, and straight identified.

Your First Meeting

Come to your first meeting prepared. Arrange chairs in a circle so that everyone can see each other and everyone is included. Here is one possible format for a first meeting:

Welcome everyone. Discuss ground rules (respect for one another, confidentiality, sharing air time, no one has to speak who does not wish to.) Review the evening's agenda. Many people feel more comfortable when they know what to expect. Make sure that everyone is comfortable physically: let them know where the bathroom

is, where they may and may not smoke, that they may get up and leave the room if they wish to, etc.

Do some sort of "go-around" in which each person gets a chance to speak. Have each person say their name and answer a question or two (why they came, what they would like to get out of the meeting, an interesting fact about themselves.) One exercise which can be a good icebreaker is to have people divide into pairs. Within each pair, have each person interview the other for 3 minutes, then switch roles. When each has interviewed a partner, come back to the main group and go around the room having each person introduce her/his partner: "This is Teresa. She hates lima beans and likes to play rugby and the violin".

Have a moderated discussion. Most people in a new group have had little or no opportunity to talk about issues related to bisexuality and are starving for a chance to talk.

Set aside time to decide on the next step. Do people want to have another meeting, to start a group etc? Make sure that you do not leave the meeting without scheduling your next meeting. Pass around a phone list so that you (or someone else who is designated) have a way to reach people interested in meeting again.

Make sure that this meeting does not last more than 2 hours or people will start to drift out and will miss the planning segment of the meeting. Keep an eye on the time and try to leave 40 minutes or so for the planning segment. You may have to cut off an interesting conversation but explain that you are asking people to cut the current conversation short to work out a way to continue the discussion later.

Subsequent Meetings

Depending upon the needs and desires of its members support groups usually take one of four formats:

- Focus on personal support or empowerment. A personal support group would meet regularly and might focus on "go-arounds" with each member giving an update on current issues in her or his life. Other group members would listen, and sometimes if asked, offer comments or advice. Occasionally, issues raised in the go-arounds might lead to impassioned political discussions over sexual politics and other issues.

- Focus on discussion of topics. A discussion focused group would pick a topic in advance of each meeting. Topics might include: a book or article that everyone agreed to read and discuss, or a subject (The politics of marriage, bisexuality, and feminism, coming out to one's

children, parents, friends, partners, etc., dating, gender differences in relationships, monogamy and open relationships, safer sex, being bi in the gay community, etc.)

- Focus on activities. An activity-focused group might meet regularly for social activities: going out dancing, bowling, to the movies, to the beach, or renting and watching videos.
- A combination of the above. Brief go-arounds followed by a topic discussion, or go-arounds some weeks and topic discussions on others, with periodic social activities.

The group must decide where and how often to meet, and you must decide what type of commitment is expected from members. One suggestion is to meet weekly for a fixed period of time to form a sense of community and group cohesion and then to adjust your meetings to a less intensive schedule. Another suggestion is to begin with a personal support and empowerment group with a several weeks of topic discussions to allow members time to build trust. You also need to decide whether to be an open or closed group. You might begin as an open group and then decide to close the group to new members at a later date, as the group coalesces. If you decide to close your group, you may wish to set up a mechanism for helping others form their own support groups. You may choose to rotate facilitators, or to have a regular volunteer or professional facilitator.

It is important to remember that, no matter what you do, not all groups will last. The group chemistry may not be right. If this happens, you may want to try again from the beginning.

Words Of Advice

Whenever possible, talk to other people who have experience in what you are trying to do. Talk to people who have started bisexual support groups in areas similar to yours, or who have started other types of support groups in your own community. We can learn from other's successes and mistakes.

Embrace diversity. While it may sometimes be more comfortable to have a group filled with people who are like you in terms of class, race, politics, etc., sometimes we learn more in a group where a variety of diverse voices are present.

Try, to the greatest extent possible, to accommodate people's needs. Is your meeting place wheelchair accessible? Are there pets, cigarette smoke, or other

environmental substances present that members may be allergic to? Is your meeting place on public transportation for members without cars?

An occasional individual may contact you or show up at your meetings whose needs cannot be met by a support group. You may wish to have the names and phone numbers of the nearest hotline and of a couple of supportive therapists so that you can provide appropriate referrals.

Be clear in your advertising, and to new members that your group is not a dating service. Some support groups have policies stating that group members should not get romantically involved with one another.

Be aware that your group will provide support for many more people than actually attend meetings. The simple knowledge that there is a bisexual group meeting out there may be affirming to more people than you will ever know. And that is another good reason to get the word out.

If your group is an open group, try to make meeting time, place and contact information consistent. Some people may be terrified at the idea of attending a bisexual support group, and it may take them months to get up the courage to come to their first meeting. Make sure these people can find you.

Once your group is established, don't forget to get listed in the International Directory of Bisexual Groups, which is available from BRC. Send information about your group to the addresses listed below.

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Bisexual Resource Centre

Phone: +1 617 338 9595
Email: BRC@panix.com
Address: PO Box 639, Cambridge, MA 02140, USA

Sydney Bisexual Network

Web page: <http://sbn.bi.org>
Email: sbn-admin@yahoogroups.com
Info line: (02) 9565 4281
Address: SBN, PO Box 281, Broadway, NSW 2007

Australian Bisexual Network

Web page: www.rainbow.net.au/~ausbinet/
Email: ausbinet@rainbow.net.au
Phone: (07) 3857-2500
Address: ABN, PO Box 490, Lutwyche, QLD 4030



How To Start A Bisexual Support Group

Robyn Ochs

Bisexual support groups are springing up all over the world. Is there one in your town? If not, you may want to start one. Here are some pointers to help you create the safe space essential for creating a positive bisexual identity.

What Is A Support Group? It's up to you to decide what type of group you want. It can be a social group, a facilitated or unfacilitated discussion group, it can be closed or open to newcomers. Each type of group will require different skills to run.

Rule Number One: There Are No Rules. There is no simple formula for the successful creation of a bisexual support group. Even within a given country, every community has its own character. Organizing in Minneapolis is not the same as organizing in a small town in New Hampshire. And a small town in New Hampshire may be different from a small town in Idaho. Therefore, what follows are guidelines and suggestions, not hard and fast rules. You will need to adapt this information to your own community's resources and needs, and to your own personal desires.

A Group Will Be More Successful If Its Members Feel A Sense Of Ownership. If you are beginning a group, do everything possible to make sure that the group, and not one person, shares responsibility and decision making. Therefore, while it is important to go into your first meeting with some ideas about what you would like a group to be, be open to other people's ideas. Failure to do so will result in a situation where all members will not get what they need from the group, and you will get stuck doing all of the work because other people will not feel invested in the group. And if you burn out or lose interest, the group may cease to exist.